

Anthony L. Chute. *A Piety Above the Common Standard: Jesse Mercer and Evangelistic Calvinism*, Baptists: History, Literature, Theology, Hymns. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005. Pp.xiv, 238. \$25.00, paper.

Before there was the “Building Bridges” conference, there was Jesse Mercer. In November of 2007, Southern Baptists with differing perspectives on Calvinism gathered for a conference at Ridgecrest designed to foster a spirit of unity and cooperation. This was exactly the kind of cooperation for which Jesse Mercer labored among Georgia Baptists two hundred years earlier. In this theological biography of Jesse Mercer (1769–1841) which grew out of his dissertation from his PhD in historical theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Anthony Chute has detailed Mercer’s valiant efforts to promote unity between the Missionary and Primitive Baptists of Georgia in the first half of the nineteenth century.

In the preface, Chute defines the central question of his work as: “In what ways did Jesse Mercer defend missions, education, and cooperative efforts on the basis of a Calvinistic theology?” (xi). In answering this question the author hopes to provide insight into “how theological convictions informed practical areas of ministry” (xiii). Thus, this work will be of practical value to those who desire to explore the implications of theology upon methodology. In addition, this work is of immense historical value in that it provides insight into the background from which the Southern Baptist Convention would emerge in 1845 in Augusta, Georgia, just four years after Jesse Mercer’s death. As Chute notes, “The study of the life and work of Jesse Mercer (1769–1841) provides insight into the emergence of Southern Baptists as a mission-minded organization with a Calvinistic foundation” (xi).

Chute’s thesis is developed in eight chapters, the first three of which introduce to Mercer, his times, and his Calvinism. Chapters four through seven outline the implications of Mercer’s Calvinism upon his views on revival, missions, education, and cooperation respectively. The final chapter gives the author’s conclusion. Chute begins in chapter one by describing the historical background of the young state of Georgia and early Baptist efforts there. When Jesse Mercer began his ministry, the state of Georgia was only in its first fifty years of existence. When Jesse Mercer was born there were only 137 Baptist churches in Georgia, but by the time he was ordained twenty years later there were 3,340. During this period of exponential growth among Georgia Baptists, the need for cooperation between churches of like faith and practice became apparent. The Georgia Baptist Association, which would become the Georgia Baptist Convention in 1822, was formed in 1814 to help address this need. Chute’s chronicling of the explicit Calvinism of this organization and the role of Silas Mercer, Jesse’s father, are important contributions to the reader’s understanding of the milieu of Jesse Mercer’s life and ministry.

Chapter two examines the life and times of Jesse Mercer. Mercer’s significance as a Baptist leader in the South is explored by examining his early life, conversion, call to ministry, and work as a pastor and editor of *The Christian Index*. In the next chapter, Chute takes an in-depth look at Mercer’s Calvinism. Surprisingly, Mercer subscribed to John Gill’s brand of Calvinism, as opposed to that of Andrew Fuller. Most of those who promoted missions, as Mercer did, affirmed the New School Calvinism which was traced back to the teachings of Andrew Fuller. Mercer, however, claimed to be “rather of the Old, than of the *new* school” and did “not fully receive all Mr. Fuller’s views of the methods of divine mercy” (61). This anomaly allowed Mercer to be sympathetic toward and seek unity between both the Old School Primitive Baptists and the New School Missionary Baptists.

Chapters four through seven explore the implications of Mercer's Calvinism on his views of revival, missions, education, and cooperation. The early nineteenth century was a time of vigorous debate over the issue of Calvinism and its practical implications. Severe disagreements about Calvinism led to vitriolic name-calling which has all too often been associated with such discussions. One group was referred to by the other by such names as: "apostates," "idolaters," and "bloodsuckers." From the other side came epithets such as: "the do-nothing party," "Antinomians," and "Ignoramuses" (189). In the midst of this kind of an environment, Jesse Mercer remained committed to the doctrine of Christian unity. Chute summarizes the importance of this doctrine to him: "The doctrine of election manifested the sovereignty of God in salvation, and the doctrine of union among Christians reflected unity within the Godhead. To him, both issues were worth defending" (216). Mercer, however, did not believe that agreement on the tenets of Calvinism was essential to unity: "I have yet to learn that unity of belief in any system of faith, is essential to Christian fellowship" (210). Christian unity should be important to believers primarily because it is important to Christ. Commenting on the prayer for the unity of believers prayed by Jesus to His Father just before his arrest and crucifixion, Mercer stressed the importance of Christian unity with these sobering words: "If then, the unity of the saints is so dear to Christ, it should be dear to his children" (213).

*A Piety Above the Common Standard* is a work that will benefit a variety of readers. The historical scholar who reads this work will find a wealth of information about the religious life of the antebellum South. The student of the early history of Southern Baptists will gain insight into the doctrinal commitments of some of the denomination's early leaders. Baptist pastors seeking to understand how one can retain robust theological distinctives without losing a desire to cooperate with other Baptist churches in the areas of education and missions will find a helpful guide in the life and ministry of Jesse Mercer. By his skilled use of primary sources on both sides of the debate between Primitive and Missionary Baptists, Chute has crafted a work which is both well-researched and highly readable. This uncommon combination in historical theology provides the reader with an education that is enjoyable. Now that this paperback edition is available at a more affordable price it is hoped that this volume will find its way into the hands of many scholars, students, and pastors. If this indeed occurs, a revival of a spirit of unity and cooperation may well be the result.

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