

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

***Baptist Political Theology.* Edited by Thomas S. Kidd, Paul D. Miller, and Andrew T. Walker. Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2023. ix + 774 pp. \$59.99.**

“Befuddlement” and “intrigue” are the two terms that editors Thomas Kidd, Paul Miller, and Andrew Walker use to describe reactions to their efforts to bring to print this volume on Baptist political theology. One could be forgiven if they asked, “Do Baptists have a political theology?” Aside from their Free Church commitments, Baptists are often given little attention in considerations of Christian intellectual engagement with politics. This volume attempts to introduce and exemplify a distinctly Baptist political theology.

The editors explain the two-fold inspiration for this volume derives from their convictions that “responsible theological reflection demands the rigorous application of Baptist principles to the public arena” and that “there is more to the possibility of a Baptist political theology than first meets the eye” (1-2). The editors ground Baptist political theology in Baptist theological distinctives, including conversion, soul competency, believer’s baptism, local church membership, and local church autonomy, which all stem from the post-Reformation emphasis on *sola scriptura*. They assert “an inner logic connects adult baptism, conversion, religious freedom, and disestablishment” (9). Baptists hold that no one is born into Christ’s church; people can only be born again into it. Their convictions about the church and the ordinances translate into a distinct approach to political culture. The authors return to these themes again and again.

The book consists of two parts. The first part includes historical examinations of leading figures and prominent themes. It is comprised of seventeen essays, some of which analyze the life and work of an individual, some a few people, and others a historical era. The essays in the second part are written by Baptists who address a variety of topics, from natural

law to bioethics to economics. Such a hefty volume renders impossible a comprehensive review in this limited space. This book note will offer a brief overview, followed by positive appraisals of its contributions and friendly critiques of its insufficiencies.

Part One features historical essays which explore Baptist political reflection and engagement. Dustin Bruce considers the Reformation-era enmeshment of church and state to demonstrate the significance of early Baptist rejection of state influence. Michael Haykin provides a two-hundred-year overview of British Baptist political engagement from the beginnings of the Baptist movement to Andrew Fuller. James Calvin Davis gives the first of five chapters dedicated to the life and work of a single figure in Baptist history, with an analysis of the life and work of the sometime Baptist Roger Williams. Malcolm Yarnell's essay advances scholarship on the relationship of English Baptists with John Locke. He provides clarifying evidence, particularly regarding William Kiffen's relationship with Locke, and corrects frequently misattributed references which American Baptists made to Locke.

Kristina Benham and Thomas Kidd offer a helpful overview of Baptists during colonial and revolutionary America, demonstrating the transformation among many from "an uneasy relationship with American political authorities" to a "strongly positive, providential view of the American nation" (123). The following two chapters support this assertion. Casey Hough critically engages the life and work of John Leland, and Brandon O'Brien does the same for Isaac Backus. Unfortunately, several other authors in this volume encroach on their subject matter and offer less involved yet redundant analyses of Leland and Backus.

The next five chapters form a thematic unity, engaging a most vexing political-theological issue for American Baptists: slavery and its consequences. Tom Nettles explores antebellum Baptist debates about slavery. Eric M. Washington gives a historical overview of the Baptist movement and enslaved people as well as a long history of the Civil Rights movement. Gregory Wills provides a sweeping and impressively varied review of Baptist experiences in the American Civil War. Kenneth Reid's chapter on "The African American Baptist Tradition," and Daniel Lee Hill's examination of Martin Luther King Jr.'s political theology, complement Washington's essay and offer helpful analyses of the long-term impacts of American slavery on Baptist political engagement.

Aaron Douglas Weaver's chapter on Walter Rauschenbusch, Henlee

Barnette, and James Dunn makes for an interesting pair with the chapter on Carl F. H. Henry by Jason Duesing and Jesse Payne. Next follows an essay treating Billy Graham, Charles Colson, Richard Land, Albert Mohler, Russell Moore, and Jonathan Leeman. Including six thinkers in one chapter proves too much, and the analysis of two living contributors in the volume alongside Graham and Colson is odd.

