

H-Net Reviews

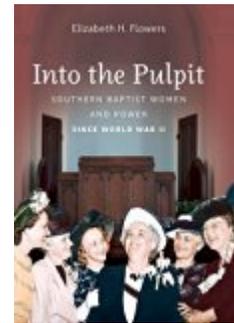
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elizabeth Hill Flowers. *Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power since World War II*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. xii + 263 pp. \$47.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3534-0.

Reviewed by Charity R. Carney (Western Governors University)

Published on H-South (January, 2013)

Commissioned by Matthew L. Downs



Southern Baptist Womanhood: Conservatives, Moderates, and the Contest Over Women's Role in the Southern Baptist Convention since World War II

In the introduction to *Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power since World War II*, Elizabeth H. Flowers reveals that her study's theoretical framework draws on Ann Braude's wisdom: "Women's history is American religious history" (p. 6). In her concise and well-constructed history of the women in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), Flowers demonstrates that women's history is even bigger than that; it is American institutional history and American cultural history as well. *Into the Pulpit* relates the story of women's leadership (and submission) in the SBC to the power struggle between conservative and moderate members—a struggle that defined the denomination in the decades following World War II. The contextual reach of the book is impressive, extending beyond a simple narrative of the organization to describe larger cultural trends and connect this regional denomination to national movements and pressures. Within this broad and complex narrative, Flowers retains the personal histories of important SBC figures like Addie Davis, the first SBC ordained woman minister, and Jessie Tillison Sappington, who fought for an SBC resolution to prevent women from being ordained. By weaving these portraits into the institutional and cultural framework of the study, the author constructs a history that is at once grounded in individual experiences and persuasive in its larger argument regarding the debate over womanhood in the Southern Baptist Convention.

Most chapters have nested narratives, providing

some illustrative vignettes but then offering a broad, national perspective on cultural trends, leading to the institutional responses of the SBC, and women's roles within developing controversies within the denomination. This organizational structure helps drive chapter 1, which explores the post-WWII period and how prosperity affected SBC decisions, including its transition from "local, non-integrated, lived religious vitality" to "corporate sect" (p. 31). This more centralized organization anxiously confronted cultural pressures of the 1960s with intense internal debate, culminating, ultimately, in an identity crisis. Flowers offers a compelling argument that connects the discourse of theological liberalism, civil rights, and feminism to the evolution of the Women's Missionary Union and women's ordination. Womanhood served as primary focus of the conservative faction and moderates pushed back with calls for "freedom" and pluralism.

Chapter 2 turns to the rising tensions in the denomination during the 1970s and the ways that gender influenced the 1979 break. Flowers emphasizes the importance of both conservative as well as moderate women in defining the controversy over women's place in the church. This chapter examines women not as a singular group but as distinct factions within the SBC, promoting wildly different definitions of womanhood influenced by or pushing back against feminism. Proponents of evangelical feminism faced off against advocates of traditional "biblical" womanhood, pitting arguments for empower-

ment and women's ordination against calls for women's submission and male leadership. The SBC did organize events like the Christian Liberation for Women Conference, demonstrating the influence of national feminism on the organization and the hope many had for enhanced roles for women in the denomination.

Conservatives fought moderate demands and chapter 3 centers on shifting influence in the SBC from 1979 to 1983. Flowers examines the rhetoric of both factions during this period, with conservatives adopting "inerrancy" as their cause and moderates responding with the claims to defending "freedom" (p. 69). The author ably demonstrates the importance of the rise of "women's ministry" to securing conservative leadership in the SBC, detailing how "women's ministry" offered a submissive model of womanhood to combat the growing feminism of American culture. Conversely, she also describes the birth of the Southern Baptist Women in Ministry (SBWIM), a support network started by moderates for women preachers and Baptists who supported them. SBWIM was plagued by internal divisions but the organization is representative of the desire amongst many Southern Baptists for increased female leadership.

These conservative/moderate tensions boil over in chapter 4, which examines the relationship between race and gender in the contest to define Baptist womanhood in the 1990s. External movements to combat racism led the SBC to apologize to African Americans in 1995 for supporting slavery at their founding in 1845, and Flowers insists that "conservatives had to realize how difficult it would be to continue promoting women's submission without evoking ready associations with southern patriarchy, the southern order, and ultimately racial matters" (p. 143). This contradiction did not prevent conservatives from following through with their mission to imbed women's submission into church doctrine. In 2000, under the conservative leadership of Paige Patterson, the Baptist Faith and Message explicitly forbade women's ordination.

In the end, the marginalized moderates responded to the conservative ascendancy through dissent and renewed efforts to promote "freedom." Chapter 5 provides insight into the reactions of moderate groups like the SBWIM and the Alliance and their continued efforts to promote women's ordination. Moderates, however, did not

form a united front and Flowers offers a useful description of the differences between the Alliance and its steadfast commitment to women's ordination, and the Baptists Committed to the SBC, whose primary goal was to elect an SBC president. When those efforts failed, many moderates simply left the SBC and joined the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF), forming their own denomination.

Flowers's work is strongest in its ability to combine an overarching narrative and cohesive argument with the voices of SBC women. Women truly are the center of this work and the author takes a unique approach of combining traditional sources (conference minutes, periodicals, bulletins) with anecdotal evidence from the perspective of the women who have lived these controversies. Thus the sources are textual and field-based, as Flowers spent two years attending women's conferences and retreats, national meetings, and local Baptist meetings. This is not a study of disembodied "women" and "womanhood" but centers on the reality of the experiences and decisions of women on both sides of these SBC debates. Flowers ably demonstrates how women stood on both sides of the moderate/conservative war over womanhood, contrasting figures like Molly Marshall-Green (a tenured, ordained female faculty member at Southern Theological Seminary) with Dorothy Patterson (the conservative advocate for "complementarianism" who fought women's ordination).

There are some very interesting anecdotes that this study leaves unexplored, which could have added even more to the book's gender analysis of the SBC. For instance, at the 1978 meeting of the "Consultation on Women in Church-Related Vocations," Flowers mentions that banquet items included "Germaine Greer's Greens" and "Marabel's Total Dough" alongside "Scarlett's Salad" and "Lottie Moon's Daily Fare" (p. 62). This particular aside presents an opportunity for additional analysis of SBC food culture and womanhood. Moments like this one are plentiful in Flowers's book, but the institutional focus of the study limits the development of many tantalizing findings, offering areas for further exploration in future studies. *Into the Pulpit* is a fascinating book that would interest scholars of religious studies, southern history, and women's history as well as those who desire a deeper understanding of the recent controversies in the SBC.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-south>

Citation: Charity R. Carney. Review of Flowers, Elizabeth Hill, *Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power since World War II*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. January, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36412>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.