

Episode 3 - Loopholes

We've covered a lot of ground in two episodes, so let's recap where we've been. In 1964, Addie Davis became the first woman to be ordained in the SBC, signaling the convention's potential openness to women's ordination. Three years later, in 1967, 37-year old judge Paul Pressler dropped by Paige Patterson's apartment while Paige was a student at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. They went to Cafe Du Monde and talked until 3 in the morning, bonding over a shared concern for the liberal drift of the SBC and planting seeds for what would ultimately become the Conservative Resurgence.

As multiple lawsuits helped bring to light, Paul Pressler allegedly began sexually abusing boys and young men behind closed doors around that time- in the late 1970s. Paige Patterson gained momentum as an SBC leader and is alleged to have covered up the abuses committed by his mentee, Darrell Gilyard, and allegedly covered up a rape while he was president at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. After he was fired from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary when those allegations came to light, he was then accused of misappropriating "confidential donor information," redirecting funds from the Harold E. Riley Foundation, and stealing seminary property.¹

All the while, Patterson and Pressler were controlling the direction of the largest Protestant denomination in North America under the guise of morality and biblical orthodoxy which specifically targeted women in ministry.

In 1984, 5 years into the Conservative Resurgence, the SBC passed a resolution "On ordination and the role of women in ministry." The resolution emphasized that women belonged under male headship, that women should not assume authority over men, and because of "creation order" and the "Edenic fall" women were barred from the pastoral office.² Regardless, women like Kathy Hoppe were still going to Seminary and seeking ordination despite harmful interactions and frustrating obstacles. By the late 80s, around 500 Southern Baptist women were ordained, 18 of whom served as pastors.³ An

¹ See footnotes in episode 2.

²Resolutions for the SBC annual meetings can be found on their website:
<https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/resolution-on-ordination-and-the-role-of-women-in-ministry/>

³Susan M. Shaw, "How women in the Southern Baptist Convention have fought for decades to be ordained," *The Conversation*, June 1, 2021,
<https://theconversation.com/how-women-in-the-southern-baptist-convention-have-fought-for-decades-to-be-ordained-161061>

organization called Baptist Women in Ministry mobilized to support women in their callings, meeting every year alongside the SBC's annual convention. But the Conservative Resurgence also mobilized and continued to limit where and how women could serve in the church. The SBC was divided, and what it meant to be a Southern Baptist woman called by God to ministry was increasingly complicated.

But every system has loopholes, even the Southern Baptist Convention. In this episode we are going to talk about the most visible of these loopholes—ways that women could serve in ministry that were generally acceptable, and often celebrated- by the SBC.

Those loopholes are:

1. Become a professor.
2. Become a missionary.
3. Become a pastor's wife.

These three paths allowed women to functionally lead, preach, and pastor women *and* men... they just weren't allowed to call themselves pastors or be ordained. In many ways, these loopholes come down to the use of language and setting. Instead of inviting a woman on stage to "preach" or "teach", for example, she was invited instead to "share." Instead of being a "pastor" a woman was a "director" or a "missionary" or a "prayer warrior." That is what we mean by language loopholes.

And here's what we mean by setting loopholes: While women could not teach men inside Southern Baptist Churches, they were allowed to teach men in colleges, universities, and seminaries. While women missionaries funded by the SBC were preaching the Gospel, pastoring, and baptizing people across the world, they would not be allowed to do the same thing inside church buildings in America. And, as pastors' wives, women could lead, teach, and even preach, as long as their husbands and churches allowed it.

