

# God Speaks to Us, Too

Southern Baptist Women  
on Church, Home, and  
Society

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THE UNIVERSITY PRESS OF KENTUCKY

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# Introduction

## *Raised Right—The Making of Southern Baptist Identity*

*Living for Jesus a life that is true,  
Striving to please him in all that I do,  
Yielding allegiance glad-hearted and free,  
This is the pathway of blessing for me.*

—Thomas O. Chisholm, “Living for Jesus”

Mama said, “I just don’t believe a woman should be the pastor of a church.” We were sitting in the living room of the house in which I’d grown up. Mom was kicked back in her overstuffed recliner, and I was on the sofa. The lavalier microphone cords linked us to each other and to my digital recorder.

“Why not?” I asked, walking the fine line between researcher and goading prodigal daughter.

“Because women are more emotional creatures, and we’re supposed to be protected. And God put that man here to protect us. We’re the weaker sex; I believe that. Not weaker in the mind. But we’re supposed to . . . we have a road.”

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I asked the women who participated in my interviews to allow me to use their real names and thus preserve their words and experiences as a piece of Baptist history. All but three of the names used in this book are real; the three people who chose to use pseudonyms were concerned about possible conflicts of interest with their work. Because these women honored me with their time, their trust, their words, and their real names, I felt compelled to mention each participant’s name at least once in the book. To help readers keep everyone straight, I provide on page 269 a “cast of characters”—because, indeed, these women are characters—that lists each participant’s name and some brief identifying information.

Then, in the next breath, she said, “Without women in the church, there’d be no church either, because women do most of the work in the church.”

“So why wouldn’t it make sense to . . . ?”

She cut me off. “And I believe a woman can be a preacher too. But I believe being a pastor is more than just getting up there like an evangelist and preaching the Word.”

“What else do you see as the role of the pastor?”

“The pastor is supposed to feed the flock; that’s number one. But he also is supposed to minister to that flock, by showing love and compassion and visiting them, and getting to know them like his family.”

“You don’t think women are better . . . ?”

She interrupted me again. “Yeah, women can be a complement; and that’s what a wife is, a helpmeet to the man.”

“I’m trying to figure out what specifically for you excludes women from the pastorate, because everything you’re describing women do well.”

“Probably administration,” she answered, then added without taking a breath, “I know women are good at administration. One of my gifts was administration. When I did that treasurer’s job I knew that without a doubt.”

She paused, realizing what she was saying. “I guess maybe it was the way I was brought up, but I just . . . men, the world respects men more in a leadership capacity. It’s just like what I was talking about, in church if a man gets up and says something, they all listen; if a woman gets up, she’s running her mouth.”

I asked her whether she thought things might change as more women moved into leadership positions in society.

“If I were younger, I might believe that. I can see women in leadership positions in the church, maybe *under* a pastor, as assistant or something like that, but not the head of the church. To me, the pastor is the head of the church under Christ, and even though God is no respecter of persons. . . .” The irony of what she was saying struck her. “I guess it’s just because of the way I was raised, and my age, and everything, that I just don’t believe a woman should be the pastor of a church,” she concluded.

“But you believe in local church autonomy?” I asked.

“Right. I believe in the autonomy of the local church. If you have a church that votes a woman as the pastor or co-pastor, that church has the right to do that.”

In many ways, my mother is a typical Southern Baptist woman. She's conservative, Bible believing, missions minded, and civically engaged, and she's full of contradictions. She has spent her entire life in the Deep South, where she married young, had children, and made a home in which my sister and I were raised to be good Southern Baptist girls. She tells me that my father is the head of the house, although I can't imagine his daring to make a family decision without her input. She herself did not go to college or have a career, but she made sure that my sister and I both got an excellent higher education and would always be able to be self-sufficient. She teaches Sunday school at her church, serves on church committees, and helps provide for needy people in her community. She reads her Bible daily and has definite ideas about what's right and wrong. She also feels perfectly free to challenge her pastor or anyone else in authority about the Bible, theology, or the church budget. I asked her, "I take it you think it's okay to disagree with the pastor?"

"Oh, yes," she answered, "He knows it too. . . . And he knows that if he preaches something, and my little light goes off that that's not the way I see it, that I'll ask him about it."

Although she taught me to be respectful of others, she also told me that I had to think for myself, and she certainly models that. Yet we've ended up thinking pretty differently about a lot of things—something fairly characteristic of Baptists. Put two Baptists in a room together, the saying goes, and you'll get three opinions. Or, as one of my participants put it, "If you've met one Baptist, you've met one Baptist."

Baptist is by far the predominant religion in the South: Baptists account for 44.9 percent of all religious adherents in Kentucky, 42.4 percent in Alabama, 40.9 percent in Mississippi, 40.8 percent in Tennessee, 35.5 percent in Georgia, 34.9 percent in South Carolina, and 33.8 percent in North Carolina.<sup>1</sup> Baptists had their beginnings in seventeenth-century England when two distinct groups emerged at almost the same time with very different ideas about free will and predestination. And Baptists have been fighting ever since.<sup>2</sup> Controversy has always attended Baptists because they believe that each individual has equal and direct access to God and therefore possesses the ability to determine what is true and right for herself or himself. They've disagreed—and sometimes parted ways—over missions, their origins, the Bible, hymn singing, and women, among other things. But disagreement hasn't always been a bad thing, because it has kept Baptist faith alive, vibrant, and relevant as its adherents have engaged in debates over the important issues of the day, including (from the seventeenth century on) the status, rights, and roles

of women. And for Baptist women, these debates have played a pivotal role in how they've constructed their own identities, as well as fostered a great deal of diversity among Baptist women themselves. Though they've had their differences, Baptists have also typically agreed on a number of important points that distinguished them from the other Reformation offspring. From the beginning, one belief in particular characterized Baptists: freedom.

Most Americans probably would not think of Baptists as radicals, but in the seventeenth century, Baptists were on the cutting edge of radical changes in Protestant faith and practice. They were called a "base sect," a "scab of error," a "seduced and . . . schismatical rabble of deluded children, servants, and people," "a profane and sacrilegious sect," an "impure and carnal sect," and "anarchists."<sup>3</sup> Surprisingly, the belief that raised such an outcry from the conservative establishment, the belief that threatened both church and crown, was freedom. Baptists demanded complete liberty of conscience. They believed that one could enter Christianity only through a conscious, voluntary choice, free of coercion. In practice, this meant that infant baptism had to be replaced by believer's baptism, and the requisite for church membership became one's own free decision to join rather than induction into membership through baptism as an infant. More than theological heretics, Baptists were considered political traitors. Baptists called for the separation of church and state, and they disobeyed the laws of the state when those laws conflicted with their beliefs. For their convictions, Baptists were persecuted, whipped, and imprisoned—both in England and in America.

Today, people hardly think of Baptists as dissenters and nonconformists who started out demanding freedom of conscience for all people. In particular, Southern Baptists tout themselves as conservatives, and in recent years they have made far-reaching changes to redefine the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). They have embraced Republican politics<sup>4</sup> and have become vocal proponents of pastoral authority and women's subordination. When fundamentalists took control of the Convention in the early 1990s, many moderate Southern Baptists left the denomination to form alternative organizations that highlighted historic Baptist characteristics such as soul freedom and the separation of church and state. Nonetheless, although the public face of Southern Baptists may seem entirely fundamentalist, the ideals of soul freedom still have great sway in Southern Baptist churches. This is especially significant for women, whose roles and identities have been central in

the changing rhetoric of the Convention since 1979 and the beginning of what is known as “the Controversy” among Southern Baptists.

## Being Baptist

The central theme of this book is soul competency—the notion of a free soul that stands alone before God and is therefore competent and responsible for its own decisions without the need for any other mediator—and how this Baptist distinctiveness shapes (consciously and unconsciously) the identities of Southern Baptist women. These women are more complex, more thoughtful, kinder, and usually more rebellious than outside observers might think. This book reveals that complexity and suggests that even in the midst of patriarchy (in which they are often willing participants), Southern Baptist women create ways to claim their own identity and to act independently because they are, in their own eyes, competent before God.

