

**Review of Elizabeth H. Flowers, *Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power Since World War II*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2012, ix + 263 pp., ISBN 978-0-8078-3534-0**

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In the post-World War II southern United States, tremendous social, economic, and technological changes were occurring. Southerners welcomed these changes because they brought new opportunities and prosperity to the region. The Southern Baptist denomination also welcomed these changes, took advantage of the prosperity, and grew to be the nation's largest Protestant religious group. For a time, life seemed to be good for people in the South. But, as is often the case, these changes created opportunities as well as tensions. The end of the Jim Crow era gave rise to both white flight and urban blight:

Economic progress led to an influx of new labour, first transregional and later transnational. Higher education levels brought greater acceptance of controversial philosophical and scientific concepts. The 1960s also introduced the war in Vietnam, the sexual revolution, rock and roll, and hippie culture. The result was that to many southerners, including Southern Baptists, the enemy no longer resided without, as the 'godless North,' but had moved within, as secular or liberal America (p. 2).

One such tension that southerners had to confront was the changing role of women. Women were seeking college degrees, choosing careers, taking on new positions of leadership, and challenging the notion that there were limits to what women could do. The women's issue also found its way into the Southern Baptist denomination. Southern Baptists found themselves in heated debates over the ordination of women and women in the role of pastor. Conservative Baptists argued that women could not hold positions of authority or power in the church, and more moderate Baptists argued that God could call whomever God chooses to do the work of the kingdom. This issue, along with many others, began to divide Southern Baptists. Moderates and conservatives engaged in a battle for control of the denomination.

As a Baptist, a historian of women in American religion, and one who felt the impact of the women's issue on the Southern Baptist denomination, Elizabeth Flowers argues that 'as moderates and conservatives fought for control of the denomination, the issue over women's changing roles and their bid toward greater ecclesial power moved from the sides to the center of the controversy' (p. 3). Flowers argues that while the controversy in the Southern Baptist denomination has historically been viewed and written about as debates concerning scriptural interpretation and church polity, her intent in writing this book is to show that women were major characters in the controversy and to correct an imbalance in the literature that placed the women's issue at the edges of the denominational conflict. In Chapter 1, Flowers describes how Southern Baptists became the largest Protestant denomination in America and how, for a time, they enjoyed their new-found prosperity. She goes on to identify some of the emerging cultural and theological issues of the 1960s, such as modern science, civil rights, feminism, and biblical inerrancy, that began to create tension in the flourishing denomination. Chapter 2 describes several events of the 1970s that happened within and outside the denomination to help set the stage for the 'Baptist battles' that began in 1979. Such events include the growing tide of evangelical feminism, the emergence of a biblical definition of womanhood, a conference hosted by the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission on 'Christian Liberation for Contemporary Women,' and a conference organized by the Southern Baptist Inter-Agency Council on 'Women in Church-Related Vocations.' Chapter 3 describes the controversy in the denomination between the conservative and moderate factions from 1979 to 1983. Flowers examines the rhetoric of each faction, citing how "'inerrancy" functioned as conservatives' initial rallying call and how "freedom" was the moderates' response' (p. 69). Yet, while these theological issues seemed to dominate the controversy, women on both sides of the debate were making their voices heard. Conservative women offered a new definition of 'women's ministry' that supported a submissive model of womanhood. And moderate women formed a new organization, Southern Baptist Women in Ministry, that supported the ordination of women and women as pastors. Chapter 4 focuses on the role the conservative faction played in the Southern Baptist controversy. It explores the conservatives' attitudes toward women, liberal theology, biblical interpretation, and denominational polity, as well as the strategies that were implemented to bring about a conservative victory in 1990. In Chapter 5, Flowers gives attention to the moderates and their struggle to respond to the conservative movement. As moderates began to lose power and position within the denominational agencies, they established new networks, seminaries, and organizations. Such groups included the Alliance of Baptists and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Flowers describes these new organizations and their relationship with the moderate women's organization, Southern Baptist Women in Ministry.

*Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power Since World War II* is an informative read for persons interested in Southern history, women's history, and religious studies. The book is an excellent portrayal of how cultural, geographic, secular, economic, and theological trends can influence religious denominations and movements in America. Among Southern Baptists, in particular, Flowers demonstrates how such trends created anxiety and conflict and, ultimately, divided the denomination. But, it is with great insight and care, that Flowers not only tells the story of Southern Baptists; she tells the story of

Southern Baptist *women*. She is clear to show how the story of the denomination and the story of its women eventually became inextricably connected and intertwined.

Flowers does a good job of identifying various cultural and theological issues that converged to set the stage for the conflict among Southern Baptists. And her point in writing the book is to highlight the particular issue of women's roles in ministry and its connection with the denominational conflict. But, many historians and persons involved directly in the Baptist conflict would argue that another issue existed that played a major role in the conflict: power. While Flowers is correct in the cultural and theological issues she identifies, more attention could have been given to the dynamic of power. Long before biblical inerrancy and women's ordination became debates between conservatives and moderates, conservatives complained of being left out of key denominational positions of leadership and policy making. As a result, conservatives devised a plan to 'take over' the denomination that involved a methodical process of securing positions of power on key committees. Once securing these committee positions, it became possible for them to elect leadership positions such as president, vice-president, and agency heads. Many historians argue that biblical inerrancy eventually became the rallying cry for conservatives because it helped to 'baptize' their political strategies. In turn, it has been argued, that inerrancy was also used to establish denominational policies against women's ordination and women in pastoral roles because of the perceived threat women posed to men in leadership positions in the denomination and in the churches. Moderates were equally involved in trying to maintain power in the denomination, though they were not as organized or aggressive as the conservatives. And, even among moderates today, there isn't unified support of women in pastoral roles. Thus, in the mix of all the issues that converged to set the stage for the Southern Baptist controversy, power must be recognized and discussed as a key dynamic.

This book is a serious read for those wanting to understand the nature of the debate over women's ordination in evangelical circles through the lens of the Southern Baptist denomination. But, it is also a delightful and heartfelt read for those who want to hear the voices and stories of women who were directly affected by a denomination's debates about women's roles and calling.