

Policy on Biblical Equality

Biblical/Theological Rationale

Ministering to a diversity of persons has its origin in divine creation. All humankind descended from that first pair, Adam and Eve, whom God created after His own image (Gen. 1:27, 2:15-20). Humans were the pinnacle of the beings God created (Ps. 8:3-8). Not only is all the earth the Lord's, but also all its peoples (Ps. 24:1). Although God chose one nation, Israel, to be the people through whom salvation would come, this soteriological mission was never intended to be reserved for Israel alone. The Abrahamic covenant makes it clear that the covenant is not merely for Abraham's family, but that through it "all the nations of the world shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3, Gal. 3:8). Although the Hebrew people tended to look inward, God kept re-orienting them outward. The Old Testament law instructed Israel to treat the "strangers" or immigrants with kindness (Ex. 22:21, 23:9, Lev. 19:10, 19:33-34, 23:22, 25:35m 35:15, Deut. 10:18-19, 14:29, 23:7, 24:14, 24:19-21, 27:19). God led the reluctant prophet Jonah to preach a revival for the pagan city of Nineveh (Jonah 1-4). Hebrews such as Joseph, Daniel, and Esther impacted other nations, while Rahab, Ruth, Uriah the Hittite, Hiram, and Cyrus of Persia impacted Israel in a positive way.

The New Testament church reflects increasing diversity of race and ethnicity. The Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20, c.f. Acts 1:8) assigns the church with the mission of reaching all persons of all nations with the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. The early prototype of the office of deacons was created to resolve tensions between the Hellenistic Jews and the Palestinian Jews, with Stephen (whose name indicated a Greek background) as one of their leaders (Acts 6-7). Simon Peter was led by God to expand the mission beyond Judaism to the Greeks (Acts 10), and the church at Antioch sent out missionaries to the Gentile world (Acts 13). The salvation of the Gentiles raised concerns in the Jerusalem church, but these were resolved at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). The remainder of the book of Acts celebrates the expansion of Christianity across the Roman world.

The Pauline epistles reinforce this multiethnic approach to ministry. Persons of each gender, ethnic group and socio-economic status are made equal "in Christ" as God's adopted children (Gal. 3:26-29). Paul urges the Colossian believers to put aside prejudice and discrimination against other ethnic groups: "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all" (Col. 3:11, NASB). Christ has made Jew and Gentile one, breaking down the wall of hostility dividing them and uniting Gentiles who were far off with Jews who were near (Eph. 2:11-22). The appeal of the gospel is to be offered to "whosoever" will believe, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender (Matt. 7:24, 10:23-33, Luke 6:47, 12:8, John 3:15-16, 4:13-14, 6:40, 8:51, 11:26, Acts 2:21, 10:43, Rom. 9:33, 10:11-13, 1 John 2:23, 4:15, 5:1). The New Testament gives us two specific glimpses of the multicultural diversity of the early church. The leaders of the church at Antioch, as described in Acts 13:1, included Barnabas of the island of Cypress, two Africans (Simon called "Niger" and Lucius of present-day Libya), one Asian (Paul from Tarsus in the Roman province of Cilicia in present day Turkey), and Manean, who was reared with Herod the Tetrarch in Galilee. The cultural diversity in the early church was also illustrated in the Apostle Paul's note

to the Roman church. In Romans 16, he personally addresses over twenty-nine Christians – 19 men and 10 women. Paul particularly commends Phoebe, a woman, a key servant of the church. The majority of the names listed are either Greek or Latin names, with several Hebrew names and perhaps a couple of pagan origin.

While there is no spiritual distinction between men and women in Christ (Gal. 3:28), the New Testament does draw some distinctions regarding the pastoral office. While affirming the women serving the Lord through the church, all references to pastors are male (1 Cor. 14:34-37, 1 Tim. 2:11-12, 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-12). Thus, Article VI of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, our SBC doctrinal statement, states that “While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.” NOBTS is committed to this confessional stance in training leaders.

The current church should be multiethnic because the eschatological church will be. The Old Testament prophets spoke of all nations coming to worship in Jerusalem (Isa. 2:2-4, Mic. 4:2, Zech. 14:16). This theme of the people of God coming from all tribes and nations is repeated in the book of Revelation (Rev. 5:9, 7:9, 15:4, 17:15). The church of today should be reaching out to all peoples of all nations, for of such does the Kingdom of God consist.

Missional Rationale

The Mission of NOBTS and Leavell College is “to prepare servants to walk with Christ, proclaim His truth, and fulfill His mission.” The Great Commandments call upon us to practice love of all persons (Matt. 22:36-40). The Great Commission is to proclaim the gospel to all people of all nations (Matt. 28:19-20, c.f. Acts 1:8). While we are committed to principles of inclusion, we understand that the best thing for our fellow man is to live in a way that pleases God. Therefore, we are committed to “biblical equality.”

This multicultural focus is our mission at NOBTS. Because of the increasing diversity represented in Southern Baptist churches, the multicultural urban setting in which the Seminary’s base campus is planted, and the Seminary’s initiatives to offer theological training to a diversity of ethnic, racial, and gender students, NOBTS desires to increase the ethnic and racial diversity within its faculty and student body. Underscoring this desire is the fact that the Southern Baptist Convention has become more diverse intentionally in the last two decades, such that minority/ethnic congregations now constitute about 22 percent of SBC churches, not including those who attend predominantly Anglo congregations. NOBTS has programs focused on Korean and Hispanic students. Therefore, the Seminary enthusiastically supports the aspiration to increase ethnic and racial diversity in our faculty.

Although Baptists in the South often have not been exemplars of racial equality and diversity, the Southern Baptist Convention has made encouraging and significant strides in these areas in recent years. In 1995, on the 150th anniversary of its founding, the Southern Baptist Convention approved a resolution repenting of its racism.¹ In 2012, Fred Luter was elected the

¹ The resolution is available at <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/899>. Dr. Lemke on our faculty was part of a Racial Reconciliation Task Force which was created in response to the approval of that resolution.

first African American to serve as the President of the SBC, and persons of various ethnicities are serving in significant positions in associational, state, and national entities in the SBC. Non-Anglo churches in the SBC have increased from about 6,000 churches in 1998 to over 11,000 churches in 2020, now comprising 22 percent of all SBC churches. Nearly 3,900 of these churches are predominantly African American. A resolution encouraging more diversity in the convention's entities was approved in 2008,² and African American, Asian American, Hispanic, and multiethnic advisory committees were appointed to assist the convention to be more responsive to minorities.³ The SBC has come a long way in redressing the racism and support for slavery of its early leaders. The SBC of today is quite different than the SBC of yesterday, and that is reflected nowhere more clearly than in our increasing biblical equality.

² The resolution is available at <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/1185/on-celebrating-the-growing-ethnic-diversity-of-the-southern-baptist-convention>. Progress toward those goals was reported in this Baptist Press story: The SBC also approved resolutions on the 50th anniversary of the approval of the Civil Rights Act in 2014 (<http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/2246/on-the-fiftieth-anniversary-of-the-civil-rights-act>) and on Racial Reconciliation in 2015 (<http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/2254/on-racial-reconciliation>).

³ See the Baptist Press story at <https://www.baptiststandard.com/news/baptist/17916-sbc-executive-committee-affirms-racial-diversity-report>.