Wife's feminism costs Bible professor his job

By Ann Marie Lipinski

HE IS THE SON of a Baptist minister, she the daughter of Arkansas farmers. They met at a California biblical college more than 20 years ago. When they married, she dutifully left school and had four children; he, the scholar and provider, received his doctorate in theology and went on to teach the Bible. He built a name for himself in theological circles and became, says one admirer, a "guru" among students of the Bible. She sought release at the typewriter, feeling her way through religiously inspired pieces.

Then, in 1977, she hit. Not in a big way—not in the way a Judith Krantz or a James Michener or other perfectors of the popular paperback have hit. But in her own quiet way, Patricia Gundry published a book. "Women Be Free" was the title she gave to her biblical case for sexual equality in Christianity, and Zondervan Publishing, a Christian evangelical house in Grand Rapids, Mich., set it in type. The prose was not angry or inflamed, simply the claim of a "household technician" that God created men and women equal. The book sold some 9,000 copies.

She was happy with its mild success; her family was proud.

TODAY, STANLEY Gundry, for 11 years a respected and popular professor of theology at Chicago's Moody Bible Institute, is out of work because of that book. He lost his job because his wife is a feminist. It didn't help, he says, that he embraced feminism, too.

"I feel great," says Gundry, 42 and unemployed. "I refused to be compromised."

"I am very proud of my father," says daughter Ann. "He stood up for what he believed in."

"I feel badly for his students," Mrs. Gundry says, "because they're losing a good teacher, and I feel badly for Stan because he used to respect some people at Moody he doesn't respect anymore. But I'm happy that this issue is getting some attention. For that, I'm glad this whole thing happened."

THE "WHOLE thing," as Mrs. Gundry puts it, began with her address last March to a meeting of the Glen Ellyn Housewives for ERA (Equal Rights Amendment). The careful, measured tone of "Women Be Free" had won Mrs. Gundry the description of "the feminist who's not offensive"; church and civic women's groups, seeking such an entity, often petitioned her to speak. This she did gladly; in a sense, she finally was getting her day at the pulpit.

"I was never pushy," she recalls. "I was always very nice. I knew I couldn't reach people any other way. When I went to that meeting, it wasn't to speak about the ERA. It was to talk about my book, which explains that inequality in the church is not biblical in origin, but rather social and theological, going back to medieval philosophy.

"Then I told them who the first feminist was by reading from Genesis. Where God says that He created male and female, and all that He created was good, and it's obvious that they were created equal. God *was* the first feminist because he created women as fully human; there is nothing wrong with us. It's only our interpretation of the Bible that's lopsided.

"And then I defined feminism which, to me, is Alan Alda's definition: a feminist is someone who believes that women are people. Then the question and answer period started, and that's when the trouble began."

ACCORDING TO Mrs. Gundry, several members of the local Stop ERA movement had attended the meeting in Glen Ellyn and, when her speech was over, began asking her questions about the controversial amendment. She and some of the other attendants recall many of the questions as "hostile," but, Mrs. Gundry says, she "dealt very gently with them because I have found that that's much the best policy."

"I told them that while I didn't know what to think about the ERA for a long time, I weighed the evidence on both sides of the issue and came to the conclusion that it is a reasonable and just law that only means what it says," Mrs. Gundry recalls. "But I added that I knew many people were genuinely frightened by it, even horrified, but that I had no problem being their friend.

"After the meeting was over, one of the Stop ERA proponents told me she'd hate to be in my place when God judges me. I told her I wasn't afraid."

Several days later, Dr. Gundry's superiors at Moody began receiving letters complaining about its employment of a man whose wife is a feminist. According to the Gundrys, who were permitted to read some of the 80 letters Moody received, Mrs. Gundry was charged with not

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believing in the Bible and with being pro-homosexual.

MRS. GUNDRY'S simple reply: "My whole book is based on a careful reading and belief in the Bible. As for homosexuals, I told them I couldn't judge whether they were decent or indecent because I don't know any, but that I had a feeling they varied just like everybody else and ought to be treated like human beings.")

A west suburban Baptist pastor urged his congregation, as well as listeners of his radio program, to submit letters of protest to the school. The controversy reached as far west as some California churches where a newsletter was circulated complaining of Mrs. Gundry's views.

Despite the uproar, Dr. Gundry, who believes in ordination for women, felt fairly secure from professional attack.

"Although the complaints began this spring, I have held my present feminist views for six or seven years now," he says, "and as best I can figure out, I suppose I've been teaching these views in the classroom for that long. In all that time, no one had ever said anything to me to suggest that I was out of line. Because Moody is an interdenominational institution, it was my belief that differences of opinion on feminism were to be tolerated much the same way as differences concerning baptism are.

