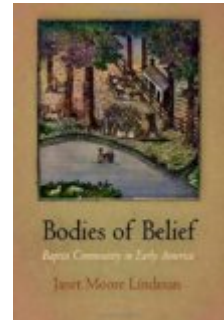


**Janet Moore Lindman.** *Bodies of Belief: Baptist Community in Early America.* Early American Studies Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. 272 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4114-3.



**Reviewed by** Mary Carroll Johansen

**Published on** H-South (November, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Catherine A. Cardno (American Society of Civil Engineers)

In *Bodies of Belief*, Janet Moore Lindman explores the issue of Baptist corporeality on two levels. First, she considers how individuals experienced spiritual conversion as a physical process. Second, she examines the body of the church created by adherents to the Baptist religion. Lindman focuses on a central paradox of the early Baptist Church: while the church promised spiritual salvation to all who underwent a "substantive conversion," the earthly church the Baptists created "racialized and gendered believers' bodies" (p. 2). Although Baptists referred to each other as "brother" and "sister," they formed a church that was hierarchical in nature: white males controlled church polity; white female and black members held subordinate roles. Moreover, after an initial campaign against the slave trade in the 1770s, the church retreated from its early radicalism. As the church attained mainstream status, it left the slavery issue to local option, allowing Baptists to become defenders of a conservative social order (p. 142). Lindman questions earlier interpretations of evangelical religions that have

stressed their democratic character, noting the persistent hierarchical nature of the Baptist Church.

*Bodies of Belief* compares Baptist churches in two regions, the Delaware Valley and Virginia, from the seventeenth century, when they were isolated "little tabernacles in the wilderness," to the early nineteenth century, when the Baptist Church attained its status as a mainline church (p. 3). Previous studies of the Baptist Church in colonial America have focused on either New England or the Chesapeake; the Delaware Valley has been comparatively neglected, as the last full-length work on the region (Norman Maring's *Baptists in New Jersey: A Study in Transition*) was published in 1964. Yet, Lindman argues, the valley offers an important venue for study as Baptists in this region, unlike those to the North and South, enjoyed comparative religious freedom. The Philadelphia Baptist Association, formed in 1707, radiated its influence not merely to the middle colonies but also to Virginia, which did not see sustained growth among Baptist congregations until the

mid-eighteenth century, and to other colonies all along the seaboard. While Baptists in Virginia faced strong opposition from those who saw in their piety a challenge to traditional manly pursuits, the Baptist Church in Pennsylvania enjoyed a relatively peaceful coexistence with other religious groups and was a "small but principal denomination" by the time of the American Revolution (p. 32).

Moreover, there has been a historiographical revolution since 1964. Maring's work on the Baptists in New Jersey narrates the institutional growth of the Baptist Church, focusing on church leadership. Lindman places her emphasis on the effect of religion on the whole congregation, with particular attention to the roles of race and gender, including masculinity.

Lindman divides her book into two sections, focusing first on the process of conversion and then on the church the congregants created. Lindman emphasizes the corporeality of the conversion process: God's words "struck" those who heard them; sinners responded with tears, moans, screams, and jerks. After wrestling with the devil for their souls, converts experienced "a new birth" through baptism by immersion (pp. 54-58). Baptists practiced nine religious rites, such as the kiss of charity and the fellowship of the right hand, which brought "unity and structure into a religious community," but also "chaos and disorder" when people objected to aspects of the rituals, the ministers, or the church (p. 84). Foot washing, for example, fell into disuse because of its association with the labor of enslaved blacks (which was ironic since Christ at the Last Supper had purposely rendered a service usually done by slaves). Adherents who sinned were subject to church discipline, including removal from the body of the church through excommunication. Lindman emphasizes the impact of race and gender in all of these processes. Shocked by conversion meetings that combined the emotional qualities of women with the exuberant worship styles associated with

blacks, white men were slow to join the Baptist Church. Yet, while sometimes a minority in congregations, as ministers and elders white males held ultimate power in the church: when Baptist meetings focused their attention on social and sexual sin, women and African Americans were most at risk of being accused and expelled.

Baptist women expected to participate in all aspects of church life. Their "domesticated piety" brought others, including men, to the Baptist faith and created networks of female spirituality through which they could read, write, and speak on religious matters (p. 112). Women served as official representatives to investigate accusations of sinfulness by female members, and some Separate Baptist churches allowed women to serve as exhorters. In the mid-eighteenth century, however, Baptist churches began to "ponder" women's roles, particularly their right to vote on church matters (p. 112). While female members of the Baptist Church in Philadelphia successfully guarded their right to vote on church matters in 1764, most Virginia meetings prohibited women from exercising the franchise.

Like women, African Americans held "episodic power" in churches as elders, exhorters, and preachers; some blacks used their new persona as converted Christians to challenge their masters' sinfulness (p. 146). These opportunities did not mean, however, that blacks were equal members of biracial congregations; many African Americans were "hearers" rather than members of predominantly white congregations (p. 134). Over time, blacks formed their own separate churches and developed their own version of Christianity, while white Baptists moved away from their early criticism of slavery.

