

Baptists in America: A History

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American evangelicalism has, for some time, been dominated by Baptists. American Baptist churches attract tens of millions of worshippers, and the Southern Baptist Convention stands unrivalled as the single largest Protestant denomination in the country. And yet, despite their numerical hegemony, American Baptists have not attracted commensurate attention from historians. This is not, of course, to say that Baptists have been completely ignored: recent studies by David Bebbington and Robert Johnson have surveyed the global scope of the Baptist movement [\(1\)](#), and historians of American religion such as Gregory Wills, Elizabeth Hill Flowers, and Janet Moore Lindman, to name a few, have analysed crucial aspects of Baptist history in the United States. [\(2\)](#) And yet, these works notwithstanding, narrative surveys of the distinctively American Baptist experience have been in short supply, often regarded as the niche concern of denominational historians. Bill Leonard's excellent study of American Baptist life comes closest to filling this gap, but his book is structured thematically and the accent falls on contemporary Baptist practice and identity. [\(3\)](#) Given the size and influence of American Baptists, their relative lack of historiographical attention is surprising. Surely a group that includes such diverse religious figures as Harry Emerson Fosdick, Billy Graham, and Martin Luther King Jr, merits an authoritative, mainstream, narrative history, and Thomas Kidd and Barry Hankins have admirably provided it with *Baptists in America*.

The book is an ambitious, lively survey of any and all Americans who took for themselves the name 'Baptist' from the mid-17th century to the present day. Organized chronologically, Kidd and Hankins make every effort to contextualise their subjects within the broader narrative of American history, and they conceptually frame the book with the claim that American Baptists are best understood in light of their dual identity as both 'insiders' and 'outsiders' *vis-à-vis* that broader American culture. Given that the authors cover some 350 years, the book is impressively grounded in primary source material, a fact which reflects the complementary expertise of the authors. Kidd specializes in the history of colonial America, while Hankins' work focuses on American religion during the 19th and 20th centuries. As a result, rather than the heavy reliance on secondary sources so common in introductory surveys of this type, we find instead a richly documented account which utilizes diaries, church records, newspapers, the minutes of association meetings, and denominational literature to tell an incredibly wide-ranging story. The authors are also practising Baptists themselves, a point to which they draw attention in the book's preface. And yet, despite their clear

affection for the tradition, the authors largely make good on their promise to tell the story without betraying a 'theological or political ax to grind' and without downplaying American Baptists' 'many failings' (pp. x–xi).

The book's first five chapters follow American Baptists from their early phase as 17th-century 'colonial outlaws' to their largely successful campaign for religious disestablishment following the Revolution. After briefly surveying Christian attitudes toward baptism from the earliest New Testament sources through the Anabaptists of the 16th century, the book situates the first American Baptists within the wider context of 17th-century, trans-Atlantic Puritanism. Beginning with the founding of America's first Baptist church in 1638 in Rhode Island, we are told that the earliest generation of American Baptists followed a pattern of theological mutation not unlike their counterparts across the Atlantic. As 'dissenters became radicalized by persecution' they soon began 'a wholesale reconsideration of their faith and rituals', a process which often culminated in the denial of infant baptism (p. 7). Such theological reimagining, however, was not appreciated by colonial officials wary of religious dissent, and the early chapters chronicle the dogged, though largely unsuccessful, efforts to silence Baptist voices. In 17th-century New England, Baptists were fined, whipped, imprisoned, and exiled. Baptists at one Boston meeting house even arrived for worship one morning only to discover that the front door had been crudely nailed shut. None of these diverse punishments, however, were able to stifle the growing Baptist movement, and in 1681 the Massachusetts General Court conceded defeat, giving 'official approval for the Baptists to meet publicly' (p. 18).

Taking advantage of their new-found toleration, Baptists began to organise their churches into networks for mutual support and advice. Kidd and Hankins survey the 18th-century development of regional networks, which tried to navigate between the seemingly conflicting desires to 'regularize Baptist life' while also not 'dictat[ing] policy or theology to individual congregations' (p. 21). This tension between autonomy as a first principle of Baptist polity and the practical need for greater denominational coherence is one that emerges here and resurfaces throughout the book. Other recurring themes introduced in these early chapters include Baptist debate over the relative importance of an educated pastorate, the participation of African Americans within Baptist churches, and the group's geographic expansion into the American West.