"BECAUSE OF THE nature of my courses, the subject of feminism and equality in the church didn't come up very often, but ocasionally it would and I'd always be careful to present both sides of the issue. I tried to be balanced. I didn't ride the issue as a hobby horse. But the students all knew how I felt about it; I think most of the faculty did.

"I assumed the administration did as well because when the new dean of faculty came in three years ago (he has since left for a position in Philadelphia), I was concerned that I level with him, so I told him what my views on the subject were. I added that my wife had a book coming out on the subject that was sure to raise some questions, and I just wanted him to know where I stood.

"He assured me there was no problem, and even added that he had some sympathy for the position himself. So I never hid anything under the rug. I was very, very clear."

To ease the worries of the Moody administration, Mrs. Gundry arranged a meeting with institute president George Sweeting and dean of education Alfred Martin. She explained that the controversy was more political than religious in nature, and offered them copies of her book to prove her adherence to biblical doctrine. She said that many of the charges leveled against her in the letters were false, and added that she had never represented her views as those of the Moody Institute's.

MRS. GUNDRY LEFT the meeting feeling the issue had been settled, only to find out soon after that she had been banned from writing for any of Moody's publications as well as from addressing Moody's radio audience.

Dr. Gundry was told he could not address the issue of feminism again in the classroom because a summer student of his had complained about Dr. Gundry's position—a position, the administration claimed, that conflicted with the institute's.

"As far as I knew, the school had no formal position," Dr. Gundry says. "There is nothing in the doctrine statements we sign each year which even touches on the subject. They said the fact that women could not take the pastors major was evidence of their position, but that didn't make sense to me; it was inconsistent. For instance, women can take the missions major and go out in some other country and perform the work of a missionary, which is basically the work of the pastor in this country. Or they can take the Bible theology major, which most students consider to be better preparation for becoming a pastor than pastors major.

"Furthermore, in our evening school, women who are pastors in the black community can come and take our courses and they're already ordained."

DR. GUNDRY sumbitted a letter of protest to the institute directors, in which he argued that feminism "was a matter about which there ought to be freedom of conscience among faculty members." Dr. Martin responded with the promise of a "careful, detailed, and prompt reply."

The reply came on Aug. 1 with Martin's request for Gundry's resignation. Under protest, and with the promise of severence pay, Dr. Gundry complied. Outside of a short press release explaining that the Gundrys' feminist principles were "objectionable to the administration and trustees of the Moody Bible Institute," officers of the school have refused comment on the controversy.

Since then, the sound of the telephone in the Gundry home—a modest Wheaton ranch house complete with rocking chairs and a living room organ—has been a constant backdrop to family life. Reporters calling for information, friends phoning their understanding, and former students voicing their shock (one claimed she would not return to Moody this year because of Dr. Gundry's absence; an alumna said she was turning in her diploma) have occupied much of the family's time.

The Gundrys, however, do not regret the attention the controversy has attracted. Frankly, they welcome it.

"I AM NOT bitter," Dr. Gundry says, "and I still believe Moody is a good school. My concern is that Moody does not go through with what they have started—which is narrowing themselves. The school should be open for discussion and differences of opinion. My other concern is the fact that what happened to me could happen to anyone at Moody—all of it behind your back with no chance for a grievance procedure. (Dr. Gundry was never given the name of the accusing student, nor allowed to respond to his charges.) If some kind of grievance procedure or committee at Moody were to come out of this, a structure by which a faculty member could be heard by his own peers, then I'll be satisfied that something good has come out of this."

"This is finally bringing attention to something that's very badly needed, and that is for women to have equal opportunity in Christian colleges," Mrs. Gundry says. "For that I'm very glad . . . The average Christian male has no idea what's hanging over the head of the Christian female who has been made to feel like there's something wrong with her, like she's half a person. Women have got to know that this isn't true, but they're not going to get it from the pulpit."

IF THEIR CRITICS had hoped to silence the Gundrys on feminism, their efforts have failed. Mrs. Gundry is awaiting publication of her next book—"Heirs Together"—which is a feminist argument for equality in marriage. Her husband, who has taken on some free-lance editing since his resignation, is seeking another teaching job, one that will allow him to teach theology without silencing his support for feminism.

"It's an important issue," says Dr. Gundry.

The Gundrys' four children, however, are perhaps the happiest of all. Since Dr. Gundry had been teaching at Moody, he was restricted by the institution's code of conduct from, among other things, attending movies. Mrs. Gundry recalls that he once had to sit in the parking lot while the rest of the family attended a showing of "Mary Poppins."

"It's ridiculous when your own father can do less than you can and you're 19," daughter Ann says. "It's hard to explain to people that your dad can't go to a show with you."

The week Dr. Gundry resigned, his family arranged a fitting celebration.

"It may not sound like much," he says, laughing, "but I finally got to see 'Star Wars.' "

Tribune photo by David Nystrom

Stanley and Patricia Gundry: He finally saw "Star Wars."