Women in Ministry:  
Southern Baptists and Quakers

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

Brittney Schmidt

Thesis Advisor  
Dr. Mark Malaby

Ball State University  
Muncie, Indiana  
May 2011

Expected Date of Graduation  
May 2011
Abstract

Women have a long history of being excluded from leadership opportunities in our society. This exclusion still exists today, especially in many church settings. For example, the Southern Baptist Church is one primary denomination, along with many others, that does not allow a woman to be in the pulpit and serve as a senior minister. Quakers, however, are on the other end of the spectrum and allow this practice. They believe all are ministers and should serve in that capacity, regardless of gender. All are welcome to participate and serve in any role of the Quaker Church. This paper compares and contrasts the roles and involvement of women in leadership capacities in each of the two denominations.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Mark Malaby, my thesis advisor, for counseling me throughout this undertaking. He was always more than helpful with anything that I needed. Thank you.

I would also like to thank Dr. Carmen Siering. She taught the Women and Gender Studies class that gave me the initial idea. I learned so much from her, both as a professor and as a fellow Quaker woman. I truly appreciate her.
Women, as a whole, have a history of making room for themselves in society, welcome or not. This idea even spills over into faith and religion. Some denominations have nearly always accepted women as leaders in the church while others still reject the idea. For example, Southern Baptists do not allow women to preach in the pulpit or become Deacons of the church. Quakers, though, are quite the opposite. These two denominations, Southern Baptist and Quaker, illustrate two very different views on women in ministry.

Southern Baptists have historically excluded women from obtaining leading roles in their church. In 1885, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) changed their constitution to read “brethren” as opposed to “messengers.” “Brethren” was thought to be a more masculine term, which is exactly what they wanted. The SBC was aiming to keep women from being accepted as a “messenger,” or minister. The position of the church minister should only be filled by a male, in their opinion (James, Jackson, Shepherd, & Showalter, 2006). This idea carried over into other aspects of the church, as well.

Women were not permitted to vote on policies within the church. This means that even if they wanted to change their eligibility to vote, a male would have to present the notion and vote on it. The women were not allowed to bring up the topic in church or vote on it. It was not until the year 1918 that women received the right to vote within the church (James, Jackson, Shepherd, & Showalter, 2006). Many years later, the topic of women in ministry finally surfaced in the Southern Baptist churches.

In 1984, the issue of having females as ministers came up at the SBC. This caused a major rift between everyone involved in the church because of the two
extreme views on the matter. Those in favor of it wanted the church to move to a more modern way of conducting church services and making decisions that affected the entire congregation. They felt that women were capable of teaching God's word in the same way that men were. Then there were those who did not agree at all. In their opinion, a woman should stay quiet and submit to her husband, as it says in the Bible (Fletcher, 1994).

The congregation members who were against women in ministry (traditionalists) used specific verses in the Bible to illustrate their argument, such as, “Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says” (1 Corinthians 14:34, New International Version). “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent” (1 Timothy 2:11-12, New International Version). The traditionalists argued that these verses specifically said that women cannot be a leader in a church. Congregation members who held the opposite view did not agree. They believed that those verses were taken out of context. They were meant for people at that time that were not behaving in a godly way. Verses were up for interpretation and the traditionalists had a different view than others.

Something had to be done in order to subdue all the turmoil in the church. The Home Mission Board (HMB) was the governing board of the Southern Baptist Convention. This group decided to create a committee to focus on the problem in attempt to soothe all the conflict within the church body. The committee worked for a year on the issue with no success. After that year, the attempt was abandoned and the HMB became dominated by traditionalists. Because of this, women were still not
allowed to be ministers within the Southern Baptist Church. It was decided that churches that had female ministers were to be given zero mission money and were to be "disfellowshipped" from the church body (Fletcher, 1994).

In the late 1990’s Southern Baptists still had the same stance on the matter. The SBC voted to make an addition to their Faith and Message statement. A woman was expected to “submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ” (Morgan, 2003). Women were to be fully submissive to their husbands and it was the opinion that women could not fully do that if they were a leader in the church, as well. Men were to be the head and women were to follow (Morgan, 2003). It was to stay this way, too.

