

Book Review

Samuel Waldron, *Baptist Roots in America: The Historical Background of Reformed Baptists in America* (Simpson Publishing, 1991).

Waldron, now Professor of Systematic Theology at the Midwest Center for Theological Studies in Owensboro, Kentucky, wrote this booklet to provide a historical context for the rise of Reformed Baptist Churches in America in the last thirty to forty years. The work has three primary chapters and a conclusion:

I. The Rise of Particular Baptists in America.

Waldron's basic thesis is that the early Baptists (pre-1900) were Calvinistic (Reformed), coming out of the English Particular Baptists movement and the Great Awakening. Their guiding confession of faith was the Second London Baptist Confession (1689), a Baptist revision of the Westminster Confession and the Savoy Declaration. This Confession was adopted (along with two extra articles) by Baptists in America in the influential Philadelphia Baptist Confession of 1742.

II. The Decline of Particular Baptists in America.

Next, Waldron asks, "What happened?" (p. 9). How did early Calvinistic Baptist churches become so doctrinally shallow and Arminian? The author traces seven major factors:

1. The American, Democratic Ethos.

"There was something in the political philosophy associated with the American Revolution which was profoundly antithetical to Calvinism. There was something in the Baptist alliance with the likes of Thomas Jefferson which did not bode well for the future" (p. 10).

2. Revivalism.

3. Methodism.

4. Inclusivism.

By this Waldron means an effort to downplay the doctrinal divide between Arminian ("free will") and Reformed Baptists.

5. Hyper-Calvinism.

The "Hard-shell" views of men like Daniel Parker (1781-1844) led to "passivism in the Christian life and the rejection of evangelistic effort" (p. 22), placing the doctrines of grace in a distorted light.

6. Modernism.

Liberalism began to creep in after the Civil War, and by the 20th century “it was a flood of heresy among Baptists” (p. 25).

7. The Fundamentalist movement.

Waldron notes three harmful tendencies here: (1) dangerous reduction of focus to a few “fundamentals” that downplayed doctrines of grace; (2) domination of Dispensational Premillennialism; (3) Kewick focus on “higher life,” a modification Wesleyan perfectionism rooted in “a Pelagianizing view of sin.”

Some of the ill byproducts here included “Easy-believism” and the teaching of “Carnal Christian Theory” (p. 28).

III. The Rise of Reformed Baptists in America.

Waldron cites the popularity of the writings of C. H. Spurgeon and A. W. Pink; the founding of Westminster Seminary; and the Banner of Truth’s reprinting of Puritan literature as influences that have led to the contemporary reclamation of the Particular Baptist tradition in America.

IV. Concluding Observations.

Waldron closes by describing “the counter-cultural character of the Reformed Baptist movement in America” (p. 41). He urges Baptists to beware the dangers of “anti-creedalism” which “opened the door to Arminianism and made it impossible to shut the door against Modernism” (p. 43). He also warns against falling into “hyper-Calvinism”: “The cult of five-pointism must be avoided” (p. 45).

Waldron notes that although Calvinists (and Calvinistic Baptists, in particular) promoted and encouraged religious liberty in America, the rise of the American democratic spirit, in turn, led to the decline of Calvinism in American Churches (Baptists included).

In his closing call for contemporary Reformed Baptist churches to be “counter-cultural” Waldron notes the exposure of “a fundamental tension between the spirit of American democracy and the spirit of Biblical Calvinism” (see pp. 41-43).

He continues: “Together with much that was good, sound, and even Biblical, there was mixed the little ‘leaven’ of a political philosophy fundamentally the same as that which spawned the French Revolution. Though long restrained and moderated by the vigorously Christian environment, in which it was planted, it blossomed in an increasingly general hostility to biblical Calvinism. Now its fruit is ripening in an America largely dominated by secular humanism and its radical separation of church and state.”

Reformed Baptists, according to Waldron, must face the fact that “they are a counter-culture.” Any insistence “on the electing grace and authoritative law of an absolutely

sovereign God must seem un-American to their neighbors! In a certain sense it will be!” He adds, “Only sovereign grace can make a 20th century American a Christian.”

Waldron concludes: “Any church, therefore, determined to preach and practice the whole counsel of God in America today must be ready for war. It must be ready to be called many things by those who believe in autonomous freedom and worship at the shrine of individual liberty! Even those who should know better may be alienated by the spirit of the age. Yet the war is not un-winnable.... The secret of winning the war is not compromise with the spirit of this age. It is uncompromising obedience to God which holds the promise of his blessing.”

Closing Reflection:

Samuel Waldron has given us some keen insights on understanding not just the state of Baptists in America but of contemporary evangelicalism in general. Every Virginia Baptist, in particular, should read this booklet. True to Waldron’s thesis, Calvinistic Virginia Baptists (born of the merger of Regular and Separate Baptists in the early 19th century) loosened their doctrinal convictions in the post Civil War era. One can clearly trace this if he goes back and reads the articles in the *Religious Herald*, the newspaper of Virginia Baptists. J. B. Jeter (1802-1880) was the last Calvinistic editor of the *Religious Herald*. With the transition to R. H. Pitt a period of doctrinal decline was hastened. Pitt used the pages of the *Herald*, for example, to speak out against the adoption of the *Baptist Faith and Message* in 1925 (the SBC answer to the fundamentalist-modernist controversy). “Freedom” became more important than “purity.” “Anti-creedalism” has subsequently led to liberalism. Waldron offers a compelling analysis of the Baptist trajectory, and a stirring challenge for faithful living in these days.

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