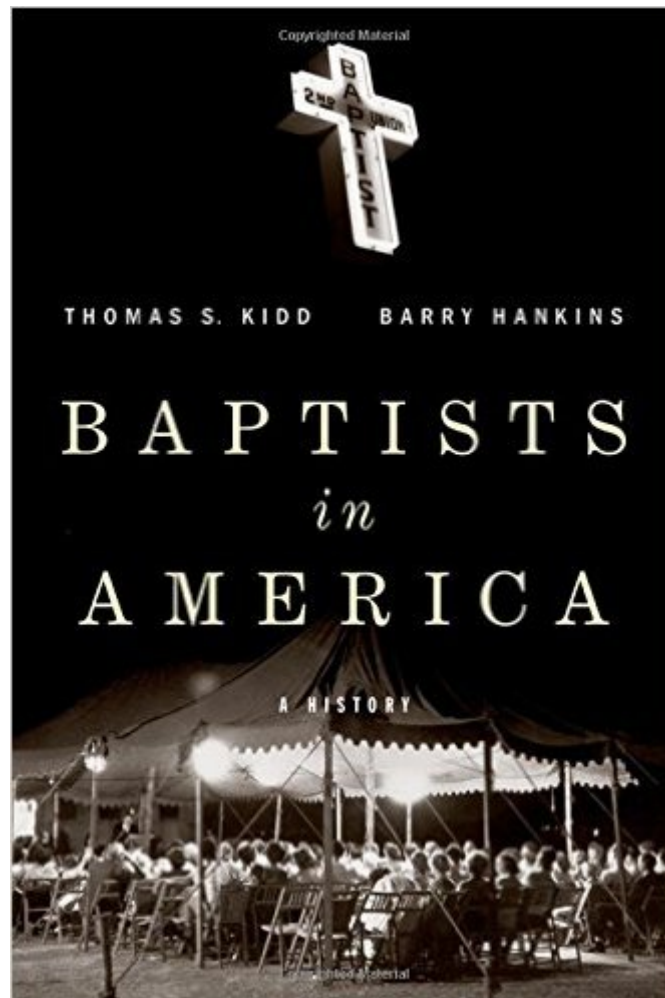


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# Baptists In America: A History



## Synopsis

The Puritans called Baptists "the troublers of churches in all places" and hounded them out of Massachusetts Bay Colony. Four hundred years later, Baptists are the second-largest religious group in America, and their influence matches their numbers. They have built strong institutions, from megachurches to publishing houses to charities to mission organizations, and have firmly established themselves in the mainstream of American culture. Yet the historical legacy of outsider status lingers, and the inherently fractured nature of their faith makes Baptists ever wary of threats from within as well as without. In *Baptists in America*, Thomas S. Kidd and Barry Hankins explore the long-running tensions between church, state, and culture that Baptists have shaped and navigated. Despite the moment of unity that their early persecution provided, their history has been marked by internal battles and schisms that were microcosms of national events, from the conflict over slavery that divided North from South to the conservative revolution of the 1970s and 80s. Baptists have made an indelible impact on American religious and cultural history, from their early insistence that America should have no established church to their place in the modern-day culture wars, where they frequently advocate greater religious involvement in politics. Yet the more mainstream they have become, the more they have been pressured to conform to the mainstream, a paradox that defines--and is essential to understanding--the Baptist experience in America. Kidd and Hankins, both practicing Baptists, weave the threads of Baptist history alongside those of American history. *Baptists in America* is a remarkable story of how one religious denomination was transformed from persecuted minority into a leading actor on the national stage, with profound implications for American society and culture.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

From seed form in the first colonies, to peak-Baptist in the late 1980s, for better or for worse, the Baptist influence in America cannot be denied. Surprisingly, following the Baptist thread of American history provides an amazingly instructive perspective for understanding the development of America, from its initial stage consisting of multiple officially Christian British colonies to its present stage of consolidated power and avowed religious neutrality. From Roger Williams's encounter with the fledgling Massachusetts Bay Colony in the early 1600s, to Russell Moore in 2015, "Baptists in America" engagingly covers it all. Especially refreshing and enlightening is the bold commentary generously interjected by the authors, which keeps the history relevant and alive from beginning to end. I thoroughly tested the highlighting limits of my Kindle app! Baptists in America is a highly rewarding read.

I am particularly interested in the history of Christianity in America. I've written quite a bit and lectured extensively on this topic over the past few years. So, I was very excited to see that one of my favorite historians, Thomas Kidd, had a new work titled Baptists in America. I was less familiar with Barry Hankins (the book's co-author), but he and Kidd made an excellent team. I intend to read more from Hankins in the coming months. I love that Kidd and Hankins take great care to attach important moments in baptist history to historically noteworthy instances in American history. This is very helpful in aiding the reader to situate baptist history in its larger, contextual, setting. I commend the authors for being (in my opinion) very fair in the appraisal of controversial moments in baptist history. I would note that their handling of the conservative resurgence was well-written and gracious. One feature of the book that is especially timely is the discussion of the baptist emphasis on religious liberty. I think most readers will find this segment of the book quite useful. As debates over the role of religion continue in our country, it is a nice reminder that baptists have always stood for religious liberty. Baptists in America is an excellent text. I would strongly encourage all baptists, history buffs, church historians, and general readers alike to add this book to your summer reading list. Great work by Thomas Kidd and Barry Hankins.