As of the year 2000, the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 specifically stated that the role of a minister may only be filled by a man. This was to further ensure that Southern Baptist congregation members fully understood the guidelines of their denomination. If it was stated plainly, churches had less of a chance to go against the majority. A woman was not to be welcome in the pulpit in any church at any time (James, Jackson, Shepherd, & Showalter, 2006).

A year later, a motion was made to prohibit women from becoming ordained as ministers. Voting took place on the motion and it was granted. The addition quickly went into effect and still is today (James, Jackson, Shepherd, & Showalter, 2006).

Regardless of what the Baptist Faith and Message states, Baptist women still make their way into leadership. Currently, there are approximately 2,000 Baptist women who are ministers, staff members, chaplains, missionaries, or seminary school faculty members. However, these women include all Baptists, not just the Southern
Baptists. It remains unknown how many of these women have been officially ordained (James, Jackson, Shepherd, & Showalter, 2006). This has not gone without resistance, though.

In 2003, a committee of the Southern Baptist Convention stated that they would recommend to the 2004 Convention to break away from the Baptist World Alliance (BWA). The committee stated that this was because the BWA had recently started to endorse women in ministry and the committee did not agree (Shaw, 2008). It could not be found whether or not the Convention decided to side with the committee or not. Few studies have been done to look at this specific subject, but there are some in existence.

In 1996, a study was conducted on one of Texas’s largest Southern Baptist Churches. The researchers looked at the role of women in this specific church. It was a long process. One of the researchers attended the church’s Bible study class for women for six months. During these six months, the researcher merely observed. He paid attention to how the women were treated by others and how they, themselves, acted (Pevey, Williams, & Ellison, 1996).

The first half hour of the class involved both the men and the women of the church. Everyone gathered and was led in worship by the men. It was noted that women rarely spoke during this time. Afterwards, the church members would split off. Men would go do their study and women would go do theirs in a separate area (Pevey, Williams, & Ellison, 1996). In all components of the Bible study, God was referred to as a man. No one thought of God as a female. In addition, it was made clear that a woman’s most important role is that of a mother and a homemaker. The men made this apparent, as well as the women (Pevey, Williams, & Ellison, 1996).
After observing for six months, researchers conducted interviews with 12 of the 240 women who attended the Bible study. The ages ranged from 42 to 71. All of these women were married or had been married in the past. The Baptist faith had been a part of their lives for a long time, with the average time frame being 43 years. None of the women held a leadership role within the church (Pevey, Williams, & Ellison, 1996).

Researchers noted that these 12 women always referred to God as a male. Masculine pronouns were also always used when talking about God. All but one woman stated that wives should submit to their husbands. Their view on this statement was a little surprising, though. The general meaning of this idea was that men and women should both have their own views. Both were also welcome to voice them on most subjects, but usually the woman may only voice hers to her husband. The man always gets the final say, however, when making a decision (Pevey, Williams, & Ellison, 1996). As agreeable as these women in the study seemed to be, there were others that spoke out against the ways of the denomination.

Nancy Hastings Sehested was the first woman to become a Southern Baptist minister. She was the organizer and leader of a conference in 1983 for women in ministry. The conference was held in Louisville, Kentucky. There were 33 other Southern Baptist women in attendance. The purpose of the conference was to encourage female participation in church ministry. They also wanted to be a support system for each other on the topic of women in ministry. This may have come about because it was about the same time that women’s roles began to change in American society as a whole (Fletcher, 1994).
During the convention, the women decided to present their views to the SBC. They gathered their sources and presented their thoughts and goals to the convention in 1984. The topics they focused on included subjects such as allowing women ministers in the churches and exploring different options in general within church ministry and leadership. As mentioned above, it did not do much good (Fletcher, 1994). Perhaps one reason is that Sehested was not the only noteworthy person to speak up and the other speakers tended to disagree with her.