Rosalie Beck, the first female professor of religion at Baylor University- an institution who at that point was in cooperation with the SBC through their affiliation with the Baptist General Convention of Texas- said she never understood that part.⁴ For her, it was just "self-deception and relabeling":

Rosalie Beck: I have actually heard staunch anti-women minister types say, "Well, Lydia could lead the church in Philippi and Priscilla could lead the church in Ephesus because

⁴ For more on Baylor University, see the history on their website: <https://about.web.baylor.edu/heritage/baylor-history>. See also, Donald D. Schmeltkopf, *Baylor at the Crossroads: Memoirs of a Provost* (Cascade Books, 2015).

they were in their homes in the domestic sphere." And I'm going, "It's not about where you are, it's about authority. It's about the call of God. It doesn't matter if you're in a home or if you're in a cathedral. Do you have the authority given by God to do that? I think because I never sought ordination. I'm an ordained deacon in my church, but I never sought ordination for preaching ministry, because that wasn't my calling, that I could be acceptable as a church historian.

The language that Rosalie uses here is important. She said, "I could be acceptable as a church historian." That's what these loopholes provided *and still provide* for women in the SBC. Acceptable ways to follow their callings, even if their callings are functionally pastoral. In this episode, we're going to feature three women- including Rosalie Beck- and the loopholes that allowed them to serve in ministry.

[Intro Music Start]

Created in partnership with the Bible for Normal People, this is All the Buried Women: A miniseries uncovering women's stories hidden in the Southern Baptist Convention's archives. Hosted by me, Beth Allison Barr. And me, Savannah Locke.

[Intro Music End]

Episode 3: Loopholes

Beck: My name is Rosalie Beck. I was a professor at Baylor University for 35 years, and I joined the faculty in 1984.

Rosalie went to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary to get her Master of Divinity at the height of the Conservative Resurgence. We asked her what her experience was like as a young Seminarian:

Beck: At Southwestern, there were about 2100 in school of theology. There were 50 women. There were very few who were interested in making something like a conversation or just discussion group We were very isolated. I knew the women that I knew in the dorm because I stayed in the women's dorm were almost all education, religious education people, and they had the intention of being church workers. But they also, from the faculty, got a lot of support. I mean, I never had a faculty member ring me out except once, and he didn't ring me out, he tried to be smart, and I took care of that. It was Dr. Cal Guy in a missions course. He was old then, so I don't know when he met the Lord. But he was talking about a missiology principle that you make do with what

you have. You may want the best with all the bells and whistles, but you put together what will work in the circumstances. And he Just as an example, a grass-cutting implement that he could put on his tractor, he lived on a farm outside of Fort Worth, and he used words like "couplings" and "universal joints," and of course I didn't have a clue what he was talking about. And he stopped, now this is a missionary prep class, and it was required for all of theology students. And he said, "Now you women, and over half the members of the class were women, you women won't be able to understand this bless your pointy little heads." And I couldn't believe that he said that. I had never heard anything like that from a professor. And I sat right in the front, and he turned after he And it was a moment of God's grace because I looked at him and said, "Dr. Guy, you have every right to be completely wrong." Of course, I had the highest grade in the class.

Rosalie graduated from Southwestern with her MDiv and, to no one's surprise, received the first ever Robert A. Baker Church History Award celebrating her as an outstanding student in her field.⁵ As you can tell, Rosalie is brilliant and a bit of a rebel, which allowed her to blaze her own trail forward in academia. Knowing she wanted to be a professor, she set her eyes on Baylor for her PhD. Rosalie's experience as a PhD student at Baylor was good- she had support from her family, peers, and professors. Well... most professors:

Beck: There were one or two that were kind of wiggly to start with, but they straightened out. John Davidson, for example, was the professor of psychology of religion and a really very good teacher, very good teacher. And he taught the research seminar for the PhD students in religion. And he told the same story every semester about the same time. I was one of 12 in the seminar and the only woman. In fact, I was the first woman, I think, who actually finished the PhD program. But one of my friends had done a master's degree, and she had taken the research seminar. And she said, "Now, at some point this semester, he's going to tell you this story, And it's all about trying to think outside the box. And the story is you're in a room with a group of people and it's a concrete room. There's a locked metal door and to get out of the room you have to think outside the box. In the middle of the room in the floor is a tube and a watertight tube and there's a ping-pong ball in it and on the ping-pong ball is the key. How do you get out? And it's really a good thought game. But Katie, I said, "I don't know because I'm not good at thought games." And Katie said, "Okay, what you do is you all urinate into the hole and it'll float the ball up and you take the key and you unlock the door." The day comes where he's telling this story. And he had this habit of pushing his fingers up under his glasses so that we're on top of his head by the time he finished. And he did

