

Elizabeth Flowers, *Into the Pulpit*, The University of North Carolina Press | Chapel Hill, 2012.
Reviewed by Jacob Brenton.

In her book, *Into the Pulpit*, Elizabeth Flowers chronicles the recent history of the Southern Baptist Convention through the lens of “the woman question”. This history traces events from the postwar South in the 1950’s through about 2009 or so: expanding her time frame in either direction a bit to give necessary backstory as needed. Elizabeth H. Flowers works at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth as the assistant professor of American religious history. As both a religious scholar and historian, Flowers brings an interesting perspective to her work as a woman who, like many of the characters she chronicles, grew up in a Southern Baptist setting before leaving Baptist life to pursue an education from other denominations more open to women in power (Flowers 14). Her research on the subject appears to be well-rounded and exhaustive, delving deep into primary source documents and exploring the current life of Baptist women in depth through immersing herself in the cultures of both conservatives and moderates.

Into the Pulpit is primarily organized as a chronological history that clusters key events and figures of women’s power in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) over a roughly 10-20 year long period per chapter, slowing down as needed for key events. Before she starts her story, Flowers gives a broad overview of the event known as the “Fundamentalist Takeover” and lays the groundwork for her work with plenty of pertinent information about the Woman’s Missionary Union, her personal experience in the SBC, ethnic tensions surrounding the story, and the basis of what her argument will entail. In a more personal, hopeful tone, Flowers concludes her work with an epilogue chronicling the “field research” of women’s events and conventions that she attended while writing this book, sharing insight gained and lessons learned along the way. Of all

the factors discussed by Flowers in the work, the “woman question” appears to be the leading issue of Southern Baptist life in the 20th century.

It must have seemed absurd to conservative Baptists in the South. Their very own Sunday School Board, the shining beacon of light against the seemingly liberal American Baptists, published Ralph Elliot’s *The Message of Genesis* in 1961 (35). This book, written by a professor at the SBC’s Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, called into question the traditional, literal interpretation of the creation account; sending shockwaves throughout the convention. It’s not that the members of the SBC were necessarily against modern science, but more so that members were concerned that calling into question the full accuracy of one biblical account would have “undermined the scriptural integrity and infallibility that Southern Baptists held sacred” (35). The book sparked a debate so vibrant that it merited a change to the SBC’s official statement of belief, prompting a revised *Baptist Faith and Message* in 1963 with new language to reflect biblical inerrancy (37). Though this move was carried out with the intentions of calming future debates, it was just the beginning of a painful, drawn out era of Southern Baptist Battles over important issues such as the infallibility of Scripture, racial equality, and, perhaps most poignantly, the issue of women in pulpit ministry within the Southern Baptist Convention. With a vivid backdrop of societal and academic advances to frame the issue, the debate over a woman’s role in Southern Baptist Church life became a central battle in the Convention from the 1960s to the 1990s, standing together with and playing off of the more publicized wars of racial equality and the authority of the Bible.

Issues of a woman’s place in the church did not start suddenly in the middle of the 20th century though; women had been “bothering” the men who controlled Southern Baptist life since

they formed the Woman's Missionary Union (WMU) in 1888 as an auxiliary to the Convention (20). Though the women in the WMU agreed that the cross of Christ was theirs to carry to the nations, they could not agree on what part a woman should play: often arguing over "the issues of women giving public speeches, suffrage, and their organizational autonomy" (3).

Nevertheless, after forty three years of existence as a Convention, the WMU finally allowed women in the SBC a formal, recognized platform to organize and support the work of the Gospel cooperatively. As the Convention journeyed into the 20th century, the women of the WMU played a remarkably important role in teaching and training the boys and girls of associated churches to embrace the language of "calling" to ministry and the role everyone, male or female, had to play in spreading the Good News to the world. A Southern Baptist child would no doubt see a man in the pulpit every Sunday, but every other event in their church life, from Royal Ambassadors and Girls in Action, to Training Unions, to mission projects would usually be led by an empowered, spirit-led WMU woman.

As the United States emerged from World War II victorious and began the middle of the century unified, two factors contributed greatly to explosion of Southern Baptist churches in the postwar period: a dramatic increase in American conservatism and the nationalization of Dixie (34). After the scandalous and wild morality of the 1920's, the extreme poverty of the 1930's, and the wartime horror of the 1940's, the nation as a whole, and the thousands of young men returning from battle were ready to settle down and find a new modern, but comfortably conservative normal. Southern Baptists had always leaned more conservatively in their thought, and with a newly restructured convention wide calendar of "Royal Ambassadors and Girls Auxiliary, revivals in the fall and spring, and Vacation Bible School in the summer", the

Southern Baptist Convention could provide the contemporary 1950's family with a perfectly "nonliturgical" liturgy in which to worship, grow, serve, and, all too soon, fight (32). Additionally, the nation emerged from this era of worldwide wars unified together, blurring the once stark lines between North and South. This unification and nationalization in the South helped the "Southern Baptists [become] a symbol, as much American as they were Southern" (34). As the denomination grew wildly, the once loosely strung together association of churches had to now determine an official stance on important issues such as the role of women in ministry. The "middle of the road" efforts denominational leadership had been enacting for the sake of unity were no longer going to be sufficient in a Convention that had such loud outcries against Elliot's *The Message of Genesis*. Over the next forty years, women would play a vital role in the Southern Baptist response to the issues of how African Americans were treated, the ways in which the Bible can and should be used in church and personal life, and most importantly, what their own role would be in the church.

