H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Stricklin. *A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest In The Twentieth Century.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999. xviii + 229 pp. $36.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2093-5.

Reviewed by Barry Hankins (J.M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies, Baylor University)
Published on H-AmRel (April, 2000)

The Southern Baptists Nobody Knew

Historian Sam Hill once referred to Southern Baptists as having a "cultural ethnicity." In *A Genealogy of Dissent* David Stricklin acts as an ethnographer, using largely oral history techniques to identify a genealogy that produced progressive dissenters within the Southern Baptist subculture. The book becomes more than just an interpretation of these dissenters, however, as Stricklin's scholarship reveals much about the Southern Baptist cultural ethnicity as a whole and why the denomination came under the dominance of its conservative wing.

Southern Baptist progressive dissenters were essentially those gadflies on the left of the denomination who constantly pestered the moderate leaders of the SBC to consider positions more radical than the SBC mainstream. The primary issues of concern were race, peace and justice,and women in ministry, topics that constitute the main chapters of Stricklin's work. These dissenters were outsiders within their own denomination. They were always more concerned with taking a prophetic stance within the larger southern culture than they were about finding their way into leadership positions within their denomination.

Stricklin shows that this network of progressive dissenters can be traced directly or indirectly back to a small group of Southern Baptist prophetic visionaries in the 1920s and 1930s. The key person, kind of the patriarch of the family, was Walt Johnson. Martin England and Clarence Jordan were directly influenced by Johnson, and they in turn influenced the likes of Foy Valentine and perhaps the most famous of the dissenters Will Campbell. In an important and instructive twist, Valentine became a key denominational insider as executive director of the SBC Christian Life Commission. Even while attempting to take the progressive vision into the denomination, there was often tension between Valentine and the other products of the geneaology. From his perspective, which exemplified moderate leadership across the denomination, the dissenters were too independent to be of much good, while from the perspective of the dissenters Valentine and other insiders had compromised themselves too much to be prophetic.

The most interesting aspect of the book comes in its last main chapter where Stricklin shows that the fundamentalists who took over the SBC in the 1980s were also dissenters. Although they had very different theological, political, and social views than the progressives, their strained relationship with the moderates and outsider status was very similar to that of their counterparts on the left. Even more significantly, both sets of dissenters wanted to change the world economically and politically, something moderates were much less likely to attempt. Stricklin makes a compelling argument that the progressives and fundamentalists, as dissenters, had more in common with each other than either had with the moderates. At the same time, however, progressives and moderates shared an antipathy for the fundamentalists. As Stricklin writes, "[P]rogressives and moderates made the same crucial mistake that they criticized the fundamentalists for making: assuming that their interpretation of the gospel was the only commendable one" (167). Hence, these three groups together coexisted in relationship with one another under the umbrella that was the old SBC.

The difference between the progressives and fundamentalists was that the fundamentalists decided to take over the denomination and thereby become its insiders. Fundamentalists were not willing to remain merely "an irritant force or a group of gadflies" (165). Progressives, by contrast, "could not or would not do what was necessary to avoid being, within the context of the denomination, irrelevant" (165). Fundamentalists succeeded because, theologically at least, they had the masses on their side. By contrast, one of the primary weaknesses of the progressives was that they failed to cultivate and maintain a strong relationship with common, less-educated Southern Baptists, even on issues such as economic jus-

tice where the progressives may have been able to lead a populist campaign for reform.

Having begun interviewing progressive dissenters back in the mid-eighties, Stricklin knows much more about them than he does the fundamentalists, which is appropriate given that the progressives are his primary subjects. The basis for his discussion of the fundamentalists comes largely from secondary sources. Had he been able to interview some of them, he may have wanted to reconsider calling them fundamentalists, given that they loath that name and prefer instead to be called simply conservatives. He is correct, however, in arguing that the conservatives succeeded in lumping together the progressives and moderates as those who had grown out of touch with grassroots Southern Baptists. As a good historian, or even anthropologist, Sticklin has spent years living and conversing with his subjects. He exhibits a clear understanding of all three groups without becoming an apologist for any of them.

I began this book anticipating that I would learn a good bit about Southern Baptist progressive dissenters. I finished the book believing that it is must reading for anyone wishing to understand what happened to the Southern Baptist Convention in the eighties and nineties and for anyone trying to come to grips with what it means, historically, to be Baptist. Stricklin makes a strong, and I believe accurate, claim when he says that the events of the takeover of the SBC by the fundamentalist dissenters of the right revealed "that the convention had outlived its days as a pluralistic body" (170). "Being Baptist," he writes, "never required the kinds of unanimity of belief that fundamentalists demanded or the silent assent to the wisdom of one clique of leaders that moderates craved. Either a split or some other form of dramatic reminder of what it meant to be Baptist was long overdue in Southern Baptist life" (170). When the split came, the moderates lost everything, the fundamentalists gained more than they could have ever hoped, and the progressives were the least affected. The progressive dissenters had merely to walk away from the SBC because they knew that once the fundamentalists were in control, the chance of nudging the the denomination in a progressive direction was completely lost. What started as a study of one small group of activists who dissented from the mainstream of their culturally-dominant religious institution, turned out to provide great insight into the mindset of the insiders who controlled that institution and the other dissenters who eventually ousted those insiders from power.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Barry Hankins. Review of Stricklin, David, *A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest In The Twentieth Century*. H-AmRel, H-Net Reviews. April, 2000.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4026

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.