

Rick Warren, Southern Baptists and the Firestorm Over Women Pastors

Rick Warren is one of the most influential pastors in this country. His book "The Purpose Driven Life" is known as the best-selling nonfiction book of all time, with 50 million copies published. The congregation he has led for 42 years, Saddleback Church, has more than 30,000 members in 14 locations in southern California.

But Warren, who is 69, made lots of enemies last year when he ordained three women as staff pastors at Saddleback. The Southern Baptist Convention ousted the church in February of this year because the SBC maintains that the Bible forbids women to serve in pastoral positions. This week, when SBC delegates gather in New Orleans for their annual meeting, hardliners are likely to reinforce their stance against Saddleback.

"I *publicly apologize* to every good woman in my life, church and ministry that I failed to speak up for in my years of ignorance," Warren said in a statement he posted on Twitter on June 10. "What grieves me is that I hindered them in obeying the Great Commission command (and Acts 2:17-18) that *everyone* is to *teach* in the church. I held them back from using the spiritual gifts and leadership skills that the Holy Spirit had sovereignly placed in them."

In response to Warren's post, angry detractors labeled him a heretic and a false teacher. But the embattled pastor, who retired in 2022, responded to his critics with grace. I plan to do the same because (1) the American church already has too much division, and (2) I love Southern Baptists because they are a vital part of the body of Christ.

Not all Southern Baptists march in lockstep over this issue. Some insist that women can never teach men. Others say it's OK for women to teach as long as they don't function as pastors or preach on Sunday mornings. Meanwhile, the SBC has a long tradition of female missionaries—and its overseas missions offering fund is named after Lottie Moon, a Baptist woman who preached the gospel for four decades in China.

It's sad that strict fundamentalists in the SBC are calling Warren a heretic because he believes women can preach. After all, many conservative, Bible-believing denominations in this country ordain women—including the Assemblies of God, the Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.), the International Pentecostal Holiness Church, the Foursquare Church, the Church of God (Anderson, Ind.), the Salvation Army, the Wesleyan Church (which has allowed female ordination for 140 years) and countless charismatic church networks and independent congregations.

Hardliners in the SBC oppose women in the pulpit for two reasons. One, they have a narrow interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:12, and they insist that Paul laid down a universal ban on women serving in spiritual leadership of any kind. Second, conservative Baptists fear that ordaining women will lead churches down a "slippery slope" to embrace liberal theology.

Catherine Booth found herself in the middle of this controversy more than 150 years ago. A powerful preacher, she founded the Salvation Army with her husband, William, in 1865. At that time many critics of women preachers told her that it was "unfeminine" for her to preach the gospel. So in 1859 she wrote a pamphlet, "Female Teaching: Women's Right to Preach the Gospel."

Booth's writing is still one of the clearest defenses of a woman's right to preach ever penned. Yet her critics continued to throw tomatoes and apples at her when she spoke on street corners in London. Not only did she eloquently dissect the

words of the apostle Paul to prove that he had women preachers on his team (such as Priscilla, Phoebe, Euodia, Syntyche and others), but Booth asked a powerful question: If God were against women preachers, why does it seem the Holy Spirit is blessing the ministry of women who speak publicly?

Catherine Booth's critics dismissed her, but her legacy is legendary. She introduced more alcoholics, homeless people and marginalized maids and seamstresses to Jesus Christ than any of her forgotten critics. And the denomination she and her husband founded has 1.7 million members today, an international outreach to the poor and many women pastors.

Booth often quoted Acts 2:17a, which says: "'In the last days it shall be,' says God, 'that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.'" For Mrs. Booth, this was the "Emancipation Proclamation" for women in the church. It clearly states that women will speak for God after the coming of the Holy Spirit's power.

What does "your daughters will prophesy" mean if it doesn't mean they will preach? Does it mean they can preach only outside the church? Does it mean they are only sanctioned to conduct Bible studies for women? Does it mean they can preach as long as they don't stand behind a Plexiglas pulpit? Does it mean they can preach as long as there are no adult men in the audience?

Peter's sermon in Acts 2 was not about limitation. Acts 2:17 does not include an asterisk with a footnote that says, " *Only in certain situations." Acts 2:17 is about freedom, because Pentecost removed the gender barrier.

I will continue to love and support my brothers and sisters in the Southern Baptist Convention, regardless of whether they change their views on this divisive issue. But I also appeal to them to stop putting the heretic label on Bible-believing Christians who disagree with their interpretations. Those of

us who ordain women do it not to mislead the church, but to empower as many people as possible to win the world for Jesus.
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