I asked each participant what being Baptist means to her. There was a surprising consistency in their answers. Many mentioned issues such as Baptists’ high view of scripture or their emphasis on missions. Some named specific elements, such as the Cooperative Program, which is the financial support mechanism for the denomination’s work. Others noted theological propositions, such as eternal security, which may or may not be a belief shared by other Baptists. By far, however, most of their answers had to do with soul competency. Raquel Ellis, a twenty-nine-year-old graduate student in Illinois, answered the question this way: “[Being Baptist] means that we can approach God directly (no middleman) and have a personal relationship with him, that Christians should be baptized to publicly profess their acceptance of Christ, and that the Bible is God-breathed.” Joanne Parker, editor of the Woman’s Missionary Union’s *Missions Mosaic* magazine, grew up Catholic and became Southern Baptist as an adult. When I asked her what being Baptist means to her, she immediately responded, “Being Baptist means that I have the freedom to go directly to God in prayer; I have the freedom to open my Bible and study it without someone else telling me, ‘This is what you need to learn.’” Judy Masters, a lifelong friend of my mother’s, told me, “I think [being Baptist has] given me the independence to believe as I feel like the Bible teaches me to believe. It gives me the independence to study [God’s] Word and not have to trust what somebody else tells me. It gives me a firm conviction

that directs which paths I choose.” For each participant, in some way, the idea that God speaks directly to her and that she has the ability to discern God’s direction in her own life is paramount to her experience of being Baptist. In many ways, this belief in their soul competency lies at the heart of their identities.

Because they believe in their own competence in matters of religion, Southern Baptist women tend to exhibit a strong sense of agency and autonomy—they are able to act and to govern themselves.<sup>5</sup> Although outsiders tend to see Southern Baptist women as dominated by men because of the patriarchal context of Southern Baptist life, the reality is that agency always occurs within a social context that defines the parameters of the choices available to people.<sup>6</sup> Within the parameters of Southern Baptist life, women are able to utilize creative strategies that expand those boundaries while remaining fully involved in their relationships and their communities. Thus, although the public face of Southern Baptists is unapologetically patriarchal (and many Southern Baptist women themselves espouse notions of subordination and submissiveness), the reality is that within their contexts, Southern Baptist women develop a variety of strategies to adapt to and challenge the constraints they face in church, at home, and in society, and these strategies are closely interwoven with these women’s understanding of themselves as Southern Baptists.

## Southern Baptist Identity

That I would grow up Southern Baptist seems inevitable. I was born in Georgia, the heart of the Bible Belt and a stronghold for Southern Baptists. In fact, my little county of 69,000 inhabitants had sixty Southern Baptist churches in 1960 when I made my appearance at McCall Hospital in Rome, Georgia, just three days after my mother’s twenty-first birthday. The first place my parents ever took me to was a Southern Baptist church. My father grew up Southern Baptist, and when I recently asked his mother about her own churchgoing experiences, my now ninety-eight-year-old grandmother told me, “I’m a Baptist, teeth and toe.” My mother’s family was not particularly religious, so she attended a Christian church on her own while she was growing up. When she married my father in 1957, four months before her eighteenth birthday (he was twenty-three), she started going to a Southern Baptist church with him. And my path was set.



Southern Baptists came into being in 1845 in response to northern Baptists' increasing opposition to slavery.<sup>7</sup> Until this point, Baptists in the North and South had cooperated to support missionaries, and the mission societies had a policy of neutrality with regard to slavery. As northern Baptists became more and more abolitionist, however, Baptists in the South, on the whole, became more entrenched in their defense of slavery. Tensions reached a breaking point in 1844, when Baptists in Georgia nominated a slave owner for appointment as a home missionary, constituting a test case of the Home Mission Society's neutrality. The society refused to act on the test case. Then Alabama Baptists questioned whether slaveholders could be appointed as foreign missionaries. The neutrality stance was cited in response, but the following sentence was added: "one thing is certain; we can never be a party to any arrangement which would imply approbation of slavery."<sup>8</sup> Some Baptists in the South called for a cautious response, but delegates from various southern Baptist bodies gathered in Augusta, Georgia, on May 8, 1845, and formed the Southern Baptist Convention with 4,126 churches and 351,951 members.<sup>9</sup>

For the next 100 years, Southern Baptists continued as one of many strong Christian denominations in the South. But with its successful "Million More in '54" campaign, the Convention experienced unprecedented growth. Coupled with southern economic expansion, this campaign catapulted Southern Baptists to the forefront of Christianity in the South. Soon, Southern Baptists became the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. One of the keys to the denomination's success was its ability to create a common identity for Southern Baptist church members. To be Southern Baptist was not simply to hold membership in a Southern Baptist church. Rather, it was to construct a sense of self shaped by Southern Baptist theology, polity, educational programs, and church practices.

As early as 1963, Southern Baptist religious educator Findley Edge critiqued the institutionalization of Southern Baptists and the resulting concern for numbers and programs over authentic faith.<sup>10</sup> He warned that numerical success could not be equated with faithful Christian living and pointed out that Southern Baptists' emphasis on growth and efficiency had led to unregenerate church membership—that is, those who had had conversion experiences but who had not gone on to lead authentic Christian lives. For Edge, the division of salvation from discipleship was problematic at best and heretical at worst. He worried that

the denomination's packaging of curricular materials and programs rooted in secular educational and management scholarship rather than theology would lead to programmed rather than experiential faith. Yet for most leaders in the denomination, unprecedented growth equated with God's blessing, so they did not heed Edge's warning. They continued to develop materials that turned Christian education into a series of step-by-step guidelines instead of a dynamic experience of the divine. Though theologically problematic, these materials worked—if the goal was to create a simple and singular identity for Southern Baptists.

So, I was born not so much into a church or a denomination as into an identity. And for me, that identity was gendered and racialized in the sociohistorical context of the 1960s and 1970s South. Developmental theorist James Fowler contends that the process of meaning-making is central to faith.<sup>11</sup> As I thought about my own life and the lives of other Southern Baptist women, I became interested in this process of meaning-making. I wanted to understand how Southern Baptist women make meaning of their lives, how they construct gendered identities that are complex and often contradictory, and how they understand themselves as Southern Baptist women.

So I decided to ask them. Funded by the Louisville Institute, I spent a year and a half talking to 159 current and former Southern Baptist women. Support from the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives and Oregon State University's Valley Library allowed me to comb Southern Baptist archives to find out what women of the past had to say for themselves—and what others had to say about them. Oregon State University's Center for the Humanities provided me with a fellowship that gave me the time and space to travel and write.

## Gathering the Stories

I set out to talk to the broadest spectrum of Southern Baptist women possible, because I wanted to reflect their great diversity. I talked to fundamentalist, conservative, moderate, and liberal women; to laywomen and women in ministry; to white, black, Asian American, and Latina women; to young and old women; to southern, midwestern, and western women. Many of the women in my study are now former Southern Baptists. They are among the thousands of people who left the denomination after the fifteen-year struggle between moderates and fundamentalists resulted in the latter making radical changes in the denomination's public stance on issues related to women. Yet their iden-

tities were forged in Southern Baptist churches, and most of them continue to identify with some Baptist group.

Diana Garland once led the social work program at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, but she was a casualty of the Controversy and left to join the faculty of another Baptist institution—Baylor University. Paula Sheridan, a professor of social work at Whittier College in California, asked Diana, “Why are you doing this at Baylor when you could do it anywhere?” Diana answered, “Because these are my people.”

“I understand that,” I said, when Paula told me of their conversation.

“And I will say to people who make fun of Southern Baptists,” Paula continued, “‘These are my people.’ This is a part of my family, and if I separated myself from that I would be fragmenting myself.”

Many consider themselves Baptists in exile. That metaphor seems to predominate among those who either were forced out of Southern Baptist life or left of their own free will. In fact, a volume of essays written by a number of moderate leaders during the Controversy is entitled *Exiled*.<sup>12</sup> Speaking of the people who left, Paula said, “We’re all in exile.” She believes that the trick is learning how to love what has both birthed and harmed us.

Nan Cook, a member of First Baptist Church in Batesburg, South Carolina, has remained a Southern Baptist. She explained, “A preacher told me one time if you were ever raised a Baptist, you were always a Baptist!” Interestingly, the women who stayed and the women who left have many more similarities than differences. Those who left provide a much more vocal alternative narrative to the Convention’s official stance on women, but even the women who stayed present a more subtle and nuanced picture of simultaneous complicity and resistance than most outside observers would predict. For simplicity’s sake, I refer to all these women as Southern Baptists, noting their affiliation with other groups or denominations when it is relevant.

Perhaps the most poignant moment of my research came when I sat down to lunch with Dorothy and Paige Patterson. Paige is now president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Dorothy teaches there. Paige was one of the leaders of the conservatives during the Controversy, and Dorothy was an outspoken advocate of the changes in the Convention. In every way we were (and are) on opposite sides of most issues, yet I found myself in their home, eating lunch, and sharing stories. Like Leslie Jordan (see the preface), I had to put all the ugly things under my chair and just listen to and learn from these people.