⁵ See Rosalie Beck's bio at CBE International (Christians for Biblical Equality): <https://www.cbeinternational.org/person/rosalie-beck/>

that. And he says, "Now, I usually tell, give you a thought game at this point, but we have a lady in the class. And there are parts of this thought game that are not quite up to snuff when a lady's present. And "I haven't decided really whether I'm going to tell the story or not." And he decides to tell the story, of course he did. And so he told it, and all the guys are looking at each other, and they're looking at me, and I go, "Well, it's really quite simple, Dr. Davidson. Everybody urinates in the hole, it floats the ball up, and get the key," and he blushed.

Rosalie, like many other women we've interviewed from this era in the SBC's history, embodies both a fiery spirit and a hilarious wit. This combination, alongside her intelligence, opened up doors for her to do what she was made for: teaching women and men religion, theology, and history. After getting her PhD, she applied to be a [full-time lecturer] professor of religion at Baylor. The Board of Trustees, whose president was Milton Cunningham at the time, were open to the idea, as long as Rosalie could properly answer these two questions:

Beck: When I was hired, Jack Flanders was the chair and he was in conversation with Dr. Reynolds who was the president at that time and Reynolds was incredibly supportive of women as much as he could be of women in religion. So Jack talked with Reynolds, Reynolds went through all the rules about hiring because this was way back when it was really just an interview, and that was it, not the circus that it is now. And Dr. Reynolds decided that he could hire me as a lecturer without going to the board of trustees. And he did call Milton Cunningham, who was the president of the board of trustees at that time, and was pastor of a big church in Houston. Cunningham asked him two questions when he said, "I want to hire a woman to teach in religion." Is she ordained? Does she want to be? And if the answer was yes to either of those, my hiring would have been blocked by the chair of the board of trustees.

Isn't this interesting? Rosalie could get hired as a professor as long as she was not, and did not want to be, ordained. In the SBC, ordination became a scarlet letter for women. And to be clear, getting ordained is not a magical process. Churches don't have to let you preach if you are ordained. People are not forced to listen to you if you are ordained. There's not even an established process in the SBC for ordination. Right now, on the SBC's website, they say this about ordination: "The SBC is not a church; as such, it neither ordains nor 'recognizes' ordination. Both initial ordination and recognition of previous ordination are addressed strictly on a local church level... When a church senses that God has led a person into pastoral ministry, it is a common practice to have a council (usually of pastors) review his testimony of salvation, his pastoral calling from

the Lord, and his qualifications...for pastoral ministry. Based upon that interview the church typically decides whether or not ordination would be appropriate.”⁶

If you took this at face value, it wouldn't seem like the SBC was too obsessed with ordination, right? They go out of their way to say the SBC is not a church and cannot ordain or recognize ordination. But in reality, as we know, ordination served as a litmus test. If Rosalie Beck said she wanted to be ordained, it would have sounded off the alarms for the Board of Trustees. Not because there is something magical about ordination- it's not like God suddenly overtakes someone's body when a group of SBC pastors recognize their call to ministry- but because being ordained as a woman shattered the crystallized expectations of what it meant to be a submissive, godly woman. It also put women in a position to compete with men for jobs.

Because Rosalie didn't want to be ordained, she was allowed to functionally do the very thing the SBC said she *couldn't* do: teach women and men the Bible. Her loophole existed because of language and setting. She didn't want the title of ordination, and she would teach men in classrooms not churches. Therefore, she was acceptable.