Much of 18th-century Baptist growth took place against the backdrop of the Great Awakening, and the authors do a fine job contextualising Baptist activity within this broader story of religious change. The increase in religious enthusiasm was 'rooted in widespread dissatisfaction with the churches of the colonies, Britain, and Europe', and Baptists' relationship to the Awakening was complex. Among several of the more prominent Baptist churches 'the revivals caused lasting damage, usually when pastors failed to support the awakenings' (p. 24). Yet, at the same time, many key Baptist doctrinal emphases were particularly well-suited to the tenor of the times. Stressing the need for a personal conversion experience, fiery revivalists like George Whitfield cast a vision of Christian life and piety which perfectly complemented Baptist faith and practice.

The third chapter shifts the focus from the Great Awakening to the American Revolution. Despite the persistence in some Baptist circles of a strong pacifist sentiment, most of the leading Baptist representatives were supportive of the revolutionary cause. Their motivation was not, however, an unalloyed patriotism, for many hoped that the establishment of a new American political order might also bring the disestablishment of the state church. Appeals for civil liberty from the British government were easily transmuted into appeals for religious liberty from all state interference. Perhaps the most influential voice among Baptists making this argument was Isaac Backus, whose *Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty* (1773) was distributed directly to the members of the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia during September 1774 (p. 49). Though their efforts were not immediately rewarded, Backus and others were nonetheless hopeful that the American victory augured future political changes more conducive to their movement's flourishing.

Chapter four looks directly to those changes by examining the surprising 'partnership between sceptical or liberal Christian politicians, and legions of Baptists in the cause of religious liberty'. This alliance of seemingly disparate American factions ultimately helped to bring about the disestablishment of state

churches throughout the young country and the ratification of the First Amendment, events which the authors describe as ‘the most important religious outcome of the American Revolution’ (p. 59). It was surely a turning point for Baptists, who after the war’s conclusion entered into a ‘new phase of expansion and revival’, moving west into the Ohio River Valley and beyond (p. 67). This geographic diffusion becomes a focal point in chapter five as the authors track the proliferation of Baptist churches during the first half of the 19th century. The total number of American Baptists grew from approximately 10,000 in 1776, to 100,000 by 1800, and then to an astonishing 800,000 by 1848 (p. 77). Such growth was bound up with a wider religious resurgence during the same period, and the authors skilfully integrate Baptist development into the broader story of the ‘Second Great Awakening’, the latter term being convincingly critiqued as ‘more a convenient label than an accurate description’ (p. 84). The chapter is also notable in that it marks the authors’ first substantive interaction with intra-Baptist disagreements over the ‘nuances of Calvinist theology’ (p. 82), a theme which resurfaces throughout the narrative. Likewise, the chapter begins to explore the Baptist commitment to organised evangelistic and missionary efforts (pp. 92–7), a topic to which the authors also regularly return.

Chapters six through eight examine Baptists during the 19th century, the dominant issues, of course, being slavery, the American Civil War, and emancipation. The authors highlight the fact that during this period, ‘[e]veryday pressure against slavery came most directly from black Baptists themselves’ (p. 99). This was because most Baptist associations refused to speak directly to the issue, arguing that slavery and emancipation were civil, rather than ecclesial, issues. Particularly in the South, this silence amounted to tacit approval, and as the southern cotton industry grew rapidly during the early 19th century, so too did the ‘pressure to sanctify slave ownership’ (p. 102). By 1845, the conflict over slavery had grown so acute that a broad coalition of southern church leaders withdrew their support from the then regnant Triennial Convention to form their own pro-slavery Southern Baptist Convention.

In addition to the experience of African American Baptists, the book includes Baptist groups often neglected in other histories of the movement, most notably Baptist churches led by Chinese, Japanese, and Hispanic Americans, all of which operated vibrant Baptist ministries by the late 19th century (p. 121). Kidd and Hankins also highlight Baptist efforts to ‘bring the gospel to Native Americans’ on the western frontier, as well as the fascinating but seldom told story of the ‘antimissionary’ movement which roiled Baptist circles in the South and Midwest during the 1820s (pp. 110–14).

