

Molly Marshall: A Woman of Faith and Courage

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“Molly has been a gift and joy in my life. . . . It is not easy to be a church leader and a woman. It never has been. Even so, Molly has made a path where there was none. Thanks be to God for her courage,” wrote Diana Garland, chair of the Social Work Department at Baylor University, of her longtime friend and former colleague Molly Marshall.¹ Another former colleague Robert Shippey, now associate professor of religion at Shorter College, described Marshall as “a caring individual whose pastoral sensitivities perfectly blended with her scholarly mind. She has been a pioneer paving the way for others to follow—not just female students aspiring to her stature—but for all of us who have valued Baptist liberty, Christian compassion, and integrity.”²

Throughout her ministry as a Baptist educator and minister, Molly Marshall, professor of theology and spiritual formation and acting academic dean at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Kansas, has modeled servant leadership for her students, her church members, her friends, and her admirers. She has written widely, especially in the areas of theology, women’s issues, and spiritual formation. She has preached in churches throughout the country and lectured on seminary and college campuses and at academic meetings. For the past twenty years, she has invested herself in the lives of young ministers and has challenged them to examine their theological beliefs and to live out their faith. Despite her academic giftedness, her commitment to the gospel, and her compassionate spirit, Marshall encountered discrimination and intolerance within the Baptist world. As she faced these difficult situations, Marshall demonstrated extraordinary strength of character and self-control, and she remained a Baptist. In 1999, she wrote, “Being Baptist has basically been the same as being alive for me.”³ Today, she continues to be a Baptist – “out of conscience and hope.”⁴

Growing up in a Baptist family in northeastern Oklahoma shaped the kind of Baptist that Molly Marshall has become. Her maternal great-grandfather, W.S. Wiley, a Baptist preacher and field missionary for the American Baptist Publication Society, traveled in a covered wagon from Illinois to the Oklahoma Territory. He rode horseback throughout the territory, starting Sunday Schools, planting churches, and preaching to the Native Americans. Of her great-grandfather, Marshall wrote that his “sermons and speeches (of which I have many) evince a great joy in helping create new communities of faith among the Cherokees, Choctaws, Creeks, Chickasaws, and Delawares. From reading these simple notes he left behind I have learned that being baptist is not a narrow, judgmental endeavor, but an inclusive gathering of varied family members into a large house.”⁵ From her great-grandfather, Marshall also discovered that Baptists believed in proclaiming the gospel to all people, supporting missions, and committing themselves to the mandate of the Great Commission.

Attending a Baptist church in her hometown of Muskogee, Oklahoma, also shaped the kind of Baptist Marshall has become. That church, First Baptist, was organized by the faculty of Bacone College, a school founded for and committed to the education of Native Americans. In its early years, the church was aligned with both the Northern and Southern Baptist Conventions; and although the dual alignment came to an end in 1913, the church’s heritage reflected an openness to embrace and work with the extended Baptist family.

First Baptist was in many ways a typical Southern Baptist church, expecting its members to attend regularly – twice on Sunday, once on Wednesday, and every night during revival weeks—and Marshall was a faithful member. Baptized at age eight, she participated in Sunday School and Training Union, gave her money to the Lottie Moon and Annie Armstrong Mission Offerings, and attended GA’s (Girl’s Auxiliary) where she learned the history of Southern Baptist missions and memorized all pertinent facts about the SBC’s mission enterprises. Along with the other girls

in her church, Marshall learned that “the highest calling a Southern Baptist girl could hope to receive was that God wanted her to forsake all and go to a foreign country to serve.”⁶

At the age of fourteen, Marshall recognized that God had extended a calling to her. Because few Baptist female served in ministry positions in Oklahoma during the 1960s and because opportunities for women in ministry were limited, it is no surprise that as a young teenager, she felt that her only options for being faithful to her calling were to be missionary, marry a preacher, or serve the church through ministry with youth.⁷ Of the three options available to her, Marshall believed that God had called her to work with young people.

To prepare for a ministry with youth, Marshall enrolled in Oklahoma Baptist University at Shawnee, Oklahoma. There she studied with Rowena Strickland, a woman serving as professor of Bible. Marshall saw for the first time the possibility that women could serve in non-traditional ways. She also discovered other young women who were following God’s call into ministry, including Diana Garland, who lived down the hall in her freshman dorm.