After lunch, Paige went back to his office, and Dorothy and I sat down for her interview. I had asked her to find a photograph of herself as a girl growing up in a Southern Baptist church, and she showed me one in which she was Queen Regent in Service. (More about this later. For now, suffice it to say that, for Southern Baptist girls in the mid-twentieth century, this was akin to reaching the highest level of Girl Scouts.) As I looked at that photo, I saw one of those fond memories that so many Southern Baptist girls shared, and I grieved that we had not found a way to work through our differences and hold on to those precious things we did have in common.

The Controversy among Southern Baptists began in 1979 when a group of fundamentalist leaders developed a scheme to take control of the denomination's boards, agencies, and institutions by electing a fundamentalist as president of the Southern Baptist Convention. The president of the SBC has great appointive powers, and the plan was that he would use those powers to appoint like-minded people to the committee on committees, which nominated people to the committee on boards, which in turn nominated trustees to the boards of the various denominational organizations. The motivating forces behind this power play were the fundamentalists' belief that theological liberalism had crept into the Convention and their own sense of disenfranchisement from places of power.

The work of the SBC's annual meeting is done by "messengers," people elected by their local churches to attend the convention and vote their own personal convictions. Messengers are not delegates; they do not represent their congregations. In keeping with the Baptist notion of a priesthood of believers, churches do not instruct messengers how to vote; they trust that the messengers will listen when God speaks directly to them. Each church that gives a minimum amount through the Cooperative Program, the denomination's funding mechanism, can send two messengers. For each additional incremental sum, a local church can send another messenger, up to a maximum of ten messengers per church. During the height of the Controversy, as many as 45,000 messengers attended the annual convention. The fundamentalist leadership used the rallying cry of biblical inerrancy—the notion that scripture is without error not only in theology but also in history and science (explored in more detail in chapter 2)—to rally messengers to vote for the fundamentalist candidate. They suggested that theological liberalism had to be rooted out of the denomination's agencies and institutions, and they pitted themselves—the true believers of the Bible—

against the more moderate Southern Baptists who, at the time, held most of the paid positions in the Convention and whose fidelity to scripture was open to question because they did not hold to inerrancy. For the next thirteen chaotic, hostile, and painful years, the fundamentalists controlled the Convention, and the moderates looked for ways to create alternative Baptist structures.

One of the more interesting phenomena I observed when I talked to Southern Baptist women was their puzzlement at my question about their denominational affiliation. On the demographic survey that I had the women fill out, I asked whether they were currently Southern Baptists and, if not, with what denomination they were affiliated. I also asked whether their churches were affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) or the Alliance of Baptists, two splinter groups founded by moderates in response to fundamentalist control of the Convention. (Some Southern Baptist churches remained within the Convention but associated with one or both of these groups. Other churches disaffiliated themselves completely from the SBC and joined one or both of these alternatives. At this point, neither the CBF nor the Alliance considers itself a separate denomination *per se*.) I was amazed at the consternation these questions caused. Many of the women no longer considered themselves Southern Baptist but pointed out that because the CBF and the Alliance aren't really denominations, they didn't actually have a denomination. The question for them seemed to be, "Who are we now, if we aren't Southern Baptists?" In the focus groups held at conservative and fundamentalist churches, I heard the women whispering to one another, "Are we part of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship? Are we part of the Alliance of Baptists? What are those, anyway?" Apparently, the splintering of the SBC has created a denominational identity crisis for many women. Thirty years ago, every one of them would have said unequivocally, "We're Southern Baptist," and they would have been proud to say so. In 2005, many weren't quite sure what they were—Baptists of some sort, but to a great degree, that unwavering sense of identity that existed before the Controversy was no more.<sup>13</sup>

I myself face this denominational identity crisis. I earned a master's degree and a PhD at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. I did internships at the state Baptist newspaper in Kentucky and the Woman's Missionary Union (WMU), auxiliary to the SBC, in Birmingham, Alabama. I was a full-time faculty member at a Southern Baptist college and an adjunct instructor for two Southern

Baptist seminaries. I wrote articles and devised curricular materials for WMU and the Baptist Sunday School Board. I was an ordained Southern Baptist minister. But as the Controversy raged, I found myself more and more at odds with the type of people Southern Baptists were becoming. I quit teaching for the Southern Baptist college when the personal attacks on me (I was referred to as “that woman on the religion faculty”) began to take too much of a personal toll. I moved to Oregon to teach at an evangelical Quaker college, and I joined the only moderate Southern Baptist church there (there aren’t many Southern Baptist churches of any stripe in Oregon); I also taught at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary’s extension campus in Portland. By the mid-1990s, however, the Convention had changed so radically that I felt I no longer belonged among the people who had so greatly influenced who I had become. So I left Southern Baptist life in 1995 and became a member of the United Church of Christ (UCC). I began the process of changing my ordination to the UCC—in fact, the only step left was an essay I had to write—when I realized that I just couldn’t do it. Like my grandmother, I was a Baptist “teeth and toe,” and though I dearly love the UCC, I couldn’t change my identity. So I remain a Baptist minister in exile in the United Church of Christ.

My background provides me with a unique perspective to write a book about Southern Baptist women. Most of the other scholarly works on fundamentalist and evangelical women have been written by women who were outsiders to the groups they studied. I approached my research as both an insider and an outsider. As an insider—as someone who grew up Southern Baptist—I know the language, the practices, and the culturally constructed meanings associated with them. I also know the people, and this made my access to a wide variety of Southern Baptist women possible. As someone who left the denomination more than ten years ago, I also have the distance to approach Southern Baptists as an outside observer. I no longer have a personal stake in what happens in the Convention or in the splinter groups, although I still have a strong emotional attachment to the Convention and the many Baptist people I know and love. This research has demanded that I be highly self-reflective because of my emotional investment in the subject and because of the autobiographical content of my research. Deciding whether to use “we” or “they” when referring to Southern Baptists in this book engendered a sort of existential crisis for me, and I hope my readers will forgive my inconsistency in the use of pronouns throughout the text.

My own location in relation to this research meant that I had to be very careful to listen closely to my informants. I had to try to set aside my own issues with the denomination and hear how these women made meaning of their own lives and experiences as Southern Baptists. Sometimes this was immensely difficult for me because, as a feminist, I recognize a great deal of oppression in Southern Baptist theology and practice. Also, almost invariably, my participants assumed that I agreed with them theologically, socially, and politically about the issues at hand. At times, I felt very uncomfortable with this implicit assumption, yet I was reluctant to break the flow of the conversation or risk losing their trust in me by disagreeing. I decided that nothing was to be gained by correcting their perceptions of me, and I resolved my internal conflict by determining to write about their beliefs in a manner that was respectful and cognizant of their right to hold those beliefs and to use them to construct meaningful identities for themselves, even though I might critique them from my feminist perspective.

I worked hard to include voices that speak from a wide range of diverse perspectives and to ensure that my analysis was true to the things they told me and the meanings they made. I began with the women I knew—my mother and her closest friends (otherwise known as “the Clique”), the women with whom I had attended seminary, and the women involved in denominational work that I had met along the way. They talked to me, and they referred me to other women who might have important things to say. I logged about 30,000 frequent-flier miles traveling to Georgia, North and South Carolina, Florida, Alabama, Tennessee, Texas, and California to talk in person with as many women as possible. I shudder to think of the long-distance telephone bills for the interviews I conducted by phone. I talked to some women individually and to some in focus groups. I interviewed the Clique five times—a focus group at the beginning of the research; three separate, individual life history interviews; and a final focus group at the conclusion of the research.

There were also women who declined to talk to me. Many of them were employed by very conservative churches or denominational agencies, although other women in the same position did agree to participate. Just doing research on women raises red flags for many conservatives, and I suppose it didn't help that I was a former Southern Baptist and current director of women studies at a northwestern state university. An atmosphere of suspicion and fear is pervasive at many Southern Baptist institutions, and one participant informed me that a number of women who turned me down likely did so for fear of losing

their jobs. Others may have simply mistrusted me and doubted my willingness to represent them fairly and respectfully. One pastor denied me access to women in his church for fear that I might criticize them or condemn Southern Baptists—despite my assurances that this was not my intent.