Beck: It's all about the title. I don't know how many women ministers I have met who were missionaries and they were pastoring churches. They just didn't talk about it when they came back home. And they never preached at home, they just gave devotion.

Rosalie Beck taught her first class as a religion professor at Baylor in 1984. As previously mentioned, she was the first full-time woman hired to teach in the Religion department at Baylor and, as she remembers, there was concern that her gender might deter male students from signing up for her courses.

Undeterred, Rosalie taught for the next thirty five years, from the genesis of the Conservative Resurgence until her retirement in 2019. Thousands of students came through her doors and learned about religion, theology, the Bible, and history. She directly impacted people like Pamela Durso, the historian we interviewed about Addie Davis in Episode 1; or Meredith Stone, the director of Baptist Women in Ministry who we also interviewed in Episode 1; and (me!) Beth Allison Barr, who taught alongside Rosalie at Baylor. She was able to have a decades-long impact on Baptist women and men because of a loophole in the SBC's system which accepted women as professors of religion.

⁶ See the SBC website: <https://www.sbc.net/about/what-we-do/faq/>

But we have two more loopholes to discuss, starting with a missionary named Bertha Smith, and one SBC pastor's surprising discovery that she, a woman, had preached at his church forty years ago.

[Music Transition]

Steve Bezner: Our church has elders and so we said let's commission a study and decide what we need to do. What our goal was was to say we want to draw very bright lines so that way no woman in the congregation is ever fearful of exercising her gift because she knows exactly what our congregation believes regarding the role of women within the church. So we did that, and that was a multi-year process.

This is Steve Bezner, pastor of Houston Northwest Church and author of the book, *Your Jesus is Too American*. He's describing a study the elders at his SBC church commissioned to determine their stance on women in ministry.

Bezner: In that process, I was asking about the concept of women preaching, would that be allowed in our church? And one of the men who was part of this study said, I don't know that we've ever had a woman preach, but then one of the men who's at the time was serving as an elder and has been a member of the church, basically as long as the church has been existent said, no, no, no, that's not true. We actually have had women who have preached in our congregation. I mean, this was News to me. I had not heard this. So I said really, okay So who who are these women and he said well There's a woman by the name of Bertha Smith who I know preached on more than one occasion at Houston Northwest now I had never heard the name Bertha Smith and so that sent me down You know kind of an internet rabbit hole trying to find out who Bertha Smith was and then I found out that there was this woman They Bertha Smith who had not only preached at Houston Northwest, the church that I currently pastor, but then churches not just all over Texas, but churches all over the nation. And that was how she came to be known to me.

Olive Bertha Smith, affectionately known as “Miss Bertha”, was born in South Carolina in 1888. She went to school to become a teacher, but sensed God calling her to become a missionary. She enrolled in the Women's Missionary Union Training School in Kentucky and, with time, it became more clear that she was meant to be a missionary in China. Appointed by the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board in 1917, she sailed to China at the age of 29 and didn't move back to America until she was 70. During that

time, she worked in China, was held in a Japanese internment camp for six months, and became the SBC's first missionary to Taiwan.⁷

I spent hours going through Bertha's documents in the SBC's archives, including letters to and from her sister, private journal entries from her time in China, and invitations from pastors asking Bertha to come preach at their churches- I mean, share at their churches.

If you search Bertha's name right now, you can find dozens of audio recordings of her sermons, mainly from the 70s and 80s, where she *shared* teachings from the Bible in front of entire congregations- men and women alike. If we took one of those recordings and made a transcript of her exact words, and gave it to a regular churchgoer and asked them, "What is this?" They would say, "It's a sermon, of course!"

But you can listen for yourself. Here is a clip of Bertha at an SBC church in Texas in the late 70s:

Bertha Smith: The water poured out. And then later on, when they're wandering around in the wilderness again, they had no water. And the Lord told Moses to go speak to the rock. Go speak to it. Why could he not strike it again? That rock represented our Lord Jesus Christ. The New Testament tells us that Jesus was that rock that was struck, and he couldn't be crucified but once. And if it's crucified, we only speak to Him.