During Marshall’s years in college, the women’s movement in the United States expanded the educational and career possibilities for women. Women throughout America were enrolling in graduate programs in record numbers and were competing for professional level positions in the business world. Women even had more employment options within Southern Baptist churches. Although they were not being hired to pastor churches, women were now serving on church staffs, mainly as youth and children’s ministers. This new openness to women in Southern Baptist life provided Marshall opportunities for ministry. In the summers of her college years, she served as youth minister at three churches: Valley Baptist Church in Lutherville, Maryland; First Baptist Church of Cushing, Oklahoma; and First Baptist Church of Comanche, Texas.

After completing her undergraduate degree, Marshall headed in 1973 to Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. While working on a Master of Divinity degree at Southern, Marshall served as the associate campus minister for Jefferson Community College in Louisville, Kentucky; in the summer of 1974, she went to Jerusalem as a summer missionary.

In 1976, with a Master of Divinity degree in hand, Marshall left Louisville and moved to Little Rock, Arkansas, where she spent two years serving as minister of youth and single adults at Pulaski Heights Baptist Church. This ministry experience helped Marshall to formulate an understanding of vocation and to recognize that her vocational call was to the ministry of teaching. While serving at Pulaski Heights, Marshall “figured out that it had to get better at the seminary—meaning a new understanding and advocacy for women in ministry—before it would get better in the churches.”⁸

Given her new understanding of vocation and the earlier encouragement she had received from some of her male professors, Marshall took the next logical step. In 1979, she enrolled in the doctoral program at Southern. The program proved to be an excellent experience for her and allowed her to broaden her theological boundaries. She did her external work with John A. T. Robinson at Cambridge, and he encouraged her “to venture theologically.”⁹ Such encouragement led her to focus her dissertation on issues of religious pluralism. The topic and title of her dissertation, “No Salvation Outside the Church? A Critical Inquiry,” resulted in Marshall being labeled a universalist by Southern’s trustees. Christopher Chapman, pastor of Knollwood Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, recalled a discussion of Marshall’s dissertation by Southern’s Board of Trustees.

The business at hand was a consideration of tenure for Molly Marshall-Green, Professor of Christian Theology, and the conversation focused upon Molly’s doctoral dissertation which addressed the question of how Christian theology should regard people who lived before the time of Jesus or have lived since the time of Jesus but have never heard of him. Since Molly did not conclude that all of these people were necessarily eternally damned, some of the trustees were troubled. They confused Molly’s ideas with universalism, the notion that all people will be saved,

which was not what she was saying. And they viewed this to be a threat to the distinctiveness of the Christian witness which they argued hinged on one's belief in the depravity of humanity and the efficacy of the cross. In any event, there was a misunderstanding, and in the heat of the dialogue, one trustee asked, "Dr. Marshall-Green, do you believe in the total depravity of man?" After a brief pause, Molly replied, "Yes . . . and a few women, too!"¹⁰

Like Chapman, Marshall believed that the labeling of her theological position as that of universalism was unwarranted and was the result of "guilt by association" since universalism was one of the most compelling arguments of her mentor, John Robinson.¹¹

Midway through the doctoral program, Marshall married Douglas Green, a family physician. At the time of their marriage in 1981, Green had been widowed and had three grown children. Today, Marshall describes him as "my most faithful friend and support through the years of denominational controversy. He believes in my vocation and daily works to sustain what he deems an important ministry in theological education."¹²

As Marshall neared the completion of the doctoral program, St. Matthews Baptist Church in Louisville ordained her to the gospel ministry on May 11, 1983. A few weeks later, she became the pastor of Jordan Baptist Church, a small, rural church in Sanders, Kentucky. In December of that year, Marshall graduated from Southern, becoming one of the first Baptist women to earn a doctoral degree and to be ordained. Marshall's academic success and pastoral experience, however, made her a target for criticism. Just as the seminary trustees had questioned her dissertation, Baptist leaders now questioned her right to lead a church. At the 1984 Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) meeting, Southern Baptist leaders responded to her hiring and to the increasing numbers of women in Southern Baptist life who were articulating their call to ministry, by adopting a resolution:

