

ordinance...is abolished.” Only “the Sabbath principle” continues in the New Testament church, he says (401–2). So which is it? Is the moral law in effect today, or does it only provide principles for the church? Shall we cut the Ten Commandments into “perpetual” and “abrogated” portions now too? On what grounds?

How much better the dispensational hermeneutic, which requires no such intrigues. Dispensationalism recognizes that (1) the old covenant law was an indivisible unity; (2) that it was given exclusively to Israel at Sinai when it was constituted as a nation-state; and (3) that it was utterly fulfilled and laid aside by Christ so that it is no longer our rule of life. Does this leave the church without a law? Of course not, for in this age we are all bound by a new law—the law of Christ (1 Cor 9:20–21).

In summary, this new volume on the 1689 confession is a generally helpful guide for understanding the origin, history, and teachings of the Reformed Baptist movement. Though not intended by the authors, it also highlights the internal contradictions inherent in the Reformed Baptist system. In their efforts to uphold credobaptism and regenerate church membership while simultaneously holding a form of covenant theology, Reformed Baptists have opened themselves up to the charge of equivocation and have been forced into hermeneutical contortions that most would find uncomfortable. This probably explains why the Reformed Baptist movement is perpetually hemorrhaging members to paedobaptist denominations on the one side and to dispensational Baptist ranks on the other. Most people simply cannot live with the cognitive dissonance.

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Let Men Be Free: Baptist Politics in the Early United States (1776–1835), by Obbie Tyler Todd. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2022. 235 pp. \$35.00

Let Men Be Free is the first comprehensive treatment of Baptist politics in early America. It comes in eight chapters and is organized both chronologically and thematically—an arrangement made necessary by the tremendous variety of issues, perspectives, and organizations in Baptist life in the early republic.

As a work of scholarship, this book is truly stunning. Todd has consulted hundreds of primary sources including letters, tracts, sermons, books, minutes from association meetings, and personal diaries. He includes voices from virtually every member of the Baptist fraternity, including Black, Native American, Regular, Separate, and Free-Will Baptists. As the book unfolds, Todd also manages to weave doctrinal debates and biographical sketches together into a seamless narrative that renders the work both informative and compelling. While highlighting

the diversity of Baptist thought in early America, he also demonstrates that Baptists of all stripes were guided by a “polar star”: the quest for religious liberty.

In the first chapter, Todd demonstrates that the Baptist quest for religious liberty was driven *both* by theological conviction *and* by the Baptists’ lived experience as a persecuted people. He also shows that Baptists did not all share the same definition of religious liberty. For some, liberty simply meant that the government should not give preferential treatment to any one Protestant denomination. For others, liberty meant that Church and State should be utterly separated. The difference led to heated intramural debates about the appropriateness of government-funded military chaplains, Sabbath laws, and even religious tests for public office.

Chapter two examines Baptist contributions to the Revolutionary War. Todd makes the case that Baptists were as patriotic as any during the war. At the same time, Baptists also *used* the war to make their case for religious disestablishment. Isaac Backus spoke for many when he declared to America’s leaders, “You tell us you cannot [submit to England] because you are taxed where you are not represented. And is it not really so with us [Baptists in America]? You do not deny the right of the British Parliament to impose taxes within her own realm; only complain that she extends her taxing power beyond her proper limits. And have we not as good right to say you do the same thing?” (43). Todd demonstrates how this combination of wartime zeal and persuasive rhetoric gave the Baptists a hearing in early America which contributed to the eventual change of public opinion on religious establishments.

The next two chapters delve into the differences between Baptist Republicans (or “Jeffersonian Baptists”) who advocated for a weak federal government and a hard wall of separation between Church and State, and Baptist Federalists, who advocated for a more robust central government—one that would actively encourage Christianity in the new nation. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that Baptist political activism is nothing new. Neither is the Baptist habit of forging alliances with politicians who do not share their religious views, or the practice of wrapping public policy discussions in religious language, or the penchant for dividing over party politics!

In chapters five through seven, Todd shifts gears to consider early Baptist perspectives on a variety of social issues. Topics include slavery, Native American displacement, nationalism, and foreign policy. Todd shows that having a common religious creed did not lead Baptists to hold uniform views on these matters; more determinative were a person’s ethnic heritage, economic station, and geographical location. On slavery, one can find abolitionists like Nat Turner and slaveholders like Richard Furman within the Baptist ranks. On the Native American question, there were Baptists like David Jones who argued in favor of white land distribution as a means of “civilizing” Indians. But other Baptists, like Evan Jones, marched with the Cherokees on the “Trail of Tears.” On foreign policy, some Baptists were eager to project American

power overseas, while others wanted America to keep out of foreign entanglements.

I was surprised to read of the debates over foreign missions among the Baptists in early America. It seems that the drive to organize, centralize, and mobilize mission efforts was almost entirely led by well-educated urban Baptists, while Baptists on the frontier saw all of this as a misuse of precious resources. Their desire was to avoid centralization, keep all the money under local church control, and focus on domestic evangelism instead. The same conflict played out with temperance societies, Bible societies, education societies, and anti-gambling societies. Fledgling Baptists on the frontier feared that pride and avarice were driving well-to-do Baptists in the cities to establish (and then oversee) these vast parachurch ministries. Illinois Baptist Daniel Parker went so far as to accuse centralizing urban Baptists of "popery."

All these debates took their toll on Baptist unity in America. Arguments over slavery finally split the Triennial Convention, leading to the creation of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845. The growth of parachurch ministries gave rise to the Landmark Baptists. And on it went. Yet, paradoxically, these same issues also served to propel Baptists out of the margins of national life. As more Baptists began educating themselves and getting involved in social causes, they began attracting more socially prominent adherents. "People from higher walks of life were flocking to the baptismal pool, giving the Baptists a new social texture and even more optimism for the future of the denomination," Todd writes (195–96). By the middle of the nineteenth century the Baptists were well on their way to becoming the nation's most populous denomination. Many achieved political office. In some instances, politicians became Baptist ministers (196). Baptists were becoming mainstream.

Todd frequently uses the phrase "the Baptist church" in this work, which is a bit unconventional. As a Baptist himself, Todd surely knows that it is more accurate to speak of "Baptist churches" or "the Baptist denomination" than of "the Baptist church." The fourth chapter also has a section heading entitled, "The Divinity of the Constitution." In my opinion, this heading is a bit misleading. While Todd shows that Baptists in early America believed the U. S. Constitution (and especially the First Amendment) was a wonderful gift of Providence, he presents no evidence to suggest that any Baptists considered the Constitution divinely inspired or infallible.

These alleged weaknesses aside, *Let Men Be Free* is a welcome addition to Baptist historiography. More than that, I believe (and hope!) that it will serve as a catalyst for many more studies of Baptists, their politics, and their influence on America.

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