

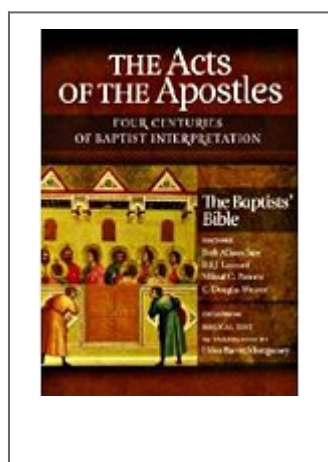
Book presents Baptists' historical views on the biblical book of Acts

December 18, 2009

Baptist minister Vavasor Powell of Wales ruffled feathers in 1649 when he quoted the New Testament book of Acts to scold pastors who disdained youthful preachers as upstarts.

[Clarence Jordan](#), a 1960s civil rights activist, raised eyebrows with his interpretation of Acts, in which he compared a Jewish judicial council to the Ku Klux Klan.

And the late Baptist minister Ella Mitchell stirred things up in 1985, remarking that when it came to the Holy Spirit, God had “dumped the bucket on a whole lot of women a whole lot of times”— including calling her to preach.



A weighty—literally—948-page volume released this year by scholars of history and religion contains those and hundreds of other historical nuggets about interpretations of Acts by Baptists.

Several Baptist ministers who have reviewed the book are enthusiastic, saying it provides new insights for their congregations.

Baptists began as religious refugees from England who gathered in 1609 to worship in an Amsterdam bakery. Today, they number more than 100 million members worldwide. Through it all, they have struggled to stay true to Scripture and to the early Christian faith.

They have done so as they wrote sermons, faith confessions, devotions and commentaries—and participated in debates.

[*The Acts of the Apostles: Four Centuries of Baptist Interpretation*](#), published by Baylor University Press, gathers the views of more than 120 Baptist ministers, authors and scholars through the years. The book is the product of four years of research by more than 30 scholars and students from Texas to Scotland.

“We started with Acts because it’s such a pivotal book, with emphasis on baptism and the beginnings of the early church,” said [Beth Allison Barr](#), a co-editor of the book and an assistant professor of European women’s history at Baylor University in Waco.

“The goal is to try to figure out how Baptists incorporated Scripture into confessions and sermons and articulated their identities—and to help us preserve and understand what it means to be Baptist.”

Some Baptists quoted in the book are high profile—Billy Graham, London preacher Charles Spurgeon of the 19th century and California pastor Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Life*.

But the book also includes interpretations from dozens of lesser-known Baptists, as well as a 1924 translation of Acts by one of the first Baptist women to have a biblical translation published.

The book “takes folks to places they had never planned on going, and where others do not wish them to go at all,” the editors wrote in the book’s introduction.

But “we have decided to present the whole Baptist tradition, ‘warts and all,’ some of which may be judged to be racist, misogynist or heretical.”

Pastor Duane Brooks of Tallowood Baptist Church in Houston called the volume “my go-to book on Acts.”

The book is “a user-friendly, comprehensive resource,” Dorisanne Cooper of Lake Shore Baptist Church in Waco said.

“I add voices from my own tradition that I would otherwise have a hard time tracking down,” she said. “In true Baptist fashion, I can agree with them or argue with them, but always find myself enriched by them in some way.”

The volume includes views spanning the theological spectrum and reflects worship styles ranging from charismatic to liturgical. It remains faithful to original interpretations—even spelling and punctuation irregularities.

“One of the major values is that it contains a whole lot of writings from rare sources published, and it puts all this in one book,” said Doug Weaver, associate professor and director of undergraduate studies in the Baylor University religion department.

Not only does the book recover Baptist voices from long ago, but also ones from far away, said Mikeal Parsons, a co-editor and the Kidd L. and Buna Hitchcock Macon professor of religion at Baylor University.

The authors went global, including African Baptists, Native American Baptists and Australian Baptists.

A Nigerian Baptist quoted in the book said members of the Yoruba tribe

view the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as described in Acts as “a sort of spiritual ancestor,” Parsons said. While many Baptists are hesitant about charismatic expressions, “speaking in tongues comes very naturally to the tribe,” he said.

Many Baptists’ interpretations reflect the spirit of their times.

Civil rights activist Clarence Jordan wrote *The Cotton Patch Version of Luke and Acts: Jesus’ Doings and the Happenings*, in which the Apostle Paul is hauled to city hall while the Ku Klux Klan plots to lynch him.

In Jordan’s take on Acts 23:11, “the Lord stood beside Paul and said, ‘Keep your chin up, because you’ve got to stand up for me in Washington just as you have here in Atlanta.’”

At the [Baptist World Alliance](#) annual meeting in the Netherlands in the summer, 150 copies of the book were distributed.

“While it is too early for reviews, the feedback from buyers has been strong and positive,” said Carey Newman, director of Baylor University Press. “Those receiving the volume could not have been more pleased.”

Research for the project was made possible by grants from Louisville Institute in Kentucky, Baylor University in Waco, Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C., Tallowood Baptist Church in Houston and Charles DeLancey, a member of Tallowood. Also co-editing was Bill Leonard, dean of the School of Divinity and professor of church history at Wake Forest University.

For more information, visit www1.baylor.edu/baptistbible.