Baptist Book Review

Readings in Baptist History: Four Centuries of Selected Documents Compiled by Joseph Early Jr.

By Laurence M. Vance, Ph.D.

The preface to this collection of documents doesn't begin well. Joseph Early Jr. is assistant professor of religion at the University of the Cumberlands in Kentucky, a liberal arts university affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. He holds degrees from three Southern Baptist schools. It is not surprising, therefore, that he begins his preface with a statement that the "Baptist denomination" was born in 1609. The noted Southern Baptist historian John T. Christian would disagree.

Another negative thing about this book is considered by the author to be a positive: "I have added no introductory comments that might color the interpretation of the documents." Although that is always a possibility, I still think that this common practice should not be abandoned, especially since Early provides no general introduction to the document collection, just a brief preface.

The standard collections of Baptist confessions of faith (and sometimes other related documents) are *Confessions of Faith, and Other Public Documents, Illustrative of the History of the Baptist Churches of England in the 17th Century*, edited by Edward Bean Underhill (Han-

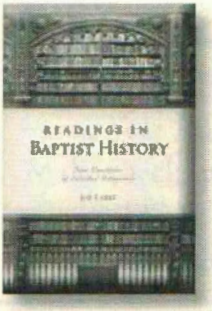
serd Knollys Society, 1854); *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, edited by W. J. McGlothlin (American Baptist Publication Society, 1911); and *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, edited by William L. Lumpkin (Judson Press, 1959, 1969). More recently there are *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, edited by H. Leon McBeth (Broadman & Holman, 1990) and *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms*, edited by Timothy and Denise George (Broadman & Holman, 1999).

Readings in Baptist History is not a collection of Baptist confessions of faith. It is a compilation of forty-one documents related to Baptist history. Actually, a few of the selections consist of multiple documents on the same subject. In spite of its aforementioned faults, it is an important supplement to the collections of Underhill, McGlothlin, Lumpkin, and George—but not McBeth, as will be explained below. This is mainly because only one complete document in this compilation can be found elsewhere: "A Declaration of the Faith of English People Remaining in Amsterdam in Holland, 1611" also appears in Underhill, McGlothlin, Lumpkin, and McBeth. The documents in this book of readings are arranged in chronological order. There are subject and Scripture indexes. The antiquated language of some of the documents has been updated "to aid the modern reader's comprehension." British spelling has been changed to American orthography. The sources of all the readings are given in full.

There is tremendous variety in Early's selections. He includes documents concerning controversies among Baptists over Calvinism, slavery, Landmarkism, and J. Frank Norris. There are several documents relating to liberty of conscience. Some of the documents are actually selections from books: John Gill's *A Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, Ben M. Bogard's *The Baptist Way Book*, and J. M. Carroll's *The*

Trail of Blood. The three different editions of the *Baptist Faith and Message* (1925, 1963, 2000) are compared in parallel columns.

Indispensable for students of Baptist history are the aforementioned works of Lumpkin and McBeth (but not his history book [*The Baptist Heritage*], other than to get a modern Southern Baptist view of Baptist history). Of Early's forty-one selections in *Readings in Baptist History*, thirty-four are found (usually in whole but sometimes in part) in McBeth's much more valuable work *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*. At 281 pages, and with relatively brief documents, Early's compilation of documents appears to be better suited for classroom use.



Joseph Early, ed., *Readings in Baptist History: Four Centuries of Selected Documents* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2008), $19.99, www.BHPublishingGroup.com.