Bertha spoke for 56 minutes, often reading from her giant Bible that sat on the pulpit. She did an altar call of sorts at the end, then prayed for the hearts of everyone in the room to be moved towards God. What would you call that?

It sounds a lot like preaching to us. And did you catch that "Amen" in the background? The one said by a man? That shows there weren't just children or women in the room. Bertha Smith taught men in Southern Baptist churches. If you look at the ways she is described by the SBC's website or literature, you would absolutely see her celebrated; just not as a teacher or pastor, but as a missionary.

⁷ The documents in this section can be found in Olive Bertha Smith Collection, AR 856, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives (SBHLA), Nashville, TN. Bertha's sermons can be found online at sermon index <https://www.sermonindex.net/modules/mydownloads/viewcat.php?cid=768> and <https://vimeo.com/channels/1280783>. Danny Akin's sermon, "A Soul-Winning Missionary and Woman of Prayer, Revival and the Victorious Christian Life," can be found online here: <https://www.danielakin.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Galatians-2.20-Bertha-Smith-A-Soul-Winning-Missionary...Manuscript-kh.pdf>. See also her memoir, *Go Home and Tell* (Broadman Press, 1965), and her bio on the International Mission Board website: <https://www.imb.org/175/missionary-profiles/bertha-smith/>

That's because being a missionary is a loophole for Southern Baptist women to do a lot of things pastors do, just in different countries or with a different title. Or, in Miss Bertha's case, it gave her the leeway to do pastor-y things in Southern Baptist Churches. And that sermon of hers was not a rare occasion.

In the archives, we found several letters from SBC pastors in America either asking Miss Bertha to come share at their church, or thanking her for her ministry. One letter, written by a pastor in 1984, thanked her for speaking to their youth group. He said, "Miss Bertha, I thank the Lord for your clear Biblical teaching concerning the Cross and our sins. I am maintaining an up-to-date sin list and am experiencing victory in the Spirit-controlled life. Your zeal for Christ has motivated me to yield myself totally into our gracious Father's hands." This pastor seemed extremely comfortable celebrating Bertha's sermon and its impact on him personally, not just on the students. Why was this ok? Was it okay for Bertha to preach in the presence of this pastor, and for her sermon to teach him, because her intended audience was youth? What is the loophole that allowed for Bertha to teach a man?

In another letter, a pastor asked Bertha to come lead a "Prayer Event" at their church like she had done at many others. Another one celebrated Bertha for her "retreats." Another asked that she would organize a "prayer band." One letter from a Baptist pastor in Taiwan said, "I heard that you are very busy for preaching and writing. May our lord bless your invitations and messages."

Bertha was being invited to "share" or "pray" or "have a retreat" with SBC churches all across the country. Functionally, she was preaching and teaching. There are dozens of audio recordings from Bertha's messages at these churches, and all of them are sermons. That's why, when Steve Bezner's church commissioned a study on women in ministry, an elder said, "A woman *has* preached here before." He was right. Miss Bertha graced the pulpit of Houston Northwest Church in the early 1980s. As it turns out, Steve saw her preach when he was just a little boy:

Bezner: So our church was started in 1973. And at the time, you know, where our church sits was sort of more of a rural church, kind of on the outskirts of Houston. Now we're definitely in the middle of the city. But so in the eighties, it was beginning that transition from rural to becoming more of a suburban, urban congregation. But the church has always had a really big heart for missions. And so it was very common for the church to bring in mission speakers. And so as a result, they would bring in folks who would serve with, at the time, what was referred to as the Foreign Mission Board, now the International Mission Board, and they would bring people in to speak. Well, so as you are already aware, Ms. Bertha had been serving as a missionary for many years.