Baptists are not the most homogenous group. This could make writing readable histories about them a significant challenge. In this volume, Kidd and Hankins provide a quality, readable, and

engaging story. If you have read David Bebbington's *Baptists through the Centuries: a History of a Global People*, you will find this volume fits with it like a puzzle, providing the American "zoom in" that was not possible in Bebbington's broader work. If you are looking for a book to bolster your personal Baptist polemics, this is not that book. It is even and thorough, a quality telling of the Baptist story. If you are a Baptist in America (whatever flavor), you will find your own history in the pages of this book.

Excellent! Learned so much about my denomination. Great information and a lot of detail. Despite all the ups and downs, still glad to be a Baptist in America! Great collaboration by both of our Baylor Professors.

From outcasts and outsiders, to power brokers and insiders, Baptists in America have run the gamut. Baptist historians Thomas Kidd and Barry Hankins have described that gamut in *Baptists in America: A History*. From the pre-colonial era right up to the 21st century, Kidd and Hankins examine the character, theology, and role of Baptists in American history. The first half of the history of Baptists in America made me proud to call myself a Baptist. We all know that many of the early colonists came to America for religious freedom. What is often forgotten is that some of them only wanted freedom for their own kind; Baptists were excluded from enjoying that freedom. Some New England Baptists wondered "whether their liberties were safer under the king of England than under colonial authorities." Baptists were imprisoned, beaten, and forbidden from meeting. They were compelled to pay taxes to support state churches. Yet as the colonies won their independence from England, the Baptists' insistence on religious liberty won the day. Other parts of the history of Baptists in America gave me mixed feelings about being a Southern Baptist. In the growing nation, slavery became a more and more contested issue. Southern Baptists eventually split off from their northern brethren. They unconscionably defended slavery using scripture. They believed that slavery was sometimes an occasion for sin, but that the institution itself was OK. In spite of this terrible oversight (not exclusive to Baptists, of course), the Southern Baptists retained a more Orthodox theological position, in contrast to their counterparts up north, who succumbed to the liberal influences of the Social Gospel and higher criticism. The final portion of *Baptists in America* reminded me why I no longer attend a Southern Baptist church. Mirroring the earlier conflicts over higher criticism, Southern Baptists in the late 20th century began narrowing the definition of Baptist, and actively excluding those who did not fit the bill. Kidd and Hankins give a nice summary history of this period of Southern Baptist life, but I felt like they were too kind to the movement. The witch hunt

mentality, the outright lies that were told, the careers that were derailed, not the mention the institutions that were weakened and the personal relationships that were destroyed, all set in motion a further dissembling and weakening of the Southern Baptist Convention. This controversy led, in part, to my departure from the SBC, as well as many other Baptists. I wish they would have covered a parallel controversy, which also played a role in many Baptists' departure for other churches. I found it interesting that, according to Kidd and Hankins, some of the early Baptist movements in America were accompanied by signs and wonders and spiritual manifestations. At some point along the way, however, Baptists became cessationists, claiming that manifestation gifts (tongues, healing, words of knowledge) were only practiced during the apostolic age and are no longer valid. About the same time the witch hunt for "liberals" was in force in the SBC, a charismatic movement was sweeping through American denominations, including Baptists. While a few churches embraced the movement, the Convention as a whole rejected it, calling home (firing) missionaries and other denominational workers who were reputed to be exercising these gifts. I wondered what Kidd and Hankins might say about this, but it wasn't addressed. (Perhaps my personal experience has inflated in my mind the importance of this expression of Baptist life!) Kidd and Hankins's overall theme is compelling. Baptists have, in just a few hundred years, progressed from being a tiny, persecuted minority, to being a huge, diverse, and powerful force in the global church and in American life as a whole. Yet at the heart of Baptist life is a feeling of outsider status. While few Baptists hold to the Landmarkian belief that only their little strain of Baptists are true Christians, Baptists tend stubbornly to believe their way is the right way (as evidenced by the countless schisms among Baptists as they disagree about what the right way really is). I enjoyed Kidd and Hankins's readable, engaging history. *Baptists in America* follows the contours of Baptist life, and is chock full of anecdote after anecdote of the activities of our Baptist forebears. I had some seminars with Hankins as student at Baylor and remember well the passion for engaging his subject; that passion comes through in *Baptists in America*. (I don't know Kidd, but I suspect he shares Hankins's passion and engagement.) Kidd and Hankins conclude that there is little that defines what a Baptist is, other than "evangelism and schism." They write, "Historically, a Baptist church is a local body of baptized believers who come together and call themselves Baptist." I would think that many churches (like my own) who have eschewed denominational labels would trace their roots to Baptist denominations and would still be included in the Baptist family. Even though the word Baptist is nowhere found on my church sign, and even though my church doesn't participate in any Baptist denominational life, Kidd and Hankins have reminded me that perhaps I am still a Baptist after all. Thanks to NetGalley and the publisher for the complimentary electronic review copy!

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