

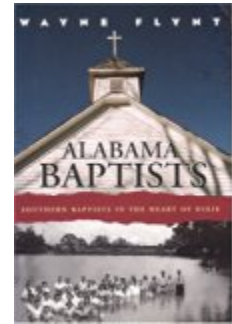
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Wayne Flynt. *Alabama Baptists: Southern Baptists in the Heart of Dixie*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. xxi + 731 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8173-5282-0.

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Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Baptists in Alabama

Historians and pundits of popular culture have often cited the prevalence of Baptists in the American South. Some commentators have merely noted it, while others used it as ammunition. H. L. Mencken, for example, decried both the denomination and the region as examples of conservative religion and lack of education. Wayne Flynt, however, takes these stereotypes and others to task in his mammoth work on Baptists in Alabama, first published in 1998 and now available in paperback. The book does a fine job of providing a detailed history of the denomination in that state, and Flynt works to shatter some of the myths surrounding members of his own faith.

Flynt asserts that the history of Alabama is linked to the history of the Alabama Baptist State Convention, noting that in Alabama, Baptists have “the highest percentage of Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) dominance of any state” (p. ix). He states that his purpose “was simple: to explain Baptists to themselves and to explain them to others,” with a special concentration on Baptists in Alabama (p. ix). This process of explanation spans over six hundred pages of text, including numerous photographs and illustrations of Baptists, Baptist life, and Baptist buildings.

In his explanation, Flynt employs a three-fold approach. He examines individual Baptists (as well as Baptists as individuals and their relationship with their faith), local congregations of Baptists (and how they understood their roles), and the denomination as a whole in Alabama and how the individual congregations related

to each other. This last layer of examination has posed many challenges for scholars of Baptist history. Baptist polity—the way Baptists organize their denominational structure—is congregational, which means that each individual congregation sends delegates, or “messengers,” to a local, state, or larger convention, but that no congregation is obligated to follow the positions declared at these larger meetings. Each church is autonomous, which can lead outsiders to misunderstand the denomination as a whole. Flynt, however, does yeoman work in separating out the beliefs of individual congregations, the state association, and the Southern Baptist Convention itself (established in 1845 in a schism over slavery).

That work in teasing out varying positions helps Flynt lay to rest some very crucial stereotypes about Southern Baptists. For example, Flynt challenges the notion that Baptists have traditionally opposed public funding for education. In numerous examples, he demonstrates that Alabama Baptists were greatly concerned about the ability of people to read, as this skill was crucial to understanding Christianity once a person had converted. Public education, Alabama Baptists reasoned, was the best way to improve literacy. Protestants have always believed that a literate populace was important for understanding the message of the Bible, and Alabama Baptists strongly supported public education until the second half of the twentieth century, when racial integration of schools and a ban on Bible reading in schools dampened their enthusiasm. Flynt also paints interesting pictures of a pulpit/pew split over issues such as social

work and integration, as well as a rural/urban split over missions and theology.

Alabama Baptists also highlights the role that women played in the denomination. While not allowed to preach for most of the denomination's history, women could and did exercise other influence, such as fundraising, which Flynt documents admirably. Female Baptists become a subversive force in this book, chipping away doggedly at the barriers men erected to keep them away from power. The reader gets a sense that while the men were busy reminding each other of Paul's prohibition against women speaking in church, the women were using every other avenue available to ensure their voices were heard, even if not directly.

If the book has a weakness, it is the same issue that Alabama Baptists themselves have struggled with: race. Flynt's approach to the issue broke no new ground, and the book relies largely on white sources and provides a white narrative of race relations. To be sure, Flynt is sensitive to the failings of his white-run denomination in

dealing with African Americans. For example, he correctly calls white Baptists to task for their treatment of African Americans, pointing out their paternalistic treatment of the newly freed slaves and their near-constant comments about the need for black Baptists to "get religion," a veiled attack on their theology and their worship style. He does not, however, examine in a more detailed manner the ways that black and white Baptists influenced each other more subtly, a topic that Paul Harvey so deftly explored in *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities among Southern Baptists, 1865-1925* (1997). Given that *Alabama Baptists* was originally published in hardcover in 1998, it is likely that Flynt did not have time before the book went to publication to incorporate a more refined approach to race in his work.

This one shortcoming aside, Flynt explains Baptists in Alabama quite well, and historians of religion in the South should examine this book. Historians of culture in the South would also benefit from *Alabama Baptists*, as it illuminates the motives and actions of a large portion of the southern population.

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