And from what I gather, she was sort of seen as the modern day version of Lottie Moon and was sort of viewed with that sort of reverence and was treated as such. And so she was allowed to come and to speak on a Sunday morning from the pulpit and to bring the word to the congregation. And apparently this was happening in churches for sure all over Texas. And I'm not sure about what her ministry was beyond there. I can also tell you, so once this particular elder mentioned this to me, I suddenly had a memory stirred from my childhood. And I thought, I think that Ms. Bertha preached at my home church, which would have been First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Texas. And so I went back and I asked my parents. I said, do you remember a woman by the name of Ms. Bertha or Bertha Smith coming to speak at our church? And my mom said, absolutely. I remember her coming to speak at our church. Now I've not been able to dig up any documentation on that, but I asked, I said, "So was that a Sunday morning, a Sunday night?" And my mom, she said, she couldn't totally remember, but her memory was it was a Sunday night when we were doing a missions emphasis, kind of a missions dinner type thing at the congregational level. And Miss Bertha came and spoke that Sunday night, and then we gathered together to kind of have a dinner to hear more about missions.

Miss Bertha became an extremely influential woman in the SBC, connected to top figures in the convention like Charles Stanley - Andy Stanley's father - and Adrian Rogers. In fact, Adrian Rogers partly credited her with his desire to run for President of the SBC in 1979. She told Rogers that she felt God wanted him to be nominated.⁸ Isn't it interesting that Rogers, profoundly influenced by a preaching missionary woman in the SBC, would go on to play a key role in a resurgence that limited women in their denomination?

In some ways, Bertha Smith is not a buried woman. We found hundreds of documents in the archives about her, there is a library in Georgia named after her, and she is mentioned many times in Southern Baptist literature. In other ways, the fullness of her life and ministry *is* sanitized to align with current SBC stances on women in ministry. In title, Bertha was a missionary. In practice, Bertha was a missionary, teacher, preacher, and leader of women *and* men across the globe.

Her story highlights the contradictions within the SBC's treatment of women in ministry. You can teach, as long as you call it sharing. You can preach, as long as it's at mission nights or prayer events. Bertha's life reveals the power of loopholes which allowed women to follow their callings by sidestepping the formal titles that would have barred them from ministry.

⁸ Ron F. Hale, "Adrian Rogers: Prophet of the Conservative Resurgence," *The Christian Index*, August 6, 2018, <https://christianindex.org/stories/adrian-rogers-prophet-of-the-conservative-resurgence.2567>

But there's one loophole we have yet to discuss. And this one means a lot to us because, well, it's the subject and title of Beth's new book: *Becoming the Pastor's Wife: How Marriage Replaced Ordination as a Woman's Path to Ministry*.

[Music Transition]

Nine years after the start of the Conservative Resurgence, an SBC ordained pastor named Jann Aldredge Clanton delivered a paper in support of women's ordination at the 1988 Southern Baptist Historical Society meeting in Nashville, Tennessee. Her debate partner, who spoke against women's ordination, was a pastor's wife.⁹

Let that sink in for a minute— the significance of a pastor's wife leading the charge in the SBC against women's ordination. And it wasn't just "a" pastor's wife, either. It was Dorothy K. Patterson, the wife of Paige Patterson who was, as you know, a pastor and architect of the Conservative Resurgence. She isn't an invisible woman. But her story is important for understanding the potential power & very real limitations of the pastor's wife role.

Oh, and guess who attended this debate? Rosalie Beck!

Let's listen to her describe her experience of the event:

Beck: Okay, I was a new faculty member and the Department of Religion has been absolutely wonderful about providing travel funds and support for conferences, and I think there were like eight of us that went to the Baptist History and Heritage Society meeting. It was in Nashville, and Jane Clinton, who was an ordained minister, she died a couple of weeks ago of cancer, presented the pro -women minister's position, and Dorothy Patterson presented the anti women ministers position. And it was ridiculous. It was the most. Now Dorothy Patterson is a heck of a lot smarter than her husband. Paige Patterson is anyway. But she's super and you ask anybody who knew them at New Orleans Seminary and they'll tell you that she danced circles around her husband academically. But she realized her real power lay behind him. And she chose the role that she played very, very seriously. Each of the debaters had prepared a document and because it would be published, there were very specific limits to size and topic and all that sort of stuff. And I think it was like a 10 -page document. Well, she had a 28 -page