Therefore, be it *Resolved*, That we not decide concerns of Christian doctrine and practice by modern cultural, sociological, and ecclesiastical trends or by emotional factors; that we remind ourselves of the dearly bought Baptist principle of the final authority of Scripture in matters of faith and conduct; and that we encourage the service of women in all aspects of church life and work other than pastoral functions and leadership roles entailing ordination.¹³

Despite the SBC's resolution and despite criticism of Marshall's pastoral ministry, Roy Honeycutt, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, offered her a teaching position; in January 1984, she began her new ministry of teaching. Her hiring stirred up controversy within the seminary community. Some of Marshall's students rebelled against her presence by reporting what she said in class to denominational leaders. Despite the early criticisms of Marshall, she proved to be a successful classroom teacher and an effective seminary administrator. Mark Medley, her student at Southern and now associate professor of theology at Campbellsville University in Campbellsville, Kentucky, summed up the feelings of many of Marshall's students at Southern:

In the classroom and in the life of the gathered people of God, Molly has incarnated a contagious passion for theology. With integrity and boldness, she has challenged many students and "pew people" with the cost of cruciform living. Moreover, she has incarnated the prophetic and dissenting character of our Baptist heritage in so many countless ways. She has been and continues to be "a voice crying in the wilderness" for the integrity of our tradition. On a personal note, whether in her classroom, sitting in a rocking chair in her office, or through email correspondence, Molly has been a guide in more ways than she realizes. Her theological acumen, grace, wit and passion for truth has my deepest admiration. If I can be half the teacher and mentor she has been to me (and other students), then I will consider my vocational calling as a professor a success. Molly has been, and continues to be, my mentor, teacher, colleague, and sister in Christ.¹⁴

In 1988, Southern rewarded her good work by naming her associate dean of the School of Theology. By this time, fundamentalists controlled the SBC, and convention leaders were slowly replacing members of Southern's trustee board with fundamentalists. Trustees forced Honeycutt to retire in 1993 and then elected a young fundamentalist, Albert Mohler, Jr., as the new president of the seminary.

Shortly after his election, Mohler stated publicly, "Without apology, we are hoping that in the classroom we are expecting that all those who are added to this faculty will uphold that the pastorate is a male office and though we support women in ministry, we do not believe women should serve as pastor."¹⁵ Marshall and a few other women responded by organizing a protest. They invited women to fill the seminary chapel's balcony, where they stood, silently, during an hour-long service, demonstrating their objections to the hiring of Mohler and to the trustee commitment that no one supporting female pastors would be hired as faculty.¹⁶

During the next year, Mohler carefully built a case that Marshall's teachings and beliefs conflicted with the school's doctrinal statement, the *Abstract of Principles*. Trustees accused Marshall of teaching outside of the *Abstract's* doctrines on God, election, and biblical authority.¹⁷ Yet, the central problem with Marshall's teaching seemed to be her stance on women pastors, a stance that defied the SBC's prohibition of women serving in this position, and Marshall was surely "guilty" of supporting women in all forms of ministry.

Over the years, Marshall has written much about the role of women in the church. As a doctoral student, she wrote in 1983, "The longer I study the Scriptures, the more convinced I become of the bedrock theological support for women being afforded equal access to all positions of vocational ministry. . . . The church has, for too long, ignored or denigrated the movement of the Spirit gifting women for all forms of ministry."¹⁸ As a professor at Southern, she wrote in 1986, "I firmly believe that advocating the unhindered role of women in ministry is a thoroughly Baptist view. Indeed, our theology demands it! It is time that we lay appropriate claim to our Baptist heritage."¹⁹ Marshall's writings challenged the SBC's stance against women pastors, and she believed that it was this outspoken advocacy of women in ministry that made her a threat to the new administration at Southern.

