



Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention

Nancy Ammerman

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Since 1979 Southern Baptists have been noisily struggling to agree on symbols, beliefs, and practices as they attempt to make sense of their changing social world. Nancy Ammerman has carefully documented their struggle. She tells the story of the Baptist reversal from a moderate to a fundamentalist outlook and speculates on the future of the denomination.

Ammerman places change among the Southern Baptists in the context of the cultural and economic changes that have transformed the South from its rural past into an urbanizing, culturally diverse region. Not only did the South change; Southern Baptists did as well. Reflecting this diversity, the Southern Baptist bureaucracy was relatively progressive. During the 1960s and 1970s, moderate sentiments prevailed, while fundamentalists remained on the margins. These two were, however, becoming increasingly divergent in what they considered important about being a Baptist, in their views about the Bible, in their attitudes on the origination of women, on Christian morals, and on national politics.

Late in the 1970s, a fundamentalist coalition emerged, followed by unsuccessful efforts by moderates to oppose it. The battles escalated until 1985, when 45,000 Baptists gathered in Dallas to decide between contending presidential candidates. That dramatic event illustrated the extent to which organized political resources were determining the course of the conflict. Ammerman studies these strategies and resources as well.

Examining how this tension affected Baptists, Ammerman begins with case studies of the change it is producing in Baptist agencies. But she also brings us back to the local churches and individual believers who are renegotiating their relationships within their denomination. She asks whether the denomination's polity can accommodate an increasingly diverse group of Baptists, of whether the only way dissidents can have a voice is through schism.

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