

Book Review

Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture* (University of Alabama Press, 2002): 344 pp..

Hankins' book is an insightful analysis of the conservative renewal of the Southern Baptist Convention. The title of the book is a turn on Rufus Spain's 1967 sociological study of late nineteenth century Baptists as *At Ease in Zion*. The author contends that contemporary Baptists who have gained the upper hand in the SBC are best understood not as captives of Southern culture but, instead, as combatants in the culture war against secularism in America. They are *Uneasy in Babylon*. Indeed, Hankins' concluding observation is that "the cultural program" is "the glue that is holding conservatives [of various stripes] together" in the new SBC (276). Much to the chagrin of moderates, Hankins—himself a moderate academic—admits that despite "widespread fault lines" in the SBC, the "conservative movement seems to be maturing and not breaking apart" (277).

In chapter one ("Moving off the Plantation: Southern Baptist Conservatives become American Evangelicals"), Hankins traces American evangelicalism's influence upon and embrace by those who triumphed in the SBC struggle. He also cites moderate Baptist disdain for evangelicals, as evidenced in the attitude and writings of Glenn Hinson. Hankins draws special attention to the intellectual influence of northern evangelical giants Carl Henry and Francis Schaeffer on rising SBC elites like Richard Land, Al Mohler, Timothy George, and Mark Coppenger. This is especially true of their call for conservative Christianity's engagement with contemporary culture: "As the South ceased to be Zion and became more like the rest of the nation, they [the rising SBC conservatives] found in evangelicalism the weapons they needed to engage a secularizing culture that can be hostile to evangelical faith" (40). Rather than become "fundamentalist separatists" Hankins says the SBC leaders have "taken up the mantle of neoevangelical cultural critics and in some cases culture warriors" (40).

In chapter two ("'The War of the Worlds': Southern Baptist Conservatives as Culture Warriors"), the author suggests three distinct ways in which Southern Baptists have approached cultural engagement: (1) the intellectual position championed by confessional Calvinists, like Al Mohler; (2) the informed activist, seen primarily in Richard Land and the ERLC; and (3) the populist, led by high profile preachers like Adrian Rogers and James Draper. Though noting differences in these positions, Hankins observes that they all share "a perception that American culture is in decline from a formerly more moral, Judeo-Christian base, and that consequently the culture, and especially the government, have grown hostile to religion" (73). All manifest an "uneasiness" about the "the culture in which they live and minister" (73).

In chapter three ("From *Christianity Today* to *World Magazine*: Southern Baptist Conservatives Take Their Stand in Louisville"), Hankins chronicles the shift from mainstream evangelicalism to a more conservative, culture-challenging evangelicalism at the flagship Southern Baptist Seminary under the leadership of Al Mohler. Hankins

relies on first hand interviews and anecdotal accounts to shed light on the difficult transition undergone at Louisville in the 1990s as Al Mohler led the seminary faculty away from mainstream, *Christianity Today*-style evangelicals (like Timothy Weber, David Gushee, and Carey Newman), reluctantly brought on board while moderates still influenced the trustees, to more radical, activist, *World Magazine* style conservatives. The litmus test for distinguishing those who would stay at Southern and those who would leave would be the issue of the ordination of women. Hankins cites Weber's inside analysis that neither moderate nor conservative Southern Baptists understood northern evangelicals. Moderates distrusted them as fundamentalists; conservatives did not understand diversity among evangelicals on issues like the ordination of women. Hankins, however, points again to the powerful attraction "to the Henry-Schaeffer critique of America" among the SBC elite that would move them "into the right wing of evangelicalism" (106).

Having laid this preliminary groundwork, in the remainder of the book (chapters four through eight), Hankins devotes one chapter each to five seminal issues (religious liberty; church-state issues; abortion; role of women; and racism) on which Southern Baptists have taken clear stands in contradistinction to the prevailing secular culture. Highlights of the discussion, include Hankins' frequent taking of moderates to task for misunderstanding and mischaracterizing Southern Baptist conservatives, for example, as being in lockstep with the "Christian Right" or, even more egregiously, as Reconstructionists (see 107-14). The final chapter focuses on the SBC's 1995 racial reconciliation resolution. Hankins notes that this is one issue on which Southern Baptists have taken a position largely supported by the culture. He also rightly notes "that Southern Baptists are perhaps most newsworthy when they clash with culture ... than when they do something the larger culture applauds" (248).

Though written by a moderate, Hankins' work is a fair, thoughtful, and well-documented study of pivotal issues in contemporary SBC life. His provocative analysis demands to be taken seriously and will, no doubt, become a significant dialogue partner for those engaged in understanding the conservative resurgence in the SBC. Indeed, the Spring 2003 issue of *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, with the theme "Theology, Culture and the SBC," provides a thoughtful response to Hankins' book and includes a reaction article from the author. It remains to be seen if, as Hankins argues, "the culture program" will continue to hold the various conservative elements of the SBC together. One critique that might be leveled at the book is that it is primarily sociological and cultural, rather than theological, in focus. Were SBC conservatives primarily motivated by sociological and cultural influences or by doctrinal conviction? Are the fault lines that most threaten to divide Southern Baptists in the future related to cultural engagement or theological divisions along, say, Arminian and Augustinian lines?

Jeffrey T. Riddle, Charlottesville, Virginia