## The Clique

In the early 1970s, my family attended Shorter Avenue Baptist Church in Rome, Georgia, but my mother and a couple of her friends from church began to attend a Bible study group led by a woman from another church just down the street. As a result of my mother's involvement in that group, my whole family transferred to West Rome Baptist Church in 1973. In her Bible study group, my mother reconnected with women she had known in high school and met other women with whom she had a particular affinity. Eight of them became so close that the Bible study leader nicknamed them "the Clique." Throughout the 1970s, they raised their children together, and, with the exception of my mother, in the 1980s and 1990s, they became grandmothers together. My mother had the misfortune (in her eyes) of having two daughters who opted not to have children. In fact, one year my sister and I (at the time, living in North Carolina and California, respectively)—unbeknownst to each other—sent her the same birthday card. It read: "Mom, you can have anything you want for your birthday . . . except grandchildren." Fortunately for my sister and me, one member of the Clique who has an abundance of grandchildren has loaned one to my mother.

These women who have been friends for more than thirty years gave me the central idea for this book. All my life I watched them participate in churches that taught female subordination, yet all the while, they were the ones who provided spiritual leadership in their homes, holding their families together; they were strong women who exercised power in the church, working to meet the needs of people experiencing difficult circumstances in our town. We watched the women's movement unfold on the evening news, but at the time, they didn't identify with those women's struggles; they battled daily to assert their voices and claim their agency, not realizing the extent to which their issues really did intersect with the goals of feminism.

They may cringe to hear me say it, but they gave me my first taste of feminism. By word and by example, they taught me that I was of equal value to any boy. They did not limit my aspirations. In fact, they encour-



aged me to excel academically. Of course, at the same time, they taught me gender roles as well. My mother tried to raise me to be a proper southern lady, but that was not to be. One of my favorite photographs from my childhood shows me at the age of four in my red velvet Christmas dress, adorned with lace, and my black patent leather shoes—wearing my cousin’s new football helmet and down in three-point stance with my father.

My mother told me, “I guess I became liberated because my daughters became liberated.” She reminded me of an incident from my late adolescence when she was working as a substitute schoolteacher. My father was a pretty typical patriarch, and he didn’t particularly like the fact that my mother was working outside the home. He still expected her to fulfill all the traditional roles at home as well. Mom explained:

He wanted me here, and for all those years before he retired, I *had* to get up and I *had* to cook his breakfast, and then I got him up; and I had to do all the washing, ironing, and cleaning; that was woman’s work. That’s what he was taught. And one time, I went off to school, and he was working second shift, and he had to pack a lunch; and he didn’t take a lunch because I wasn’t here to fix it. And he came in, and I said, “Did you take a lunch?” And you said, “Daddy, you mean you can’t even spread peanut butter on two pieces of bread and put it in a lunch box?” [And he said], “I could if I wanted to!” And he always packed his lunch after that.

Still, Mom didn’t necessarily need her liberated daughters to intervene. Another time, she got mad at Dad—again over the issue of her packing him a lunch to take to work. Dad can laugh about it now too. He said, “I told her to get over there and make me a sandwich.” Mom finished the story: “I worked all the time. I had the washing and the ironing and doing the grocery shopping, preparing the Sunday school lesson because I was teaching, besides everything that [you and Karen] did all week long—and you were into everything—and I fixed his lunch. And I was so mad I put my fist right through it. And they called it the ‘Knuckle Sandwich’ at the mill. They said, ‘She was mad, but she made it.’”

These are the contradictions that intrigued me as I began this project. How could these women be both submissive wives and self-actualized agents? How could they espouse subordination while challenging husbands, deacons, pastors, and any other man who got in their way? How could they reject the women’s movement while believing in and acting on so many of its basic tenets? How could they feel empowered by churches that limited their roles based on gender? How did they con-

struct identities as Southern Baptist women that embodied all these contradictions and complexities in a unified sense of an autonomous self?

In numerous ways, the Clique is representative of many Southern Baptist women in the South. They are conservative, family-oriented, Bible-believing, active participants in a local church. Though some of them no longer attend a Southern Baptist church for various reasons (none of which has to do with theology), they identify Southern Baptist theology and polity as central to their religious understandings—and they sometimes find themselves at odds with their current churches over these denominational differences. Even though they attend different churches now, they still interact on a regular basis. They talk on the phone; they organize outings to craft fairs all over the Southeast; they have lunch together for each person's birthday, and each woman contributes a small cash gift so the celebrant can buy herself something nice; they support one another through life's difficulties and tragedies. They tell me that they are more like sisters than their biological sisters.

So, starting with these women, I began my quest to understand how Southern Baptist women construct their identities. I decided that these women would be the heart of my study because so much could be learned from their stories as individuals and as a group. I started with a focus group involving all of them. Then, over the course of a year, I interviewed each woman individually two or three times. At the end of the year, I gathered them together again for a final focus group.

Amazingly, these women, who are all in their late sixties or early seventies, have been married to the same men for the last fifty years or so. That has required some effort on their parts, and I'll go into more detail when I discuss family, later in the book. None of them finished college, although many of their children did. I grew up with their children, and, although I haven't been close to them in many years, our mothers have made sure that we know what the others are doing. (My mother, in particular, made sure that my sister and I knew who was having children, when, and how many. I kept sending home articles, books, and photos of my trips around the world.) These women are caring, compassionate, giving, strong, and sometimes stubborn. Here is a brief introduction to each of them.

**JoAnn Shaw**, my mother, was born in Rome, Georgia, and has lived there all her life. For many years she was a substitute schoolteacher, and she has always been active in church leadership as a Sunday school teacher, WMU officer, or church officer. During the course of these interviews, she confessed that during the brief time she was a

member of a Southern Methodist church in the 1990s, she served as a steward, the Southern Methodist version of a deacon. Mom is now a member of a small Southern Baptist church in Rome, where she leads a women's Bible study group on Sunday mornings. She told me conspiratorially that in the last deacon elections, she nominated a woman, but the (male) church leaders refused to broach the issue with the congregation.

**Lidia Abrams** was born in Cuba and immigrated to the United States after marrying Ralph Abrams, an American serviceman from Georgia who was stationed at Guantanamo Bay. She learned English and settled into life as a housewife, despite her mother-in-law's overt racism. She has three children, six grandchildren, and one great-grandchild. A few years ago she joined North Broad Church of God, and she has become active in its mission work in South America. During my research, she traveled to Honduras to interpret for other church members on a witnessing mission there. The first time I interviewed Lidia, we sat next to each other in the waiting room at Floyd Medical Center, where one of her family members was hospitalized, and I was reminded of her compassion and concern. Lidia is one of those women who never meets a stranger and who always has something kind to say. Again and again, in her still deeply and beautifully accented English, she told me how good it was to see me.

**Doris Bailey** was born in Alabama but went to school in Arkansas, where she played softball and rooted loudly for the basketball team. She moved to Georgia as an adult. She has two children and four grandchildren. The first time I interviewed Doris, I went to her house, where she had been baking. Doris was one of my Sunbeam leaders when I was a preschooler at Shorter Avenue Baptist Church. Now, with striking white hair, she devotes a lot of her time to helping her daughter raise a son with developmental issues and nursing her husband, who is recovering from a stroke.

**Alicia Bennett** has spent her whole life in Georgia. She has three children and two grandchildren. She loves to quilt, sew, and play tennis. During this research, she traveled with a group of women from West Rome Baptist Church to Venezuela to teach women there how to sew; they took supplies and sewing machines and distributed diaper bags donated by a local hospital. I talked to Alicia in her home while her husband, Don, pattered around outside. She told me that they had endured some difficult times when their children were young, but in recent years, Don had undergone a dramatic change—"one of my deepest blessings" she called his transformation. Alicia showed me her impres-

sive sewing room and, at the end of the interview, gave me a beautiful kitchen towel she had sewn for me.

**Kayne Carter** was born in Tennessee. Her father was an alcoholic, and her mother worked long, hard hours in a textile mill to support her three children. Kayne thus learned early on that women could be strong and make it on their own. In high school, she was captain of the volleyball team and participated in the marching band as part of the “battalion” that spelled out the school’s initials on the field. She moved to Rome with her husband for his job in construction. She has four children, eleven grandchildren, and one great-grandchild. In recent years, Kayne has struggled with health issues. I talked to her in her home, surrounded by pictures of her children and grandchildren. Kayne said that although she wishes she had done some things differently in life, her greatest joy is her family.

**Shelby Christie** has spent her entire life in Georgia. In high school, she played drums in the girls’ drum and bugle corps and was involved in the square dance and drama clubs. She has three children and eight grandchildren. She’s an avid doll collector; her house is full of curio cabinets filled with every kind of doll imaginable, and one entire room is devoted to her doll collection. The first time I interviewed Shelby, she was having some work done on the house, so she took me out to lunch at my favorite barbecue restaurant. The next time, however, I interviewed her in her home and got the grand tour of the doll collection, and I must say, it is most impressive. She started collecting dolls as a hobby in the early 1980s, and she’s lost count of how many dolls she has now. Through the years, she’s donated many of her dolls to organizations for disadvantaged children. When I asked her which doll was her favorite, she said, “I don’t know. That’s just like asking which is your favorite child!”

