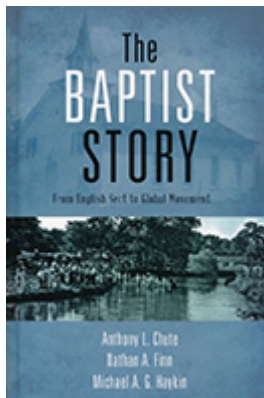


Book Review: The Baptist Story

September 9, 2015

***The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement* by Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn and Michael A.G. Haykin (B&H Academic)**

This narrative history tells the story of the Baptist movement, from its beginnings in the 17th century to the present. Three Baptist historians emphasize three themes that have characterized Baptists for 400 years: “promoting liberty of conscience, following Christ’s will in our individual lives and churches, and proclaiming the gospel everywhere.”



Particularly in the first three-quarters of the book, the writers do a good job telling the story of Baptist insistence of religious liberty for all. They recognize Baptists’ spiritual kinship with Dutch Anabaptists but do not trace direct lineage, focusing instead on Baptists’ emergence from English Separatists. The book sometimes seems a bit too heavy in recording the history of Calvinist Baptists, occasionally delving into minute detail about the varying shades of Calvinist belief, but the authors do not neglect Baptists of Arminian or mediating views.

Black Baptists

One of the book’s strengths is its treatment of the African-American Baptist tradition. The authors rightly give credit to George Liele, a freed slave, as a missionary pioneer. They note Liele planted the first African-American church in Savannah, Ga., and founded a church in Jamaica at least 10 years before William Carey sailed to India. The writers do not shy away from identifying slavery—specifically the appointment of slaveholders as

missionaries—as the original sin that birthed the Southern Baptist Convention. They emphasize the key influence of black Baptists in providing leadership to the civil rights movement. They honestly identify white Baptists—particularly in the South—as often being opponents of the civil rights movement, while also acknowledging the courage of some white Baptists, such as T.B. Maston, Clarence Jordan and Carlyle Marney, who promoted civil rights.

SBC controversy

The authors take a much more guarded tone in describing the controversy that divided the SBC in the 1980s and 1990s. To their credit, they forthrightly identify biblical inerrancy as a tool that served the victors in the denominational struggle three ways. It provided “a unifying doctrine” around which they could rally; it established “a starting point from which to discuss theological differences” on other subjects; and “it put progressives at a rhetorical disadvantage because they were forced to reject (or at least downplay) inerrancy while also arguing for a trustworthy Bible.”

Unfortunately, apart from that astute analysis, the authors take a cautious “just-the-facts” approach in describing the SBC controversy that stands in sharp contrast to the vivid narrative in the book’s early chapters. While the writers bring to life John Smyth, Henry Jessey and Roger Williams, leading Baptists of the late 20th century are dismissed with just a cursory mention. Some are not mentioned at all.

Sins of omission

For example, pastor-theologian Herschel Hobbs, who arguably shaped the theology of a generation of Sunday school teachers through the quarterly commentaries he wrote for the Baptist Sunday School Board, is mentioned only in one sentence in relation to chairing the committee that revised the Baptist Faith & Message in 1963. Russell Dilday is mentioned only in one

sentence as having been terminated by the trustees of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, is mentioned in several contexts; his predecessor, Roy Honeycutt, is omitted altogether. The SBC's withdrawal from the Baptist World Alliance only merits three sentences—which is three sentences more than the authors gave to the SBC's defunding of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs—now known as the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. The latter seems particularly glaring, considering the book's strong emphasis on religious liberty.

Perhaps it was too much to expect Broadman & Holman—the book-publishing arm of LifeWay Christian Resources—to allow a more thorough treatment of the SBC controversy. Even so, these sins of omission detract from an otherwise praiseworthy book.