⁹ The papers from the debate can be found in Baptist History and Heritage: A Southern Baptist Journal VOL. XXIII, No. 3, July 1998, pp. 50-62. Clanton delivered a paper titled, "Why I Believe Southern Baptist Churches Should Ordain Women," and Dorothy Patterson delivered a paper titled, "Why I Believe Southern Baptist Churches Should Not Ordain Women." Women in Baptist Life Collection, AR 160, SBHLA, Nashville, TN.

document and she wasn't going to cut it down. She ended up cutting it down, but she had her hat on, which was a symbol of her subservience to the male's presence. She always wore a hat when she was in a group, unless it was all women and she didn't wear a hat. That was to show her subservience. And it was funny. I mean, I was just a newbie at the whole gender thing and trying to look at the biblical record in the biblical story of women, but I just thought it was the most ludicrous thing I'd ever seen. Now she's smart and she's a good debater. I would probably enjoy just having a conversation with her about tons of different kinds of things, but I don't know how a really bright woman could take the positions that she did because they were, for one thing, was bad interpretation of Scripture, bad physiology, bad physiology, and she would say things like, "Now, this is a group of 300, mostly men in suits, who are professors, preachers, who have an interest in history. Some of the leaders from the Sunday School Board were there. There were a lot of different SBC agencies in Nashville, and a lot of them came to the meeting." And she pretended to be the subservient woman, and she was anything but the subservient because she was calling them in down and telling them they were wrong and all that when they asked questions. And at one point, there was a guy from, it was the church in Memphis that was disfellowshipped and they had been kicked out of the Shelby, I think it's the name of the association. And he, at the Q & A time, he said, "You're standing in front of a crowd of 300 scholars and pastors and executives. The vast majority of whom are men. I didn't think women were supposed to teach men." And she said, "Well, I'm sharing. I'm not teaching. I'm sharing." And he looked at her and he kind of went, "Well, I'm a man and I'm a pastor and I consider myself taught. You didn't share, you taught."

Isn't it interesting how Dorothy Patterson postured herself as submissive to male leadership, fighting against female ordination, even as she publicly exercised authority over a roomful of around 300 mostly male pastors and professors?

Did you hear how she "relabelled" herself?

How she was "sharing", not teaching?

Dorothy Patterson drew authority from her role as pastor's wife, sharing the authority of her husband. He could (and did) give her permission to speak. When she spoke, including during her debate with Jann Aldridge Clanton, she wore a hat as a symbol of her submission to Paige. This allowed for her to publicly teach and lead rooms full of men while maintaining the facade of male authority.

In my new book, *Becoming the Pastor's Wife*, I tell the history of what happened to women's ordination in the context of the rise of the pastors' wife role. I also tell how

pastors' wives perceived their own authority. I examined 150 books written by and for women married to ministers—including one written by Dorothy Patterson herself.

You know what I found? I found that even in churches who do not ordain women, women married to ordained men could serve—and be celebrated— as leaders, teachers, preachers. As long as they recognized the authority of their husbands.

As I wrote at the end of my 7th chapter, *“The pastor’s wife was literally defined by her relationship to and dependence on a man. Just as Dorothy Patterson’s trademark hats covered her hair, serving as an outward symbol of submission to male authority, the model of the pastor’s wife covered the absence of female pastors, serving as a visible symbol that women could still be active and visible in ministry even in churches that wouldn’t ordain them.”*¹⁰