Issues of racial equality had been haunting the SBC for over a century. There is no way around it, and no way to soften it, the Southern Baptist Convention was formed on the backs of slaves. As the Convention reeled from the effects of the Civil War on the broken South, many white Baptists were on the forefront of enacting the Jim Crow movement; effectively defining what segregated America would look like. Hand in hand with many other white supporters, African Americans began to demand civil rights in the era following World War II. Southern Baptists as a whole initially recoiled at the thought, with perhaps their most famous pastor, WA Criswell proclaiming that those in favor of integration were a "bunch of infidels, dying from the neck up" (39). However, the Convention constructed on the tenants of slavery and racism

changed their opinion on the racial issues fairly quickly. Within thirteen years, the governmental and societal shift in public opinion about segregation had swayed the SBC stance to at least accept a tense and awkward integration of races, culminating in Criswell's 1968 admission that his former view of integration had been a "colossal blunder" (41). Though racial equality was often times more of an ideal than a practice of the SBC in the 20th century, the issue was practically dead by the main push of the fundamentalist takeover in the 1980's, with the 1995 Resolution on Racial Reconciliation terminating any residual debate (140). This quick turn from absolute hostility to full acceptance and brotherhood with an outcast group within four decades is strangely opposite of the Southern Baptist's struggle with the woman problem. While the convention submitted to cultural influence on the issue of race, it is as if the force with which they discriminated against African Americans was all redirected toward the unequal treatment of women in the Convention.

While issues of race may have been at least resolved on the surface through formalities and official resolutions from the SBC, the Doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy caused many battles in the Convention. Conservative reformers found their way into high places in the Convention as a result of Pressler and Patterson's tour promoting absolute inerrancy and the need for a Biblical Inerrantist in the office of SBC President (73). Though great numbers of future moderates in the SBC agreed with many of the tenants conservatives were fighting for, such as the "virgin birth, the physical revelation, and the second coming", fundamentalists began to include scientific matters such as a literal six-day creationism as paramount to how Southern Baptists should interpret Scripture (75). As the Southern Baptist ideas of infallibility became increasingly

nuanced and defined, inerrancy began to be used as a tool to use in expelling moderates from SBC leadership, leading to many firings in the seminaries and agencies of the Convention.

Speaking louder than racial equality and issues of biblical infallibility though, the “woman question” stands out as the leading controversy in the SBC of the 20th century. While the documented shift in the SBC’s opinion on racial matters seemed to occur fairly quickly, one could argue that the Convention changed their mind on women even quicker. Though supporters of women in ministry were able to leave the 1978 “Consultation on Women in Church Related Vocations” with a positive outlook of change on the horizon, six short years later the Convention drastically changed course and ratified the 1984 Kansas City Resolution; officially articulating the Southern Baptist opposition to women in the Senior Pastorate (61, 102). As the Conservative Resurgence progressed, Southern Baptists defined their own unique stance on women, most easily described as “complementarianism”. In contrast to Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty’s *All We’re Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women’s Liberation*, conservative SBC women began to write books such as Marabel Morgan’s *The Total Woman* (53, 54). Along with weekend *Total Woman* conferences, books like Morgan’s began to shape the Convention’s women and their views. After American society seemed to accept feminism (to a degree), the SBC remained countercultural, looking to women leaders such as Dorothy Patterson to articulate a theology of women’s “gracious submission” (131). After formally articulating this position, the SBC provided examples of what their ideal woman looked and acted like through relatable teachers (carefully phrased to not be pastors) such as Beth Moore (184). As these ideas began to take root in Southern Baptist churches, “women’s ministry programs either replaced the WMU or put it under a larger network”, exchanging the entity that had been responsible for so many girls

feeling a sense of God's calling with a ministry that would instead uphold and teach complementarian ideals to women (139). More than any other issue, even inerrancy, an individual's theology of women in ministry became a test for fellowship in the SBC (111). Along with disfellowshipping churches that hired women as Senior Pastors, the boards of the Southern Baptist Seminaries began to fire insubordinate faculty. This is best demonstrated during the "Black Wednesday" in 1995 at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary when it became clear to scholars such as "Chancellor, Gushee, Newman, and Weber" who had affirmed inerrancy while being interviewed that their views on women's ordination were now disqualifying them for employment at the institution (128).

The Conservative Resurgence is an incredibly fascinating time period in Southern Baptist life; watching the largest and wealthiest protestant denomination in the United States engage in a "civil war" that left so many scarred victims. Quite honestly, one must wonder if the victors were left with a less vibrant and thriving Convention than they found. Though textbooks may claim this time in history to be primarily a battle over Biblical Inerrancy, a closer inspection reveals that the resulting divergent groups such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship weren't necessarily formed over wildly different Biblical theology, but rather over their response to the "woman question". Whether they will admit it or not, women shaped the SBC of the 20th century, from raising support for missions through the WMU, to standing with blacks during the battles for racial equality, to leading the "Consultation on Women in Church Related Vocations", to splitting between loud supporters of Dorothy Patterson's complementarianism, or furthering the more moderate landscape painted by the Southern Baptist Women in Ministry's publication: *FOLIO*. Every aspect of the modern condition of the Southern Baptist Convention has been

shaped by the “woman question”. With rising enrollment of women at both moderate Baptist seminaries and in programs like Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary’s degree in homemaking, it doesn’t appear that the issue will quiet down and graciously submit to the men in leadership anytime soon (185).

Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power Since World War II is a useful resource to those studying the intersection of gender and religion in the late 20th century. Flowers has an interesting method of integrating racial and gender studies to create a view that serious students of either topic should study through reading the book. This book is very helpful in the study of Baptist History because, although Flowers clearly articulates her view in the work, an audience does not ever feel that she is completely discrediting those with an opposite viewpoint.