

Baptists in the kitchen: Women-only homemaking courses

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [October 2, 2007](#) issue

In 1958, during a trifaith “Religious Emphasis Week” at the University of Arkansas, I hung out at the Sigma Nu house. One morning some Baptist Sigma Nu brothers were walking with me as I went by the Lutheran campus chapel. I stopped. “You want to go in *there*?” they asked. Yes, I wanted to see a majestic figure of Christ on the cross sculpted by Harriet Youngman Reinhardt. Once these friendly iconoclasts got over the shock of dealing with an iconodule who favored a carved corpus, one said: “You wouldn’t want to go there. That’s Lutheran!” “So am I,” I responded, and he said: “You know, I never met one of them before!”

Back when Southern Baptists were still Baptist, I was invited to Southwestern Seminary, the “largest seminary in the world,” and was impressed by its worship, classes and faculty. Since then, I’ve been a guest on many southern college and university campuses and have stayed at Baptist-dominated sororities and in faculty homes. While the southern style of hospitality and cuisine may not be to everyone’s taste, this Midwesterner ate it up. The “sisters” and spouses in these places had manners that shamed mine; their grooming and garb reflected a culture that produces Miss Americas. A few of these women were pastors, some were destined to become pastors, and still others would marry pastors. They lacked neither grace nor graces, and the last thing they needed were “home economics” courses.

But their superiors have decided otherwise, at least at Southwestern. Pop culture, pagan pluralism or the presence of non-“cradle Baptist” converts must have led to some loss of the good old manners, mores and recipes. Maybe some of the new women are married to male seminarians who have grown slovenly. Worst of all, in the eyes of new Southern Baptist leadership, many of the women have been called to ordained ministry, which is a no-no. The need for women’s submission to their husbands must have been what prompted Southwestern leaders to introduce a “new, *women-only* academic program in homemaking” (emphasis mine), a 23-hour concentration that counts toward a B.A. in humanities and a life as a pastor’s wife.

The *Dallas Morning News* reports that the program is aimed at helping establish what Southwestern's president calls "biblical family and gender roles." He adds: "We are moving against the tide in order to establish family and gender roles as described in God's word."

Because this is a "women-only" curricular track, one is tempted to shout "discrimination" and call in the feds. Yet the separation-of-church-and-state ethos would protect the seminary from legal enforcement. Only God's inspired word in the Bible should count. And precisely here is where one worries about the Bible sources and these Baptists. The seminary courses are on clothing construction, textile design and meal preparation. In the Bible these tasks were as much part of the family and gender roles of men as of women.

Bible-believing Baptists have to ask: How do we square Matthew 6:25-26 with a 23-hour course on "taking thought for what you should wear" or "eat and drink"? What about the resurrected male Jesus cooking fish and baking bread for the disciples on the beach at the sea of Tiberias (John 21: 9-14)? How about the apostle Paul, who made a living as a tentmaker? From what I know about (us) male ministers today, I'd say that if we cannot cook like Jesus, if we cannot sew like Paul, then it's we who need homemaking lessons. How about men-only or mixed gender courses? They'd be inspired, even biblical.