The pastor’s wife role, like that of missionary and professor, has played an important role throughout Baptist history. Pastor’s wives like Willie Dawson preached internationally, helped lead the Women’s Missionary Union, and was even nominated to be Vice President of the Southern Baptist Convention itself. Weptanomah Carter taught seminary, preached a popular weekly radio show, and led alongside her pastor husband. Ruth Bobo served in her church and won the respect of her congregation, so much so they nominated her for the SBC annual pastor’s wife award in 1959.¹¹

Yet, the loophole of the pastor’s wife—regardless of how much authority and influence women wield through it—can never be more than a mediated role. Dorothy Patterson’s trademark hats are a perfect symbol for what the pastor’s wife role has become in white evangelical traditions like the SBC— women can lead as long as they stay within the boundaries set by men. Becoming a pastor’s wife, while it can be a loophole, is always defined by her dependent relationship to her husband’s job.

[Music Transition]

We have a sticky note with a few goals written down for this podcast. One of them is to complicate the history of the SBC by using the SBC’s own archives. When it comes to women’s ordination or women in leadership, many Southern Baptist leaders try to claim—implicitly or explicitly— that this is simply the way it’s always been. Like women have never been allowed to get ordained before, or women have never preached in SBC churches, or women have never taught Southern Baptist men the Bible. They act like to

¹⁰ Beth Allison Barr, *Becoming the Pastor’s Wife: How Marriage Replaced Ordination as a Woman’s Path to Ministry* (Brazos Press, 2025), p. 152.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Chapters 6 and 9.

deviate from this stance which limits women in ministry would be to deviate from orthodox Christianity. But the SBC's own history shows this isn't true.

Southern Baptist women have been leading, preaching, teaching, and getting ordained, finding ways to live out their callings, with or without support.

What stands out in each of these stories is the ingenuity, resilience, and faith of women who refused to be silenced. They worked within the cracks and loopholes of a rigid system, crafting spaces where their voices could be heard and their gifts could flourish—whether in a classroom, on the mission field, or through the role of a pastor's wife.

But these loopholes also highlight the contradictions and inequities of the Southern Baptist Convention. They expose how deeply language, titles, and settings have been weaponized to maintain control while still benefiting from the labor of women. As much as these loopholes allowed women to lead and serve, they also reinforced the barriers the SBC placed in their way.

When we told Pamela Durso, who was interviewed in Episode 1 about Addie Davis, about our work on loopholes, she was quick to add in a fourth one:

Durso: So if I'm going to be honest about loopholes, the other loopholes for Southern Baptist women is they left and became Methodist and Presbyterian and Disciples in UCC. I took students once to, when I was teaching at Campbell Divinity School, we did a denominationalism class, and I took them to various churches in the Raleigh Durham area. And when we got to the Methodist Church, the pastor was going to tell us about being Methodist and what that meant. And he stood up and he looked at me and he said, "Thank you for sending us all your women." And I said, "Well, you're welcome." Because so many Southern Baptist women left. And I see that in my own world. I now affiliate with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. I'll be 63 on Saturday. There aren't women my age. There's a whole generation missing from CBF because they moved to other denominations and found a place they could serve. I think that's to me, we us the best and brightest of our women because they were not allowed to use their gifts and be fully authentically themselves.

We're so grateful that Pamela brought this up, because it rings true: for many women, leaving the SBC was the only viable path forward. Their loophole wasn't a workaround; it was an exit door—an escape from a denomination that restricted their roles and into ones that fully embraced their callings and leadership.

These women are not buried in the SBC's archives because they could never be planted there in the first place. While this miniseries is focused on women inside the SBC, we also want to honor the many women who left- and continue to leave- in order to find spaces that openly recognize their leadership, talents, and gifts.

[Music Transition]

We reached out to the SBC, Paige Patterson, Darryl Gilyard, Tommy Gilmore, and the Council for National Policy for comment, and did not hear back.

In the next episode, we'll turn our focus to a deeply troubling issue: the Southern Baptist Convention's sexual abuse problem. In it, we speak with one incredible woman who has spent decades fighting for justice, working tirelessly to bring survivors' voices to the forefront and hold the church accountable.