**Judy Masters** was born in Louisiana and moved to Rome as a teenager, where she played both basketball and the saxophone in high school. She has five children, fourteen grandchildren (one of whom, Skylar, she has loaned to my mother), and one great-grandchild. Judy, like Alicia, loves to sew, and she was part of the group from West Rome Baptist Church that traveled to Venezuela. Before leaving, she sewed a number of gowns for premature babies and donated them to a hospital in Caracas. When I interviewed Judy at her house, she showed me pictures of her children and grandchildren and gave me the grand tour of her sewing room, which was piled high with fabrics, patterns, knickknacks,

and partially finished projects. Years ago, Judy sewed my sister's wedding dress. She now sews little gowns and bonnets for the tiniest premature babies—the ones who probably won't survive—and donates them to the local hospital. Making these little things, she said, is a gift the Lord has given her.

**Nancy Moore** is a native of Georgia. In high school she was in the glee club and worked on the yearbook. She has three children and five grandchildren. She is considered the progressive of the group. Though theologically conservative, Nancy is to the left of the rest of the Clique on social issues and politics. She's a bit of an Anglophile (she served me tea in her lovely kitchen), and she enjoys traveling, especially to Europe. Nancy lives in a wooded area, and she has created a wonderful garden. Everything in her beautiful house is in its place, yet her home feels warm and welcoming. Nancy always seems to be as put together as her house is. We talked at her kitchen table, delving more deeply into personal, theological, and social issues than in my other Clique interviews. Nancy and I have always connected because of our more liberal political bent and our love of academic study. Growing up, I was also closer to Nancy's middle daughter, Beth, than I was to the children of the other Clique members.

## Other Participants

All the participants have spent some, if not most, of their lives in Southern Baptist churches, from two to seventy-eight years. They range in age from twenty-two to eighty-three. Most of them (eighty-eight) live in the South or in the Texas-Oklahoma-Missouri-Arkansas region (forty-eight). Most of them are or have been married, although a significant number are now single. More than two-thirds have children. Ten percent of the participants are women of color: eight are black, six are Latina, and three are Asian American.

Of those who identified a theological position, more than three-quarters said that they were theologically conservative or moderate. Less than 10 percent identified themselves as fundamentalist, and more than 20 percent identified themselves as theologically liberal or radical. About half have been seminary educated. Although this number is disproportionate to the number of seminary-educated women in the denomination, I believed that these women could provide a unique perspective informed both by their own experiences as Southern Bap-

tists and by their study of Baptist history and theology. Because their experiences prior to attending seminary were very similar to those of other Southern Baptist women, I don't believe that their overrepresentation has skewed the data. Rather, it has provided additional insight and perspective to inform my interpretation.

About a quarter of the participants are involved in churches affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Alliance of Baptists, or both. Eight participants are now American Baptists, one is National Baptist, and twenty have either joined another denomination (United Church of Christ, Disciples, Episcopal, Presbyterian, or Methodist) or opted out of church life altogether, all as a result of the Controversy. I included those who've left the denomination because their experiences highlight the tensions in Southern Baptist identity that emerged during the unique historical moment when women's issues became a central dividing line. Certainly, if I had included only women who are currently affiliated with a Southern Baptist church, this would have been a very different book. Yet the women who left the denomination have spent most of their lives identifying as Southern Baptists, and they left not because they had changed but because the Convention had. Their stories, then, have as much relevance as the stories of the women who remained in Southern Baptist churches. Their choice to leave the Convention is an important part of the larger story of Southern Baptist women.

Thirty-three percent of the participants are Republicans, 40 percent are Democrats, and the rest are independents (with one Libertarian) or chose not to answer the question. (Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, I found a high correlation between those who identified as theological conservatives or fundamentalists and affiliation with the Republican Party; there was a parallel correlation between those who identified as theological moderates or liberals and affiliation with the Democratic Party.)

Although these women are diverse in many ways, as I talked with them, I found an amazing number of similarities rooted in their experiences in Southern Baptist churches. These shared threads of identity are at the heart of this narrative, although the nuanced differences are also essential components of any understanding of Southern Baptist women.

Some of their responses were expected (for instance, I correctly assumed that soul competency would be an important topic), but I was occasionally surprised and perplexed by what they taught me. I knew that these women would be hospitable, but I was amazed at their gra-

ciousness, even in the face of our differences. The older women surprised me too. They're a lot more liberal on women's issues than one might think and probably a little more rebellious as well. I'm still thinking about the ways women of color negotiate Southern Baptist life; they're a lot happier with the situation than I might have expected. And, though I'm not surprised, again I find myself profoundly moved by the sense of self and the calling and faith of these women who have stood in the face of opposition, violence, disdain, apathy, and invisibility to claim their right to hear and follow the voice of God.

## Making Sense of All the Stories

As I listened to the women who participated in interviews and focus groups, I heard common themes and nuanced differences emerge. These themes and differences form the core of this book. The story I tell here is one of identity and meaning—my own, my informants', and the Southern Baptist women who preceded us. My hope is that this book will foster understanding and celebration, exploration and conversation.

What intrigues me most about Southern Baptist women are these complexities and contradictions. Because Southern Baptists are not a creedal people and have historically emphasized freedom of the individual conscience before God, the diversity within the denomination is enormous, and the range of theological and social convictions moves along a continuum from fundamentalist to progressive. The women with whom I spoke represent numerous points on that continuum. Of course, this created for me the daunting task of authentically representing their commonalities within the context of their deeply felt and experienced differences. One way I manage this is by allowing them to speak for themselves as much as possible. As I analyze their comments, I draw heavily on their own words and their own interpretations of their experiences. I am especially interested in how they construct their identities as Southern Baptists and whether that construction varies in particular ways from the constructions of other conservative Protestant women as suggested in scholarly writings on the history and sociology of religion.

Of course, Baptist identity is itself a contested construct. Even the origins of Baptists are in dispute. As a product of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in the 1980s, however, I position myself alongside the constructions of Baptist identity suggested by E. Y. Mullins, Glenn

Hinson, and Walter Shurden,<sup>14</sup> focusing on the notion of freedom of the individual conscience before God. That construction informs my analysis, even as I recognize that, for other Baptists, different constructions constitute Baptist identity.<sup>15</sup> The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, long considered the “mother seminary” of Southern Baptists, was founded in 1859 in Greenville, South Carolina, shortly after the founding of the Convention itself in 1845. The seminary closed for a while during the Civil War, and because of the destruction and economic hardship following the war, the seminary reopened in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1877. The seminary has never been a stranger to controversy, and through the years, it gained a reputation for serious theological scholarship among theological institutions around the country and for theological liberalism among Southern Baptists (although this so-called liberalism is relative in terms of the larger scope of theological education). When I attended the seminary from 1982 to 1987, at the height of the Controversy, its status and reputation had made it a primary target for fundamentalists. I don’t think a day went by that we didn’t talk about the Controversy. It affected the lives of students, faculty, and staff in profound ways that permeated the classrooms, hallway discussions, and even chapel services. Central to these discussions were our understandings of the Bible, Baptist notions of soul liberty, and the role of women. Undoubtedly, my experiences as a seminary student during this particular historical moment shaped my own identity in essential ways; they also shaped this book in terms of my understanding of who Baptists are and what has happened among them over the past half century in particular. Most importantly, my experiences affected the primacy of women in my own scholarship and teaching; my understandings of the place of women in the Controversy and the roles of women in home, church, and society; and the ways I choose to approach research and writing about women.

As I wrote this book, I paid special attention to my own voice as well as to my position in relation to the material. In preparation for writing, I read a lot of memoirs, because that was the tone I was aiming for. I wanted to tell my own story in the context of the story of a denomination and the women who have been a part of it. My story is inextricably interwoven with theirs, and despite the pain of the Controversy, my feelings for the denomination that helped raise me right and for the women who had a direct hand in that are very tender. I hope that even when I offer analysis and occasionally critique, my readers will feel the love and gratitude I have toward Southern Baptists. I hope that this



book will be experienced more like the work of a daughter telling family secrets than a bitter ex-lover spilling the beans. One of the most important issues, however, is accessibility. I want this to be a book that everyone can read—especially the women who shared their time and hospitality by participating in interviews and focus groups. I strongly believe that feminist research should be accessible and relevant outside the academy, and although I give the requisite attention to the documentation of sources, theories, and research, I want this book to be easily (and enjoyably) read.

