

Jewel L. Spangler. *Virginians Reborn: Anglican Monopoly, Evangelical Dissent, and the Rise of the Baptists in the Late Eighteenth Century*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2008. Pp. 288 + viii. \$45.00. Hardback.

Jewel Spangler has written the definitive history of Baptists in eighteenth-century Virginia. Spangler offers the most considered and careful portrait to date of how Baptists first gained a foothold in a region that later became a stronghold of Baptist sentiment. *Virginians Reborn* corrects the prevailing view that they were social revolutionaries, arguing instead that they were pragmatists who “offered the right message at the right time,” laying a solid organizational foundation for their later success.

This is a historians’ history that eschews an imaginative anthropological approach in favor of patient reading of the scarce surviving records. Spangler dismantles the picture of a culture sharply divided between the posturing of Anglican gentry and dissenting common folk drawn in Rhys Isaac’s prize-winning study, *The Transformation of Virginia*. Instead, she highlights ambiguity at every turn, reminding her readers of the complexity of religious practice and institutions in a revolutionary age and painstakingly reconstructing the social and theological context out of which Baptists emerged.

The story of the Baptists, Spangler shows, begins with the Anglicans. Her portrait recalls that of Jon Butler, who emphasized Anglican strengths in the period. A second chapter shows how Presbyterian success prefigured that of Baptists. Protestant dissent was neither a social uprising nor a counter-cultural movement, Spangler argues. Instead, “Presbyterianism was able to move into the religious mainstream fairly rapidly in Virginia, in sum, because it had never truly operated outside of it” (45). Dissenters never intended to turn their society upside down. Patriarchy survived unscathed and the practice of slavery was never seriously challenged. The new presbyteries suppressed local congregational control, while the clergy operated largely beyond it. Spangler’s account of the conventional social practice of these congregations is nicely balanced with attention to Presbyterian doctrine and practice. Anglicans became Presbyterians, she shows, because they were paying attention to ideas.

Like the Presbyterians, Baptists succeeded in the two decades before the Revolution in places where Anglicans were weak. By the 1780s, they outnumbered Presbyterians in Virginia, not so much because they starkly opposed the Anglicans as because Anglicans had prepared the way for them. The narrative is rich in the particular conditions in particular locations. General Baptists founded only one congregation on the Northern Neck by 1762, while the Calvinist Regulars founded the thriving Kettocton and Kehukee Associations on the Northern Neck and Southside respectively. Separates, meanwhile, expanded north into the Southside from North Carolina in the 1750s. When the Separates and Regulars merged in 1787, their Southside model prevailed everywhere in the state except in the Shenandoah Valley, a region where Presbyterians, Dunkers, Lutherans, and Mennonites were well-established. In short, Baptist success was predicated not on a cultural style or worship practice that appealed to common folk, but on combination of institutional expansion, Anglican misfortune, and local politics, something Spangler sums up with the phrase “religious supply and demand.” The distinctives of Baptist practice and doctrine were not unimportant, but they were balanced by the importance of the local conditions in which congregations were able to succeed. Above all, Baptists benefitted from the unsettling changes wrought by the Revolution.

Spangler finds that Baptists, like Presbyterians, practiced a conventional social ethic. An important contribution is her careful re-reading of the Anglican and Presbyterian opponents of

these upstart churches, in which she finds assertions of the revolutionary nature of the movement overstated at best. Baptists, were indeed harshly criticized by established churchmen, but these statements were more calculated to invoke fear and loathing than they were accurate. Nevertheless, Baptists themselves found advantages in being portrayed as antiestablishment and even revolutionary in those revolutionary decades. But the veneer of revolution was only that. Baptists did not liberate members from established roles. Moreover, these congregations schooled non-slaveholders in the authoritarian ways of the prevailing slave culture.

Baptists also succeeded for reasons other than Anglican weakness. They ordained many more pastors than Presbyterians, for example. Men like Shubal Stearns were charismatic advocates for their cause, inspiring others to follow their example. Baptist pastors, unlike Anglican and Presbyterians, were chosen for their abilities to bring in new converts, which often happened in the revivals. Originally part of association meetings and baptisms, revivals were an example of Baptists' pragmatism in adopting a loose institutional framework that allowed for opportunities to build up congregations outside of formal preaching—sacramental occasions, revivals, and association meetings.

Throughout the book, Spangler reads her sources with an admirable sensitivity. She is rightfully critical of Anglican and Presbyterian accounts of Baptist success and early conversion narratives, opening a valuable and fresh perspective on the period. Histories of early American religious movements would benefit greatly from the kind of nuanced reading offered here and by Cynthia Lynn Lyerly in her study of early Methodists. Stories of revivals and the founding of congregations are riven with complex motives and perspectives that deserve to be recovered and carefully scrutinized.

More context would have been helpful in the final chapter, particularly, to balance out the rich material offered on Anglicans and Presbyterians in the first two chapters. And at times, Spangler's affection for subtlety and complexity threatens clarity, as in the second chapter when she firmly establishes differences between Anglican and Presbyterian practice only to turn and argue that in fact, Presbyterians were not all that different from Anglicans after all. Yet she is right to emphasize that early evangelicals were at once radical and deeply conventional people. Like Protestants in the Reformation, the difficulty of her task may be seen in comparing her reading of these early Baptists to the work of Christine Heyrman, who famously emphasized the unsettling and even weird nature of early evangelical practice and community. On the one hand, Spangler's account agrees with this. Revivals, she argues, were unsettling events that institutionalized private religious convictions in ways that threatened outsiders and invoked impassioned responses from converts. Yet at the same time, these congregations ultimately defended the slaveholders' world. Neither women nor slaves, she reminds us, were liberated in a worldly sense in these congregations.

And yet women and slaves found something among the Baptists that they could not find anywhere else in early Virginia. Spangler insists in each of her six chapters that the dissenters' appeal cannot be understood without taking the doctrinal content and practice of Baptists and other dissenters in the early South as seriously as its social form, something that her book demonstrates is best done with the methods of history rather than theory. As such, Spangler has found a new depth and complexity in the history of early Baptists in Virginia, and her book should be read as a model for how to write religious history in early America.

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