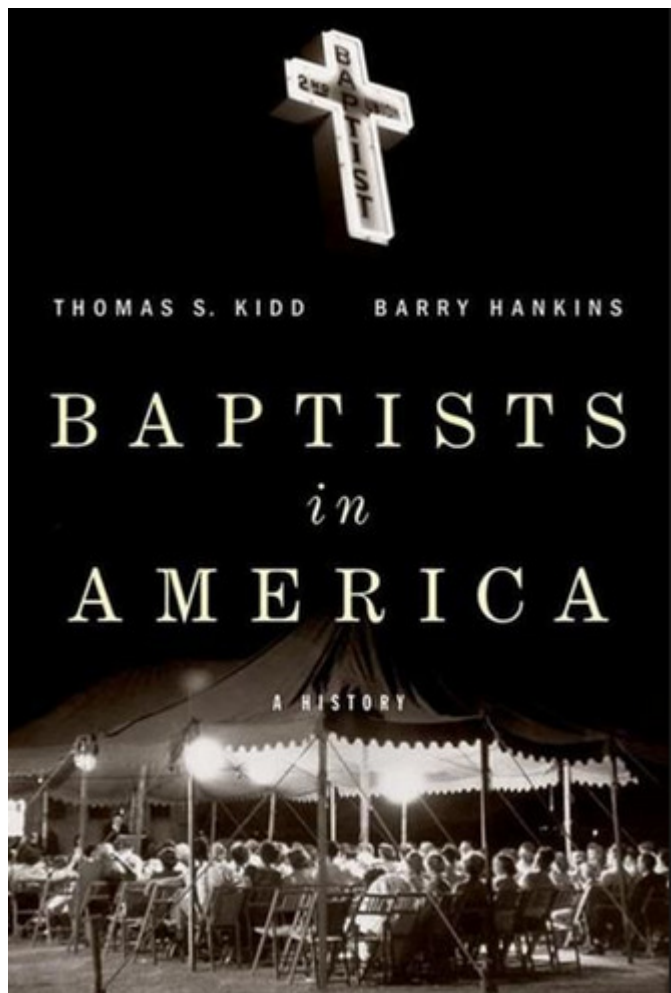


'Baptists' a captivating book

Posted: Sunday, August 16, 2015

"Baptists in America: A History" by Thomas S. Kidd and Barry Hankins. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 352 pages, \$29.95.



"Like many Black Baptist churches before the Civil War, First African Baptist in Richmond, Va., had a white pro-slavery preacher, Robert Ryland," Thomas S. Kidd and Barry Hankins explain in "Black Baptists in Babylon," the eighth chapter in "Baptists in America: A History," their comprehensive new account of the role Baptists played in our country's history since they helped colonize the New World in the early 1600s.

"After the city fell into Union hands in April 1865, he admonished his black parishioners to remain with their masters and to resist the temptation to join Union forces," they continue. "Black Union officers wanted to arrest Ryland for his remarks, but the members of his church intervened on behalf of their minister. Ryland knew that, with the Confederacy about to fall, and emancipation of slaves imminent, his time as the white pastor of a black congregation had come to an end. Within a few weeks he submitted his resignation."

Perhaps not unlike many readers, I was more or less completely unaware of how intertwined the Baptists are with our cultural heritage. As a member of the Church of Christ, I was aware of

the divergent views held by Alexander Campbell and his followers, but I found compelling the account of how different interpretations of Scripture often precipitated passionate debates that both fractured as well as reinforced the Christian faith as it continued its inevitable progression in the United States. Kidd and Hankins are masterful storytellers; even those who are not particularly religious will find the tale they weave across multiple centuries informative and instructive.

In "Baptists and the Civil Rights Movement," the 12th chapter, the authors do an incredibly effective job of relating how the attitudes and strategies of several high-profile leaders including Martin Luther King Jr., Fred Shuttlesworth and Ralph Abernathy were shaped by their Baptist affiliation. At the same time, Kidd and Hankins remind us that there was a huge divide along racial lines within the Baptist community when it came to integration: "Black and white responses to civil rights were nearly the opposite of each other. While the Southern Baptist Convention institutionally supported the civil rights

movement with its 1954 resolution, most Southern Baptist congregations and individuals went the other direction.”

The following chapter, “Schism in Zion,” which chronicles the conservative takeover of the SBC that began in 1979 with the election of Adrian Rogers as president, was without a doubt one of my favorites. As some readers may recall, this falling out was the subject of a recent volume edited by WKU communications professor Carl Kell, “Exiled Generations: Legacies of the Southern Baptist Convention Holy War,” which was reviewed April 19 in the Daily News. As such, it was interesting to consider the interpretation of events described by Kidd and Hankins in relation to the version provided by Kell. Although their orientations are somewhat different, both books tend to agree on the overall significance of one of the more traumatic and divisive episodes in the Baptist chronology.

“Conservatives won these elections by rallying their supporters around the inerrancy of Scripture,” the authors explain. “The term ‘inerrancy’ appeared in the late 19th century, and the evangelical debate over inerrancy reached a fever pitch in the 1970s. Moderates believed the inerrancy debate amounted to a false choice. They emphasized the authority of Scripture once interpreted properly, and they denied that the Bible’s authority relied on its historical or scientific accuracy in every detail.”

“Moderates argued that the conservative activists were an intolerant minority bent on controlling the denomination for political ends,” they assert. “Conservatives countered with a call for clear theological parameters. Conservatives were fighters, not Grand Compromisers. In this sense, they exuded a key trait of fundamentalism, the militant defense of orthodoxy. But they rejected fundamentalist separatism, calling instead for engagement in politics and culture.”

Kidd and Hankins are both professors in the History Department at Baylor University. Kidd co-directs Baylor’s Program in Historical Studies of Religion and is a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Studies of Religion. His previous books include “George Whitefield: America’s Spiritual Founding Father” and “God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution.” Hankins is a graduate program director and a resident scholar at the Institute for Studies of Religion. His previous books include “Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture” and “Jesus and Gin: Evangelicalism, the Roaring Twenties and Today’s Culture Wars.”

Not unexpected given the reputation of the authors, “Baptists in America” is extensively researched, with 35 pages of source notes and a 19-page bibliography at the conclusion of the 14 chapters comprising the main narrative. I was fascinated as well as intrigued by the influence this denomination had on our country – and especially the power they began to exercise on the course of events beginning well before the Revolutionary War.

“Kidd and Hankins tell the whole remarkable story of how this religious denomination was transformed from persecuted minority into a leading actor on the national stage,” Oxford University Press Publicity Assistant Molly Grote writes. “The more mainstream Baptists have become, the more they have been pressured to conform to the mainstream, a paradox that defines – and is essential to understanding – the Baptist experience in America.”

After reading “Baptists in America,” I have a much more cogent perspective on the enormous contribution this powerful and persuasive denomination had on shaping who we are as a society. If you want to know what motivates the Baptist response to many of the key issues of our day, Kidd and Hankins offer a captivating explanation.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*