

# Patricia Martin Thesis

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**C O N N E X I O N S**

Rice University, Houston, Texas

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Collection structure revised: September 23, 2013

PDF generated: September 23, 2013

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# 0.1 Abstract to "Hidden Work: Baptist Women in Texas 1880-1920"<sup>1</sup>

This study examines the extent to which the Bible's teaching regarding feminine nature and role shaped the changes modernity imposed on American women's lives in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It focuses on Texas Baptists between 1880 and 1920—a biblically conservative group of lower- and middle-class southwesterners—and provides alternative data to the existing studies of northeastern and southern women.

Chapter II delineates the specific biblical teaching regarding women that was emphasized by Texas Baptists and the ways they utilized those passages to justify an expanded role for women while retaining a concept of male authority in both the family and the church. Baptist women enlarged the scope of their religious activities most significantly between 1880 and 1920 in the creation of a successful missions support organization, the development of which is described in Chapter III. Although this all-female "union" enhanced women's administrative skills and gave them an avenue to power, it maintained an auxiliary position to the denomination as a whole and avoided theological and political issues. Chapter IV notes the same configuration of change in other religious activities of women: they expanded their sphere in worship, education, and benevolence but left ordination to the both the ministry and the diaconate as a male prerogative. The widest field of service and the best possibility of a religious vocation for women lay in their serving as missionaries. Chapter V moves from the explicitly religious realm to other aspects of Baptist women's lives and focuses on the way Christian goals were translated into character models, educational pursuits, marriage, motherhood, and the exercise of civic responsibility.

Between 1880 and 1920 Texas Baptist women used the Bible to justify their exercising greater freedom, but the patriarchal orientation of the church and the family was retained. Although this conservative reaction to change had some positive elements—it emphasized the interdependence of the sexes and the need for rearing children in a stable environment—it severely limited the full equality of Baptist women. That attainment necessitated further reinterpretation of their ideology and a willingness to deal openly with issues of conflict and power.

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<sup>1</sup>This content is available online at <<http://cnx.org/content/m44377/1.3/>>.



## 0.2 Acknowledgments for "Hidden Work: Baptist Women in Texas 1880-1920"<sup>2</sup>

Despite moments when one resolves to preface a work with a succinct "I did it all myself," a researcher and writer is invariably in other people's debt. For a historian, that debt begins with those of the past who recorded events, thoughts, or creative urges. It extends then to librarians, archivists, and collectors who preserved those records and artifacts. Although I am unable to thank the Texas Baptists who lived the slice of history portrayed in this dissertation, I can acknowledge the help I received from their denominational descendants; specifically, the late Jean Tolbert, research librarian at Moody Memorial Library, Baylor University, and Kent Keefe and Ellen Kuniyuki Brown, archivists of The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

For my skills as a historian, I express gratitude to my teachers: Thomas L. Haskell, Ira D. Gruber, Martin Wiener, the late Charles Garside, Jr., all of the Rice History Department; the late Walter Isle of the English Department; and David L. Minter, Professor Emeritus of English, Rice University. Thomas Haskell, my major professor, now Professor Emeritus of History, accepted me as an uncertain, fledgling scholar and his broad intellect and analytical acumen have enlarged and corrected my vision in the intervening years. He was joined on the dissertation committee by professors John Boles of the History Department and James Sellers of the Department of Religious Studies, both of whom gave me professional encouragement and read with a careful editorial eye. The same care and friendship was offered by typists Jane Butler and Kay Lake.

The confidence expressed by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation in awarding me a Fellowship for Women's Studies supported me beyond its financial remuneration, although that was not insignificant. The aid of the Rice University History Department in the form of scholarships and a teaching assistantship was also appreciated.

My family provided the context in which my lengthy task was possible. During its progress my sons, Rex and Jeff, became college graduates themselves; but it was my daughter, Dale, who uttered the final word, "Of course you'll finish." Finally, inestimable thanks go to William Martin, who served as an unofficial fourth member of the dissertation committee—and as much more.

