

Response to “The Ordination of Women Among Texas Baptists” by Ann Miller

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After traveling through Texas in 1962, John Steinbeck observed, “Writers facing the problem of Texas find themselves floundering in generalities, and I am no exception.”¹ Judge Abner McCall, former president of Baylor University and of the Baptist General Convention of Texas [BGCT], once compared leading Texas Baptists to do anything together was like gathering 40,000 jack rabbits at the end of a field and trying to make them stand and salute at the same time. We are a cantankerous, stubborn, and wonderful people, we Texas Baptists. I thank Dr. Miller for not floundering, as Steinbeck suggested, but for preparing a clear and concise statement of the issues that surface when the words “women” and “ordination” are spoken in the same conversation among Baptists in the South. I appreciate her inclusion of the work of Texas scholars like Leon McBeth and Bill Hendricks to make the question of women’s ordination hit home.

The question of ordaining women to any ministry, especially the deaconate or preaching ministry, is disquieting and conflict-laden among present-day Baptists in the South and in this state. In the last three decades, so many books, articles, sermons, and press releases have addressed the problem of women’s roles in professional ministry that we might think the conflict originated after the Vietnam War. This issue, for Texas Baptists [hereafter Baptists], however, is not new. Since the 1880s, the problems of women preaching, addressing an assembly including men and women, holding a position of authority in a church, periodically have occupied the thoughts of Baptists.

I will address three areas of concern raised by Dr. Miller’s paper. In a conciliatory and practical manner, Dr. Miller presented the basic scriptural and pragmatic arguments in favor of women’s ordination. She noted the honest disagreement that occurs between Baptists when different interpretations of Bible passages trigger painful discussions. The first point made by Dr. Miller that I want to underscore is that honest disagreement can and does occur between godly, Bible-believing folks. In the 1880s, most Texas Baptist churches, associations and the state convention adopted the 1833 New Hampshire Confession of Faith’s article on Scripture. Article One states that the Bible is “the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and opinions should be tried.”² Texas Baptists, both supporting the right of women to be ordained and those opposing the idea, base their positions on Scripture. Invariably, discussion of the matter began and ended with statements

¹David G. McComb, *Texas: A Modern History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 1.

²William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (rev. ed.; Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 362.

much like the one made by Mrs. S. L. Post at an 1893 Woman's Missionary Union [WMU] meeting: "I do not desire to preach, nor will I ever consent to urge upon you to do that which the God of nature has not laid upon us, but has positively forbidden in his word and emphasized in our general makeup. . . . We are Baptists and the word of God should be the end of all controversy."³

Equating "ordination" with "preaching" in a local church, which many Baptists still do, men and women opposing a change in the way women functioned in Texas churches based their position on 1 Corinthians 14, 1 Timothy 2 and the Household Codes in Ephesians and Colossians. Many of the critics knew the interpretation that these passages were culturally bound and not applicable in the same way to the world today; the critics simply rejected that position. After Edith Hill Booker's ordination in a Kansas American Baptist Church⁴ in the mid 1890s, M. V. Smith, a respected pastor and educator, wrote an article on women and ministry in the *Baptist Standard*. Smith presented the "cultural context" interpretation, rejected it, and stated, "The wives and mothers of the Bible were not under a different code of laws from the women of the nineteenth century."⁵ A powerful question associated with the ordination of women is, "How do we relate to people who honestly and prayerfully disagree with our understanding of the intent and teaching of the Text?" As Dr. Miller pointed out, "how" we handle interpretive differences and "how" we conduct ourselves when disagreements arise are a true measure of the seriousness with which we approach the Bible.

During a visit to Baylor several years ago, Dr. Mary Stewart VanLeeuwen spoke of Christians playing "proof-text" poker over the issue of women's ordination. "Proof-text" poker is played like this: you and I disagree on an issue; we begin "dealing" the Bible by quoting verses in support of our different positions; if you can quote more verses than I, you are right and I am wrong. Dr. Miller underscored the necessity of looking at God's intent throughout the entire text before making adamant statements that will affect the ability of more than half the citizens of the kingdom of God to respond freely to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. We may never argue over what a passage *says*, but we may disagree strongly in our understanding of what it *means*.

Biblical interpretation lies at the center of the ordination conflict. In 1988, two Texans debated the issue of ordination of women at the Baptist History and Heritage Society meeting. Dr. Jann Clanton, ordained to the gospel ministry by Seventh and James Baptist Church in Waco, and Dr. Dorothy Patterson, wife of Paige Patterson and member of First Baptist Church [FBC], Dallas, presented different perspectives on the ordination of women. Dr. Clanton presented a biblical perspective much like Dr. Miller's, and, like Dr. Miller, Clanton explained how ordination "authenticates" the ministry of any believer. It publicly establishes a covenant of prayer and support between the church and the minister. Clanton said:

³Mrs. S. L. Post, "Resume of the Missionary Union," *Baptist Standard* (9 October 1893): 3.

⁴H. Leon McBeth, *Women in Baptist Life* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979), 62.

⁵M. V. Smith, "Woman and Christianity," *Baptist Standard* (4 March 1897): 1.

