

Between Fetters And Freedom: African American Baptists Since Emancipation

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Recommended Citation

Byrd, James P. (2016) "Between Fetters And Freedom: African American Baptists Since Emancipation," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.4.09

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss4/4>

Review

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Fall 2016

Crowther, Edward and Harper, Keith. *Between Fetters and Freedom: African American Baptists since Emancipation.* Mercer University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 9780881465402

Baptists Remade: A New Look African American Baptists Since Emancipation

Much of what we know about African Americans in the nineteenth century comes from studies of their religious lives. Of the African Americans who were Christians, most preferred Baptist and Methodist churches for various reasons, including their “outsider” status in society, their evangelical worship practices, and their opposition to slavery, even though it was sporadic and short-lived. Over time and especially after the Civil War, African Americans shaped a unique Baptist identity that combined European and African elements. They developed state conventions, engaged in missionary work, established Sunday Schools, and supported African American educational institutions. All of this work coincided with the development of national conventions, culminating with the National Baptist Convention, USA in 1895. From that time forward, churches became centers of African American community, activism, and witness, particularly in the Civil Rights Movement. All of this information is well known. But this is only part of the story, as questions remain about the full implications of African American Baptist history. Was Christianity, or in this case the Baptist faith, primarily a force of liberation for African Americans? Or was E. Franklin Frazier correct in arguing that the black church mostly served white interests and was “responsible for the so-called backwardness of” African Americans? (3) There are also questions of theology, hymnody, and liturgy. How diverse were African American Baptist churches in their worship practices, especially compared to churches controlled by whites?

This book examines these and other questions, focusing on what it has meant to be both African American and Baptist since emancipation. As an edited

collection of essays, this book is not a comprehensive analysis of African American Baptist history. But these chapters challenge us to rethink our current understanding of Baptist history in the United States. Charles F. Irons, for example, questions the standard interpretation that the church offered African Americans an opportunity for freedom that all accepted wholeheartedly. In fact, as Irons writes, many African Americans in North Carolina refused to join black churches and continued worshipping in churches controlled by whites. The reasons were many, often hinging on the difficulties a newly freed people had in adopting to the realities of Reconstruction.

Even when these chapters do not challenge the prevailing historiography, they offer new insights from diverse perspectives. Sandy Martin persuasively analyzes the power that theological conditions wielded for African American Baptists in the Reconstruction era and beyond. As he asserted, “far from experiencing the Civil War and even the collapse of Reconstruction as an occasion for a religion of Lost Cause, African American Baptists instead held on to the convictions that God was still acting in history to liberate them spiritually and temporally” (27). In another intriguing chapter, Eric Michael Washington examined the theological concept of “Ethiopianism,” the “belief that God had decreed the redemption of Africa and included in that decree was the enslavement, emancipation, and emigration of persons of African descent in the United States” (86). This theological concept motivated African American Baptists to shape their own missionary movements and contributed to nationalist views in the National Baptist Convention, USA. We can hardly overemphasize this emphasis on mission in Baptist life. More often than not, Baptists shaped their institutions around missionary efforts and have heralded missionaries as heroic models. For Southern Baptists, Lottie Moon and Annie Armstrong became household names as the Convention associated them with Christmas and Easter offerings for missions. Often overlooked, however, is the question of how Baptist missionaries cooperated (or failed to) across racial divisions. April C. Armstrong’s essay contributes admirably to this question, focusing on the interactions between Annie Armstrong and Nannie Helen Burroughs, who founded the Women’s Convention in the NBC.

As Wayne Flynt helpfully observed in the afterword, this book is a “refreshing lens adjustment” in that it changes “our vision of an entire denominational landscape” by “focusing on lots of different details” (254). He is correct. This book challenges preconceived notions of African American Baptist history, and it does so in an insightful way. These nine chapters are well-written

and engaging narratives of personalities, events, and ideas — both inside and outside the mainstream — and together they offer a richly textured analysis of the subject. This book is a valuable read for anyone who seeks to understand Baptist history in the United States.

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