

Wayne Flynt. *Alabama Baptists: Southern Baptists in the Heart of Dixie*, Religion and American Culture. Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1998. Pp. xxi, 731. Hardback. \$43.75.

Wayne Flynt's massive volume, *Alabama Baptists: Southern Baptists in the Heart of Dixie*, provides a wide-ranging and somewhat comprehensive account of Baptists in Alabama from their beginnings around 1800 up to 1998. The Auburn University historian well describes the history of Alabama Baptists in order to clarify in general who Baptists are, what they believe, their relation to society, and the institutions they created to continue their work. In so doing, he has provided an outstanding account of the highest standard.

Flynt writes this history from the inside. He is a native of the state and a Baptist. He even trained for ministry at one of the state's Baptist colleges before pursuing his calling as a historian. He is a "self-confessed 'moderate'" (xv), yet he does much to provide a balanced description of the diverse groups which makeup Alabama Baptists. One, however, will notice sympathy for women's roles in the ministry throughout the book. Moreover, the author seems to put emphasis on the contributions and roles of churches and institutions that would align themselves with more moderate groups among Baptists. As a whole, however, Flynt provides readers with a fair description of what was going on among Alabama Baptists during each time period covered.

The book is organized chronologically. The first two chapters cover 1800–1845; each subsequent chapter focuses on ten to twenty year time spans. In each of these chapters, Flynt describes the life, practices, and beliefs of Alabama Baptists as well as how they related to the world and culture around them. He also shows how the changing world around them shaped both their practices and beliefs.

In addition to working chronologically, Flynt describes what it has meant to be a Baptist in Alabama on three levels—the individual experience, the congregational experience, and the denominational experience. In so doing, he is able to make clear the various perspectives that have been involved in being a Baptist in Alabama over a two hundred year period of time.

There is much value in this history. It is well written and provides much perspective for understanding current issues among Baptists. For example, many bloggers have recently come under fire for expressing their point of view via the internet concerning the denomination and its leadership, yet this is little different from the pastors who attacked denominational leaders as well as other pastors in newspapers and newsletters during the 1800s. One also sees that issues like Calvinism, women's roles in the ministry, church discipline, and even the use of alcohol have been addressed again and again by Baptists over the past two hundred years. Furthermore, it is somewhat humorous to read about the resistance met when many Baptist churches began to introduce choirs and organs into their worship. More seriously, however, Flynt does a great service emphasizing the role and contributions of small congregations and bi-vocational pastors in the life of the denomination.

Much of Flynt's research focuses on various Baptist papers, particularly the *Christian Index and South-Western Baptist* and the *Alabama Baptist*. This approach is a great strength of the work. These papers provide much of the primary material and give insight into what Baptists were thinking and discussing during each time period.

Flynt also shows how individual Alabama Baptists have shaped the life of the state as a whole and made major contributions to the life of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). For example, Basil Manly Sr. was both an influential pastor in the state as well as the president of the University of Alabama. Not only did Manly do much to shape Baptist life in Alabama, his son became one of the original four professors at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, the author of its *Abstract of Principles*, and helped organize the SBC Sunday School Board. Baptist pastor Isaac Taylor Tichenor became president of the Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical College, which later became Auburn University. Tichenor articulated a vision for the school that emphasized letters, science, agriculture, and engineering. Later Tichenor left Auburn to direct the Home Mission Board of the SBC. These are just a few examples of the contributions of Alabama Baptists described by Flynt.

Clarity becomes an issue at times in the book. At one point, Flynt introduces a list of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) churches including one “Southside” (613). Many cities in Alabama have a Southside Baptist Church, any one of which could be a potential CBF church. By checking the index, one sees that Flynt is referring to Southside Baptist Church in Birmingham. This reference is, however, not clear from the context. There are other examples of this lack of clarity, yet overall Flynt does well with the massive amount of information and number of names involved in writing this history.

In sum, Wayne Flynt’s book, *Alabama Baptists: Southern Baptists in the Heart of Dixie*, is an outstanding historical account. It is a well-written, interesting, and most certainly qualifies as the definitive history of Baptists in the state of Alabama.

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