

## Review of *Baptist Political Theology*

*Baptist Political Theology*. By Thomas S. Kidd (Editor), Paul D. Miller (Editor), and Andrew T. Walker (Editor). Brentwood, TN. B&H Academic, 2023, 576 pp.; ISBN: 978-1087736136.

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A book about American Baptist political theology cannot fail to intrigue. This phrase does not come up often and raises two difficult questions: did something like this ever exist, and can this exist “after Trump”?

The names and titles of the editorial team speak of a desire to embrace the immensity and connect history, politics and ethics together. Thomas S. Kidd is research professor of church history at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and senior research scholar at the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University. Paul D. Miller is professor in the practice of international affairs at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service. Andrew T. Walker is associate professor of Christian ethics and director of the Carl F. H. Henry Institute for Evangelical Engagement at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The order in the placement of names and presentation of the material is also important: most of the book is about history, a smaller part about politics, the most interesting and the smallest part about ethics.

The group of authors is even more diverse – in terms of specializations, political orientations, and theological approaches. Nevertheless, this voluminous and heterogeneous collection well expresses the real and dynamic situation in research methodology, in the church and personal positions of researchers, and in the objects of research.

The book is divided into two parts, the first of which is focused on the history of ideas (17–485), the second on contemporary issues (489–723). The disproportion in the volume of parts speaks for itself. The short Introduction (1–14) and Conclusion (725–732) convey the book’s intent and main ideas pretty well, so non-specialists can limit themselves to reading these parts and easily grasp the main points.

At the outset, the editors ask about the possibility of a Baptist political theology, which is rarely considered as a distinct and discernable tradition. The answer that the

editors and authors of the book give can be formulated in this way: we would very much like such a theology to exist, but its possibility is questionable. They proceed from two convictions: first, Baptist theology must be applied in public life in the most responsible way (and in practice it manifests itself in the most controversial way, since “America flirts with illiberalism from both the Left and the Right,” (1–2); secondly, the potential of Baptist political theology is much greater than it seems today, because, as authors believe “it is not an accident, after all, that religious liberty arises with such fervency from the Baptist tradition” (2).

Answering further the question about Baptist identity, on the basis of which such a theology can be built, the authors recall traditional traits or principles: conversion, soul competency, believer’s baptism, local church membership, local church autonomy, *Sola Scriptura*. Obviously, they all relate to political life and emphasize freedom of conscience and the church.

It is good to remember that for most of their history, Baptists were a religious minority, limited in their rights and often persecuted. It was their choice, determined theologically. It would seem natural and historically justified, that Baptists would have suspicion of political power and caution towards the state. At the same time, Baptists are not characterized by the extremes of anarchism and pacifism, since they recognize the positive role of the state. As heirs of the Reformation, Baptists take seriously the Bible’s teaching on the nature of human fallenness, finding in this the basis for a rather realistic approach to political life, then theocratic. At the same time, Baptists are characterized by a certain sectarianism in the interpretation and application of the Bible, which is expressed in the lack of any positive natural law theory of their own (4).

Noting the underdevelopment, weaknesses and shortcomings of Baptist political theology, the book focuses readers’ attention on the main theme for Baptists – advocacy for religious freedom: “This timeless political principle is the extension of Baptist theology and Baptist identity (as a people defined by their dissent against unjust authority) into the political domain” (5).

Indeed, from the earliest days of their history, Baptists have been in strong opposition to any establishmentarian political theology. The Baptist legacy is the legacy of dissent and persecution. By rejecting infant baptism, Baptists incurred the wrath of state churches. Apparently, their beliefs about baptism seemed so important to them that they were willing to suffer for them: “An inner logic connects adult baptism, conversion, religious freedom and disestablishment” (9).

The book presents the early Baptists as implacable opponents of any form of violence against freedom of conscience and government interference in spiritual or ecclesiastical matters. Baptists were no less opposed to attempts by churches to go beyond the boundaries of their jurisdiction and dictate the necessary decisions to politicians.

The book’s authors not only describe crucial moments in the Baptist history, but also insist that this legacy of dissenters and freedom lovers must be preserved and developed today. Some theses sound like strong political statements, addressed not so much to historians as to current church leaders: “We must also insist on the state’s

limitation and the church's independence, which means our presence in the public square is never an effort to take it over in the name of serving it" (12).