Throughout 1994, the pressure on her to resign increased. She recalled the events of that summer:

I was informed this past summer in June after the SBC had convened that I needed to be prepared to resign or the president would press charges for my dismissal at the fall trustee meeting. I asked what the charges were, and our system is such that you don't have to say what they are until you actually file them, and so the allegation it appeared was that I was teaching outside our confessional document that is the abstract of principles. I had only had one conversation with the president about my teaching. On March 16, I spent an hour and a half with him in the presence of the academic vice president David Dockery, and he questioned me about my writings, whether or not I perceived that they were within the *Abstract*. I said I did. No student has ever accused me of teaching outside the *Abstract*. He was rather noncommittal. He didn't say, 'You are outside the *Abstract*.' Evidently it was a just an investigation. A couple of months later I hadn't heard anything and the vice president told me that the president had evidently assumed that I was outside the *Abstracts* and that I need to be disposed of.²⁰

A campaign was mounted within the seminary to force Marshall out. Letters, flyers, and booklets critical of her teaching appeared in Southern students' mailboxes. Excerpts of her lectures were taken out of context and publicized on campus.²¹ The administration eventually gave Marshall an ultimatum: She must resign by August 19, 1994, or the president would file charges against her. David Dockery informed her that the administration had "the vote and the will to fire" her.²² Yet, Marshall chose to delay her resignation for several months because she did not want to abandon

doctoral students whose dissertations she was directing. She noted, "I want to be remembered as a person who put the interests of her students above 'proving a point' theologically."²³

By late 1994, Marshall recognized that she could not win this battle: "I decided given the ultimatum that there really was no future for me here [at Southern]," and on December 31, she submitted her resignation. Four months later, on April 19, 1995, hundreds of students and faculty gathered on the grounds of Southern to protest the curbing of free speech in Southern's classrooms and the coerced resignation of Marshall and other faculty members.²⁴ At the SBC meeting in Atlanta that summer, Mohler defended what had occurred at Southern, stating: "It is change but not change for the sake of change but change for the cause of truth of the gospel, integrity, and confession. Such change is costly but the failure to make sure change is more costly still. It is to forfeit our calling and our convictions."²⁵

Following the traumatic events of 1994, Marshall moved on. In 1995, she began her tenure at Central Baptist Theological Seminary, first serving as visiting professor of theology, worship, and spiritual formation. Central named her professor of theology and spiritual formation in 1997, making her the first female tenured professor at the seminary. That same year, the American Baptist Churches, Inc. extended Marshall the privilege of call, which meant that they recognized her ordination. Of that experience, she wrote, "To seek privilege of call among American Baptists was an expression of liberty of conscience for me. Identifying with a constellation of congregations who prize diversity, the leadership of women, and social justice seemed the right thing to do; given my family history, it was a logical homecoming for me."²⁶ One of Marshall's former students, Jerrod H. Huguenot, appreciated her willingness to embrace her "Baptistness."

As a Baptist, Molly works for the preservation of historic Baptist principles. She moves within many circles of the Baptist tradition, advocating change and reacquainting Baptist folk with their rich and diverse history. Molly is a needed presence in the fragmented landscape of Baptist life in America. She is a person who will be important in fostering an ongoing and needed dialogue between American Baptist Churches/USA, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and the Alliance of Baptists. In a time in which Baptist identity is being challenged or in danger of being diluted, Molly Marshall reminds us not to lose sight of the freedoms that have sustained the Baptist tradition.²⁷

Marshall continues to nurture young ministers, and she continues to model servant leadership for her students, her fellow church members, her friends, and her colleagues. David Tonghou Ngong, one of her former students at Central who is now working on a Ph.D. at Baylor University, found Marshall to be "a graceful *mélange* of the theological scholar and the pastor, the teacher who teaches by example and the compassionate friend. I do not know how it would be received here in the United States but in the Cameroon context I would call her mother, for that is the kind of mentor she has been to me."²⁸ Central's chief operating officer and vice president for development, Constance McNeill, in describing Marshall, wrote:

Molly is a person of courageous convictions. She is both compelled and bounded by her convictions whether in the classroom with students, in the midst of a congregation, or around the meal table with colleagues, friends and family. I knew this about Molly before I knew Molly. She was a courageous role model for Southern Baptist women called to vocational ministry but who did not find many opportunities to live it out within Southern Baptist life. She continues to serve as a role model of courageous conviction for women and men called to vocational ministry within the larger ecumenical Christian community.²⁹

