

Beth Allison Barr's latest book, "The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth," explores the history and role of women in the church. / Photo by Jennifer Pisarcik



Around Waco



A Fight for Women

Local author's book about women in ministry makes a big splash

Books

When Beth Allison Barr walked out the doors of her local evangelical church almost five years ago — a church whose leaders had just fired her husband, a youth pastor, for challenging the church's position on women not being allowed to serve as Sunday school teachers — you might like to think she never looked back.

But she did look back — and way back — in her book "The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth." It's the story of Barr's awakening to the fact that the Southern Baptist evangelical idea that women should be restricted from church leadership actually wasn't

gospel truth — and she could prove it using the Bible.

"Part of what I was trying to get people to realize [through the book] is how much our ideas about women in leadership are constructed by the culture around us," Barr said. "For people in other denominations, it's bizarre to see these restrictions against women. But the people who have grown up in traditions that have always allowed this just don't know anything different."

Barr, professor of history and associate dean of graduate studies at Baylor University, and her husband, Jeb, now the pastor of First Baptist Church of Elm Mott, served their former church for 14 years. On their last Sunday before parting ways due to "theological differences," the church organized a farewell gesture where members could come to a table and write notes to the Barr family, including their two young children, wishing

them well on their new journey. In her introduction, Barr describes how this scene — a lovely picture of grateful church members saying goodbye to their family — was actually a carefully constructed narrative, written by church elders, that said all was well because “God had ordained it so.” So, angry and hurt, Barr just left.

“I started [the book] off with that because that was the day when I realized that this system was what was happening to us,” Barr said. “That the church that had created this environment that pushed women out and that ordinary people in the church bought into it in such a way that they wouldn’t even question — it suddenly just hit me. This was anti-gospel.”

She went to the car and texted her husband, asking him to bring the kids with him. Barr went straight home to her computer where all the emotion, frustration and anger, as well as knowledge and enlightenment, flowed into words on the page, as did her tears. It wasn’t for a book, initially, Barr said. But her thoughts and ideas translated into a series of blog posts on “The Anxious Bench,” a site where Christian historians share their reflections on faith, politics and culture. Eventually, she got a call from an editor at Brazos Press, asking if she would be interested in writing a book.

“This book was not something I ever intended to do, and it’s not directed at what happened to us,” Barr said. “It’s directed at this larger problem in conservative evangelicalism. And so my thought in writing this book was really to help women in conservative circles realize that they can be called by God to ministry.”

“The Making of Biblical Womanhood” has garnered national attention, including an interview on NPR and an article in *The New Yorker*. As an academic, Barr said she is not used to writing books that sell. She’s usually writing books for very small audiences, she said.

“This has been really bizarre, in

some ways, for me because I’m suddenly on this very national and international platform that I never really intended to have,” Barr said. “So, I mean, I’m glad the book is getting so much attention because it’s reaching the audiences that I wanted it to reach, but it’s also made for an uncomfortable few months.”

Barr grew up in Mexia and has lived in Waco for a long time. Through her family, faith and work at Baylor, Barr’s roots run deep in the Central Texas soil. So, calling out her church for barring women from leadership roles was anything but comfortable — and not something she ever wanted to do.

“Even though a lot of the book took place with my experiences here, it wasn’t written to attack any places here,” she said. “It was written to address this large system that we see among conservative evangelical churches.”

In fact, she’s been careful not to name her former church or its members in her book.

“I actually worked really hard in the book to not bring too much of Waco explicitly into it,” she said. “But now that I’ve hit the national and international stage, you know, journalists are good at their jobs and they can dig [things] up. So, it’s been connected in ways that I didn’t intend.”

For example, *The New Yorker* article mentions Magnolia, which the writer could not resist including in the story.

“New Yorkers are fascinated with Magnolia,” Barr said. “It’s bizarre to them. And Magnolia is part of this because it’s part of Southern culture and it sells that Southern culture idea, which then conservative evangelicalism buys into. But I told them, ‘Look y’all, Chip has been very much an advocate of Jo’s leadership, and you’ve got to put that in the story.’ So they did. I couldn’t get them not to fixate on Magnolia. I actually tried. But, what are you going to do?”

In the process, Barr said she came to realize she can’t dictate what people write about her.

“When you put yourself out there on

a public platform, then you can’t control how other people write about you,” she said. “So I haven’t tried. I’ve been pretty good-natured about it.”

When the *Waco Tribune-Herald* covered Barr’s book, she was grateful they agreed not to name her church home of 14 years.

“I mean, everybody will know, but I want people to know that I’m not intentionally calling out the church,” she said. “I think everybody was kind of duped in this system. They were taught things that led them to act in a way that I think is wrong. But it’s the system.”

Barr said she can count on her fingers the number of Baptist churches in Waco that have women in leadership positions, especially outside of children’s ministry.