## Making Meaning and Making Identity

As a feminist, I'm concerned about what is happening among Southern Baptists. The denomination claims 16 million members, and after its fifteen-year Controversy, it has reconstructed itself in a way that ideologically circumscribes women's roles. Much of the research on conservative Protestant women in general takes note of the ways women define themselves and find empowerment in churches that espouse female subordination. That is certainly an important part of the meaning-making I found among Southern Baptist women, and it suggests that denominational pronouncements hardly characterize the reality of women's lives. Instead, I found women with a strong sense of agency and autonomy rooted in their very identity as Southern Baptists. In fact, I would suggest that in Southern Baptist theology and practice lie the impetus for women's strong sense of self and agency and the key to the differences between Southern Baptist women and other conservative Protestant women. Although many of these women say that they find power in submission, they also feel perfectly free to disagree with men—whether their husbands or their pastors. And among more moderate women with feminist leanings, submission to anyone other than God is not even a part of their lexicon. After talking to these women and reading about their predecessors in Baptist history, I'm convinced that Baptist notions of independence, liberty, and individual conscience provide a powerful counteraction to the rhetoric of submission espoused by denominational leaders and many local church pastors.

My participants are largely southern women, but even those who aren't southern are influenced by the denomination's curricular materials and periodicals that come right out of Nashville, Birmingham, Atlanta, and Richmond. Therefore, they are also part of a larger story (and myth) about (white) women in the South who learned to hold their

families together in the midst of war, alcoholic and abusive daddies, economic crises, and Yankee carpetbagging. From birth, most white southern women learn the subtle skills of getting what they want while making men feel like they're the ones making the decisions and ruling the home. And southern women take these skills to church with them. The rhetoric of submission is not unfamiliar to southern women; it's an assumed part of southern culture. That Southern Baptist churches would espouse submission is expected, because they are cultural products of the South. Southern Baptist women's internalization of this rhetoric is part of their birthright as southerners: women are quiet, genteel, submissive—at least on the surface.

Paralleling the rhetoric of submission, however, is the reality of resistance. In ways covert and occasionally overt, southern women challenge their subordination. It is common knowledge among conservative Southern Baptist women that they run the church; no Southern Baptist church could continue to do its work for very long without them. Among moderate Southern Baptist women there is more outright rebellion—women who claim their right to equality in the home and to leadership in the church. Of course, being southern women, they usually try to rebel as nicely as possible, with relatively few outbursts of temper or name-calling. Rather, they exhibit a quiet determination and an unshakable sense of their God-given right (as humans, as Christians, and especially as Baptists) to do whatever they feel God is leading them to do.

## Raised Right

In *The Whisper of the River*, Ferrol Sams's novel about a young boy growing up Southern Baptist, the novel's protagonist, Porter Osborne Jr., explains that he was "Raised Right":

The child who had been Raised Right was not only Saved but had spent a large part of his formative years in the House of the Lord. Attendance at piano recitals did not count, but everything else did. From Sunbeams through BYPU [Baptist Young People's Union], from Sunday school to prayer meeting, from Those Attending Preaching to Those With Prepared Lessons, everything was counted. So was everybody. In the midst of all this scorekeeping the concept of being saved by grace was a nebulous and adult bit of foolishness not to be contemplated with anything approaching the fervor accorded perfect attendance. A pin with added yearly bars swinging like a sandwich sign on an adolescent chest proclaimed indisputably to the world that its wearer had been Raised Right.<sup>16</sup>

I was raised right, as were the majority of the participants in my study. Most of the women I talked to grew up in Southern Baptist churches where the concept of being raised right was paramount, along with being saved, being baptized, and maybe even being called to full-time Christian service (for girls, that meant missions, music, religious education, or becoming a pastor's wife). Like many of the offspring of the Protestant Reformation, Baptists cherish the notion of salvation by faith alone, and the works that ought to accompany salvation are highly touted as evidence of true conversion. As southern girls, we were taught that we were supposed to be nice, sit still, fold our hands in our laps, cross our legs at the ankle, say "ma'am" and "sir" to every adult, never backtalk, help clear the table and wash the dishes, never call boys, and read our Bibles and pray every day. If we arrived at Sunday school early and helped the teacher set out cookies and Kool-Aid, if we remembered to say "please" and "thank you," the adult teachers would murmur approvingly among themselves, "Now that girl was raised right."

The messages from our families and southern culture came through loud and clear, backed up by the scripture verses we memorized, the hymns we sang, and the sermons we heard. Everywhere we turned, there were implicit and explicit messages about what being a Southern Baptist girl or woman means.

## Sunbeams, Sword Drills, and Age-Graded Curriculum

In my travels, I often run into other Southern Baptists. Usually in less than two minutes, we are talking about the Southern Baptists we know in common. There may be 16 million of us, but I don't think there are six degrees of separation between us. Even more striking than our common acquaintances are our common experiences. To non-Southern Baptists, I'm sure it sounds like we're talking to one another in code—Sunbeams, GAs (formerly Girls' Auxiliary; now Girls in Action), RAs (Royal Ambassadors), WMU, altar calls, walking the aisle. Paula Sheridan told me this story: She had gone to see a production of Leslie Jordan's *Like a Dog on Linoleum*, a one-man show centered on his coming to terms with his conservative upbringing. The performance was so powerful that Paula wrote Jordan a letter afterward, thanking him for his work. She signed the letter "Paula M. Sheridan, Queen Regent in Service." Shortly thereafter she got a reply addressed to "Paula M. Sheridan, Queen Regent in Service," and the letter began, "Dear Queenie." Leslie thanked Paula for bringing her students to the play and then he

wrote, “I want you to have this; I found it.” Enclosed was a 1967 photo of his twin sisters being crown-bearers in a GA coronation. He wrote, “You of all people will enjoy this.” Paula explained that, among Southern Baptists—whether current or former—“it’s like there’s a code.” One of her colleagues at Whittier College, a professor of religion whose office is across the hall from hers, was once a Southern Baptist. “We talk in code,” she emphasized, “and that is a touchstone; and we are at home with each other like no one else.”

The person who transcribed the recorded interviews for this project (who has never been a Southern Baptist) e-mailed me to ask, “Susan, what’s an Act Teen?” (Actually, it’s “Acteen,” but more about that later in the book.) Another day she called in alarm because the participants kept talking about something called “sword drills.” I can only imagine what she was picturing in her mind, but in reality, a sword drill is a competition to see who can look up Bible verses the fastest.

Southern Baptist women share a common identity created by the common programs and practices of most Southern Baptist churches, the majority of which use curricular materials produced by the denomination’s central publishing agencies. Lifeway, formerly known as the Baptist Sunday School Board, produces Bible study and discipleship materials. Woman’s Missionary Union (WMU) produces mission-related educational materials for preschoolers, girls, and women. Other materials come from the International Mission Board (formerly the Foreign Mission Board) and the North American Mission Board (formerly the Home Mission Board). On Sunday mornings, Southern Baptists the nation over study the same Bible passages using the same lesson plans. When I was growing up, on Sunday nights we participated in Training Union (previously known as the Baptist Young People’s Union, or BYPU; later known as Church Training and then Discipleship Training), studying Baptist history, theology, and polity. On Wednesday nights we had Sunbeams for preschoolers (now Mission Friends), GA for first- through sixth-grade girls, and Acteens for high school girls. Through these WMU organizations, we learned about Southern Baptist missionaries around the world and did missions in our own communities. In the summer, we’d go to GA camp and get to meet real live missionaries home on furlough from far-away places we had learned to locate on a map. So whether we were in Georgia, Kentucky, Texas, or California (yes, there are Southern Baptists in California), we read the same words, studied the same lessons, learned the same biblical principles, and prayed for the same missionaries on their birthdays.<sup>17</sup>

And through these materials, we also learned about gender roles. In 1978, Kay Shurden analyzed gender in curricular materials published by the Baptist Sunday School Board from 1973 to 1978 and presented her findings to the Consultation on Women in Church-Related Vocations. Not surprisingly, she discovered mostly stereotypical representations of females and males, with an occasional challenge to gender norms. She also found that as the age of the target group increased, so did the likelihood that the author of the materials would be male.<sup>18</sup> The drawings and photos we saw in the curricular materials reinforced traditional gender roles for women, as did the practices we observed in most Southern Baptist churches.