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<sup>2</sup>This content is available online at <<http://cnx.org/content/m44378/1.1/>>.



## 0.3 Abbreviations to "Hidden Work: Baptist Women in Texas 1880-1920"<sup>3</sup>

BGCT	Baptist General Convention of Texas
BS	Baptist Standard
BWMW	Baptist Women Mission Workers
SBC	Southern Baptist Convention
TBH	Texas Baptist and Herald
WMU	Woman's Missionary Union

**Table 1**

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<sup>3</sup>This content is available online at <<http://cnx.org/content/m44379/1.1/>>.

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## 0.4 A Note on Names for "Hidden Work: Baptist Women in Texas 1880-1920"<sup>4</sup>

Even during as limited a span as the scope of this study—1880 to 1920—common usage of women's names changed. In the late nineteenth century Texas women often shortened their given name and maiden name to initials; for instance, Fannie Breedlove Davis, a prominent Texas Baptist woman of the period, signed her letters and articles "F. B. Davis." This practice makes it difficult to assign sex to lists of names, such as the participants in a conference or meeting. Before women were expressly forbidden to serve as messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention in 1885, Myra E. Graves of Texas signed in simply as "M. E. Graves" without incident.

After 1900, propriety increasingly demanded that a woman drop her own names and wear her husband's, preceded by "Mrs." Lou Beckley Williams, Fannie Davis's successor as president of Texas Baptist Women Mission Workers, was always referred to as "Mrs. W. L. Williams." Mary Hill Davis, who became president after Mrs. Williams, was formally called "Mrs. F. S. Davis," but she was such a strong figure that she was also frequently designated by her own names.

I have primarily sought to identify women by their given name and family name, but when using a shortened form, I maintained their usage of "Mrs." and "Miss." Only when a woman's given name was not known have I designated her exclusively by her husband's name.

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<sup>4</sup>This content is available online at <<http://cnx.org/content/m44380/1.2/>>.

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# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 - Introduction and Chapter Topics

### 1.1 1.1 Introduction to "Hidden Work: Baptist Women in Texas 1880-1920"<sup>1</sup>

#### CHAPTER I

##### Introduction

To say that Baptists believe the Bible is a truism. But to say that in the late twentieth century the largest and most vigorous Protestant body in the United States still affirmed that the "Bible is word-for-word God's message without scientific or historical error"<sup>2</sup> raised significant social and intellectual issues. This position, of course, was not limited to Baptists. In a 1977-78 Gallup opinion index, 83 percent of the general population—not just religious conservatives—stated that they believed the Bible to be the inspired word of God,<sup>3</sup> and six in ten affirmed that their religious beliefs were "very important" in their lives.<sup>4</sup> The respect and admiration accorded Billy Graham in poll after poll, the steady growth of evangelical religion in all parts of the nation in the 1970s, the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976 on the barest of past records save his personal faith and integrity, and the evangelical caucus that emerged in the political campaign of 1980 testified that the old-time religion was still "good enough" for many Americans. These facts suggest that despite the disdain in which intellectuals had held biblical inerrancy for a century, the Scriptures, interpreted literally, were still authoritative for a large segment of the nation.

Historians have often acknowledged a conservative religious tradition to be characteristic of the South. C. Vann Woodward stated:

*Neither learning nor literature of the secular sort could compare with religion in power and influence over the mind and spirit of the South. The exuberant religiosity of the Southern people, the conservative orthodoxy of the dominant sects, and the overwhelming Protestantism of all but a few parts of the region were forces that persisted powerfully in the twentieth century.*<sup>5</sup>

And, a later scholar, Eugene Genovese asserted that a simple Christian faith, albeit one combined with African traditions, was an asset to American blacks, providing them with joy and community in the midst of an otherwise abusive system.<sup>6</sup> Generally speaking, however, conservative Christianity as an ideology was

<sup>1</sup>This content is available online at <<http://cnx.org/content/m44382/1.2/>>.

