

Walter B. Shurden. *Not An Easy Journey: Some Transitions in Baptist Life*, Baptists: History, Literature, Theology, Hymns. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005. Pp. xii, 310. \$30.00, paper.

The last generation or so has seen a proliferation of dissertations, articles, and books related to Southern Baptist history. Much of this literature has been devoted to the political and theological controversies that erupted in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) during the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Among Baptist-related church historians, arguably no other scholar has written more about the history of Southern Baptists and moderate ex-Southern Baptists than Walter B. Shurden, longtime professor of Christianity and retired director of the Center for Baptist Studies at Mercer University. *Not An Easy Journey* is an anthology of Shurden's shorter writings, including scholarly articles, oral addresses, and popular writings, some of which are published for the first time in this collection.

*Not An Easy Journey* is divided into three major sections, each of which captures one of Shurden's particular scholarly emphases or ecclesiastical interests: Baptists and Their Distinctives, Baptists and Southern Baptist Convention History, and Baptists and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship History. The book concludes with a brief bibliography of some of Shurden's favorite Baptist history books.

The first section is devoted to Baptist identity and distinctives. The writings address such topics as Shurden's spiritual biography, important events in Baptist history, religious liberty, the priesthood of all believers, associationalism, and appreciations of Southern Baptist scholars Penrose St. Amant and John Steely. Of special interest is Shurden's article "The Baptist Identity and The Baptist Manifesto," which addresses an internecine debate among theologically progressive Baptists over the last decade or so. Shurden is perhaps the strongest academic critic of *The Baptist Manifesto*, a document that proposes a postliberal interpretation of Baptist identity as a *via media* between SBC conservatives on the right and ex-Southern Baptist moderates on the left.

The second section addresses the history of Southern Baptists, Shurden's denominational home until the late 1980s. The writings include an encyclopedia entry on Southern Baptist history, a historiographical essay about Southern Baptist origins, a critique of the Convention's evolving confessionalism, an essay discussing the role pastors have played in shaping SBC theology, and a discussion of Southern Baptist identity during the Second World War. Many of these pieces were written during the height of denominational controversy in the 1980s. Two of the essays that directly address the controversy originated as an endowed lectureship at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1980: "The Southern Baptist Synthesis: Is it Cracking?" and "The Inerrancy Debate: A Comparative Study of Southern Baptist Controversies." The former is arguably the most important essay written about Southern Baptist history in the last thirty years.

The final section addresses the history of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF), the largest network of moderate Baptists in the South, many of whom still maintain superficial ties to the SBC. Unlike the other writings in this collection, the CBF-related pieces are not scholarly, but rather are the recollections and even musings of a historian who also happens to be a participant-observer in the moderate movement. Many of Shurden's writings are short reflections and "birthday letters" to various moderate

ministries, but at least two are of special interest to historians. Shurden's reflections on the organizational meeting of the CBF and his short history of "An Address to the Public," a public statement he played a crucial role in drafting, will be required reading for scholars interested in studying the origins of the post-SBC moderate Baptist movement.

*Not An Easy Journey* is one of the most helpful Baptist history resourced published in recent years for at least three reasons. First, most of Shurden's publications have been short essays and articles rather than monographs. This collection conveniently brings together the writings of a significant Baptist historian in one book. Second, as the moderate Baptist movement enters its second generation and begins to diversify (as evidenced in debate over *The Baptist Manifesto*), Shurden's scholarship represents the ideological headwaters of a movement that now flows in several directions. Shurden is among the best representatives of the type of scholar that characterized progressive Southern Baptist life from the Vietnam era into the 1990s. Finally, because of Shurden's direct involvement in the moderate movement, his writings are in the unique position of being simultaneously primary and secondary sources. Shurden was not a detached academician, but rather was an active leader among moderate Baptists. As important as his scholarly writings are (and this reviewer thinks they are quite important), Shurden's greatest historical contribution is his leadership among progressive Baptists in the South during the final years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

No historian can adequately study Southern Baptist history or the origins of the moderate movement without grappling with the writings of Walter Shurden. Many scholars will disagree with Shurden's understanding of Baptist identity, his interpretation of elements of Southern Baptist history, and even the books he deems to be most important for Baptist historians. He is an unabashed apologist for both moderate Baptist life and, following E. Y. Mullins, a strongly individualist and perhaps overly American interpretation of Baptist identity. Furthermore, Shurden's tendency toward absolutist language is particularly grating, especially coming from a man who spent much of his career fighting against a group that he considered inappropriately absolutist! But regardless of what one thinks of his convictions and priorities, all scholars are in debt to Shurden for collating those writings in one place and Mercer University Press for publishing this important work. His book will join the memoirs of Grady Cothen, Duke McCall, and Cecil Sherman as one of the most helpful introductions to late-20<sup>th</sup> century moderate Baptist thought.

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