

James H. Slatton. *W. H. Whitsitt: The Man and the Controversy*. James N. Griffith Series in Baptist Studies. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009. Pp. xi, 348. \$40.00. Hardback.

When James Slatton, formerly the pastor of River Road Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia, went to visit a potential church member, he discovered after arriving that his hostess was the granddaughter of William Whitsitt, the third president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Almost unbelievably, Whitsitt's descendant was also in possession of the professor's personal diary and other family documents previously unknown to researchers. Not only did the fortunate visitor shepherd these items into the Virginia Baptist Historical Society's collection, he also found the time to use them to write what must be the fullest account of the "Whitsitt Controversy" ever composed.

Students of Southern Baptist history are undoubtedly familiar with Whitsitt's story. After publicly stating that Baptists recovered immersion as a form of baptism in the seventeenth century, a group of "Landmark" Baptists forced Whitsitt to resign, citing his disagreement with most Southern Baptists on the issue of Baptist origins. The most familiar version of the story offers itself as a cautionary tale against allowing rank-and-file Christians to challenge the academic findings of professional scholars.

Although Slatton does not challenge this familiar interpretation of the Whitsitt Controversy, his biography adds layers of rich detail that illumine some of the story's previously dark corners. The author paints a picture of a quiet man who, after serving in the Civil War, traveled to Europe with John Broadus' blessing but without a very clear idea of his reasons for being there. Whitsitt's travels and contacts with Christians of different stripes influenced him to develop a strong sense of the catholicity of the church, a belief which contrasted sharply with those of many Southern Baptists. Whitsitt developed ambivalent feelings toward his own denomination, but these feelings were not the cause of his historical "discovery." Instead, Whitsitt appears in Slatton's work as a person genuinely committed to historical inquiry. Hardly a saint, however, Whitsitt also emerges as a fiercely critical person, referring to James Boyce as a "dunderhead" in his diary and harboring negative assessments of almost every other member of the seminary faculty (117). By the point in the narrative in which Whitsitt's views become controversial, the reader is well acquainted with the character of the protagonist.

The main strength of the book may be the clarity with which the author teases apart the many strands of political intrigue by which Whitsitt's friends sought to outflank his denominational opponents and retain him in the seminary presidency. In particular, Slatton describes in great detail the deft political maneuvering of William E. Hatcher, a man whose gifts for parliamentary manipulation kept Whitsitt relatively safe on the floors of countless Baptist state and associational meetings during the controversy. In fact, in Hatcher's shadow, the aging Whitsitt of the final half of the book seems vacillating and weak, increasingly the pawn of sparring denominational politicians alternately concerned for the purity of Southern Baptist ecclesiology and the financial security of Southern Baptist institutions. Slatton perceptively notes that a number of Whitsitt's defenders were motivated less by a concern for academic freedom or sympathy with his position than by a desire to retain a financial hold over the South's Baptists.

This overriding concern for organizational stability is what led many leaders and editors originally friendly to Whitsitt eventually to join the chorus of voices demanding his resignation. Originally thinking that criticism of Whitsitt would dissipate in time, some Baptist leaders later began to signal their willingness to sacrifice Whitsitt as seminary president in order to keep the peace. Although the seminary trustees continued to support Whitsitt throughout the controversy,

he yielded to pressure after the still-young A. T. Robertson, under the impression that his own professional career hung in the balance, begged him to abandon the presidency. This explanation of Whitsitt's resignation despite trustee support and the tenuous connection between the seminary and the convention may constitute the book's most important contribution to scholarly understanding of the controversy.

Slatton's narrative is diachronistic. While his recounting of Whitsitt's story is firmly rooted in a close reading of his sources, he tells the tale with one eye firmly planted on contemporary Southern Baptist life. The author anachronistically refers to Presbyterians responsible for the nineteenth-century heresy trial of Charles Briggs at New York's Union Theological Seminary as "fundamentalists." More explicitly, Slatton connects the Whitsitt controversy with more recent events in Southern Baptist life when he claims that the Whitsitt story "evokes a haunting sense of *déjà vu*" in "those who experienced the moderate-fundamentalist controversy" (p. 323). Depending upon their own preferences, readers will find these tendencies to be either irritating or gratifying. In any case, Slatton never allows this aspect of his project to undermine his storytelling.

Perhaps because the author was motivated to write by his discovery of the Whitsitt diary, the shape of his narrative is dictated almost entirely by his primary sources. This translates to a text which is sometimes as much about the sources themselves as it is about the events that they mediate. Slatton occasionally includes episodes from Whitsitt's life simply because his diary mentions them, even when they add nothing to the plot. Further, in several chapters the author records the contents of the diary and other documents almost without interpretation. Some readers may welcome these opportunities to draw their own conclusions, while others may be disappointed that the book privileges narrative over analysis.

Even the power of the most brilliant historical interpretation is diminished if buried underneath mounds of dense or awkward prose. Fortunately, Slatton has provided students of Baptist history with an extraordinarily readable account of the origins, progress, and immediate results of the Whitsitt controversy. The clarity of Slatton's writing and the vigorous pace of his narrative gently usher the reader through accounts of interpersonal conflict and Byzantine ecclesiastical politics. As a result, the book seems much shorter than its three hundred pages.

Students which seek to mine the book for specific information rather than reading it through need be warned that the index, while complete, seems to have been based on an earlier pagination of the text. As a result, page numbers offered in the index are often inaccurate, although the information required can usually be found within a page or two of the location given. Slatton's text, however, is a narrative designed for reading and not for research. Interested laypeople will enjoy the Slatton's energetic storytelling, while both new and seasoned students of Baptist history will read the book with profit.

Andrew C. Smith
Vanderbilt University