

[MJTM 16 (2014–2015)]

BOOK REVIEW

Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A. G. Haykin.
The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement.
Nashville: B. & H. Academic, 2015. xi + 356 pp. Hbk. ISBN
978-1-4336-7375-7. \$49.99.

The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement is written by three Baptist historians. Anthony L. Chute is Associate Professor of Church History and Associate Dean of the School of Christian Ministries at California Baptist University. Nathan Finn is Dean of the School of Theology and Missions and Professor of Christian Thought and Tradition at Union University. Michael Haykin is Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality and Director of the Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The authors assert that the book is intended as a textbook for first-time students of Baptist history. With this goal in mind, they aim to cover as much ground as possible. As a result, the book at times sacrifices detail for breadth, so that students get a general sense of the trends and impulses throughout Baptist history. The other goal of the book is to show how Baptists have been a global movement. To accomplish this, the authors have striven to show the commonalities Baptists share throughout the world, while also illustrating the uniqueness of Baptist groups in different regions. The authors have also endeavored to show Baptists in their moments of faithfulness and their moments of failure, which means being honest to the point of discomfort. However, to be honest in this way is to be true to the Christian scholar's task. To ignore a group's past failures is to be unfaithful to the story of God's people.

The book is divided into four sections. The first three are

divided according to time period, and each is written by the author specializing in that specific time period. In the final section, entitled “Baptist Beliefs,” the authors put aside the historian’s pen to describe the identity and distinctives of Baptists. Staying true to the book’s title, the authors proceed from the birth of the Baptist movement in the seventeenth century through to the present.

Section 1 details Baptist beginnings in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, wherein the authors firmly locate themselves in the camp of scholars who maintain that Baptists developed out of the English Separatist movement. They refer to Baptists as “children of the Puritans” (14). They go on to give an account of the two dominant streams of Baptists, the General Baptists and the Particular Baptists, and place emphasis on the persecution of Baptists as non-conformists. Also covered is the Baptist expansion into North America and its early development, including Baptists and the First Great Awakening, developments in theological education, and tensions related to the slave trade.

Section 2 covers the nineteenth century. The authors characterize this century as a time of outreach and expansion, with a great deal of growth in Baptist foreign and domestic missions. Another trend of the nineteenth century was increasing organization and unity, as manifested in the growth of conventions and associations, as well as a proliferation of Baptist theological institutions and publications. The chapter also deals with the progress and setbacks of the nineteenth century, such as issues of theological identity, controversies, the development of the Northern and Southern Baptist conventions, Baptist missions in Europe, aberrant teachings (e.g. Landmarkism), the American Baptist experience of the Civil War, increased immigration, and the push for temperance.

Section 3 is concerned with the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is in this section that the discussion of Baptists as a global movement really begins, as the authors discuss the formation of the Baptist World Alliance. Other aspects covered include the modernization of ministry practice, the birth of the Baptist prosperity gospel, modernist-fundamentalist controversies, the effects of the two World Wars, the rise of global

communism and suppression of religious liberty in some parts of the world, Baptist involvement in the civil rights movement, and inerrancy controversies in theological education. Coverage of the twenty-first century deals with the explosion of Baptists in the two-thirds world, particularly Asia and Africa, increased secularism in the West, Baptist responses to the charismatic movement, and threats to religious liberty.

The fourth and final section outlines the major convictions and emphases of Baptists in the early twenty-first century. In this section, the authors discuss Baptist identity, beliefs, and principles. They identify the following as key Baptist distinctives: regenerated church membership, believer's baptism, congregational polity, local church autonomy, and religious freedom. The authors conclude by observing that the Baptist story consistently returns to three key themes: promoting liberty of conscience, following Christ's will in individual lives and churches, and proclaiming the gospel everywhere. They believe these have been, and must continue to be, the top priorities of Baptists all over the world. This is the smallest section by far, and although it seemed like an unusual addition to a history book, it did function well as a summary of themes and distinctives that have defined Baptists throughout their history.

One of the book's merits is its narrative progression through four centuries of Baptist history, describing the Baptist experience from its beginnings in England, through its expansion into North America, Europe, and the world. The narrative, together with minimal use of academic jargon, augments the book's readability. To supplement the historical narrative, the book includes many illustrations and excerpts, as well as discussion questions at the end of each chapter. The book undertakes a broad survey of Baptist history, and as such, is most valuable as a textbook.

