

Will We Ever Stop Arguing About Women Preachers?

Two months after violent storms tore through Alabama, another huge tempest is raging there this week—and this one threatens to blow apart the nation's largest Protestant denomination. Representatives of the Southern Baptist Convention have been meeting in Birmingham, Alabama, and this time, the issue of women's ordination is the tornado.

Prior to this week's two-day meeting, controversy began to swirl when popular Bible teacher Beth Moore, a Southern Baptist, mentioned in a tweet that she would be preaching at a Mother's Day church service. A group of male SBC leaders who are "complementarians"—those who oppose women in the pulpit—began expressing concerns that Moore was scheduled to speak on a panel during the conference on June 12.

Owen Strachan, a professor at the SBC's Midwestern Baptist Seminary, warned that Moore has no business preaching in front of a mixed congregation. "For a woman to teach and preach to adult men is to defy God's Word," Strachan said. "Elders must not allow such a sinful practice."

Strachan wasn't subtle. He is implying that Beth Moore is engaged in a "sinful practice" because she dares to preach in a church on a Sunday.

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. And others think it's okay for women to speak as long as they aren't preaching on a Sunday morning in a church. Meanwhile, others are hoping the SBC will relax its rules on female ordination.

Catherine Booth found herself in the middle of this

controversy more than 150 years ago. A powerful preacher in her own right, she founded the Salvation Army with her husband, William, in 1865. At that time many staunch critics of women preachers were telling 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 while wearing her signature bonnet. Not only did she eloquently dissect the words of the apostle Paul to prove that he had women preachers on his team (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, and an international outreach to the poor.

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.’”