To argue that women can minister without ordination begs the question. Throughout Christian history countless unordained women and men have performed vital ministries. The question is not whether ordination is necessary for ministry, but whether ordination is used to exclude women from certain ministry and leadership roles in the church. It is Baptist tradition to ordain deacons and pastors. Thus if women are denied ordination, they are denied the opportunity to minister in these areas.⁶

In response, Patterson stated:

The church has never sought to suppress gifts God has given but rather strives to ensure full and proper use of those gifts in a divinely given framework based upon natural order of creation and appropriateness of function within a master plan. One cannot accept the Bible as authoritative while rejecting its authority concerning home and church order.⁷

As Dr. Miller pointed out, the arguments about ordination of women ultimately revolve around the issue of how we understand what the Bible teaches about ministry.

Another point made by Dr. Miller was in response to the question, “Who do we turn to for a ‘true’ explanation of the text?” She pointed out an area of friction between the evolving structure of the Baptist church and women’s ordination. In seventeenth-century England, few of the Baptist church leaders had a theological education. In twenty-first-century Texas, few of the church leaders lack a specialized, theological education. Specialized training for different church ministries aids the growth of the idea that a church, even a congregational-polity church, has the characteristics of a corporation, and should be run as one. As Dr. Miller noted, the adoption of the corporate mentality by church leaders, in both small and large congregations, forces identification of the pastorate and deaconate, for which most churches now require ordination, to be associated with authority, with male leadership. Few women provide corporate leadership models, and even fewer provide pastoral leadership models. The answer to the question “Who has the ‘true’ interpretation of Scripture?” is very simple—the CEO, the Chairman of the Board, the pastor. In 1988, the Southern Baptist Convention met in San Antonio and passed a resolution stating that when a difference of interpretation arose between the pastor and the laity, the pastor’s interpretation was right.⁸ In 1993, W. A. Criswell, then senior pastor of FBC Dallas, told a group of ministers that he “ruled” his church, and his decisions were not to be questioned.⁹ Dr. Miller wrote, “A Baptist church is not a monarchy, an oligarchy, or a hierarchy, but a fellowship of believers where all are one in Christ Jesus.” Authority and influence are earned by *pastor*, *deacon*, or *layperson* living a life of love,

⁶Jann Aldredge Clanton, “Why I Believe Southern Baptist Churches Should Ordain Women,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 23 (July 1988): 54.

⁷Dorothy Kelley Patterson, “Why I Believe Southern Baptist Churches Should Not Ordain Women,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 23 (July 1988): 61.

⁸Southern Baptist Convention, *Annual*, 1988, 69.

⁹Tim Nicholas, “Criswell Explains How to be a Good Pastor,” *Baptist Standard* (12 January 1994): 11.

self-sacrifice, and service. If we end the discussion of important matters because *the* pastor or *the* head of the deacon body speaks, or if we accept without careful examination and prayer the pronouncement of any leader, we renig on our responsibility to rightly divide the word of truth.

The last of Dr. Miller's emphases that I will examine today is a critical one for Baptists. Patricia Martin wrote that between 1880 and 1920, Texas Baptist men and women came to an accommodation on the role of women in the church. Women's roles expanded as the world vision of Baptists expanded. But the expansion did not include the deaconate or preaching. In 1895, the editor of the *Woman's Page* in the *Baptist Standard* explained to a "leading pastor in Texas" that the women employed by the BGCT "hold children's meetings, visit the children of these meetings, look after the poor, the sick, the afflicted, the stranger and the neglected generally. They hold Mother's meetings, conduct industrial schools, they do gospel work of every description—except preaching. These women do not preach. They do not want to preach. The brethren need not be alarmed."¹⁰ Martin asserts that by the 1920s, women had expanded their ministry areas to include everything but the deaconate and the pastorate. These two powerful ministries remained reserved for men. Peace was maintained because everyone knew their place and kept it.¹¹ Dr. Miller underscored the painful part of any disagreement—the disintegration of the church's peace. Texas Baptists "made do" with a workable approach to women in ministry until the peaceful compact was shattered by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the social unrest of the 1970s. Marginalized people, including women, began to understand equality in a new way, and within the church, some women wanted to answer God's call wherever it took them. Some men came to understand the traditional anti-women-in-ministry texts in a new way. And unrest grew in the churches.

Dr. Miller rightly noted that many women and men agonize over how far to push for change in the church. Years ago Ralph Neighbour, while pastor of Westminster Baptist Church in Houston, wrote a book titled *The Seven Last Words of the Church*—"We've never done it that way before." Change frightens us, tradition gives our lives structure and makes our current situation understandable. Agents of change, whether agitating for women's ordination or for a new color of carpet in the sanctuary, must decide if their "cause" is worth the disintegration of the peace of their community of faith. Men and women have left because they believe they will not be able to realize equality in ministry without destroying the fellowship of the church. Others have chosen to remain in our congregations and quietly agitate for change that will allow women and men to pursue their vocation in Christian service unimpeded by gender barriers. A classic film was titled, "What Price Glory?" Today, Baptists are making a new film titled, "What Price Peace?" Some change is good; some is destructive. As we work through the issue of ordination/ministry for women in our churches, we must decide what cost we are willing to pay for peace. Part of that

¹⁰"Women's Page," *Baptist Standard* (22 August 1895): 7.

¹¹Patricia Martin, "Ordained Work—Unordained Workers: Texas 'Bible Women,' 1880-1920," *The Journal of Texas Baptist History* 8 (1988): 7.

decision is to discern whether the peace we seek is simply a lack of conflict or is truly God's peace.