The book's strength as a textbook, however, is also its weakness. The goal of covering Baptist history from beginning to end mean that the authors can only briefly touch on the major trends and events in Baptist history. As a consequence of this approach, the authors fail to provide the reader with a sense of the scholarly discussions surrounding some of the key moments

in Baptist history. The only exception to this is in the first chapter where the authors briefly allude to the contested origins of Baptists as the descendants of Anabaptists or the descendants of Puritans. Other than this instance, however, little attention is directed toward the scholarly discussions that are taking place, or have taken place, on aspects of Baptist history. Unfortunately, and this is due to the nature of historical surveys that span centuries, this could lead readers to hold assumptions, or make claims, in ignorance of the contested status of a given assumption or claim. In an attempt to remedy this situation, which the authors are fully aware of, a brief bibliography is given at the end of each chapter, but the bibliographies are not enough to equip readers with a rudimentary knowledge of the scholarly debates on the subjects. As a result, the book, as with all historical surveys, can only equip the reader with general knowledge, thus limiting the book's usefulness in the academy.

As a Canadian reader, I was disappointed by the authors' tendency to focus primarily on American Baptists. Canadian, British, and Baptists worldwide were not wholly neglected, but for a book claiming to tell the Baptist story from English sect to global movement, an inordinate amount of focus was given to Baptists in America, particularly the Southern Baptist Convention. The book reads more like a history of American Baptists that gives special emphasis to the movement's British roots. This disproportionate focus on American Baptists implies that the book's intended audience is in fact American readers. Though this is not necessarily a problem, it certainly limits the book's usefulness for Baptists outside the U.S.A.

The authors also side step the ongoing debate over Baptist identity: what exactly constitutes a Baptist? Rather than reviewing the variety of perspectives on this matter, they simply posited that a person can be a Baptist by conditioning, convenience, or conviction. Although this is an accurate assessment of the different ways a person can be a Baptist, it is both unremarkable and beside the point; unremarkable because such an assessment can be applied to any Christian at various stages in their spiritual journey, and beside the point because it does not address the question of Baptist identity. A more helpful

assessment would have provided the reader with a sense of the different arguments and perspectives on what it means to be a Baptist, before explicating the various doctrines on which Baptists place special emphasis.

Another problem persists in the book's section on Baptist identity and belief. In addition to the lack of attention given to scholarly discussions on Baptist identity, the authors step boldly into the forbidden territory of gender exclusive language. In the only part of the book that purports to be prescriptive, rather than descriptive, the use of gender exclusive language is a serious blunder. In the subsection entitled, "Baptist Identity," the authors write such things as, "A Baptist by conviction considers *himself* a Baptist ultimately because of what *he* believes, which in turn influences *his* decision to join a congregation or denomination that shares *his* beliefs" (326, my emphasis). This is not an oversight or a minor mistake. Clearly, such language is intended. This usage betrays an implicit assumption about gender roles in the church, or, at the very least, an insensitivity toward current discussions regarding the role of women in the church. The authors chose the worst topic in which to use gender exclusive language. In reality, there is no room for archaic notions of gender superiority in our day and age, not to mention the fact that Baptists have long encouraged women's involvement in church life, despite exhibiting various perspectives on women's ordination. In this way too, the book's usefulness for the academy is limited.

In conclusion, this book seems particularly well suited for English-speaking American readers who hail from, or are well acquainted with, either the American Baptist or Southern Baptist conventions, and who have no knowledge of Baptist history. For Baptists outside of the U.S.A., this book functions as an introduction for first-time students of Baptist history, primarily the sections covering the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Baptist historians, on the other hand, would be prudent to avoid using *The Baptist Story*. I give this recommendation on the grounds of the book's self-proclaimed function as a textbook, its consequent inability to deal with the critical issues in Baptist scholarship, and several features mentioned above which limit

the book's usefulness for serious scholars. Having said that, the book's primary value is found in the story it tells of an ever-growing group of Christ followers, a group who, through moments of faithfulness and moments of failure, continue to seek God's kingdom on earth.

Adam Rudy
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, ON