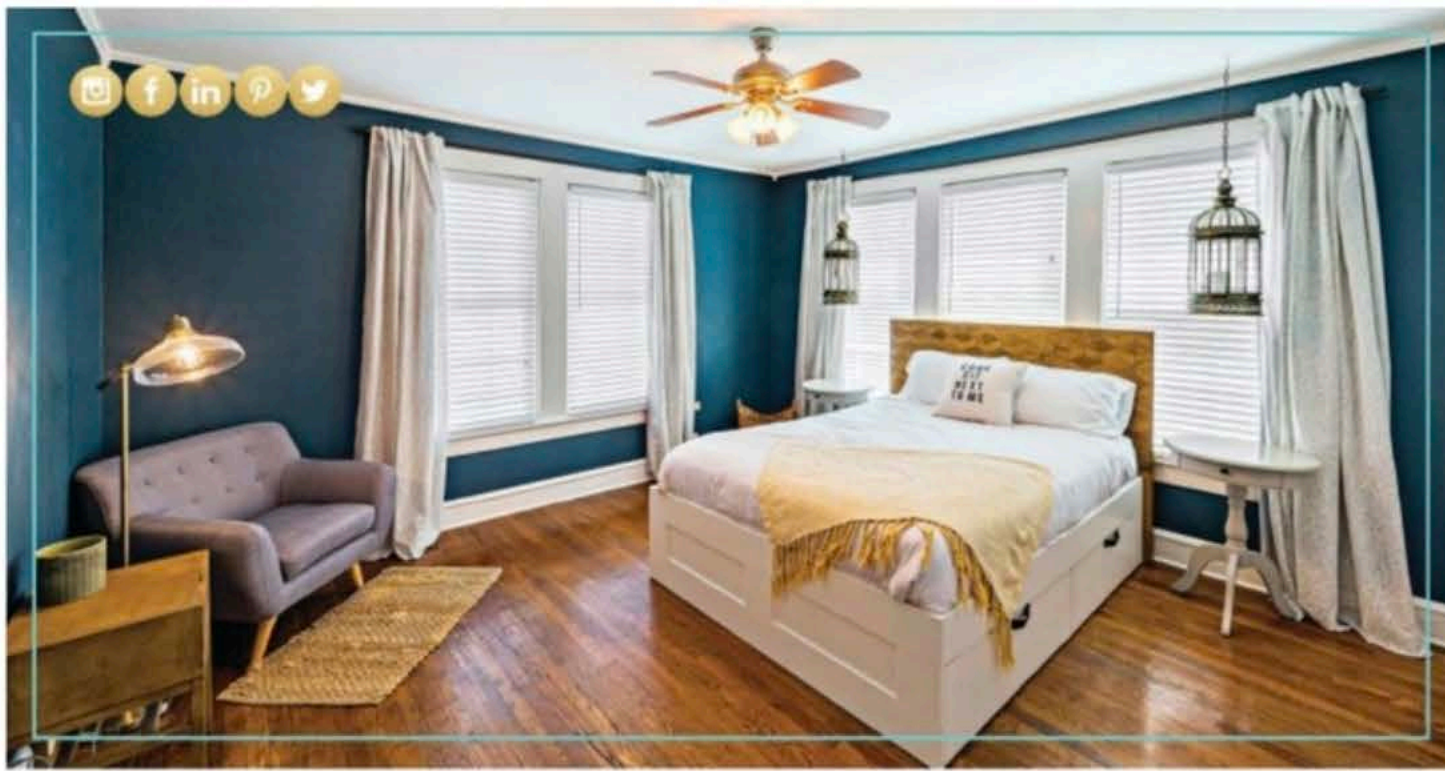
“It’s strange because Waco has [George W. Truett Theological] Seminary and Truett has been advocating for women in ministry,” she said. “It was founded to have a moderate Baptist seminary that supported women in ministry. So women come here because it’s one of the few Baptist seminaries where they can come and be able to take preaching classes and be ordained.”

But yet it’s hard for them to find ministry positions when they leave, especially in the Texas area, Barr said.

“It shows that there’s still a great disconnect, and that the Baptist world, even the more progressive Baptist world, is still really entrenched in not having women in leadership.”

Barr grew up in the Southern Baptist tradition and was influenced early on by James Dobson and his “Focus on the Family” message. It became part of the water that she grew up in and that her parents were then immersed in, she said.

Complementarianism — the theological view that men and women have different but complementary roles and responsibilities in marriage, family life, and religious leadership — came to the forefront. And though Barr said those teachings began to infiltrate her family, they did not influence the way the



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family actually functioned.

“I think that’s one of the reasons I was always able to recognize that there was something wrong with the system,” Barr said. “I grew up with a family that didn’t model this, so the influences on my family were outside.”

And the idea never played out in the Barrs’ marriage either, she said.

“We always talked about things, and I always felt free to disagree,” she said. “So I probably began to question it more and eventually realized I can’t follow this. Part of it was, because I was in this academic world where I was really researching and seeing this in church history and really starting to put the pieces together, where [Jeb] was hearing it from me.”

Several breaking points gave Barr the clarity she had been seeking.

“I had my daughter in 2010, and my son, by that time, was getting close to 6,” she said. “And I started being worried about what he was hearing. I knew I could disassociate in my mind between God and these teachings that I was beginning to think were wrong. But I began to worry about my children. Could they disassociate these? And as youth ministry leaders, we saw what happened to youth who were taught this very rigid faith, you know, that was so fragile. And then when those youth would go to college and they would find out that there’s more than one creation story in the Bible — and that would cause their faith to shatter. Many of them would walk away. And so I began to worry about that, not just for the youth, but for my own kids.”