Lindman ties together her emphasis on the congregational nature of the Baptist religion with her interpretation of the place of African Americans in the church to explain why "the church could not agree on a definitive policy regarding slaveholding" (p. 145). Baptists in Pennsylvania

accepted their state's gradual emancipation policy, but when the Philadelphia Baptist Association refused to take a strong stand on abolition, some churches left the association in protest. Some Virginia Baptists individually manumitted their slaves while others stated that the question of slavery was an "improper subject" for a religious institution, as only civil authorities could decide the matter; although some individuals and member churches questioned the legitimacy of slavery, the General Association of Virginia ultimately chose to remain silent on the subject (pp. 142-145). Slavery, abolition, and the status of African Americans in the church were subjects handled largely at the congregational level.

Power in the churches remained in the hands of white males, who developed a new ideal of evangelical manhood that included "tenderness, sensitivity, earnestness, and self-sacrifice," as well as the "moral strength and physical endurance" ministers needed to develop and to spread a new denomination (p. 172). The clergy's efforts created a transatlantic network that facilitated the church's growth and strengthened white male supremacy over the colonial social order.

Lindman addresses the Baptist Church in Virginia in a way different from Rhys Isaac's *Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*, as is made clear by the way each interprets Reverend James Ireland's account of his conversion. Isaac emphasizes the class challenge that Baptists brought to Virginia; the largely lower-class members of the Baptist Church frowned on the dancing, betting, and drinking that were the favored diversions of Virginia's gentry. Isaac's rendering focuses on Ireland's aristocratic mentor, who insisted he would "convert" Ireland back to dancing, because he "sensed the challenge to his way of life that was implicit in Ireland's withdrawal" from gentry society.[1] Lindman's interpretation instead stresses the gender dimensions of the conversion process: "James Ireland conceived of his struggle for salvation specifically in terms of masculinity" (p. 162).

He wrestled with the devil, Ireland wrote, in a "conflict of manhood" before converting and finding fellowship with evangelicals (p. 162).

Lindman's sources include minutes of Baptist church meetings; the letters, journals, diaries, and papers of ministers and members; and early church histories. Her work compares Baptist churches in the Delaware Valley and Virginia, but one wishes the comparison had been more finely drawn. Why, for example, did she focus on Virginia, as opposed to another colony with an established church and a slave economy? She provides a table comparing discipline rates in Baptist churches, but the table does not clearly identify in which colonies the churches are located (p. 110). This lack of clarity is also an occasional problem in the text, forcing those without a knowledge of all town and county names in the two areas to keep referencing her comprehensive listing of churches at the front of the book.

In some places, Lindman could have pushed her interpretation further. She noted that in Pennsylvania the Quakers influenced Baptists' speech (the use of "thee" and "thou") and plain dress. Might Quakerism also have influenced the attitudes of Baptists toward women? Quakers, with their belief that the Inner Light resides in both the male and the female, allowed women to speak in meetings and held separate women's meetings. Jean R. Soderlund has argued that Quaker men and women held no power independently of each other; both jointly led the Quaker faith.[2] Could Philadelphia Baptists' decision to grant women suffrage in church matters have been influenced by the example of their Quaker neighbors? In an earlier essay on Baptist women, Lindman drew a sharp contrast between women in the two faiths, arguing that "Baptists did not provide the same opportunity for female activism as [was] found among the Quakers"; her current work does not contrast the faiths as explicitly.[3]

In another area, Lindman notes that some slaves who had become Baptists questioned their

masters' morality: thus, "Evangelicalism could potentially provide blacks the means to greater control over their lives and communities" (p. 149). Her argument does not appear to go as far as John B. Boles's that the evangelical church was "perhaps the only place in southern society where bond and free so nearly met as equals," but one wishes Lindman had examined this potential for expanded authority more fully.[4]

*Bodies of Belief* will be useful for graduate-level courses on the history of religion in America, or the history of the middle colonies. It contributes to our understanding of the variegated development of evangelical religion in early America, the unique nature of the middle colonies, and the ways in which new institutions both challenged and reified traditional understandings of race and gender.

#### Notes

[1]. Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1982), 161-162. See, also, Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 184.

[2]. Jean R. Soderlund, "Women's Authority in Pennsylvania and New Jersey Quaker Meetings, 1680-1760," *William and Mary Quarterly* 44 (1987): 722-749.

[3]. Janet Moore Lindman, "Wise Virgins and Pious Mothers: Spiritual Community among Baptist Women of the Delaware Valley," in *Women and Freedom in Early America*, ed. Larry D. Eldridge (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 128.

[4]. John B. Boles, *Religion in Antebellum Kentucky* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1976), 85. See, also, Jewel L. Spangler, "Becoming Baptists: Conversion in Colonial and Early National Virginia," *Journal of Southern History* 67 (2001): 243-286, esp. 278.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-south>

**Citation:** Mary Carroll Johansen. Review of Lindman, Janet Moore. *Bodies of Belief: Baptist Community in Early America*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. November, 2009.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24318>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.