

## **The 'Camelot' Years**

*by Russell D. Moore*

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A moderate Baptist theological journal has published a jarring article which portrays the "old" Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, when it was under the control of Baptist moderates, as simultaneously a feminist-friendly "Camelot" of theological liberalism and an oppressive "bar culture" in which women students were subjected to lewd innuendoes and forced kisses from male graduate students and professors.

The women doctoral students profiled in the summer 1998 issue of the *Review and Expositor*, published in November, are described as having completed a spiritual "journey" which, for many of them, means the jettisoning of cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith, including the existence of a personal God.

*Review and Expositor*, which broke ties with Southern Seminary in 1996 in protest over the conservative theological reforms of President R. Albert Mohler Jr. is published by a consortium of moderate Baptist theological institutions including Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, George W. Truett Seminary, Central Baptist Theological Seminary, Gardner-Webb Divinity School, and Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology.

The article, "Once There Was a Camelot: Women Doctoral Graduates of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982-1992, Talk About the Seminary, the Fundamentalist Takeover, and Their Lives Since SBTS" by Susan Shaw and Tisa Lewis, details the findings of a 1997 study funded by the Pew Charitable Trust.

Responses generated from the Southern alumni who had "lived through trauma" of the changing of the guard at the seminary were detailed in first-person reminiscences from twenty-six of the thirty-four women who graduated from the Ed.D. and Ph.D. programs of the seminary between 1982-92. Four of the twenty-six respondents - 15 percent - identified themselves as lesbians. Some of the respondents used obscenities which would be too offensive to include in this article.

"This sad article reveals a sickness which should concern every Southern Baptist," Mohler said. "With breathtaking candor, these women reveal their departures from the faith - with many of them having left behind any semblance of biblical Christianity.

"The need for a conservative redirection of Southern Seminary is convincingly and powerfully demonstrated. If any faithful Christian had any question about the need for theological accountability and integrity in our seminaries, this evidence should be fully convincing. The article is heartbreaking and tragic. This is why Southern Seminary must be, and now is, so clearly committed to biblical inerrancy, confessional accountability, and the faith once for all delivered to the saints," Mohler added.

Recounting a commencement address by former Southern Seminary President Duke McCall in which he urged students to remember that "once there was a Camelot" at the Louisville, Ky., campus, the journal noted that two of the women quoted McCall's statement as an apt description of their feelings about the institution. In the words of one respondent, the seminary "moved me away from Southern Baptists ... moved me away from organized religion" and "moved me toward a much broader view of God than I ever could have imagined."

Four of the respondents reported having been sexually assaulted or harassed by professors or fellow graduate students, while others described being asked out on dates by married doctoral students. One respondent depicted the seminary as having a "bar culture" in which women were the subject of innuendoes and jokes in the library's graduate lounge. Others reported sexual discrimination from professors and colleagues.

The respondents displayed strong feelings about the current conservative evangelical theological stance of Southern Seminary and its president. Two women, who were in the doctoral program at the same time as Mohler, expressed shock and outrage that he emerged from the same studies holding to such orthodox theological tenets as biblical inerrancy when he "received the same education the rest of us did."

"It grieves me to think I went to school with [Mohler]," a respondent named "Nicole" said. "How did you get out of this institution with that mindset and ideology?" she rhetorically asks of Mohler. All of the women were given pseudonyms in order to "protect anonymity," the authors noted.

The journal noted that a common theological theme among the women is "a broadening of their conception of God."

While many of the respondents observed that "they do not know who or what God is, they also reported being comfortable living in that ambiguity." A woman named "Leslie" recounted that she believed in God when arriving at Southern Seminary, but "when I left Southern ... the only thing I was willing to say was that God had something to do with connectedness." She now defines God simply as the experience of "unconditional love."

Another participant related her reluctance to use the word "God" at all, preferring to say "the spirits, the divine, the powers of the cosmos" because "people truly interested in growing spiritually and developing spiritually will eventually grow beyond the concept of God."

"I believe in God," said one respondent. "I'm just not sure I believe in God in a real personal sense as in 'His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He cares for me.' I'm not sure about that."

"I talk to God. I fuss at God. I cuss at God," one participant disclosed. "But it's a very ambiguous relationship right now because I really don't know how to relate to God or how God relates to me."

"So my life is in my hands," another participant said. "I stopped calling God 'Father,' and I stopped asking God to do things for me that I could do for myself."

The journal noted that while some of the women include traditional practices of prayer and Bible reading in their spiritual exercises, others "have begun to include practices from other faith traditions, such as Buddhism and Shamanism, in their practices of Christian faith." Several of them define their faith in terms of social activism for such causes as civil rights or the homosexual rights movement. One participant

described her church life as having "the emphasis more on we've got to get these draft resisters to Canada" as opposed to "let's sit back and pray or whatever."

"I am a Christian, but I don't pray much. ... It's more in terms of, to me Christianity is more a way of acting than not, and that's just my perspective," she continued.

Some of the women expressed frustration that the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the moderate shadow denomination which emerged from the years of controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention, continues the "chilly climate" of their seminary years by staffing positions mostly with men. One respondent noted that the CBF is "patriarchy all over again. They wear better ties."

"So I feel like, you know, you're lying to us still," one respondent said regarding the dearth of women in CBF leadership positions. The CBF, she argued, is "perpetuating" what the "fundamentalists did."

In explaining the study's methodology, Shaw and Lewis proffered the contention advanced by the movement known as gender-feminism that male-female sexual distinctions "are essentially social constructs which give meaning to and define groups of biological characteristics in relation to power." The writers stated that the study had been "a powerful, emotional, and cathartic experience" which led them to conclude that "Southern Seminary was not perfect, any more than Camelot, but it was a place where we as women came to construct an initial understanding of ourselves as women in ministry."

The article comes on the heels of an article on "The Changing Face of Baptist Theological Students" in the *Review and Expositor's* Spring 1998 issue in which students at new moderate schools such as Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Truett Seminary, Central Seminary, and Gardner-Webb Divinity School were surveyed regarding their doctrinal convictions.

The majority of students in that study were comfortable viewing the Old Testament accounts of Adam and Eve, the Noahic flood, and Joshua's destruction of Jericho as mythical while affirming that "Jesus did not have to speak every word attributed to him by the New Testament

writers" and "some of the miracles could have a logical, scientific explanation."

Only 36 percent of the students said it would make a difference to them "if the canon of the New Testament were reopened and writings were added to and/or removed from it," while 40 percent gave the answer "don't know" to that question.

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