During Reconstruction the total number of African American Baptists grew rapidly, through both the planting of churches within predominantly white conventions and the establishment of African American denominational bodies. Kidd and Hankins observe that even as white Baptists struggled to navigate race relations in a post-emancipation world, black leaders likewise disagreed ‘over the extent to which black Baptists should cooperate with whites’ (p. 153). Given the fact that the ‘major black Baptist denominations formed for sociological rather than theological reasons’, the authors conclude the chapter by arguing that within the broader Baptist community it is perhaps African Americans who have best exemplified the ‘outsider/dissenter posture of early Baptist history’ (p. 165).

Meanwhile, their white counterparts were enhancing their cultural profile, as the growth of the Southern Baptist Convention and its stranglehold on the region’s religious life allowed ‘white Southern Baptists’ to become ‘consummate cultural insiders’ (p. 167). Chapters nine and ten document the beginning of this transformation, an ascent to respectability punctuated by George W. Truett preaching ‘the most famous sermon in Southern Baptist history’ on the steps of the United States Capitol building (p. 179). The authors eschew any sense of triumphalism, however, noting that as the South moved to institute Jim Crow laws during the same period ‘white Southern Baptists led the way’ (p. 167). In the north, by contrast, many Baptists joined with Methodists, Presbyterians, and others in a mainline, ecumenical, progressive movement oriented around social reform. Led by the Baptist pastor Walter Rauschenbusch, this Social Gospel resonated widely among moderate and liberal Baptists, whilst simultaneously alienating more conservative Baptist leaders who saw the entire project as a shift away from the traditional emphases of historic Protestantism (pp. 170–2). These concerns fed directly into the controversy between fundamentalists and

modernists which divided the Northern Baptist Convention along with much of American Protestantism more generally during the first half of the 20th century.

Chapter 11 is more loosely organised than previous chapters, beginning with an attempt to catalogue the dizzying diversity of Baptist groups active by the mid-20th century, and ending with an argument that such denominational labels no longer serve as the reliable indicators of cultural and political allegiance that they once did. Rather, the authors assert, 'the key variable is not the name of the denomination but whether the group, congregation, or individual identifies as *theologically* conservative, moderate, or liberal within those groups' (italics in the original, p. 210).

The authors return to a more tightly focused narrative in chapter 12, as they document the substantial degree to which African American Baptists were active participants in the social and cultural upheavals which eventually led to the *de jure*, if not *de facto*, desegregation of the American South. They also address the degree to which many white Baptists worked not to facilitate but to block these very same changes. Indeed, the authors observe that when the Baptist and white civil rights activist Clarence Jordan was violently harassed during the 1950s, 'many of the persecutors were Baptists too' (p. 217). Such complexities are handled with even-handed clarity and the chapter stands as one of the strongest in the book.

In the final chapter, Kidd and Hankins document a late-20th century movement within the Southern Baptist Convention to fundamentally transform the denomination's theological and social direction. Though the subject matter might initially strike some as too parochial to be of general interest, the authors argue that the transition was, in fact, 'one of the most significant religious events of the twentieth century' (p. 228). The story is well told and the victory of conservative elements within the denomination marks a fascinating counterpoint to the string of defeats experienced earlier in the 20th century by fundamentalists within the Northern Baptist Convention. Beginning in the late 1970s, the architects of the conservative takeover used one's willingness to affirm the 'inerrancy of Scripture' as a litmus test of orthodoxy and successfully manoeuvred their preferred individuals onto the boards of seminaries and denominational agencies. The eventual 'result was the near-complete personnel turnover at some of the schools and almost all of the agencies' (p. 237). The authors note how the changing dynamics within the Southern Baptist Convention mirrored 'a conservative shift taking place in the wider culture', a shift highlighted by Ronald Reagan's successful bid for a second presidential term in 1984 (p. 230).

Baptists in America is an undeniably strong book, but some critical comments can still be made. First, certain readers will be disappointed to find that virtually no attention has been paid to Baptist historiography, and one is largely left to wonder how the present work complements or contradicts that which has come before. The omission is likely intentional, given that the text seems intended as an introductory survey, but let those looking for more substantive historiographical analysis consider themselves forewarned. Also, though the book is extensively documented, both in the notes and the bibliography, the inclusion of a thematically-sorted list of recommended further reading would have been a welcome addition for readers new to the subject.