The tasks that the members of the team of authors set for themselves were quite large-scale and ambitious: "We hope this volume is a road map, showing from where we have come, what road we have traveled, and where we think our road leads next" (14). It must be admitted that the authors coped with the first task – to show the path traveled. With the second, everything is much more complicated.

The first, historical part, is well written in terms of names and events. Readers will find interesting details in articles about quite famous heroes of recent history, such as Martin Luther King Jr., Carl F. H. Henry, Billy Graham, Charles Colson, Russell Moore. It is important that not only the significance and contribution of these leaders is shown, but also their controversies. Chapters about Baptist leaders from more distant history (Roger Williams, John Leland, Isaac Backus) seem less original, more encyclopedic than analytical.

The First Part is significantly strengthened and featured by chapters about the connection between the most important historical events and church transformations: "Baptists and the American Revolution," "Baptists, Slavery and Segregation," "Baptists and the Civil War."

Some specific traditions and movements within American Baptists are well described, among them "Progressive Baptists," "The African American Baptist Tradition," "The Christian Right."

Two chapters summarize contemporary challenges to political life and their theological reflections: "Contemporary Baptist Political Theology" and "Baptist Witness in a Post-Christian Culture." The latter seems to be the strongest in terms of philosophical and theological analysis and would find a better place in the next part of the book.

The Second Part of the book problematizes the history of Baptist political theology and begins with the troubling generalization: "This country does not feel very Christian anymore" (489). Of course, "normal" Baptists never considered America a Christian nation, but they still felt pretty good about themselves, like they were in Jerusalem. Today, American Baptists find themselves in Babylon (it's not for nothing that the first article in the section is called "Baptists in Babylon") and barely have time and enthusiasm to respond to the tectonic movements and radical challenges of our days. Several chapters respond to some pressing issues of our time, including "The Contemporary Challenge to Religious Liberty," "Bioethics and Human Dignity," "Sexuality and Gender," "Stewardship and Environmentalism," and "Political Economy."

Among these topics there was no place for the topic of war and peace. Although the issues of pacifism and patriotism, nationalism and militarism were partially discussed in the first, historical part, and in the second part the reception of the ideas of Just War Theory was briefly discussed, but in general the topic of war remained without actualization. Against the background of the war in Ukraine, global terrorism, tense relations with Iran, China and North Korea, the lack of fresh insights about the theological and political positions of American Baptists regarding war and rumors of war looks quite eloquent.

Some of the best articles in the collection focus on two rich theological traditions from which Baptists are beginning to learn a little: the Natural Law Tradition and the Just War Tradition. Dialogue with these traditions can help the Baptists to develop a more holistic theology and a better understanding of specifically Baptist traits in a general, ecumenical Christian context.

The Second Part ends with a topical article on Baptists as evangelicals with a disturbing and provocative conclusion: “The nature of Southern Baptist evangelical identity is no longer so clear – but that is because evangelical identity itself is now up for debate [...] Southern Baptists are clearly arrayed across the spectrum from the quadrilateral to the patrilateral. To paraphrase Lord Shaftesbury, “I know what constituted [a Southern Baptist] Evangelical in former times. I have no clear notion of what constitutes one now” (721–722).

It is true, some evangelicals stopped defining their identity by the Gospel and became part of the “conservative” political agenda. For many evangelicals the quadrilateral, which defined evangelical by conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism, was replaced by the patrilateral (Christian masculinity, patriarchy, nationalism, militarism). Can Baptists still consider themselves evangelicals after all this? What place does the topic of religious freedom occupy in the life and theology of Baptist churches in the United States? Can American Baptists reclaim their name as lovers and defenders of freedom?

Read to the end, the book raises deep concerns and evokes a feeling of anxiety about the future of Baptist political theology and Baptist Church tradition. Will the history of American Baptists last? Will Baptists remain true to their core principle of freedom? Will politicized and compromised evangelical Christianity be the end of Baptist history, theology, and ethics?

Baptist readers cannot but arouse sympathy and agreement with this clear and firm statement: “Baptists in America and other parts of the world have sometimes envisioned themselves as part of the “moral majority,” but the most common stance in Baptist history has been that of a dissenting minority, of strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (8).

And yet, observing the presidential race in America and the blind loyalty of Baptist leaders to Trump rather than Christ, one cannot help but wonder how much American Baptists still value freedom and how much they are ready to pay for their freedom? Are they still willing to be in the minority, as strangers and pilgrims on the way to The Kingdom?

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