

Wifely submission: The SBC Resolution

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This article appears in the [July 1, 1998](#) issue.

Media coverage of the Southern Baptist Convention's declaration that wives should "submit graciously" to their husbands has been surprisingly extensive. After all, for the past several decades, in SBC pulpits, Wednesday evening prayer meetings, marriage seminars and Christian counseling sessions one could hear sermonettes urging wives to engage in "gracious submission" to their husbands' "servant leadership." Previous SBC votes to boycott Disney or blast lesbian actress Ellen DeGeneres might seem more newsworthy.

Yet the Southern Baptist resolution is significant. Convention activists chose this year not only to issue a public statement of their version of family values but also to insert that view into the credo of the denomination, the Baptist Faith and Message. In 1925 messengers (delegates) to the SBC adopted the first Message statement, intending to patch over differences between fundamentalists and more mainstream Baptists that were wracking the convention. The Message has since become the closest thing to a creed in this creedless denomination. The short document focuses primarily on matters of sin, salvation and spiritual growth, and until now has touched only coincidentally on social matters. It has served effectively to unify the disparate parts of the denomination around a broad evangelical message. Changing it, then, is no small matter.

Nor is it a small matter to change the Message to address social themes. The Depression, a world war, the civil rights movement and the Vietnam war spurred no such action. The family values debate has.

The committee that drew up the resolution included Dorothy Patterson, wife of Paige Patterson, who in the 1970s teamed with Paul Pressler to energize conservative activism in the convention. The battle for control of SBC politics raged in the 1980s,

but by 1990 it was over--with the conservatives victorious.

Newly appointed trustees of major seminaries began stamping SBC institutions in their own image. Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville experienced a near-total turnover in faculty in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In one particularly well-known case, documented in the film *Battle for the Minds*, female Bible scholar Molly Marshall was ousted by the newly appointed president of Southern, R. Albert Mohler Jr.--whose wife has also been a leading advocate of gracious submission.

Marshall's ouster highlighted the gender politics of the new regime--staunchly patriarchal in matters of theological leadership. During the 1980s, in fact, SBC leaders came into conflict with leaders of the Woman's Missionary Union, the highly successful fund-raising auxiliary for SBC missions. This in itself was a remarkable testament to the insistence of the new SBC regime on pressing its social agenda. By calling into question the convention's traditional cozy relationship with the WMU, the conservatives threatened the financial basis of the SBC's gigantic missionary enterprise. In more recent years SBC leaders have created an alternative structure of girls and women's missionary church groups that has, if not displaced the WMU, at least provided a convention-controlled alternative.

The SBC's concern about gender roles is not unlike that displayed by such organizations as the Family Research Council, Concerned Women for America and the Promise Keepers. But the unequivocal proclamation on wifely submission moves the denomination well beyond the ambiguous and frequently conflicting statements on marital relationships made by these other groups.

The meaning of "submission," of course, has changed significantly over time, despite the convention's claim that its resolution exalts the "unchanging Christ." Even among religious conservatives the word does not suggest blind obedience so much as pliant cooperation and acceptance of familial obligations. Research by sociologists, historians and ethnographers has clearly shown that the language of female submission in recent U.S. history has often been intertwined with the language of egalitarianism and, more important, that many women and men who claim to believe in female submission do not actually practice that belief with the literalness that outsiders might suppose.

In most everyday cases, the doctrine of submission entails consulting one's husband in areas that affect the family; it does not prevent attempts at persuasion, influence

or even outright manipulation. Such techniques allow women who lack certain forms of social power or authority to get what they want without, it is hoped, seeming overly aggressive, unfeminine or “feminist.” While such methods are not directly advocated by the doctrine’s supporters, Southern Baptists and everyone else know that they go on all the time in real life.

It is safe to say, then, that a great many contemporary religious avowals of wifely submission are far more symbolic than real. In some cases, such avowals say more about male fantasies of power (and female collusion in such fantasies) than about most domestic realities. The committee members who wrote the amendment admitted as much when they told the press that the statement “does not require wives to do everything their husbands say.”

What the statement does require is not pinpointed. But however vaguely defined, submission carries immense symbolic power. It is a symbol of what some have called a “kinder, gentler patriarchy” but also of an ordered, harmonious home: a home in which spouses do not argue bitterly with one another, in which husbands make a good living for the family and care lovingly for their families, and in which women’s lives are made safe and stable. The insertion of this new guideline into the Faith and Message statement is ultimately as much about molding men into ideal, domesticated husbands as about controlling women--possibly even more so.

After all, women have consistently been some of the most vigorous advocates of the doctrine of wifely submission. Evangelical groups like Women’s Aglow Fellowship have until very recently included this doctrine in their most important statements of faith. Meanwhile, countless members of Aglow and other groups have described being married to men who are selfish, irresponsible, domineering or simply non-Christian--men who, for whatever reason, do not exactly inspire their wives to gracious submission.

Why have these women kept telling one another to submit? Because they have believed that female deference, properly applied, can help turn boorish husbands into tender, responsive, reliable, churchgoing husbands--men who, in short, will transform their wives’ submission from a burden to a reward. While Aglow has lately moved away from direct advocacy of wifely submission, the concern with domesticating husbands remains evident there and in other Christian women’s groups like Women of Faith, Chosen Women and Praise Keepers, not to mention the strongly women-supported men’s group Promise Keepers.

Of course, Promise Keepers, which is led by ex-football coach Bill McCartney, has been more concerned with strengthening the muscular Christianity of born-again men than with increasing women's influence, but the two goals are apparently not so incompatible that men and women cannot cooperate in refining evangelical masculinity and femininity. While not addressing McCartney's concerns so directly, the SBC amendment echoes the evangelical anxiety about contemporary gender roles so evident in these related venues. Whatever else the amendment symbolizes, perhaps its most powerful message is that men should act like "real men" and women should act like ladies--and that the blurring of traditional gender roles undermines the health of church and country.

Even if the true import of this new statement is more in the symbolic realm than in that of everyday life, words matter, and the wording of this statement matters quite a lot. The convention soundly defeated a competing amendment calling for what many biblical commentators say is the more scripturally accurate notion of "mutual submission" between husbands and wives (the preferred language of Roman Catholic leaders in recent years and a formula invoked by many moderate Southern Baptists). The rejection of this idea suggests that denominational leaders and those sympathetic to them mean what they say, and they now mean for women to express renewed deference to their husbands (and express it "graciously") even as men are supposed to become more loving and protective toward their wives.

More to the point, denominational leaders and representatives have arrogated the privilege to make church law not only in the areas of theology and social policy but in private life as well. This move is particularly disturbing for those women and men who do not interpret the fifth chapter of Ephesians in so literal a way. These believers are fast approaching a crossroads where hard choices will have to be made about whether it is still possible to be "in but not of" the Southern Baptist Convention.

The Promise Keepers have chosen to remain ambiguous on the subject of wifely submission. Time will tell whether that group will now feel pressure to clarify its position and whether the highly influential James Dobson, who praised the SBC for passing the amendment, will begin leading Focus on the Family toward the SBC position. Time will also tell what impact the SBC statement will make on the lives of women and men within the SBC.

Chances are the effects will be minimal, as men and women continue to struggle to maintain viable families in the midst of contradictory messages and profound

cultural pressures. The one thing the statement has done, however, is make clear that the SBC, in its current form, will do little to confront the complexities of those struggles.