Few women have ever held public leadership roles in Southern Baptist churches, except in WMU. They are generally overrepresented as Sunday school teachers for children but have been forbidden to teach adult classes that include men. They have not preached nor led prayer in public worship very often. They have been ordained as deacons only occasionally and as ministers even more rarely. They have organized dinners and made sure that the little plastic communion cups were filled with Welch's grape juice for the Lord's Supper. They have taken hot meals to families who have lost loved ones, and they have given their mites to support missions.

What we witnessed in church reinforced cultural messages about gender. We learned that women's roles were supportive; we were to serve, almost always in the background, with no regard for recognition. Our works done in secret would be rewarded in heaven. But we also knew that each Southern Baptist church was ultimately dependent on us. Women were the backbone of the church, more likely to attend services and more likely to participate in its various programs. Over and over we heard the message, even from our pastors: "Women run this church." So we knew that we were powerful, but, being raised right, we also knew that we had to use that power subtly. Girls who were raised right didn't make a fuss, but we did know how to get things done, especially in the cause of Christ.

Missions are a central issue for Southern Baptists. After all, the only reason that stubbornly independent Baptists ever agreed to work together was because they realized that they could do more for missions by pooling their resources than by working alone. Key to our understanding of ourselves as Southern Baptist is our support for home and foreign missions and our involvement in missions in our own communities. We grew up making special offerings for missions, collecting toi-

lettries to send to missionaries in poverty-stricken countries, and distributing food baskets to needy families in our own towns at Christmas. We knew that our faith demanded our action in the world, particularly if it helped us share the good news of Jesus with others.

Southern Baptists are evangelistic people. They believe that salvation comes by accepting Jesus as one's personal Lord and Savior, and they believe that their task is to carry that message to all the world. A conversion experience is another common denominator for Southern Baptists. In some way, whether at a revival, during an in-home visit by the pastor, or at a youth camp, every Southern Baptist gets "saved." This experience is usually swiftly followed by full-immersion baptism, most often in the church's baptismal pool, but occasionally in a river, lake, ocean, or swimming pool. Since the seventeenth century, baptism by immersion has been a central part of Baptist identity, and this continues to be true today, as most of my participants noted. Being Baptist means being baptized.

The reason for Southern Baptists' emphasis on issues such as salvation and baptism is their strong belief in the authority of the Bible in matters of faith and practice. In fact, Southern Baptists inevitably trace the justification for everything they do—worship, evangelism, missions, Christian education—to the Bible. And individual Southern Baptists incorporate their understanding of the Bible in their construction of self. Southern Baptist programs and materials emphasize the importance of both knowing and internalizing scripture, and this intimate relationship with the Bible provides a deep connection with the larger Christian story the Bible tells. Biblical metaphors abounded in my participants' stories, and each described the Bible as a means by which she achieved closer contact with God. Other Christian denominations also hold a high view of scripture, but Southern Baptists have emphasized the Bible in such a thoroughgoing way and produced such effective Bible curricula that scripture is as deeply integrated into the emotional and cognitive processes of devout Southern Baptists as are the ABCs and numbers. The Bible is not just a book that Southern Baptists read; it is a part of who they are.

Other characteristics of Baptist theology are also important organizing factors for Southern Baptist identity. In particular, the doctrine of the priesthood of believers is paramount, even when people don't know what to call it. Baptists believe that each person can go directly to God, without the need for any mediator. Southern Baptists also believe that each local church is autonomous, that it governs itself democrati-

cally and sets its own beliefs, practices, policies, and procedures. The Southern Baptist Convention, then, does not exercise power over local congregations. In fact, the Convention exists to empower the churches to carry out their own missions. The Convention cannot tell any local church what to do, and no real Baptist would even consider trying to coerce another person to believe anything.

Religious liberty is another principle that Baptists hold dear, although in recent years, this principle has been eroded both in the Convention and in many local churches as religion and politics have become linked. Baptists believe that the state should have no power of coercion in matters of religion. They believe that each person should be free to worship, or not worship, as she or he sees fit. Roger Williams, the first Baptist in America, fled religious persecution in New England and founded Rhode Island on the basis of religious liberty. In a sermon from the 1640s, Williams denounced religious persecution and articulated a doctrine of complete religious liberty. "It is the will and command of God," he said, "that a permission of the most paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or anti-christian consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and countries. . . . God requireth not a uniformity of religion to be enacted and enforced in any civil state; which enforced uniformity, sooner or later, is the greatest occasion of civil war, ravishing of conscience, persecution of Jesus Christ in his servants, and of the hypocrisy and destruction of millions of souls."<sup>19</sup>

Almost a century and a half later, when the founders of the Republic wrote the Constitution of the United States, they ensured that the new government would be free of religious coercion. Because of their brilliant insight, the Constitution guarantees that there is no religious test for public office. But only because of the agitation of Baptists, particularly those in Virginia, was another important sentence added to the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Several years later, Thomas Jefferson wrote to the Baptists of Danbury, Connecticut, "I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibit the free exercise thereof, thus building a wall of separation between church and state."<sup>20</sup> Twenty years later, James Madison wrote, "I have no doubt that every new example will succeed, as every past one has done, in showing that religion and government will both exist in greater purity the less they are mixed together."<sup>21</sup>

Freedom is an essential strand running through Southern Baptist identity. Despite the depth and strength of their own convictions, again and again Southern Baptist women told me that belief is a matter of one's individual conscience before God. They believe that there is room for disagreement and difference among faithful Southern Baptists, although the extent to which difference is permissible depends on how conservative the women are. For most of them, certain key beliefs cannot be compromised—primarily the need for salvation, the importance of baptism by immersion, and the primacy of scripture in faith and practice. Beyond this, most of them say, there's room to disagree. "Is it okay to disagree with your pastor?" I asked them.

"Of course," they said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because God speaks to me too," they told me.

Southern Baptist worship styles vary—from southern gospel to formal liturgical to informal contemporary. Nonetheless, the overall design of most Southern Baptist worship services is strikingly similar. The service opens with announcements, handshaking, music, testimonies, offerings, and scripture reading. But these are all preludes to the main event—the sermon. For Baptists, the preaching of the Word is central to worship; therefore, the sermon (as opposed to the Eucharist) is the primary focus of the service. The sermon is usually followed by an altar call or an invitation. During this time, as the congregation sings, people are invited to walk down the aisle of the church, take the pastor by the hand, and commit their lives to Christ, rededicate their lives to Christ if they have backslid, or join the church by baptism or by providing a statement of baptism or letter of transfer from another Southern Baptist church.

Another of the primary contributors to Southern Baptist identity is the *Baptist Hymnal*. As "contemporary" worship has moved eastward from California, the *Baptist Hymnal* has, in many congregations, taken a backseat to praise choruses projected onto a large screen. But for most of us who worshipped in a Baptist church before the last decade, the *Baptist Hymnal* provided a unifying experience of worship and theology. Although some of us sang from its southern gospel sections and others sang the more formal hymns set to music by Bach and Beethoven, to a great degree, we shared a common musical experience across the denomination. We all knew "Victory in Jesus" by heart, and thousands of us walked the aisle to "Just as I Am." When we visited other congregations on those rare Sundays we were away on vacation (vacation was no



excuse for any raised-right Southern Baptist to miss church), we always knew that we would experience a sense of familiarity. Wherever we were, those Southern Baptists would be studying the same Sunday school lesson as our friends at home, and they'd be singing from the same hymnal we used. We also learned a lot of theology from the hymns—not all of it good. Certainly, the issue of inclusive language had not prevailed with the hymnal's editors at the Baptist Sunday School Board, even by the 1991 edition. Still, those hymns shaped who we were as Christians and as Southern Baptists. The hymnal of the United Church of Christ contains many of the same hymns in the *Baptist Hymnal*, with the words faithfully changed to reflect UCC theology and inclusive language. But I often find myself singing different words from the rest of the congregation because those old Baptist hymns are so deeply embedded in my memory and psyche.

One final important feature in the development of Southern Baptist identity is what I call the myth of Southern Baptists—that is, the myth of Southern Baptist superiority. The myth probably began with the Landmark controversy, when certain Baptists suggested that Baptist churches were the only true churches and that Baptists did not come out of the Reformation but have existed in continuous succession from the time of John the Baptist.<sup>22</sup> Baptist historian Bill Leonard explains that these Baptists “turned to an ideology that traced Baptists in an unbroken line directly to the New Testament church and enabled Baptist churches to claim a unique historical authenticity.”<sup>23</sup> Most Southern Baptists don't believe that anymore, but many do believe that Southern Baptists are the most theologically correct, most biblically based, most missions minded, most evangelistic, and most educationally effective of all Christian denominations. Size may have something to do with the myth of Southern Baptist superiority: with 16 million members, the Southern Baptist Convention is the nation's largest Protestant denomination. All this combines to give Southern Baptists a good sense of denominational self. To be Southern Baptist is to be part of something big.

