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#### BOOK REVIEW

Barry Hankins and Thomas S. Kidd. *Baptists in America: A History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. xi + 329 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-0-1999-7753-6. \$29.95.

*Baptists in America* is written by Thomas S. Kidd, Distinguished Professor of History at Baylor University, and Barry Hankins, Professor of History and Graduate Program Director at Baylor University. Drawing on their knowledge and expertise in the area of American evangelicalism, Hankins and Kidd have written an excellent book about American Baptists. In *Baptists in America*, Kidd and Hankins argue that Baptists, in their relationship with American culture, have oscillated between outsider and insider status throughout their history. Initially, the Baptists' status as outsiders provided a common identity, but as they grew into a more substantial Protestant power, their ability to unify around missions and evangelism, as they had done in the past, became difficult because of growing theological and social differences. Pressure to conform to the larger culture increased as Baptists grew in number. The extent of their conformity determined their status as insiders or outsiders, and as differences proliferated, they found themselves on both sides of the fence, so that Baptists were simultaneously insiders and outsiders, depending on the conversation.

The first two chapters focus on Baptists in colonial America, particularly their status as outsiders. A number of the colonies had established churches, and Baptists experienced much persecution at the hands of Congregationalists in New England and Anglicans in South Carolina. In the third chapter, which looks at Baptists and the American Revolution, Kidd and Hankins argue that, even though the Baptists' experience of the Revolution was the same as most Americans at the time, Baptists gradually

began to embrace it as a godly cause. They believed the Revolution would deliver America from Britain and herald a new age of religious liberty in which they would no longer suffer persecution. The belief that America was a nation specially blessed by God began to pervade Baptists' thought during this time.

The period of disestablishment following the war is the focus of chapter 4. The authors argue that Baptists firmly supported Thomas Jefferson, seeing him as a champion of religious liberty. Further, they argue that Baptists, particularly those of an evangelical persuasion, were the key factor in driving the gradual disestablishment of state churches both during the Revolution and after. In chapter 5, Hankins and Kidd argue that the Second Great Awakening was a key catalyst in the Baptists' incredible growth over the first half of the nineteenth century, claiming that "between the Revolution and the Civil War Methodists and Baptists achieved the greatest organizational success in American religious history" (85). It was also during this widespread growth that Baptists began to face division and schism over a variety of issues, such as missions and Landmarkism. At the same time, Baptists struggled to fit slavery into their faith and vice versa. The existence of slavery was often assumed, resulting in important questions going unanswered. Chapters 6 and 7 deal specifically with Baptists and slavery, arguing that, although some Baptists condemned slavery, the majority of white Baptists had "made peace with the institution" (99). The issue of slavery seethed below the surface, and upon bursting, not only did it permanently divide Baptists, but it divided the nation and eventually led to the Civil War; thus were born the Southern and Northern Baptist Conventions.

Chapter 8 focuses on the experience of Black Baptists after the Civil War. Hankins and Kidd argue that in the postwar period African-American Christianity became a separate institution due to legal segregation in the South. They also argue that Black Baptists' unity was formed around sociological rather than theological commonalities, namely, their past experience as slaves, so that their churches became "institutions of African American identity within a society dominated by whites" (165). This meant

that, as White Baptists became a kind of establishment in the South, Black Baptists retained the posture of dissent that had characterized the earliest Baptists. In the authors' terms, Black Baptists remained outsiders, while White Baptists became insiders.

Chapters 9 through 13 cover the various ways in which Baptists were simultaneously cultural insiders and outsiders. In the South, the time following the Civil War was marked by the convergence of Southern culture with a kind of "religious kingdom" (166). This was perpetuated by the myth of lost cause, and resulted in the conflation of God's Kingdom with America. At the same time, the rise of modernist theology and the reaction of fundamentalism wracked the Baptists in the North. The modernists, which the authors label "liberals," reconciled their faith with the increasingly secular culture by emphasizing religious experience, whereas the fundamentalists, which the authors label "conservatives," militantly defended orthodoxy, particularly the authority of the Scripture. The authors argue that the liberals remained cultural insiders, while the conservatives became outsiders. This led to frequent theological controversies in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the Convention assemblies each year became a battle ground for the warring parties—liberals and conservatives. As the southern states reintegrated with the rest of the nation after World War I, there was an increasingly prevalent identification of Baptist democracy with American democracy. As intra-denominational conflict grew, Baptists began emphasizing some of their historic principles, religious liberty foremost among them. Ultimately, the liberals won by adjusting their faith to fit the times, but this would only lead to controversy and division later in the twentieth century.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Baptists frequently exhibited ambivalence on issues such as the Civil Rights movement, abortion, and ecumenism. Baptists could be insiders and outsiders simultaneously. As a result, there was often controversy among Baptists over issues they could not agree upon. The authors argue, however, that in the last decades of the twentieth century, primarily fundamentalist Southern

Baptists constantly came into conflict with the secular mainstream, generally on purpose, and they became, once again, cultural outsiders. There was also conflict within the Southern Baptist Convention when a controversy exploded between conservatives and moderates over the doctrine of inerrancy. The convention was, over time, strategically taken over by the conservatives, and the ensuing purge of moderates from convention seminaries and institutions increased the overall conservative nature of the convention.