For over twenty years, Marshall has been a well-known and much-loved role model for Baptist women, including me. During my college years, I read with great interest her writings in *Folio*, the publication of a new organization known as Southern Baptist Women in Ministry. During my years in seminary and then in the doctoral program at Baylor University, I continued to follow her career through news reports and her writings. Although I have never heard her lecture or preach and have never met her, Marshall

served for me as a source of hope. My own sense of calling to the ministry of teaching mirrored what I saw her living out, and I gained strength from knowing that she was faithfully following God's leadership. Marshall has served as a model of courage and faith for hundreds of other women and men, who, like me, have not had the opportunity to sit in her classroom or listen to her sermons.

Today, Molly Marshall continues to be a source of hope for many Baptists. She challenges us to embrace new pathways for ministry, and she reminds us that a new day has come for Baptist women called by God to ministry. She prompts us to remember that:

The fresh wind of the Spirit in Baptist life today is evident in the influx of women serving on church staffs and the unprecedented number of women graduating from seminary and seeking pastorates. . . . More daunting, yet increasingly more common, is the emergence of women as church planters. Birthing new churches as an expression of their pastoral midwifery, these Baptists are constructing creative new patterns of Christian community. Many of us greet this move as a significant sign of ecclesial renewal; that is, the last barrier to full inclusion is being traversed. In calling women as pastors, churches are finally living out the encompassing implication of our baptismal vows. "All are one in Christ Jesus"; therefore, the church must receive her daughters "for such a time as this."³⁰

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¹Diana Garland, e-mail message to author, March 3, 2004.

²Robert C. Shippey, Jr., e-mail message to author, March 10, 2004.

³Molly T. Marshall, "A Baptist by Conscience: A Baptist in Hope," *Why I Am a Baptist: Reflections on Being Baptist in the 21st Century*, ed. Cecil P. Staton (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1999), 89.

⁴*Ibid.*, 90.

⁵Molly T. Marshall, "A House with Many Rooms," *Baptists Today* 19, no.5 (May 2001), 33.

⁶Molly T. Marshall, "The Changing Face of Baptist Discipleship," *Review and Expositor* 95, no.1 (Winter, 1998), 60.

⁷Molly T. Marshall, e-mail message to author, April 3, 2004.

⁸*Ibid.*, March 4, 2004.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Christopher C. F. Chapman, "Is God a Universalist?" Knollwood Baptist Church, Winston-Salem, NC (August 18, 2002), www.knollwood.org/Sermons/sermon%20for%208-18-02.doc (accessed March 26, 2004).

¹¹Molly T. Marshall, e-mail message to author, March 4, 2004.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Annual*, Southern Baptist Convention, 1984, 65.

¹⁴Mark Medley, e-mail message to author, April 5, 2004.

¹⁵"Battle for the Minds," video, produced and directed by Steven Lipscomb (Hohokus, NJ: New Day Films, 1997).

¹⁶Mark Wiebe, "Pioneer Preacher Molly Marshall Keeps Advocating an Equal Role for Women in the Church," *Kansas City Star*, March 23, 1997: Metropolitan Section, page 6; Molly T. Marshall, e-mail message to author, April 3, 2004.

¹⁷"Battle for the Minds."

¹⁸Molly Marshall-Green, "Women in Ministry: A Biblical Theology," *Folio* 1, no. 2 (Fall, 1983),

1.

¹⁹Molly Marshall, "Toward Encompassing Theological Vision for Women in Light of Baptist Tradition," *Folio* 4, no. 2 (Autumn 1986), 1.

²⁰"Battle for the Minds."

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*

²³Linda McKinnish Bridges, "Molly Truman Marshall," *Encyclopedia of Religious Controversies in the United States*, eds. George H. Shriver and Bill J. Leonard (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 279.

²⁴"Battle for the Minds."

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Marshall, "A House with Many Rooms," 33.

²⁷Jerrod H. Huguenot, e-mail message to author, April 2, 2004.

²⁸David Tonghou Ngong, e-mail message to author, March 30, 2004.

²⁹Constance McNeill, e-mail message to author, March 26, 2004.

³⁰Marshall, "A Baptist by Conscience: A Baptist in Hope," 91.