Carl F.H. Henry also spoke at the 1984 convention. His view, however, was much different. Henry voiced his opinion against the group of women with Sehested. He stated that woman have no place in ministry. His view was illustrated when he used a verse from 1 Timothy. “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent” (1 Timothy 2:12 New International Version). In Henry’s opinion, as well as many others, men and only men should have the responsibility of leadership in the church. They were the first created and women were the first to sin. That was enough justification for them. A vote of the men in the church was held after the discussion and the women lost. Of the people in attendance, 58% of them voted against Sehested and her group because of Henry’s explanation of his views (Fletcher, 1994).

Two people of the Southern Baptist faith were interviewed for the purposes of this paper. A man (Bret, 26 years old) and a woman (Kay, approximately 52 years old) answered four specific questions.

1. What is the typical role of a woman in your church?
2. In your opinion, should men and women have different roles within the church?

3. What is your opinion on having a female minister?

4. Tell me your philosophy of women in leadership (in the pulpit, not just serving on committees) within the Baptist church.

Kay answered the first question by stating that women are typically teachers in her church. The second was answered, “In my opinion, men and women can and do a job the same. Women are more organized usually” (K. McIver, personal communication, January, 2011). Kay answered the third and last questions as to be expected. To the third, she stated,

“I feel that the job of minister should be a man’s. The only thing I can base this opinion on is the Bible states plainly that the man is the head of the family. I feel that a church should be a family. Also, in Bible times all leadership roles were that of men. I feel that a woman can be in a leadership role, but I think a minister should be a man” (K. McIver, personal communication, January, 2011).

Kay’s fourth answer reflected this same idea. “My philosophy of a woman in leadership is that if she is capable and willing and in God’s will she should be allowed to serve everywhere except Minister and Deacons” (K. McIver, personal communication, January, 2011).

Overall, Kay had the typical Southern Baptist viewpoint when it came to women in ministry. She believes they should be submissive and not have any part in the higher leadership roles of the church. Hearing this was not surprising.
Bret's answers to these questions were quite similar. To the first, he said, "Well, being a member of a Southern Baptist Church, the typical role of the woman in ministry usually is with the children. Our children's minister is a lady. The other more typical role is that of the pianist or the organist" (B. Mciver, personal communication, March, 2011).

The second response showed his views on men and women having different roles. "In my opinion, no. With the exception of the senior pastor" (B. Mciver, personal communication, March, 2011). This answer leads into his answer for question three.

"My opinion on the minister in a church setting is that it's the job of the man. I will refer to 1 Timothy 3:1-14. The difference is while I do not feel that women should be ministers, I feel that they can work as missionaries who start churches, such as Lottie Moon in the late 1800s in China to great teachers/speakers of today, such as Beth Moore. These women never call themselves ministers/pastors but just teachers and servants of God" (B. Mciver, personal communication, March, 2011).

Bret again referred to 1 Timothy 3:1-14 for his fourth answer. "While I feel a man should be the senior pastor, I feel that the woman's leadership is best served in an associate role" (B. Mciver, personal communication, March, 2011).

Bret had the same general views as Kay. Since both are from, and were brought up in, Southern Baptist churches, they have always had the view that women do not belong in the pulpit. This goes to show that Southern Baptists may have had some discussions over the topic, but have kept with the same overall opinion about
women in ministry. This includes today. Quakers, on the other hand, have had this opportunity available to women from the beginning.

Approximately 1,300 – 1,500 Quaker community women were ministers at the inception of the United States of America in 1776. These women were among the first females to speak publicly in the country. Their audiences consisted of all types of people, both male and female. This stems from the long-held Quaker beliefs. In the Quaker faith, it is believed that everyone has the spirit within themselves, including men as well as women. It is this way in the Southern Baptist faith, too, but Quakers take advantage of this idea in a different way. Anyone can preach to anyone else because that is the spirit communicating through the person. It does not matter who is minister or speaker of a church because it is not the "person" that is doing the ministering. It is God (Campbell, 2001). This belief can be explained a little more thoroughly by looking at the structure of a Quaker service.

