

James J. Thompson Jr. *Tried as by Fire: Southern Baptists and the Religious Controversies of the 1920s*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1982. Pp. xiii, 244. Hardcover. \$35.00.

Intense controversy and division characterized much of American Protestantism in the 1920s. The rise of theological modernism, evolutionary science, higher criticism, and the social gospel, along with fundamentalist responses to these challenges, reshaped the American religious landscape. Serious historical treatments of these conflicts have often focused on northern denominations where modernism was strong, only briefly noting conflicts among the more conservative Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). In *Tried as by Fire*, James Thompson shows that Southern Baptists were not immune to the theological conflicts of the 1920s. Thompson argues that while Southern Baptists remained overwhelmingly conservative, numerous unnecessary controversies threatened Southern Baptist unity and diverted their time and attention from the goal of evangelizing the world.

Thompson divides his book into two parts. Part I briefly sets the background, examining Southern Baptist attitudes following World War I. The 75 Million Campaign, which began in 1919, was the greatest example of Southern Baptist unity, optimism, and determination to evangelize the world. This evangelistic vision and unity was disrupted in the 1920s by numerous controversies brought about by external threats and internal divisions. The final eight chapters describe these controversies and the ways in which Southern Baptists responded to them.

The first major source of division within the SBC grew out of differing positions over the social content of the gospel. Thompson argues that the vast majority of Southern Baptists rejected social activism in favor of an exclusive focus on evangelism. There was an insignificant number of Southern Baptists who embraced Walter Rauschenbusch's social gospel. However, a vocal minority of moderate leaders, such as A. T. Robertson, E. Y. Mullins, W. O. Carver, and W. T. Conner, called for Baptists to work for social reform along with evangelism. These moderates were often opposed and attacked by premillennial fundamentalists, like J. Frank Norris, who saw no social role for the church and who reacted against anything resembling the social gospel.

Southern Baptist involvement in the modernist-fundamentalist controversy disrupted and distracted the denomination more than any other factor. The Southern Baptist response to modernism existed on two levels. One, nearly all Southern Baptists were conservative and viewed modernism as an external threat to orthodoxy that should be opposed. Two, Southern Baptist fundamentalists perceived modernism not just as an external threat but also as an internal menace, and worked militantly to expose modernist Southern Baptists. Thompson uses the label "modernist" only for those who accommodated the Christian message to culture so far as to deny orthodox doctrine, and therefore claims that true modernism "had scarcely touched Southern Baptists" (139). Those labeled as modernists by fundamentalists, were actually religious conservatives who, unlike fundamentalists, countered theological modernism "with the tools of reason rather than the weapons of invective" (140).

These differing responses to modernism led to a growing divide between fundamentalists and conservative leaders in the SBC. Thompson focuses on clashes over the Bible and evolution to illustrate this divide. Conservative leaders like Robertson, Mullins, Conner, J. R. Sampey, and George W. Truett, believed in the inspiration of the Bible but rejected verbal inspiration, which Thompson equates with the dictation theory. They also engaged in scholarly research and advocated a literary interpretation of the Bible. While these conservative leaders normally disagreed with evolution, they did not like the fundamentalist condemnation of science or the

condemnation of all forms of evolution as anti-Christian. Fundamentalists, on the other hand, adopted the verbal theory of inspiration, opposed all forms of Biblical criticism, advocated a literal interpretation of the Bible, and crusaded against all forms of evolution. Extremism dominated as most of the Southern Baptist masses embraced fundamentalist views on both of these issues.

Even though most Southern Baptists sided with fundamentalists on evolution and the Bible, the movement led by J. Frank Norris did not receive widespread support. Few Baptists endorsed attacks against SBC leaders or joined fundamentalists in separating from the SBC. Thompson points to these facts in order to question the rural-urban thesis of fundamentalism, which was only beginning to be challenged at the time he authored this book. While Thompson uses the rural-urban thesis to explain the wider fundamentalist movement and account for Southern Baptist conservatism, he thinks it fails to explain why most rural Baptists stayed loyal to the denomination. In the end, most Baptists rejected the interdenominational impulse of fundamentalists as distracting to the denomination and its goal of saving the South and evangelizing the world.

The final two chapters describe crises that the SBC faced in the late 1920s. The nomination of the Roman Catholic, Alfred E. Smith, as the Democratic candidate for president in 1928, stirred up opposition and anxiety over rising urbanization and Roman Catholicism among rural Southern Baptists. The stock market crash of October 1929 furthered the financial troubles the SBC had experienced since the failure of the 75 Million Campaign in the early 1920s. The Great Depression threw them deeper into debt and nearly disabled their missionary endeavors, which had already been disrupted and distracted by a decade of controversy.

Though published over twenty-five years ago, *Tried as by Fire* is still an important source for understanding this pivotal era of Southern Baptist history. Drawing heavily on Baptist periodicals from different regions of the South and archival materials from twenty-three Baptist leaders, Thompson provides a well researched account of this important decade. The strongest part of this book is the thorough account of how Baptists in each state responded to the evolutionary controversy. While nearly all Baptists opposed evolution, Thompson demonstrates that this opposition did not always lead to official advocacy for antievolution legislation.

The weaknesses of this book are mainly interpretive. Since *Tried as by Fire* was finished before the publication of George Marsden's *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, Thompson was unable to interact with recent advances in fundamentalist historiography. This makes his lengthy interpretation of Southern Baptist fundamentalism somewhat incomplete, if not inaccurate. A second weakness relates to a central argument of the book: the claim that modernism had little or no impact on Southern Baptists. Thompson repeatedly emphasizes the general conservatism of the moderate element in the SBC. Therefore, he argues, the fundamentalist opposition to these leaders was based on a misreading of the situation. While it is true that there were an insignificant number of full-blown modernists in the SBC, Thompson's narrow definition of modernism does not take into account serious theological shifts that did occur during the period. For example, while E. Y. Mullins was no modernist, the influence of Boston personalism, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and William James helped lead him to teach a more progressive theology than his teacher, James P. Boyce. Further interpretive nuance regarding theological shifts in the 1920s may have helped more fully explain the motivations of Southern Baptist fundamentalists, as well as the tensions that remained in the SBC following the 1920s.

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Since 1982, several monographs have been published that focus on 1920s leaders like E. Y. Mullins, J. Frank Norris, and William L. Poteat. While these works have added to Thompson's interpretation, *Tried as by Fire* still provides the best available summary of 1920s Southern Baptist life.

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