The myth per se isn't really talked about in Southern Baptist churches. Rather, the sense of success and importance is conveyed through publications and meetings and the tendency to compare Southern Baptists with other denominations. “Southern Baptists are closest to what I believe,” many of my participants told me. I'm not sure that most Southern Baptists have actually looked into what other denominations believe, but they've learned from church leaders and curricular materials and programs that Southern Baptists are the best, the truest, the most

correct. So, even though many participants told me that being Christian was more important than being Baptist, they were also quick to note that they were Southern Baptists because Southern Baptists are the best. What's most interesting here is that they don't seem to have any sense that such a belief is a cultural product; they tend to see themselves outside of any context that gives shape to their belief. This may be one downside of autonomous thinking. The Southern Baptist and American emphasis on individualism may well contribute to these women's thinking of their own intellectual and faith processes as outside any social and historical context that fashions them. They make their choices individually, but those choices are inevitably shaped by their social context. To a great degree, they believe what they believe because that is what they have been exposed to; it is what fits into their lives; it is what allows them to make sense of their life experiences. The myth of Southern Baptist superiority, however, suggests that their grasp on ultimate and eternal truths exists outside history and location; there is one truth, and Southern Baptists know it. This myth, like the myth of the Old South, remains a salient feature of Southern Baptist identity and plays a rather large (and mostly unconscious) role in how women construct themselves as Southern Baptists.

### Race, Place, and Generation

Although Southern Baptist women share a common process of identity-making, their unique locations in time and place also have great influence on their constructions of self. Race is a primary issue of identity for Southern Baptist women. Because of its racist history, the Southern Baptist Convention is predominantly white, both in membership and in leadership. And because most Southern Baptists are southerners, their awareness of race grows out of the unique history of race relations in the South. The white women I spoke with are well aware of the privilege that comes with being white in this country, and not surprisingly, the women of color related their experiences of overt and covert racism. For the majority of Southern Baptist women, whiteness is an essential component of their identity (later in the book I explore how race has shaped who they are). By far, the majority of my participants are white women. Almost all of the women of color I spoke with participate in predominantly white congregations. My research, therefore, does not reflect to any significant degree the experiences of Southern Baptist women of color who participate in minority churches, and that is a shortcoming of

this book. My inability to access these women was likely related to my own social location as a white woman, a former Southern Baptist, and a northwesterner who is geographically removed from most of these congregations, particularly black Southern Baptist churches. The book thus deals mostly with the experiences of white women, although about 10 percent of the participants are women of color. As I discuss later, for these women, identification as Southern Baptist is usually much more closely connected to theology or experiences in local churches than to issues of race.

Generational differences also emerged in my research. The women's movement seems to be one central marker for the shaping of identity. The women of my mother's generation, who were already housewives and raising children by the time the movement began, understood that their options were limited when they were growing up in the 1950s. Even if they thought about going to college, it was secondary to marrying and having a family. In the case of the Clique, they remained married to the same men all their lives; however, many of their daughters have experienced divorce and single parenthood. Although these older women don't see the women's movement as being particularly beneficial to them, they do recognize that it opened up greater opportunities for their daughters in terms of higher education and equal employment, promotion, and pay. The women of my generation, who were the first to benefit directly from the women's movement, are either decidedly feminist themselves or at least believe in and enjoy the equality won by the movement. Although many middle-aged participants see feminists as "going too far" or "being too militant," they generally recognize and appreciate the achievements of feminists.

For the subgroup of middle-aged women consisting of those in ministry, a second key event—the Controversy among Southern Baptists that raged from 1979 to 1993—is a defining part of their identities. These women went to seminary in the 1970s and 1980s with a sense that they had a calling by God and the support of Southern Baptists. Influenced by the women's movement and its emphasis on a woman's ability to hold any job, these women claimed a place in ministry and were sent to seminary by their local churches. They believed that they would be able to spend their lives serving Southern Baptists. But the Controversy, with its emphasis on women's subordination and exclusion from pastoral leadership, led most of these women to rethink their relationship with the SBC and Southern Baptist churches. For many, this became both a vocational and an identity crisis. Some resolved the crisis by fo-

cusing on their participation in autonomous local Southern Baptist churches. Others became involved in splinter groups such as the CBF and the Alliance. Still others joined other denominations. A handful left ministry and the church entirely.

Younger women, however, have had very different experiences compared with either of these older groups. Younger conservative women distance themselves much more from feminism than do older conservative women, and in many ways, they espouse much more traditional gender roles than either the middle-aged or older women in my study. They have less experience participating in Southern Baptist programs, and they identify less as Southern Baptist than as “Christian.” They are more influenced by the broader evangelical and fundamentalist movements in this country than by their own Baptist history and historical Baptist practices.

Moderate young women, in contrast, have grown up in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists. Their churches transitioned to these new groups when the women were young children, so they have experienced curricular materials from a new publishing house (Smyth & Helwys) that emphasize gender equality and women’s roles in the lay and pastoral ministry. Many of these young women have known female pastors, and those who have chosen to attend the new moderate Baptist seminaries (such as McAfee in Georgia and Truett in Texas) are developing identities as Baptist women with very little reference to the Southern Baptist Convention. They are much more comfortable calling themselves feminists, and they envision churches and relationships that practice equality between women and men.

Most of these women are southerners, and so their identities as women are shaped strongly by southern culture, whether they identify themselves as feminist or conservative or anything in between. Among Southern Baptists who are not southerners, regional differences play a significant role in the development of identity. For example, the older generation of California Southern Baptists who moved from places such as Oklahoma and Arkansas carried their southern culture with them. Native Californians, however, developed a Southern Baptist identity that reflects California culture. Many California churches have dropped “Baptist” from their names, preferring to be known as such-and-such community church instead. A praise band, complete with electric guitar, bass, and drum kit, leads worship. Dress is informal. Interestingly, this style has moved east, and many southern churches are now facing conflict over contemporary versus traditional worship.

## Soul Competency

Despite the Convention's recent shift away from emphasizing historic Baptist distinctives such as religious liberty, local church autonomy, and the priesthood of believers, what may be most salient in Southern Baptist women's construction of identity is the idea of soul competency. And this notion may be what distinguishes Southern Baptist women from other conservative Protestant women. E. Y. Mullins, former president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, claimed that soul competency is "the distinctive Baptist belief."<sup>24</sup> The idea of soul competency suggests that individual human freedom flows from the nature of God; therefore, the right of individual choice is sacred. Each individual is competent before God to make her or his own choices about biblical, theological, religious, moral, ethical, and social matters, and the individual alone is responsible for making those choices.<sup>25</sup> Although soul competency does not devalue the importance of community, it does defiantly claim that every individual must ultimately be free to choose. Christian faith, according to Baptists, is "personal, experiential, and voluntary."<sup>26</sup>

As I talked to Southern Baptist women, I found an unshakable belief that God speaks directly to them. Although they respect their denominational leaders and pastors and allow them to exert quite a bit of influence in their thoughts and lives, these women recognize that their beliefs and practices are ultimately their own choices under God's guidance. In relation to women's subordinate position in Southern Baptist life, the application of the concept may be revolutionary. For moderate women, heightened attention to notions of freedom and autonomy during the Controversy gave them additional motivation to claim an equal right not only to active participation in the church but also to ordination and pastoral positions. For conservative women, the persistence of the idea of soul competency allows them to negotiate gender in ways that feel empowering, and it creates the possibility for them to refuse constructions of womanhood handed down to them from male church leaders, pastors, and denominational workers. Because they believe themselves to be competent before God, these women construct identities that embrace and express their own agency and autonomy within the varying contexts of Southern Baptist life.

A comment by one of the participants exemplifies Southern Baptist women's embodiment of soul competency and the theme of this book. She works for a Southern Baptist organization that has prominently

emphasized women's submission and the exclusion of women from pastoral leadership. She herself has not felt the calling to preach, and her job doesn't require her to address women's issues publicly, so she manages to both do her work and carry out her calling. But, she says, with that particular sense of graciousness and rebellion so common to Southern Baptist women, "If God calls a woman to preach, God calls her to preach." Southern Baptist women tend to "go along to get along" until they think God has told them otherwise. Their belief in their own competence to stand before God, to hear the voice of God, to interpret scripture for themselves, and to do what they feel God has called them to do is central in their construction of themselves and their willingness to resist wholesale subordination. Any submission to men, therefore, is always tentative; only God holds full sway over their loyalties and consciences, and only they have the right and the ability to determine what God says to them.