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# Southern Baptists Adjust to Idea of Palin

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It's the Pulpit, Not the Vice Presidency, That Concerns Denomination's Leaders

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Associated Press

Saturday, October 4, 2008; B09

RALEIGH, N.C. -- Within the nation's largest Protestant denomination, a woman may not lead a church or a home. But prominent Southern Baptists see nothing wrong with [Sarah Palin](#) serving as vice president -- or perhaps even commander-in-chief someday.

Republican presidential nominee [John McCain](#)'s selection of the Alaska governor as his running mate has thrilled conservative Christians. It also has led Southern Baptist congregations and seminary students to confront their beliefs about the role of women in leadership.

Interpreted from Scripture, the teachings on women are held close in thousands of [Southern Baptist Convention](#) churches where millions worship. Among them: "The office of pastor is limited to men," and a wife should "submit herself graciously" to her husband. This month, more than 100 Lifeway Christian Bookstores -- a retail chain affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention -- pulled from the shelves a magazine featuring five female pastors on the cover.

Yet many in the denomination say the country's second-highest leadership post is not the same as assuming the pulpit. Palin's potential work in a McCain administration -- or even as president in the event of McCain's death -- would be separate from her family life with her husband, Todd, and their children.

"There's no disconnect or inconsistency whatsoever," said [Richard Land](#), president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. "We don't go beyond where the New Testament goes. Public office is neither a church nor a marriage."

It's a question that's more than theological. The Southern Baptist Convention, with 42,000 churches and 16 million members, is reliably Republican. [President Bush](#) has addressed the denomination's annual meeting several times. And during the 2004 race, the Bush-Cheney reelection campaign hosted a reception for Southern Baptist pastors at a hotel across the street from the assembly.

The denomination is guided by the Baptist Faith and Message, a set of beliefs that includes restrictions on the roles of women. No Baptist is required to follow the statement, but it is a central theological document for Southern Baptists, their seminaries and clergy.

A prohibition on pastoral leadership by women, affirmed within the past several years, is based on the Bible verse 1 Timothy 2:12 in which the Apostle Paul says, "I permit no woman to teach or have authority over a man." Regarding family life, Southern Baptists cite Ephesians 5:22: "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord."

Land said the Southern Baptists' position allows for a wife to work outside the home, so long as her husband agrees -- and [Todd Palin](#) has long backed his wife's career in public service.

Still, many Southern Baptists believe women and mothers should stay home.

A year ago, the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, which has its main campus in Fort Worth, introduced an academic program in homemaking, where only women are taught how to cook and sew. In a 2004 sermon, the Rev. Daniel L. Akin, president of the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, in Wake Forest, N.C., cited the biblical Book of Titus to argue that one of God's assignments to young women is to "be a homemaker."

"She is not lazy or a busybody, nor is she distracted by outside pursuits and responsibilities that eat up her precious time and attention," he said. "This woman is not seduced by the sirens of modernity who tell her she is wasting her time and talent as a homemaker, and that it is the career woman who has purpose and is truly satisfied."

In a recent interview, Akin said he supports Palin's candidacy, saying that while the Bible speaks about the role of women in church and the home, it says nothing about women in government. Still, he said he would sound warnings to a wife and mother of five children who wanted to take on such a difficult job.

"Would that then disqualify her? No," Akin said. "Do I think it's a big challenge for her husband and for she and their family? Absolutely."

Bill Leonard, a Baptist historian and dean of the Wake Forest University School of Divinity, called the acceptance by Southern Baptist leaders of a woman in high-level government leadership "something of a retraction of their old view." That opens the doors for rank-and-file members of the convention to vote for a [GOP](#) ticket that includes a woman, according to Leonard.

"The SBC is so rooted now in the Republican Party that their theological judgment on this becomes an issue," said Leonard, a critic of the Southern Baptists' conservative leadership.

Palin's personal roots are in Pentecostal churches, which strictly interpret the Bible but also teach that the Holy Spirit can work equally through men and women, so women can preach and take leadership roles.

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