It was around that time, Barr said, that she heard what she perceived as a heretical sermon on complementarianism preached at her church.

“That was a big wake-up call for me really because I was suddenly like, this matters,” she said. “This is threatening the heart of Christianity, and that was a sermon preached at our church. It’s what our pastor had been taught in seminary. I mean, this is a big problem. It’s widespread.”

Things really came full circle when

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Waco's newborn and children photographer



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Barr was teaching two particular courses at Baylor: Women's History from the Greco-Roman World to the Central Middle Ages and from the Central Middle Ages to Suffrage. There, she said, she was unpacking things for her students in the classroom that didn't make sense with what was being taught in her church.

"I remember so clearly that day that we started reading Romans 16 out loud in class, and it just hit me," she said. "It was stuff that I had known for a while, and I knew who these women were. But just hearing my students read it out loud. I was like, this is wrong. This is not biblical. I mean, that was just a very powerful moment for me."

Romans 16 is the final passage in Paul's letter to Christians in Rome. He greets some individual people, like sister Phoebe, whom he addresses as a deacon, and Priscilla, whom he calls his "co-worker in Christ."

"And that was when I told my husband, I can't support this anymore," Barr said. "That was when he started to be very careful about teaching that in our youth group because we knew [where] our church stood on this issue."

Barr's research and academic teachings were proof that women have always been a very active part of leadership and church history, she said. But somewhere in time and in certain traditions, that changed.

"One of the things I was trying to point out too in the book is that women have been written out of the story and some of that's been intentional," she said. "And so that's one of the reasons we think, especially in conservative circles, that women can't be pastors or leaders or teachers. We say, well, they've never been before. So, this must be a product of feminism. And my argument is that this predates feminism by centuries."

Everything came to a head when the church was looking for a new youth Sunday school teacher. In the interim, Jeb asked if maybe his wife — a biblical scholar — could step in. He was told, yes, on a temporary basis, but that she

would not be called a Sunday school teacher. And when another woman stepped up to possibly co-teach the class with a male member, the answer was a hard "no." The Barrs decided they could no longer be part of the church.

"It's a hard decision to leave a church because they are your family," Barr said. "We lost friendships we have never replaced. Very few people knew what actually happened to us. It was really hard. But we're doing well. We're thriving."

Barr signed a book contract in August of 2019. By then she'd had breathing room and wasn't angry anymore, she said. And the book developed into a combination of historical evidence and Barr's personal testimony.

"I was still a little traumatized, but I wasn't angry," she said. "People have asked me 'why did you even put your testimony in the book?'"

Barr said that was a hard decision to make.

"One of the reasons that I put it in was because the blog post I'd been writing had been in sort of this personal narrative style where I had brought in my personal part and added to the history — and people were engaging with it," she said. "One of the shared languages of evangelical culture is testimony. That's what we do. We share our testimony with people."

So Barr went that route with the book, as well.

"But my testimony is not the evidence," she said. "My testimony is that ideas matter. Ideas about women shape how we treat women. And so I think that my testimony kind of gives teeth to that [thought that] ideas matter, but my evidence is the history."

"The Making of Biblical Womanhood" is a blend of memoir, history and activism, Barr said. So, it fits several genres.

"Fabled has it in the Christian Living section and some other places have it in the History section," she said. "Amazon has it in the Christian Evangelism section. It's kind of autobiographical too. It kind of crosses

genres, so maybe it will reach somebody who needs to hear the message in that section.”

The reaction from readers has been profound, Barr said.

“I was really astonished by how many people started reading it,” she said. “It’s been amazing. The reception has been amazing. I get letters every day. I get Instagram messages. I get Twitter direct messages. I get emails from people all over the world, saying ‘I don’t know if you’re ever going to read this, but I just wanted to tell you that this book has changed me.’ So they’re very encouraging. I mean, it’s like the book is reaching the people I wanted it to reach. It’s helping women.”

And that’s exactly what she wanted it to do.

“If people are going to know my story, at least it’s for a good cause and at least it’s to help other people,” Barr said. “So whenever I get really down and discouraged, because I also get a lot of really negative feedback, I always just think about all of those messages. The college students at Baylor are also really excited about it.”

Creating change, especially locally, is part of Barr’s agenda.

“I really do love Waco, and I’m going to be pushing churches in Waco to rethink this issue,” Barr said. “There are too many churches in the Waco area that do not even consider allowing women in leadership roles.”

You might even say Barr is an accidental feminist. But, she says it’s not just about feminism.

“It’s just realizing that there are structural problems that limit women’s ability to succeed, to get education,” she said. “They’re built into our society and in order to change them, we’ve got to change the structures. Feminism is simply an awareness that it’s not just about us. But I’m very happy with the term feminism because I want to help women. I really don’t like to be politically active. That’s not life-giving to me. But history is life-giving to me, and the church is life-giving to me. And so I am very happy to fight for women in ministry.”



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