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CELEBRATION AND CONTROVERSY

This year witnesses the celebration of 150 years of Southern Baptist History and it is of this that Jesse Fletcher writes in his *The Southern Baptist Convention: A Sesquicentennial History* [Broadman & Holman, 1994, 463pp]. The recent history of that body makes the task extremely difficult: right at the beginning Fletcher overtly identifies the present controversy between 'conservatives' and 'moderates' as the context of his writing. That is certainly honest, for author and publisher are parts of that story. Granted that, this seems an eminently fair-minded assessment. The temptation is not simply to be partisan to one side or the other, but to let controversy dominate all the writing, and the divisions and concerns of the present so colour the story that other aspects of Southern Baptist life are made subservient to it: that certainly is true of this volume. In this sense a form of ecclesiastical Whiggism is clearly here present: not only is there a relentless search for the roots of present difficulties but a third of the text covers the period from 1979.

The English story is necessarily abbreviated, but to say that 'most English Baptist experience necessary to understand the American Baptist version was in place by 1700' is not helpful. There is a brief reference to Andrew Fuller, but the way in which the New Connexion, which maintained considerable contacts in the USA, brought the insights of Wesley's evangelical Arminianism into Baptist life is totally ignored. It might

have tempered the judgment: 'The tendency for General Baptists to be more sectarian with a more radical separation of church and state, and Particular Baptists to support the civil concerns of Calvinism, can be seen in contemporary Southern Baptist conflicts'.

For all its 'Whiggishness', this account is exceptionally helpful to the English reader in identifying the perennial fault lines of Southern Baptist life: shared with British Baptists is the division over predestination and election and the resultant anti-mission stances, and the question of affirming the local church as fully the body of Christ whilst recognizing the need for combination in wider associations. Southern Baptists have debated how this larger function should be fulfilled: by comprehensive convention with control over a range of agencies or through more issue-focused societal action. Fletcher notes that Southern Baptists have turned to the second option when the consensus for co-operative action has broken down: hence moderates recently turning to societal action as the conservative resurgence has taken over convention structures.

From the beginning Southern Baptists have with difficulty sought to respect both scholarship with its concern to discover the truth and a populist tradition, often anti-intellectual and anti-institutional. The Landmark debates of the 1850s, whose significance is critical to understanding Southern Baptist history, operated on this fault line, as did the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the 1920s. Landmarkists believed in what has been called successionism - the historically implausible view that a succession of local Baptist-type churches could be traced back without interruption to New Testament times. These were the only legitimate churches, and therefore to offer pulpit hospitality outside the Baptist denomination was wrong, and closed communion a necessity. At the same time all talk of a universal church was false.

Fundamentalism (or Norrism, as it was sometimes called, focusing on its chief protagonist, J. Frank Norris, minister of First Baptist Church, Fort Worth), developed a programme of attacks upon mainstream Southern Baptist institutions under a programme of being anti-evolutionist, anti-modernist, and anti-institutional, though in 1923 Norris himself founded the Baptist Bible Union of America, which eventually became the World Fundamentalist Baptist Mission Fellowship. This is a fault line causing devastation to Southern Baptist unity again today, as the credentials of fundamentalism are rehearsed against a more positive evangelicalism, underpinned by the work of such institutions as Wheaton College and Fuller Seminary. Related to this is the debate about credal affirmation, or doctrinal subscription, rather than a freely-confessed biblically-based evangelicalism with scope for individual interpretation of detail in faithfulness to the denomination's historic confessions. The other freedom issue is that involved in the separation of church and state which seems to have lost favour with the new right, who wish to use ecclesiastical muscle to influence political parties, which highlights how far the controversy turns on issues of theology or the exercising of power: to be an inerrantist is apparently not enough, you need to be an inerrantist with the right patronage, willing to condemn those views that your patrons condemn.

Differences have also emerged between those who uphold strong pastoral leadership as a gift from God that the congregation is duty-bound to follow, and those who argue for a democratic style of church governance, though not 'the priesthood of the believer', which seems to me a significant warping of 'the priesthood of all believers' of which

Luther wrote. Since the pastors of mega-churches exercise the former kind of authority, this is seen as pragmatic justification for a style of leadership for which Biblical warrant is claimed. Biblical warrant is also deployed to exclude women from speaking to men at church functions, and necessarily from ordination. Most recently this has been focused in the withdrawal, under pressure, of an invitation to Billy Graham's daughter to speak at an evangelism conference in Oklahoma. At this moment in time the fault lines seem grave and to threaten the denomination's future.

Perhaps the first thing to note about Professor Estep's book [*Whole Gospel, Whole World: The Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1845-1995*, Broadman and Holman, 1994, 429pp] is that it has been published, for the centennial history of the Sunday School Board, *Celebrating Heritage and Hope*, penned by the cautious and much respected Leon McBeth, was voted out by the Board in August 1990. We may be grateful that the same did not happen to Estep's book for, although properly esteemed for his outstanding record as a reformation and anabaptist scholar, he calls this the most important book he has ever written. The style of writing is a narrative which for the most part stands above controversial issues, dividing the history in relation to the leadership given by corresponding secretaries/executive directors/presidents - the change of language is itself instructive - in successive generations.

'The heartbeat of the Southern Baptist Convention is missions', offers Dr Estep by way of introduction, with the belief that if that concern is brought centre-stage it will overcome the present partisanship, for it was out of the controversy over slavery that the missionary convention was brought to birth. 'While the slavery issue had shattered the fellowship of the nation's Baptists before 1845, it was the missionary imperative that precipitated the call for a consultative convention in Augusta' which might heed 'the Macedonian cry from every part of the heathen world'.

Commitment to such a crucial task has sustained the work through 150 years of problematical history - in the midst of wars, both civil and global, perennial financial crises in which commitments far exceeded either promised or actual income, ecclesiastical disputes both in the field and at home, with the Foreign Mission Board squeezed between fundamentalism and ecumenism. Controversial issues are not ignored, and an American perspective on the defunding of the European Baptist Seminary at Ruschlikon is included. Consequent on that some forty-five missionaries in Europe resigned from the Board, and eventually the services of Keith Parks, its visionary president, were curtailed. By 1990, the year at which giving to the Board peaked, it was becoming clear that controversy within the Convention was hurting the cause of missions: Estep cites an attendance of less than 3,000 of the 37,224 voting messengers at the 1990 Convention in New Orleans at the meeting at which Parks brought the Foreign Mission Board report as evidence for this. Parks noted a shift from missions to politics at annual meetings. Estep clearly believes that the only hope for the future of the Southern Baptists is to turn from theological power-brokering between moderate-conservatives and fundamentalist-conservatives and for missions to take the centre-stage once more both in the denomination's thinking and its affections.