

Stephen Wright. *The Early English Baptists, 1603–1649*.

Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, Inc., 2006. x + 278 pp. index. append. bibl. \$105. ISBN: 978-1-84383-319-52.

In Stephen Wright's *The Early English Baptists, 1603–1649* we have a well-documented historical reassessment of the place these believers held in the early Stuart era. Acknowledging that there are meager extant documents for the earliest of the Baptists, he does a masterful job of using works from hostile witnesses and various letters and court records to assemble a vibrant perspective. Here we can see the individual conscience of men like John Smyth and Thomas Helwyn developing their own particular understanding of baptism. The Baptists were to develop a radical political stance in opposition to the Church of England's compulsion on issues of spiritual import.

While showing the religious and political aspects of the movement in general, the individual development of theology lends this a more personal tone. We can see how figures such as Smyth and Helwyn came to formulate their religious attitudes as they interacted not only with scriptural texts but with other Englishmen. The intricacies of the ritual and theology behind baptism are manifold and Wright does assume some prior knowledge on the subject. With that one caveat he follows a close chronology that shows how the English Baptists progressed in their methods of ritual. In addition, he demonstrates how the changes within the Church of England brought about by Archbishop Laud gave room for the Baptists to grow.

Most telling is Wright's challenge to the interpretation of the Stinton document. A series of appendices are included to fine tune his arguments. His close reading brings in question assumptions that have influenced the history of the English Baptists, ranging from questionable dating to the conflating of terms. One of the assumptions has been the Dutch connection that Wright reasonably undermines by examining the name of "Jan Batten of Leyden." He argues that he was not a Dutchman, but an English Baptist, Timothy Batte.

With the onset of conflict between king and Parliament, Wright shows how the Baptists entered more and more into the political sphere. Though their unorthodox views were given freer rein with the dismantling of the institution of the Church of England, they recognized with other more mainstream sects that there needed to be some oversight of religion. By removing a body that controlled religious interpretations, the English had unleashed a tide of individualized theologies that threatened stability.

As he notes, the alliance of the Baptists with Independents and Presbyterians was short-lived. Further, Wright believes that the main political idea that not only granted political action but encouraged individuals to seek such a redress for persecution was something Thomas Lambe did not learn from prior Baptists such as Helwys and Murton. Rather, these views fit into a large political tradition that influenced the development of English Radicalism in which the Baptists played a significant role. By focusing on the church of Lambe, Wright shows how its doctrine could be linked with the hopes of the middling sort. The rejection of

humanity's inherent brutality and the emphasis on the ability to employ critical thought in particular when dealing with civil matters accorded well with this group. In addition, their disdain of clerical pretensions distanced them from both Independents and Presbyterians. This would allow them to be heard within the Parliamentary army and raises the question of the Baptists' role in Ireland, which calls for more research.

This overall connection of religion and politics is part of the fluid and multilayered life of the early Stuart era. As he aptly notes, English Baptists "aligned and realigned" themselves, thus highlighting shift of political and social factors during the period. Wright's account also points out that this was a time when scripture was used to define political action and personal exegesis increased the intersection of the community and the individual. His work will hopefully lead to further studies of the early English Baptists.

WILLIAM REDNOUR

City College of New York