This book has a number of merits. First, Hankins and Kidd write in an articulate, readable style that maintains a sense of momentum even through complex issues. Second, Hankins and Kidd rely heavily on stories that follow the experience of specific Baptists. This use of specific examples provides a window into Baptist experience that the readers would otherwise lack, and it brings the history to life in the mind of the reader. Third, the authors acknowledge the arguments of other historians, sometimes using them as explanations, and other times contrasting them with their own arguments. In doing this, they subtly inform the reader of some of the debates and arguments in Baptist scholarship, but without weighing down the discussion with technical terminology, theory, or jargon. Fourth, Hankins and Kidd conclude the book with a discussion of Baptist identity and note the difficulty in pinning down exactly what it means to be Baptists, because clearly, they cannot be defined by their relationship to culture. Indeed, Hankins and Kidd set out three simple criteria for Baptist identity: 1) believer's baptism; 2) local church autonomy; and 3) the willingness to call oneself a Baptist. This definition of a Baptist is in stark contrast to the tendency over the course of the twentieth century to characterize Baptist identity by the so-called Baptist distinctives or principles. Thus, they offer an original contribution to the discussion on Baptist identity.

However, there are a few criticisms that I want to note. First, the role of women in Baptist history is rarely mentioned. This is true of Church history generally, but one might have reasonably hoped that, given the discussions and disagreement over women in church leadership these days, the authors would have

heightened the book's relevance for today by devoting some discussion to women in Baptist history. This is all the more important, considering the fact that many of those opposed to women in leadership come from conservative Baptist ranks.

Second, Hankins and Kidd only briefly discuss the Baptists' missionary work for Native Americans in chapter 6, entitled, "Baptists and Slavery." Not only does the brevity of the discussion come across as an aside, given the fact that it is located in a chapter about slavery, but the subject was never mentioned again after this point. What became of the successful Baptist missions among the Native Americans? This is a question the reader is left with upon finishing the book.

Third, on one or two occasions, the authors seem to operate on the assumption that revivals are primarily the result of human agency, rather than the Holy Spirit. For example, in a discussion of Oliver Hart, a Baptist in the eighteenth century, the authors state that "Hart's resolve in the face of these troubles [a series of personal tragedies] *helped produce* a major revival in Charleston in 1754" (28; emphasis added). Similarly, in chapter 7, the authors seem to imply some kind of human agency during a discussion of visions that two Baptists experienced. They state, "the two visions both *grew out* of a common conviction . . . these visions also evoked a grinding tension over slavery" (118; emphasis added). How can one assert that a vision came from conviction? Visions are typically assigned some kind of psychological or supernatural origin, and even those assertions must be, at best, tentative. Additionally, while it is certainly possible, and indeed plausible, for a specific person to have had a leading role in a revival, assigning the causation of its origin to a person not only is inaccurate, and distorts history, but it also seems to exclude the role of the Holy Spirit in revivals. The role of God's Spirit in specific historical events is extremely difficult to discern, and the conventions and culture of academic history fairly prohibit providential explanations. It may be Hankins and Kidd were trying to avoid this pitfall, but in doing so, they fell into another. For authors who claim to be Christians themselves, in a book that is primarily intended for Christian readers, it is inappropriate to assume human agency as the sole explanation. It

would be better to avoid discussing the agency of a revival altogether, if the authors were unwilling or unable to use God as an explanation.

My fourth criticism is concerned with the lens Hankins and Kidd used to analyze Baptist history. They chose to present a history of Baptists in America through detailing the interplay of influence in the relationship between Baptists and American culture. This is a good approach, because it accounts for the influence Baptists have had on American culture and vice versa. What may have appeared as anomalies to the student of Baptist history is accounted for and explained through this approach. As with any lens, certain things are emphasized, namely, Baptists' relationship to culture, while other things are left out simply because they are out of view. At the same time, items on the periphery of the lens get stretched and distorted. Thus, my criticism is that, because American cultural history is only dealt with as Baptists experienced it, that cultural history is distorted, since it is only viewed through the Baptists' relationship to it, and potentially leads to a misunderstanding of American cultural history.

The merits of this book outweigh the criticisms I have mentioned. It is strongly written, and does much to help the reader understand current events in the United States by showing how religion, specifically Christianity, and culture can shape each other. In addition, it is relatively unbiased, insofar as that is possible. Hankins and Kidd show the good and the bad, and discuss each with fairness. *Baptists in America* will be an excellent course text for both undergraduate and graduate students, as well as for any other interested readers.

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