

Barry Hankins. *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture*. Religion and American Culture Series. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002. Pp. x, 344. \$42.50. Cloth.

Perhaps anticipating his own contribution to historical scholarship on the Southern Baptist Convention controversy, Barry Hankins argued in a Fall 1997 *Fides et Historia* article that often “history is written by the losers.” He noted that, as of the mid-1990s, “far more books covering the controversy have been written by moderates and moderate sympathizers than by the winning side.” The Baylor University professor then conveyed a somewhat condescending posture toward the quality of scholarship among SBC conservatives as he suggested that the liberal side in religious disputes is usually in a better position to make its case to an academic audience. Hankins’s case study of the historiography of the SBC conflict clearly favored the work of moderate/liberal authors, which fits with an overall preference for the moderate cause that he acknowledges from the start in *Uneasy in Babylon* (11) .

In reality, Hankins’s spiritual roots track to northern evangelicalism. For example, he began his undergraduate career at Spring Arbor College in Michigan, a Free Methodist institution. Later he completed a Ph.D. dissertation at Kansas State under Conference on Faith and History patriarch Robert Linder. As his earlier biography of J. Frank Norris demonstrates, he is well versed in the history of early twentieth-century fundamentalism. Moreover, *Uneasy in Babylon* points to his expertise regarding the neoevangelical movement that boldly emerged in the United States after World War II. At the same time, Hankins finished his collegiate work at Baylor and later returned there as a faculty member; thus it is not surprising that he reflects a moderate cultural and political stance in relation to the period of discord in the SBC.

Hankins, however, is difficult to label theologically, and that is a commendable virtue for the purposes of this monograph. Unlike some other participant-observers who betray a marked partisanship, he interprets the SBC controversy in a balanced and fairly objective manner. For instance, he allows SBC conservative leaders to speak for themselves, which is evident from the many interviews that he conducted. Furthermore, the Baylor don judiciously avoids using the label “fundamentalist” to describe the winners in the SBC conflict—“conservative” is his term of choice. Among the reasons that he gives for this nomenclature, he remarks that “it is precisely with regard to cultural engagement that the conservatives do not act like classical fundamentalists” (12). This assertion, in fact, represents a key to understanding how Hankins accounts for what happened in Southern Baptist life beginning in 1979.

As a counterpoint to Rufus Spain’s 1967 *At Ease in Zion*, a social history of Southern Baptists in the late nineteenth century, Hankins chose his title to indicate a seismic shift that had occurred in the Southern Baptist religious subculture. In particular, conservative Southern Baptists sensed that by the 1970s they no longer felt at home in an American society whose morals and values seemed so foreign to biblical Christianity. In other words, they came to view themselves as exiles from the dominant strands of American culture, an identity that “Yankee evangelicals” earlier had assumed. Hankins then unfolds his thesis that SBC conservative leaders like Mark Coppenger, Timothy George, Richard Land, and Albert Mohler became motivated for the emerging culture wars largely through exposure to northern evangelical intellectuals like Carl F. H. Henry and Francis Schaeffer. These SBC conservatives enthusiastically appropriated from their older mentors a resolute stress on cultural and political engagement, which in turn helped to induce their participation in denominational controversy. As Hankins puts it, Southern Baptist conservatives took up “the mantle of neoevangelical cultural critics and in some cases cultural

warriors” (40). SBC moderates, on the other hand, appeared to be either hostile or virtually immune to the impact of northern evangelicalism. In addition, moderate leaders who controlled the SBC until 1979 were perceived by conservatives as not sufficiently inclined to engage the culture.

Hankins then attempts to reinforce his culture-war model by examining specific developments and issues involving SBC conservative leaders. He offers generally fair treatments of battles over religious liberty, church-state positions, abortion, gender, and race. Throughout these discussions, he continues to invoke the influential role of neoevangelical thinkers in shaping the attitudes of Southern Baptist conservatives. For example, he affirms that Richard Land’s relatively progressive views on race were part of the northern evangelical legacy. In regard to the problems at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary during the early years of Al Mohler’s presidency (chapter 3), Hankins seeks to untangle the complicated situation where some of the evangelical faculty brought in to ensure better balance visibly disagreed with the new president on the issues of women’s ordination and the way in which Mohler allegedly purged professors who deviated too much from the new regime’s theological parameters. The troubles at SBTS in the mid-1990s suggest that the Hankins proposal, which assigns such a pivotal role to northern evangelicalism in the SBC conflict, might need some tweaking.

Indeed, Hankins’s take on the SBC controversy raises additional questions. First, he readily grants that the doctrine of biblical inerrancy (1) served to divide conservatives and most moderates; and (2) denoted common ground between conservatives and evangelical leaders like Henry and Schaeffer. Nonetheless, his interpretive scheme seriously downplays the theological dimension of the conservative resurgence in the SBC. Hankins comes close to dismissing conservative suspicions about the teaching in seminary and college classrooms as inconsequential. He even characterizes the iconoclastic former Southern Seminary professor Glenn Hinson as a moderate (18 and 20), even though the church historian’s published writings reveal a diluted Christology and a hazy notion about the contemporary urgency of evangelism. Second, the initial architects of the SBC “takeover” like Paige Patterson, Paul Pressler, and Adrian Rogers fit rather awkwardly into Hankins’s thesis. He seems cognizant of this, but fails to provide a satisfying resolution. Third, he neglects Grant Wacker’s useful essay, “Uneasy in Zion: Evangelicals in Postmodern Society,” which was published in the collection edited by George Marsden, *Evangelicalism in Modern America* (1984). The Duke professor’s explication of the *southern* evangelical tradition of moral and cultural custodianship significantly qualifies some of Hankins’s analyses.

In summary, *Uneasy in Babylon* reflects both the strengths and weaknesses of innovative, revisionist history. Hankins certainly is a competent historian who offers a helpful interpretive angle on the SBC controversy. At the same time, his thesis does not explain all the intricacies and dynamics of what went on in the SBC for almost twenty-five years. His book complements but does not supplant what others have written or will write about this storied era of SBC life.

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