Second, whilst the authors are to be commended for their consistent, and largely successful, effort to contextualise the Baptist story within the larger story of American history, the many attempts to correlate the two do sometimes cause confusion. Most notably, it is not always clear whether statements predicated specifically of Baptists could not just as easily be predicated of all evangelicals, or even, in some cases, all Americans. For example, we are told that 'as the Revolutionary War progressed, many Baptists began to identify newly independent America as a nation specially blessed by God.' Shortly thereafter, it is added that Baptists often exhibited a 'tendency to blend American history with the Christian history of redemption' (pp. 56–7). What we are not told, however, is to what degree these tendencies reflected any distinctively Baptist principles or circumstances. This is not to say that the relevant comparisons between Baptists and other segments of the population are never drawn; sometimes they are. For instance, the authors helpfully note that the religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening were not limited to Baptist circles and that '[i]ndeed, the growth of Methodism was even more spectacular' (p. 77). Likewise, qualifying phrases like 'along with

other evangelicals' are sprinkled throughout (p. 92). But these points of comparative analysis are too sparsely distributed and too briefly developed, often leaving readers to discern for themselves how best to untangle the strands of Baptist peculiarity from the wider religious culture to which they belonged.

Third, and related to the preceding point, many readers will likely finish the book puzzled over the seemingly central question of what, exactly, qualifies one as a 'Baptist'. One can scarcely fault Kidd and Hankins for this confusion, however, as they directly address the vexing question of Baptist identity in their conclusion, and the lingering ambiguity seems to reflect the inherently problematic nature of 'Baptist' as a coherent historical descriptor. Deeply divided over seemingly every issue germane to Protestant religion – a list which includes Calvinism, eschatology, missionary activity, female ordination, race relations, the necessity of an educated pastorate, ethical issues, and the historical reliability of the Bible – one could be forgiven for wondering if any attempt to write a unified narrative history of such a group is even a feasible project. And yet, despite this almost overwhelming diversity of expression, the very fact that 'Baptist' has taken root as a longstanding historical label with which millions of people have chosen to identify, seems almost enough to justify the term's ongoing usefulness. This is essentially the position defended by Kidd and Hankins, who persuasively critique previous attempts to define 'distinctive markers' of Baptist identity, and conclude that in addition to denying infant baptism and defending the autonomy of the local congregation, the only definitive and enduring marker of American Baptist identity has been 'simply the willingness to call oneself a Baptist' (pp. 249–52). Again, Kidd and Hankins are to be applauded for the honesty with which they address this question, but one still cannot help wonder about the degree to which the seeming incoherence of 'Baptist' as an historical category undermines any attempt to chronicle what is intended to be the common history of a meaningfully unified group.

None of these critical remarks, however, should overshadow what Kidd and Hankins have achieved with *Baptists in America*. The book fills a significant historiographical gap with scholarly rigour and literary aplomb. The organisation of such a sprawling and unwieldy subject is a formidable task, but it is one to which the authors prove more than adequate. Detail and anecdote are well balanced alongside sweeping summary, and the periodic inclusion of individual conversion narratives both reflects the specific chronological contexts from which the testimonies originated and conveys the consistently intense subjectivity of Baptist religion across time. Despite the authors' self-identification with the Baptist tradition, the story is objectively told, and there is no discernible effort made to downplay or minimize incidents and controversies that Baptist apologists might rather forget. The narrative moves swiftly and never languishes in excessive doctrinal or denominational minutiae. And though this streamlined approach makes the text an ideal choice for students and the general reader, scholars of American religion – particularly those specialising in other religious traditions – will also benefit from this well-researched introduction. *Baptists in America* is an excellent book and highly recommended.

Notes

1. D. W. Bebbington, *Baptists through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (Waco, TX, 2010); R. E. Johnson, *A Global Introduction to Baptist Churches* (New York, NY, 2010). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. G. A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South 1785–1900* (New York, NY, 1997); J. M. Lindman, *Bodies of Belief: Baptist Community in Early America* (Philadelphia, PA, 2008); E.H. Flowers, *Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power since World War II* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. B. Leonard, *Baptists in America* (New York, NY, 2005). [Back to \(3\)](#)

The authors are happy to accept this review without further comment.

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/154597>