Early Quaker churches did not conduct their services in the same way that other denominations did. This could be one reason that women have historically been more welcomed in a Quaker pulpit as opposed to others. Quaker services were considered "quiet services." Everyone sat in silence until the spirit led someone to speak to the rest of the church. This person could be a man or a woman. Those who spoke up most often and had the most experience within the church were considered ministers. The ministers' job was to guide others in the congregation in their communion with God. They were also responsible for seeing that the services went smoothly (Hogan & Solomon, 1995). By looking at these qualifications, we can see why women were able to minister.
In the late 1800's and early 1900's, it was also not unusual for women in the Quaker faith to be the dominant figures at home. These women were generally more outspoken than women of other faiths and were not condemned for it. Husbands were important figures, but not as supremely dominant as in other religions (Swain, 2001).

In addition to being leaders within the church, Quaker women were also leaders of many reform activities in secular society. They were known to speak out about gender issues that were going on at the rise of the women’s movement. Quaker schools were also often founded and taught by these women. Leadership in positions such as these was not uncommon (Swain, 2001).

It is believed by the writer that not much research has been done on women in leadership roles currently in the Quaker church. This may be because of the fact that women have nearly always been encouraged to participate in the leading of the church. They have not been limited in the same way that women of other denominations have been.

The Quaker Faith and Practice can be used to illustrate the lack of dissension in the church. Nowhere in this document does it state that a minister must be a male member of the church. It does specifically say, though, that any member who feels called is welcome in the pulpit. That is if the member meets the other qualifications, which include having a knowledge of the Quaker faith, having spiritual maturity, and having a strong commitment to God (Indiana Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice, n.d.). Women have just as much potential to fulfill these requirements as men have and that has been the belief of Quakers ever since the beginning.
One noteworthy person that shows just how women were equal to men even in the beginning was Lucretia Mott. Mott first became a minister in a Quaker church at the age of 28 and stayed one for the rest of her life. She had the opportunity to minister, assist in making decisions, raise funds, and coordinate activities within the church. Congregation members gladly accepted Mott and her contribution to the church. Women in other denominations did not have near as much flexibility, freedom, and support in their churches (Greene, 1981).

Mott was a feminist who spoke out for the rights of women. Her involvement in church leadership gave her the confidence to advocate for the equality of women in secular society. She was not only a leader in church, but also in the women’s movement (Greene, 1981).

Another such woman was Elizabeth Webb, who lived in the 18th century. In regular society, she was not allowed to vote, have her own rights, own property, or make any legal decisions without her husband’s consent. In the church, however, she was a Quaker minister. She had a voice in the church when making decisions (Campbell, 2001).

Quaker churches do not vote in the same manner as other churches. A consensus is tried to be achieved; it is not a majority vote. The theory behind this is to try and make everyone happy with the decision that is being made. Women are included in this consensus (Campbell, 2001). That is how women, like Webb, were able to be involved in making decisions within the church.
Webb’s story is one of many that show the opinions regarding women in Quaker churches. Quakers have always encouraged women to speak and participate (Campbell, 2001). It was this way in the past and continues to be this way even now.

In the same way that interviews were held for the Southern Baptist portion of this paper, two interviews were also done for the Quaker faith. Katrina is a Quaker woman (approximately 60 years old). She was not brought up in the faith, but has been a part of it for quite some time now. She was asked nearly the same questions as those who are Southern Baptist.

1. What is the typical role of a woman in your church?
2. In your opinion, should men and women have different roles within the church?
3. What is your opinion on having a female minister?
4. Tell me your philosophy of women in leadership (in the pulpit, not just serving on committees) within the Quaker church.

Katrina’s answer to question one involved her talking about females having the opportunity to fill leadership roles within the church as well as within Yearly Meeting (the governing body of all Quaker churches). She states that, in reality, the male presence is stronger in leadership than females, but that is not because females are not allowed. “Sometimes it depends on the experience of the meeting and the effectiveness of individuals” (K. Cooper, personal communication, March, 2011).

