

James Slatton, *W.H. Whitsitt: The Man and the Controversy* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2009).

On the first day of classes at Southern Seminary this term I picked up James Slatton's *W.H. Whitsitt: The Man and the Controversy* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2009). I read it all the way through within a couple of days. As a book it is generally well crafted, well researched, and is a fascinating read. But what shocked me deeply were the revelations about the thinking of William Heth Whitsitt (1841-1911), the third President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

I had always believed that the major reason for his departure from the Seminary presidency in 1899 was simply tied to his convictions about Particular Baptist origins in the seventeenth century that ran counter to the beliefs of prominent Landmarkists at the time in the Southern Baptist Convention. But what the book reveals is that although Whitsitt made public statements of devotion to the Baptist cause, he had significant doubts about Christianity and Baptist polity and doctrine that he kept private in what Slatton calls "the secret diary," a record of events and thought that has only recently been made available.

Whitsitt was somewhat dispassionate about the possible future collapse of Christianity in a way that would have shocked many of his fellow Baptists (p.108-109). He looked forward to a day when both immersion and closed communion would be dispensed with by Baptists (p.113)—a clear violation of *The Abstract of Principles* which he had signed as a teaching fellow of the seminary. While admitting that he was "in some sort a Calvinist," he was wary of "theories" that, he said, "out-Calvin Calvin." In the end, he denied the perseverance of the saints (p.150), a doctrine also clearly taught in *The Abstract of Principles*. His sympathy with Crawford Howell Toy (1836-1919), whose embrace of German liberal theology compelled him to leave the seminary in 1879, is also very evident and appears to be more than personal (pp.73-86). "Everything," he affirmed on one occasion, "is open to criticism. No opinions, or creed, or system, is exempt" (p.42).

Also shocking was his attitude towards James Petigru Boyce, the first President of the seminary. In his diary he did not hesitate to call him a "dunderhead" (p.117), one of his favorite terms of abuse (see also p.115). "A very uninteresting person," he once described him (p.84). Whitsitt was convinced that "there is scarcely to be met with anywhere a more preposterous person" (p.114; for a similar critique, see also p.130). Boyce was simply a man who was "ridiculous" (p.122). When Boyce was dying in France in 1888, Whitsitt admitted, "I feel a thrill of regret in view of

the early departure of my old enemy” (p.140), and confessed to some admiration of Boyce and that he was “a great man in some respects” (pp.140, 143). He was also critical of Basil Manly, Jr. another of the Founders of the seminary (p.121), and, even on occasion John A. Broadus (p.122), though he did respect the latter for his preaching abilities (see, for example, p.129).

Whitsitt has become something of a poster boy for freedom in scholarship. The commendatory blurbs at the beginning of the book speak of his courageous stand for academic freedom, a stand verging almost on martyrdom! A courageous martyr for truth? To be sure, his defence of Particular Baptist origins is one that numerous Baptist scholars, both conservative and liberal, have adopted. But my impression in the end was not along these lines. Rather, I came away from the reading of this biography with the impression that Whitsitt was habitually critical of pretty well everyone he met, and arrogant and petty in the way he put them down privately. It is also seems evident that he dissembled to some degree when he came to sign *The Abstract of Principles*—hardly the mark of a man courageous for truth!

A second edition of the book needs to address problems in the index. Most of the page references are off by a couple of pages or more.

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