

Baptists Through the Centuries: A History of a Global People, by David W. Bebbington. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010. xii + 315 pp. \$39.95.

David Bebbington has done it again! Widely known for his insightful quadrilateral of evangelicalism, he has now written an eminently useful overview of Baptist life. If one is looking for one book that will give a novice student a good summary of Baptist life or remind a seasoned Baptist scholar of our glorious history, this is the book to buy. Bebbington, the well-respected British Baptist historian, has done an admirable job of distilling the essence of four centuries of Baptist development along both chronological and thematic lines. He tells an engaging and balanced story of the Baptist theological pilgrimage. The book is not intended to be a detailed scholarly presentation of the fine nuances of Baptist growth. Rather, Bebbington presents an excellent panoramic view of the broad contours of Baptist history in a highly readable volume.

This panoramic view makes this work both unique and helpful. The strength of Bebbington's presentation is his ability to pick from the myriad of well-known Baptist figures a representative selection of the most important individuals while also highlighting some lesser-known but significant people. Their stories are merged into a large, colorful tapestry that presents Baptist life as one continuous evolving and growing movement. Bebbington does justice to the diversity and complexity that has characterized Baptists since their emergence from the English separatist movement in the early 1600s.

Bebbington does a nice job of connecting the early Baptists to English separatism. He recognizes that no single tributary can account entirely for the broad stream of Baptist identity, but comes out strongly against any direct connection between the early Baptists and the Anabaptists, seeing the latter's influence as minor at best. English separatism holds the key for understanding Baptist origins. From here Bebbington traces the Baptist story along the traditional lines of the General Baptists and the Particular Baptists of the seventeenth century. As the eighteenth century unfolds, Baptists, particularly in America, grew largely as a result of the revivals sweeping the Colonies. It was during this period that British Baptists divided over Socinianism at Salter's Hall. This event was the harbinger of further Baptist divergence into "fresh doctrinal paths," as the influence of Enlightenment rational principles grew (p. 68). Among these divergences were shifts in the understanding of various Baptists on ecclesiology (p. 187).

As Bebbington brings the Baptist story into the modern era, he discusses Baptist developments along important thematic lines. Theological polarization, the Social Gospel, race relations, and women in Baptist life all get major chapter treatments. As Bebbington moves toward the close of the book, he treats the important subject of religious liberty, a hallmark of Baptist character. The globalization of Baptist life, first through

the foreign mission movement and later thorough indigenous developments, is treated in summary fashion sketching a worldwide Baptist movement that is alive and well today. Finally, the subject of Baptist identity, perhaps the most contentious issue in recent Baptist thought, comes under Bebbington's scrutiny. Without catering to any particular agenda, Bebbington surveys the debate on Baptist identity from E. Y. Mullins to Bill Leonard. What makes one a Baptist—a theological core or a philosophical ideal like soul liberty? He ends the book by identifying seven "fairly distinct" Baptist groups—liberal, evangelical, premillennial, charismatic, Calvinist, Anabaptist, and High Church. One might quibble with some of these categories: for instance, the premillennial, charismatic, and Calvinist groups could all be subsumed under evangelical. Moreover, I am not sure that the category of charismatic Baptist merits a separate consideration. Many Baptist have flirted with the charismatic movement in recent history, but perhaps not in sufficient number to be considered a distinct strand, at least in its American permutations. Still, the categories are useful for noting the broad diversity in Baptist life, and Bebbington displays a refreshing evenhandedness toward all groups who affirm the Baptist label.

Weaknesses in the book are relatively minor. Bebbington, as a European Baptist, shows less familiarity with modern American Baptists, especially when he refers to the General Association of Regular Baptists as the "General Convention of Regular Baptists" (p. 267). The one thing the GARBC did not want to be was a convention. But this is relatively minor and may be overlooked. There is a heavy dependence on the secondary literature when telling certain parts of the story; in particular, his discussion of the Social Gospel and Walter Rauschenbusch relies substantially on Christopher Evans's recent biography of Rauschenbusch, *The Kingdom is Always but Coming* (Eerdmans, 2004). But again, Bebbington's primary contribution is not in the details of the Baptist story, but in the broad story that he tells, so that his occasional dependence on secondary literature is understandable.

On the whole, the book is a balanced, thoughtful presentation of Baptist life useful for student and academician alike in better understanding our glorious and sometimes spotted heritage.

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