

Editorial

Editorial for Special Issue “Reclaiming Voices: Women’s Contributions to Baptist History”

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Women make up more than half of Baptist church members globally, yet many histories of Baptists have neglected women, focusing instead on men and the institutions they lead. This Special Issue of *Religions* seeks to fill this lacuna. It amplifies women’s voices in Baptist history over the past two hundred years. By highlighting women’s stories, the Special Issue provides a fuller understanding of Baptist history as it actually happened.

Although it addresses women’s roles in Baptist history, the issue does not seek to just describe women’s contributions to male-centred movements, as in Gerda Lerner’s “contribution history”. The goal is not to “add women and stir” to add flavour. Instead, the issue seeks to reconceptualize Baptist history through the lens of gender—to change the recipe entirely. How might we understand the nineteenth century in the Southern Baptist Convention through women’s experiences? How do changes in women’s roles in the Nigerian Baptist Convention help narrate that group’s history? What shifts about our understanding of Baptist history—and Christian history more broadly—when we start with the stories of women?

The authors of the eleven articles in this issue address this question in their writings, which highlight specific women as well as broader movements and trends related to Baptist women. Articles are broad in topic as well as geographical scope. They also use new primary source research to reveal more of the history of Baptist women. I am grateful to each contributor for their important work.

Ian Randall begins the Special Issue with an analysis of missionary work, specifically of female General Baptist missionaries from Great Britain to India in the late nineteenth century. While acknowledging that scholarship about missions is complex, Randall highlights the contributions of British missionaries to education and famine relief in Orissa. He provides new primary source research on the topic using analysis of the missionary periodicals of the day.

Next, Taylor Murray moves the narrative to Canada in the first of multiple biographical articles included in the Special Issue. He profiles Dr. Olive Clark, who was a professor at the fundamentalist Toronto Baptist Seminary in the twentieth century. Clark is a fascinating example of a woman who held fundamentalist convictions—including about women’s roles—yet assumed a position of leadership and authority over others. Murray explores how she negotiated these seemingly contradictory ideas in her ministry.

Andy Goodliff also takes a biographical approach in his article, which focuses on twentieth-century British Baptist leader Lois Chapple. A woman of many talents, Chapple served as a deaconess, deacon, missionary to China, leader of the Baptist Women’s League, and leader in the Baptist World Alliance. Like Clark, she was an exceptional, not typical, woman for her context. Yet her story informs readers of the possibilities available to British Baptist women in leadership during her lifetime.

Laine Scales’s article turns our attention to women affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Baptist convention in the world and one known for its conservative views of women’s roles. Scales examines the writings of missionaries Anna Seward Pruitt and Annie Jenkins Sallee, analyzing their perspectives on singleness, marriage, and motherhood. Both women served during the woman’s missionary movement around the turn of



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the twentieth century, and both had to navigate changing roles due to varied expectations of women in different stages of life.

Gendered expectations among Southern Baptists are also a topic of Joanna Lile's article on women's experiences at SBC colleges during the Progressive Era. Lile analyzes women's publications from colleges that educated women in this period, demonstrating that "the college experience was a blend of many experiences—mischief, friendship, sisterhood, leadership, love, and spirituality—that they [female students] believed, in one way, or another were part of their journey into womanhood." Her chapter provides a fascinating look into women's experiences in higher education in the conservative Southern United States.

With his article, Gordon Heath returns to the Canadian context, this time with a biographical analysis of Rev. Dr. Muriel Spurgeon Carder. Like others profiled in this Special Issue, Carder served as a missionary, which was considered an acceptable and even heroic role for Baptist women. Yet her roles also included preacher, scholar, translator, mentor, and chaplain, among others. Heath demonstrates the ways that Carder both reinforced and undermined common assumptions about Canadian Baptist women in ministry in the twentieth century.

Continuing an emphasis on the twentieth century, Rebecca Hilton moves the reader's focus to Australian Baptist women. Contrary to what some individuals might assume, these women served in important roles in missions work, preaching, management, social ministries, and denominational leadership. Hilton explores the additional responsibilities that some women assumed during World War II because of men's absence, yet she also examines the limitations Australian Baptist women faced in the first half of the twentieth century.

The next article, by Matthews A. Ojo and Ezekiel Oladapo Ajani, features Baptist women in Nigeria from 1914 to 2021. The authors detail the changing status of women in the Nigerian Baptist Convention, which is second only to the Southern Baptist Convention in membership. They conclude that Nigerian Baptist women have moved from subordination to empowerment, as evident through their ordination, education, and leadership roles.

The next two articles return to the Southern Baptist Convention, with Leslie Garrote focusing on the recent history of a list of SBC churches with women ministers, which was created by opponents of women serving in these roles. Garrote analyzes primary sources related to these women, concluding that not only gender but race was a significant issue in this controversy. Black churches were less likely to acknowledge the list or their affiliation with the SBC at all.

C. A. Vaughn Cross also probes the topic of race as it relates to the SBC, a denomination that was founded to send slaveholders as missionaries. In a wide-ranging analysis, she examines the writings, attitudes, and actions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Southern Baptist women related to slavery, discussing what she calls the "1845 Mythos" of the denomination and its founding. Vaughn Cross's writing relays a sobering past on a topic that most contemporary Southern Baptists might prefer to ignore.

Finally, Rosalind Mary Gooden's writing returns to the Australian context, again emphasizing the role of Baptist women in missions, this time to India. She describes the first Australian Baptist missionaries—all women—and reviews their ministries. Her writing concludes the Special Issue by examining themes of gender, ministry, and missions that other contributors have also ably explored.

I hope that future scholars will continue in the trajectory of these authors as they seek to better understand the past. As they have demonstrated, it is important to utilize both traditional and non-traditional archival material for the stories of women that help us more fully comprehend the more than four-hundred-year-old tradition of the people called Baptists. This is especially needed for Baptists in the Global South, where Christianity is growing rapidly, but historical scholarship—especially about women—sometimes lags behind. Until such research is conducted and shared, our understanding of global Christian history will sadly remain incomplete.

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