

THE EQUIP INSTITUTE

Theme: Baptist Beliefs

Topic: BF&M (2000): Article VI: The Church

Fall 2025

Introduction

The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and his Word for the sake of living rightly before God in his world. The topic this week is Article VI in the Baptist Faith and Message (2000), which is on the doctrine of the church.

Article IV

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its two scriptural offices are that of pastor/elder/overseer and deacon. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor/elder/overseer is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.

The New Testament speaks also of the church as the Body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation.

Matthew 16:15-19; 18:15-20; Acts 2:41-42,47; 5:11-14; 6:3-6; 13:1-3; 14:23,27; 15:1-30; 16:5; 20:28; Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 3:16; 5:4-5; 7:17; 9:13-14; 12; Ephesians 1:22-23; 2:19-22; 3:8-11,21; 5:22-32; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:18; 1 Timothy 2:9-14; 3:1-15; 4:14; Hebrews 11:39-40; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Revelation 2-3; 21:2-3.

Key Biblical Texts

¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matt. 16:15-19)

¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." (Matt. 18:15-20)

⁴¹ So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the

prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:41-47)

¹ Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons. (Phil. 1:1)

¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Eph. 2:19-22)

Observations

Exposition of Article VI

Historical Context

This article has been expanded each time the BF&M has been revised (1925, 1963, 2000), and it was amended as recently as 2023. In most cases, the revisions have been minor tweaks that have clarified what most Southern Baptists already believed. There was one change in 2000 that proved to be one of the most controversial aspects of the BF&M (2000).

Key Ideas

The goal is to conform our view of the church as closely to the New Testament as possible

Local churches are autonomous from other churches, associations, and conventions

Local churches are congregations of baptized believers who give evidence of personal regeneration

Local churches are covenantal by nature, meaning members voluntarily pledge their commitment to God and one another

Local churches observe two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, which are treated in a separate article

Jesus rules every local church through his commands, which should ultimately determine each church's agenda

Local churches are congregational, which means every member has a part in helping to determine how best to obey Jesus's commands

Every member of the church is personally responsible and accountable to Jesus as his or her King

The two New Testament offices are pastors/elders/overseers (which are synonymous terms) and deacons

The New Testament teaches that God gifts both men and women for gospel ministry, but only biblically qualified men can be set apart as a pastor/elder/overseer

Every local church plays a part in fulfilling the Great Commission

The New Testament also affirms the universal church, or the wider Body of Christ that transcends particular local churches

The universal church will ultimately include everyone who will ever be saved, whose number will come from every people group on the earth

The Revision

The BF&M (2000) added the phrase, "While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture." This was one of the most controversial revisions to the statement because it made women in pastoral ministry a matter of confessional fidelity. Southern Baptists reiterated our commitment to the historic view—which we believe is also biblical—that women should not serve in pastoral roles in local churches.

This issue had been a source of debate since 1964, when the first Southern Baptist woman was ordained at Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, NC. By the early 1980s, a few hundred women had received ordination, and a few dozen served in pastoral roles in local churches. In 1984, the SBC adopted a resolution affirming the traditional view that only men can serve as pastors, but the issue remained hotly contested. In the 1980s and 1990s, the issue of women in pastoral ministry was a major source of debate at most of the SBC seminaries, as well as in many state conventions and local associations.

With the adoption of the BF&M (2000), SBC entities had confessional grounds for requiring a traditional view of women in pastoral ministry. There has continued to be controversy from time to time, but over the past quarter-century Southern Baptists have further clarified their views on this issue and argued it is critically important in a world marked by confusion over gender. Today, every seminary professor, missionary, curriculum writer, and entity trustee must agree with the BF&M (2000) on this matter.

Over the past five years, the controversy has centered on women who serve in pastoral roles that are subordinate to a senior pastor on a church's organizational chart. Some argue the word "pastor" in the BF&M (2000) only refers to senior or solo pastors. In 2023, the SBC amended Article VI to clarify that the terms *pastor*, *elder*, and *overseer* refer to the same office. Most Southern Baptist churches are small and have only one pastor/elder/overseer. Large churches like Taylors First Baptist Church are served by a team of pastors/elders/overseers. In some churches, some of the pastors/elders/overseers are on staff while others are uncompensated. Church leadership structures may vary, but the SBC is clear in our confession: the Bible teaches only men should be pastors/elders/overseers. The SBC continues to debate whether or not a bylaw change is needed to complement the BF&M (2000), but our practice is that churches that call women to pastoral roles are disfellowshipped from the SBC.

Nearly all Southern Baptists agree that God gifts women for ministry and even calls many to full-time Christian service, including on church staffs. The SBC adopted a resolution in 2023 that explicitly affirms this position. The debate isn't over "women in ministry," as is sometimes claimed by critics of the SBC, but rather is over whether or not God calls women to serve as pastors. On the basis of our understanding of the Scriptures, Southern Baptists believe God does not call women to serve as pastors.

One other issue of note: the BF&M (2000) is silent on the question of the gender of deacons. There are two reasons for this. First, conservative Bible scholars debate whether or not there were female deacons in the New Testament, and if so, whether they differed in any way from male deacons. Second, a minority of Southern Baptist churches have female deacons, especially in roles such as women's ministry, hospitality, bereavement ministries, and children's ministry. For these reasons, Southern Baptists have not gone on the record one way or the other on the issue of female deacons.