

David Stricklin. *A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest in the Twentieth Century*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999. Pp. xviii, 229. \$36.00, hardback.

In A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest in the 20th Century, historian David Stricklin reveals and examines the long-existing progressive wing of Southern Baptist life. Through his meticulous research, consisting mostly of primary sources and oral history interviews, Stricklin uncovers a rich heritage of progressive dissent during the 20th century. Stricklin argues that these progressive dissenters had much in common with their fundamentalist brethren. Dissidents on both the progressive left and the fundamentalist right were marginalized and alienated by mainstream denominational leaders and essentially refused a place at the denominational table. With much emphasis placed on the words and actions of Foy Valentine, Stricklin does an excellent job of showing the contrasts which existed between the institutional orientation of moderate Southern Baptists and the more independent outlook of progressives influenced by the “genealogy of dissent.”

Stricklin discusses the deep historic roots of dissent in colonial Baptist life against state-established religion. Despite the radical roots of the Baptist tradition, Stricklin notes that Southern Baptists, for most of their history, have been held captive to their southern culture. As archetypal southerners, 20th century Southern Baptists had become “racially and sexually hierarchical, suspicious of ‘modern’ viewpoints, complacent about the exploitation of the economically disadvantaged, militaristic, nationalistic, and generally hostile toward the reformist (and northern) social gospel (11). However, Stricklin argues that a “genealogy of dissent,” a small faction of Southern Baptist individuals, rebuffed their culture’s values, refusing to be, as Rufus Spain once wrote, “at ease in Zion” (19).

These dissenters functioned in many ways like a family. The spiritual father of this progressive-minded family was Walter Nathan Johnson, a radical North Carolina Baptist and pioneer racial integrationist who created a network of supporters and sympathizers from the 1920s through the 1940s. From this “genealogy of dissent” came civil rights advocates, labor organizers, peace activists, and advocates of equal political and economic rights for women in society and for equal vocational opportunities within churches and denominational organizations and institutions. The social thought of Johnson trickled down this family tree of dissenters to influence even those who had never heard his name.

Stricklin turns his attention to the two men whom Johnson influenced the most: Martin England and Clarence Jordan. Johnson’s progressive views on race inspired England and Jordan to create in south Georgia the intentionally interracial Christian community known as Koinonia Farm as a “demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God.” According to Stricklin, England and Jordan were the two principal links between Johnson’s “vision of the South brought under the leadership of Jesus” and other branches of the Southern Baptist dissident family tree. England, and particularly Jordan, had a profound impact on Foy Valentine who lived and worked at Koinonia Farm. Regarded by many during the mid-to-late 20th century as the “conscience of Southern Baptists,” Valentine served as the director of both the Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Southern Baptist Convention for a combined thirty-four years. England also played an influential role in the life of Carlyle Marney, who is described by Stricklin as “one of the most powerful, and one of the most liberal,

preachers in Southern Baptist history (40).” Marney’s influence has long been cited by progressives in Southern Baptist life especially among North Carolinians such as Bob McClernon, former pastor of Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, and Texans like pioneer woman minister Martha Gilmore. Other notable Southern Baptists inspired directly by England and/or Jordan include Will Campbell (Civil Rights worker and prominent author), Ken Sehested (founder of the Baptist Peace Fellowship), and Nancy Hastings Sehested (the most visible woman minister in the SBC in the 1980s).

Stricklin also studies the social issues around which progressive dissent arose in the Southern Baptist Convention. Progressives embraced a conciliatory attitude toward race relations. Unlike the few progressive-minded denominational leaders of the SBC, some dissenters, most notably Martin England and Will Campbell, became active in the Civil Rights Movement. Other progressives hosted interracial gatherings between local black and white ministers. Frustrated with the gradualist approach of progressive denominationalists like Foy Valentine who refused to work outside of the Convention system and repeatedly thumbed his nose at those who chose an Ivy League education over a Southern Baptist degree, some dissenters left the SBC and affiliated with the northern American Baptist Churches.

Through their involvement in the civil rights struggles, many from the “genealogy of dissent” were inspired to become peace activists. Peacemakers such as Ken Sehested along with seminary professors Glenn Hinson and Glenn Stassen were committed to helping inform, encourage, and assist Southern Baptists in the mission of peacemaking. Despite their valiant efforts, key moderate pastors and denominational leaders including Foy Valentine refused to encourage nontraditional methods (peacemaking) or organizations (Baptist Peace Fellowship, Seeds) that did not appear within the structure of the SBC. Instead of forming a partnership with the Baptist Peace Fellowship, Valentine and other moderate leaders chose to regard it as a competitor. By doing so, as Stricklin points out, moderates further alienated many dissenters from Southern Baptist life. Valentine’s demand to the progressive dissenters that “you’re either with us or against us” sounded eerily similar to the same demands made by the “fundamentalist dissenters” who sought his own head during the Southern Baptist Controversy.

According to Stricklin, the group of progressives that threatened Southern Baptist traditionalists the most was dissident women who sought to be ordained ministers. These women were largely ignored by many of the male-dominated “genealogy of dissent.” Women pastors such as Martha Gilmore and Addie Davis struggled to find acceptance in Baptist life. Finally, in the 1980s dozens of ordained women ministers came together to form Southern Baptist Women In Ministry (SBWIM). Their purpose was to help women ministers assimilate into the everyday life of Southern Baptist service. Unfortunately, their goal was never realized.

In the sixth and final chapter, Stricklin identifies a second group of dissenters in Southern Baptist life. According to Stricklin, these “fundamentalist dissenters” who feared and rejected progressive Baptist ideas and agendas eventually took over the Southern Baptist Convention and transformed her entities. Stricklin laments that the SBC’s Christian Life Commission under Richard Land quickly became “a model of fundamentalist rectitude and utility.” While Stricklin’s *A Genealogy of Dissent* is indeed an excellent work and a great contribution to the study of Baptists, this final chapter regarding the “fundamentalist resurgence” should be expanded and included in another

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volume. The idea of fundamentalists as “dissenters” is interesting but no author can adequately explain the complexities of the Southern Baptist Controversy in one mere chapter. Nonetheless, this is one book that all serious students of Baptist history should have in their personal library!

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