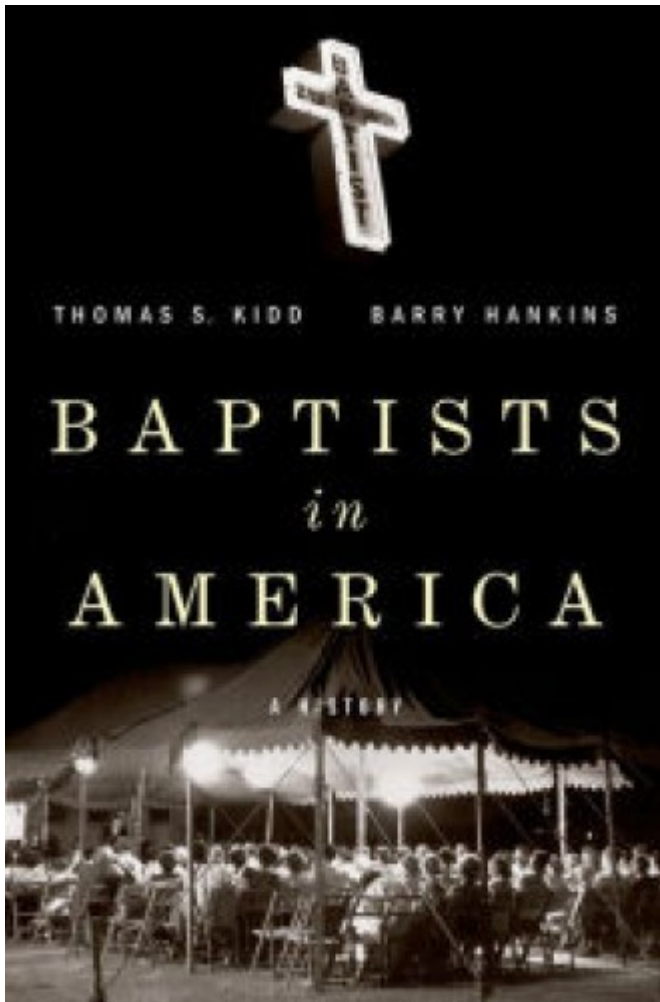


A diverse communion

by [Bill J. Leonard](#) in the [June 8, 2016](#) issue

In Review



Baptists in America

By Thomas S. Kidd and Barry Hankins
Oxford University Press

Baylor history professors Thomas Kidd and Barry Hankins describe a dilemma Baptists confronted during the time of slavery in the South. Baptists supported chattel slavery on biblical grounds, but when slaves' marriages were broken up

because one partner was sold or moved away with the master, pious slaves were put in a bind. “Could they legally remarry if they had no reasonable hope of seeing their current spouse again?” The South Carolina Baptist association’s answer was not to rule on the issue, but rather to leave each church to decide. Thus a “biblical people” were forced to renegotiate the nature of Christian marriage in order to protect chattel slavery.

This account illustrates a major thesis of the book: Baptists began as a sectarian movement characterized by a powerful sense of dissent, primarily against religious establishments and privileged state churches. Baptist theology and praxis—autonomous churches, priesthood of the laity, distinct conversion experience, believer’s baptism, and a rabid egalitarianism—challenged the sentiments of more connectional, hierarchical Christian groups. But Baptist success in evangelization, coupled with their democratic polity, drew large numbers of adherents. This growth increased cultural privilege, which for some Baptist groups led to a growing support for the social and theological status quo.

Kidd and Hankins remind us that Baptists are a second-generation Reformation communion operating at both ends of the theological spectrum—from the Arminianism of the Free Will Baptists to the Calvinism of the Primitive Baptists, with assorted Anabaptist and modified Calvinist influences stirred in for good measure and consistent controversy.

To their credit, the authors avoid use of the pejorative term *hyper-Calvinist* to describe groups like the Primitive Baptists and other Reformed Baptists; that kind of condescension by earlier historians often undermined those groups’ real contributions to Baptist identity. I wish Kidd and Hankins had at least noted the Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarian Baptists or the Primitive Baptist Universalists (known in Appalachia as “No-Hellers”)—the two traditions that bear the most colorful designations in the Baptist family.

Kidd and Hankins provide basic information about formative ideas and individuals while also focusing on lesser-known issues and persons often overlooked in survey texts. For example, in discussions of divisions over “religious affections” among Baptists in the First Great Awakening, they introduce readers to Ebenezer Kinnersley, an associate minister at the Baptist Church in Philadelphia. Going public in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Kinnersley charged that revivals created converts “filled brim-full of enthusiastical raptures and ecstasies, pretending to have large

communications from God.” Kinnersley is not a well-known colonial Baptist leader, but his actions and denunciations illustrate the depth of the controversy over outward manifestations of inner religious experience, manifestations that both blessed and divided the faithful.

The book traces the formative issues and leaders shaping Baptist life from the awakenings through slavery and Jim Crow, detailing the internal debates that split the movement into multiple groups—regionally, theologically, and culturally. Those debates are exemplified by the Old Landmark controversy, in which some Baptists attempted to make their tradition the only true church, traceable in unbroken succession to Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist in the River Jordan.

Kidd and Hankins also give serious attention to later battles between fundamentalists and liberals, evident not only in the controversies of the 1920s and the rise of Independent Baptists but also later in the fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention. The authors, who themselves have strong connections to the SBC, include an extended discussion of the controversy between “fundamentalist-conservatives” and “moderate-conservatives,” as they were often called during the final quarter of the 20th century.

Writing a general history of any movement is not easy, and reviewers are apt to point out what is omitted as well as what is included. The authors’ discussion of the continuing theological controversy in the SBC contains no reference to the beginnings of alternative groups that were formed in response, namely the Alliance of Baptists and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. I also wish that Kidd and Hankins had given more attention to the development and contributions of the American Baptist Churches USA. Most of us who have written general histories of the Baptists have not told enough of that important story. Kidd and Hankins suggest that the SBC may have the broadest racial mix of any Baptist denomination, overlooking the intentionality of racial inclusion on ABCUSA boards and committees since the 1970s. Merely to attend a biennial gathering of the ABCUSA is to see its exceptional diversity.

These omissions notwithstanding, Kidd and Hankins have produced a helpful and well-written study that offers non-Baptists a sense of who Baptists were and are, while helping to ground Baptists themselves in a sense of identity that might well prepare them for the next inevitable controversy.