

Beth Moore Controversy Points to 65% of Southern Baptists Who Think Women Should Be Pastors

Southern Baptist rockstar author and speaker Beth Moore set off a social media firestorm recently with a single tweet.

Moore, who calls herself a Bible teacher rather than a pastor or preacher, mentioned that she'd been speaking at a church on Mother's Day.

Her critics say she crossed a line.

Only men should be allowed to be pastors, according to the Southern Baptist Convention's statement of faith, known as the Baptist Faith & Message. So only men should preach.

The prohibition on women clergy is shared by the nation's two largest faith groups—the 14.8 million member SBC and the Roman Catholic Church.

Both the Baptist Faith and Message as well as the Catholic Church's Catechism strictly prohibit women from being pastors or priests.

That puts these groups at odds with other church groups, like the United Methodists, who have ordained women for five decades. It may also put them at odds with people in the pews.

The 2011 Faith Matters Survey—a study from Harvard and Notre Dame that surveyed 2,646 Americans—asked respondents how much they agreed with the following statement, “Women should be allowed to be priests or clergy in my house of worship.”

Three quarters (77.8%) of Americans agree. That includes two-

thirds (64.7%) of Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics (68.9%). That could accurately be described as strong levels of support.

Southern Baptist women in particular seem ready to accept women as pastors.

Three quarters (73.1%) of female Southern Baptists favor women in the pulpit, compared to just 58.1% of Southern Baptist men. And half of Southern Baptist women along with four in 10 men strongly support women clergy.

About 12% of Southern Baptist men strongly disagree with women clergy. So do about 7% of Southern Baptist women.

Looked at from this view, a doctrinal change for the SBC on this issue would seem to please many more people than it would anger.

So, why hasn't it happened?

This reluctance to change seems linked to how often Southern Baptist men go to church.

A bit of explanation.

I broke the SBC down into four groups based on biblical literalism and gender along with controls for race and education.

For women, there is no discernible relationship, meaning whether a Southern Baptist woman is a biblical literalist or not, there is no statistically significant change in her view of women as pastors at any level of church attendance.

The same is not true for men, however.

For male Southern Baptists who are biblical literalists, the more they attend church, the less likely they are to support female pastors. In fact, support for women clergy is

incredibly low among Southern Baptist men who are biblical literalists and attend church multiple times a week.

This result has a significant bearing on the mechanisms that could lead to change in the Southern Baptists' official position on female pastors.

The change would have to be approved by the messengers at the convention's annual meeting.

While I could not find hard data on this, I think it's fair to say that many of the messengers who are meeting this week in Birmingham are pastors of Southern Baptist churches.

And what do those pastors look like?

They must be male, they are very likely biblical literalists and they obviously attend church multiple times a week.

Think of it in terms of political conventions—they only attract the “true” believers. The same is true for denominational meetings.

While strong majorities of people in the pews would vote to make the switch, the convention delegates will continue to hold the line.

Compounding this issue is the fact that the SBC has lost 1.3 million members since 2006. Only half of children raised Southern Baptist stay that way as adults, and the religious “nones” have increased 266% since 1990.

Trying times lie ahead for the Southern Baptist Convention.
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