For the next question, Katrina prefaced by saying that she was not brought up in a Quaker church, but in an Independent Christian Church. Because of this influence, she personally prefers males to hold the leadership positions, but is not opposed to
having female leaders. She says this may be because she has never experienced a female minister before (K. Cooper, personal communication, March, 2011).

Katrina again states, for the third question, that she has not ever had a female minister before. This leads her to believe that she would prefer to have a male for the position. She then goes on to say that if the right woman were to come along, she would not object. Katrina would just want them to meet with the church’s Ministry and Oversight committee (governing body of individual churches, each church has their own M&O). Any minister, male or female, does this anyway (K. Cooper, personal communication, March, 2011).

Katrina answered the fourth question by stating that she believes everyone has their own gifts from God. If one is called to lead a church, then they should be allowed to lead a church; however, “I, personally, am just not comfortable with the idea of a lady pastor – this is more due to lack of experience than a philosophy” (K. Cooper, personal communication, March, 2011).

Wade (approximately 53 years old) was the male of the Quaker faith interviewed on the topic. He was asked the same questions as Katrina, but gave slightly different answers. To the first, he said that the typical role of a woman in his church is, “any role where their gifts can be used to benefit God’s kingdom” (W. Beatty, personal communication, December, 2010). To the second, he explained that we should not think about the stereotypical gender roles when talking about roles in a church. It is his opinion that God gives certain gifts to certain people and they should use those gifts to lead others to Christ (W. Beatty, personal communication, December, 2010).
The third question further illustrated Wade’s thoughts on female ministers. He stated that he does not take into account the gender of a minister when evaluating their eligibility. He relies on the minister’s “ability to deliver a good message” instead (W. Beatty, personal communication, December, 2010). His answer to the final question elaborated on his opinion. He stated that his church currently has women in leadership roles as well as his Yearly Meeting. He believes that these women have performed well in their duties and he fully supports them (W. Beatty, personal communication, December, 2010).

Even though Katrina and Wade are both self-proclaimed Quakers, there are still some differences in their answers. Wade fully supported Quaker women in ministry while Katrina was a little apprehensive about it. She does state, though, that it is mostly because of her lack of experience of women leaders. Overall, the two agree that women have the capability and should be allowed to become leaders in the church. Even with the differences in their answers with Kay and Bret, we can see similarities between Southern Baptists and Quakers.

The topic of women in ministry has been an issue discussed in both denominations. As with any group of people, there are differing opinions. Some are voiced, some are not. It is hard to change the mind of traditionalists, though. This may be the reason why both denominations have stayed with the way they have always believed. Women leaders are welcome in Quaker churches, but not so welcome in Southern Baptist Churches.

Even so, female ministers still exist in both churches. As stated above, female Southern Baptist ministers are not as common, but they still exist. Those churches that
have them, though, are not accepted by the others in their denomination. In addition, both denominations believe that they are doing what the Bible instructs. Most, if not all, denominations believe they are in the right. It is no different with these two. Everyone has their own interpretation of the Bible.

Along with the similarities come differences. Women have had a much easier time becoming leaders within the Quaker churches. As previously stated, Quakers encourage women to participate. All women have the opportunity, if they feel so lead. Southern Baptists, as said before, have the opposite belief. They feel that men are better suited to lead the church. Women are not welcome in the pulpit (traditionally) in the Southern Baptist churches.

Becoming a minister has its benefits. Women want to be able to have those benefits, too. They want the recognition from the church and the opportunity to participate in activities reserved for clergy. They want the interaction with all the congregation members and help them. Sometimes, women just want to talk with everyone in the church and share what they feel God is telling them (Nason-Clark, 1987). Some women just want acceptance in a ministerial position.

Women in ministry have been a touchy subject in many denominations for quite some time. Quakers are about the only group that has historically had women leaders within their churches. Southern Baptists, even with the ups and downs on the subject, have been able to keep women out of leadership. This will not stop women from trying, though. Women have a history of making room for themselves and they will probably not stop at religion. People do not always agree and will never stop fighting for what they believe in, ministry included.
References