Nathan Finn's "The Christian Right: From Reagan to Trump" provides a helpful analysis of late twentieth-century and twenty-first-century political engagement by Baptists with a special look at the Southern Baptist Convention. Finn's chapter might have been a substantial concluding chapter to Part One. Karen Swallow Prior's "Baptist Witness in a Post-Christian Culture" provides an astute analysis of the current cultural moment and makes a compelling call for Christian engagement, but it would fit better with the essays in Part Two.

Part Two consists of "a collective effort at applied political theology" (13). Jonathan Leeman opens with a description of and call to a uniquely Baptist political theology, charting a third way between the Scylla of theonomy and the Charybdis of secular liberalism. He identifies Baptist political theology with Baptist ecclesiology, an emphasis on religious freedom, a non-utopian approach to government, and the encouragement of Christians to "enter the public square as principled pragmatists with limited expectations" (511). Next, Andrew Walker makes a thorough argument for Baptist employment of natural law principles in public engagement. Albert Mohler follows with reflections on contemporary challenges to religious liberty. He offers the pessimistic prognosis: "religious freedom is now a liberty or set of liberties that can only manifest in the private confines of one's home or church—religious convictions, apparently, have no place in the public square" (552).

The next several chapters feature writers engaging a variety of political-theological issues: C. Ben Mitchell on human dignity in bioethics; J. Alan Branch on sexuality and gender; Andrew Spencer on environmentalism; Hunter Baker on economics; and Paul Miller on just war theory. Barry Hankins concludes Part Two with a reflective essay on "Baptists and American Evangelical Identity." Editors Paul Miller and Andrew Walker conclude the volume with a short essay that calls Baptists to engage actively in political society.

There is much to commend in this volume. Part One offers helpful introductions to the scholarship on leading Baptist political theologians

like Isaac Backus, John Leland, and Carl F. H. Henry. The chapters by Haykin, Benham/Kidd, Wills, and Finn taken together provide a helpful overview of Baptist political engagement over the past four-hundred years, but with a particular focus on America.

A chapter on the history of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention (ERLC) would have well-suited this volume. Various heads of the ERLC and its predecessor, the Christian Life Commission, make appearances in several essays (e.g., Foy Valentine, Richard Land, and Russell Moore). However, an institutional history of the Southern Baptist Convention's political theology arm merits its own chapter.

Part Two offers some quality reflections for today. Leeman's engaging call for Baptists to acknowledge their prophetic role in modern Babylon is much needed. Walker's argument for Baptist use of natural law is cogent. He attributes Baptist hesitancy towards natural law to its association with Roman Catholicism. His chapter could be complemented with either a comparative essay on Baptist political engagement in contrast to other Christian traditions or an essay on co-belligerency across Christian traditions.

This volume is large and sweeping. The back cover claims it "introduces readers to the full sweep of Baptist engagement with politics from the seventeenth century to today," but the editors are less ambitious. They limit the engagement to "Anglo-American history and contemporary topics of prominent concern" (13). A more fitting title for this volume would be *Anglo-American Baptist Political Theology: An Introduction*, but that has far less pop than *Baptist Political Theology*.

While this volume has much worthy of commendation, it is an unbalanced work. It has virtually nothing to say about Baptists outside the United States and England. The Baptist World Alliance is mentioned in only three chapters, and English Baptists who lived after the American Revolution are almost completely absent. Transnational examinations reveal national parochialisms and give fuller orb-ed representations of international movements. Transnational analysis would better identify what makes a distinctively "Baptist" political theology rather than a mostly Southern Baptist political theology with nods to other American Baptists.

Baptist Political Theology shows that Baptists have contributed, and are contributing, intellectually to political-theological engagement. Few will read this work cover-to-cover, but any who open it will find essays that

will challenge them to think better about the lives of Christians as dual citizens. May Baptists' political engagement grow out of their biblical commitments while we await Christ's return.

Blake McKinney
Texas Baptist College
Fort Worth, TX