<sup>2</sup>Jim Asker, "Baptists Hear Graham," *The Houston Post*, June 14, 1979, p. 38. Quoting Reverend Adrian Rogers, newly-elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

<sup>3</sup>*The Gallup Opinion Index, Religion in America: 1977-78* (Princeton, N. J.: The American Institute of Public Opinion, 1978), p. 44.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup>C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), p. 448.

<sup>6</sup>Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1974).

discounted in scholarly circles after the last quarter of the nineteenth century when modern critical methods cast the Bible as a literal, historical document in a dubious light.

Intellectuals and liberals erroneously assumed that since the Bible could not stand up to scientific standards, the evangelical Christian religion that was based on its literal interpretation would gradually be discredited. Especially after the struggle between progressives and the forces of orthodoxy over Darwinian theory that culminated in the Scopes trial in 1925, most academicians considered the case closed. They convinced themselves that the general population would eventually share their skepticism, and rarely, since then, did historians and social scientists assign biblical literalism a causative role beyond that of a conservative, restrictive impediment or a nostalgic gesture.<sup>7</sup> [Author's note, 2010: Following the rise of the religious right in the national elections of 1979 and that movement's considerable influence on American politics in the decades since, a large body of scholarship on the influence of conservative Protestant religion in contemporary culture has been produced.]

Despite this lack of serious attention by intellectuals through most of the twentieth century, the popular American mind continued to hold to the symbols and tenets of a literal biblical faith with tenacity and to argue some issues on its terms. Women's rights are a prominent example. The same reasoning used in the nineteenth century to detract from the expansion of the female role was used to resist ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s and early 1980s. The creation order of man before woman, particularly in the family, and the inherent weakness of the second sex are ideas founded in the biblical myth and so deeply rooted in our cultural subconscious that, until the late twentieth century, only radical feminists resisted them. Despite the weight this view of woman has borne in supporting disparity of domestic arrangements (and, therefore, of society), no tough, well-reasoned thought was developed to counter it before the 1970s.<sup>8</sup> Instead, a self-denying, supporting model of womanhood was incorporated into the feminist movement early in the 1900s; and while it provided a comforting rationale for woman's political and economic liberation and helped secure certain advances, including the right to vote, it also limited the scope and degree of real change.

Paradoxically, bibliolatry, as practiced in America, has not been uniform and simplistic in its advocacy of a traditional hierarchy of sexes. Opposing these conservative forces has been an emphasis on scriptural sources that promoted the supremacy of the individual. Central to Reformation theology was a diminution of the efficacy of an institution or its functionaries to mediate between a believer and the deity. Ultimately, that individualistic notion, formulated as the "priesthood of all believers," was a key concept in the cultural revolution that has transformed the western world since Martin Luther's time. The theme was an important one in the centuries of settlement and formation of government in America, and the democratic system that resulted was in many ways a secular manifestation and amplification of its individualistic thrust.

Despite efforts by some colonists to impose communal order and discipline, the abundance of land and lack of tradition in the New World quickly weakened the organicism and hierarchy of the Old. With unprecedented opportunity, individuals stood alone—not just before God, but before an open continent, as well. Those who attempted to maintain a balanced stance toward both the Word and the West found biblical teaching to support their position. The concept of freedom before God was extended to freedom from all institutional restraints and to the withdrawal of the government from exercising any control over religion.

Churches themselves tended to develop into democratic institutions, emphasizing the ultimate power and freedom of the individual members. By the nineteenth century, the pattern of free churches transmitted from Europe to New England reached independent extremes in the proliferation of evangelical sects on the American frontier. Charismatic evangelists vied with one another for the conversion of sinners in a competitive religious scene that had no parallel in the European manifestation of the Free Church tradition. In isolated congregations, lay members decided everything from the call of a minister to the acceptance of

<sup>7</sup>The resurgence of interest in spiritual and emotional experiences that accompanied the cultural ferment of the late 1960s and early 1970s and the emergence of evangelicals as a political force in the late 1970s has initiated a revival of interest in conservative Christianity and a reinterpretation of its influence in twentieth-century America. A few examples are: David F. Wells and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *The Evangelicals* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975); Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah, *The New Religious Consciousness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); and Martin E. Marty, *A Nation of Behavers* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976).

<sup>8</sup>William L. O'Neill, *Everyone Was Brave* (New York: Quadrangle/ The New York Times Book Co., 1969), p. 358.

newcomers by majority vote, including women among the voters long before they were franchised by the state.

In small communities and frontier settlements where there were few church members of either sex to fill teaching and benevolent roles, women stepped in and took an active part in these areas, leading the way, as well, in burgeoning mission efforts. The church was the first place outside the home a woman went unapologetically to learn about wider causes, develop skills, and form strengthening bonds with her "sisters." Ironically, churches became woman's launching pad into the murky atmosphere of wider public life and, at the same time, legitimated time-honored patterns that firmly delineated the distance she could rise.

Studies of the history of feminism acknowledge the role religion played in simultaneously fostering and resisting innovations in woman's sphere. In a suggestive article published in 1966, Barbara Welter revealed the religious piety that lay at the core of the restrictive nineteenth-century model of ideal womanhood.<sup>9</sup> *The Southern Lady*, by Anne Firor Scott, further documents that pious mentality in Southern women, but translates it into an activism that resulted in widespread organization beyond the religious realm.<sup>10</sup> Nancy F. Cott's elegant essay on the definition of woman's sphere from 1780-1835 identifies religion as a strong force in assisting females of that period to define their usefulness and provide group solidarity.<sup>11</sup> The "sisters," however, achieved less positive objectives than group identity, according to Ann Douglas, who claims that in the late nineteenth century, they joined with the disestablished clergy to impose their bankrupt piety, reduced to sentimentalism, on the culture at large.<sup>12</sup>

That the woman suffrage movement fought religious forces is recognized in virtually every analysis of its development; Aileen Kraditor even gives a description of the problems with biblical exegesis encountered by the suffragists.<sup>13</sup> Most studies, however, deal with the encounter between religion and feminism that occurred in the nineteenth-century phase of the movement. They concentrate their focus on leading women who ceased to be controlled by biblical literalism, either by embracing modern textual criticism as a way of interpreting the Bible in favor of expanded rights for women or by dismissing Christianity as irrelevant to modern life. Particularly in the urbanized and industrialized northeast, these activists moved beyond church-related activities into the temperance movement, settlement house work, women's clubs, and labor and pro-suffrage organizations, all of which enlarged their avenues of power and attacked social ills in a more direct fashion. Or, having exhausted their impulse to social service, they moved toward the consumer-oriented secularism Ann Douglas describes.

These attempts to understand the leaders of the feminist movement and the women who first participated in an industrial work pattern are instructive about the sexual definition and accommodation of contemporary times, but those who heralded societal change were exceptional within their period and do not exhaust the subject of the relationship between the Bible and the role of women. The average American woman maintained her literal faith long after feminist leaders became disillusioned. Throughout the twentieth century many females continued to order their lives and make sense of their experiences in the light of a biblical interpretation that upheld both male supremacy and individual freedom.

The popular mind's tenacious hold on biblical authority, the conflicting claims made on women by that allegiance and the uneven success of women's intermittent attempts to join the democratic, egalitarian current moving through United States history led me to undertake this study of the interplay between the Bible and women's role in American society. The primary issues that shaped my investigation included: In what way was the Bible authoritative to those who espoused its teachings? How did their beliefs inform the role of those women who claimed allegiance to biblical authority? Did those parts of the Bible that pertained to feminine nature and role shape the changes that occurred in women's lives? Was the Bible reinterpreted to accommodate general cultural patterns? Or was it simply ignored? To answer these questions, I decided

<sup>9</sup>Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly*, 18 (1966), 151-174.

<sup>10</sup>Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

<sup>11</sup>Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

<sup>12</sup>Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977).

<sup>13</sup>Aileen S. Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), pp. 67-8.

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