

# A Review of James H. Slatton's *W. H. Whitsitt: The Man and the Controversy*

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**J**AMES H. SLATTON. *W. H. Whitsitt: The Man and the Controversy*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009. 348 pp. + xviii. Illustrations. \$40.00.

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William H. Whitsitt (1841-1911), the third president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, was one of the most controversial figures in Southern Baptist history. His beliefs and actions precipitated a four-year controversy that threatened permanently to injure the seminary or to divide the convention.

Whitsitt was also one of the most important figures in Southern Baptist history. The failure of his crusade for freedom established the fact that Southern Baptists were determined to control their denominational institutions,

especially the seminary. In response, denomina-

tional progressives developed indirect strategies of reform. For much of the twentieth century Whitsitt became for progressive Southern Baptists the inspiring symbol of their quest to enlighten and modernize Southern Baptists.

Slatton's biography is a good introduction to Whitsitt's life and to the controversy he precipitated in 1896, but it deserves close attention especially because it uncovers for the first time the contents of Whitsitt's secret journals. The sixteen-volume set, and an important manuscript containing the edited correspondence of Whitsitt to his wife, are held under seal by the Virginia Baptist Historical Society at the University of Richmond. Whitsitt's heirs gave Slatton permission to use these materials to produce this book. Oddly, the journals remain sealed, even though this book reveals their essential content and character, and no good purpose can be served by keeping them sealed.

Slatton relies heavily on these materials, and on the Whitsitt collection at the Library of Virginia,

to tell Whitsitt's story. Whitsitt early identified with J. R. Graves and his Landmark Baptist movement—Graves preached at Whitsitt's ordination. But Whitsitt's experiences with non-Landmark Baptists during the war, and as a student at the University of Virginia and at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, helped convince him that Landmark views were incorrect. In 1872, after his return from two years of study in Germany, he began his career as a professor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Whitsitt quickly became dissatisfied with Southern Baptists. The fundamental source of the dissatisfaction was apparently the fact that so many Southern Baptists seemed to prefer the leadership of poorly educated demagogues to that of educated and cultured men. He finally resolved to remain a Southern Baptist in order to reform the denomination.

The reform that the denomination needed was to become intelligent, educated, and efficient. The main obstacle was the popularity of Landmarkism. Whitsitt aimed therefore to rid the denomination of Landmarkism. He characterized the movement as a new Roman Catholicism, and viewed his effort to destroy it as a new Protestant Reformation. He would lead Baptists to become truly Protestant.

Whitsitt conducted historical research aimed at undermining Landmark claims. His most direct assault came in a series of anonymous articles published in New York's *Independent* in 1880. In these articles Whitsitt argued that the early English Baptists did not immerse until 1641, and that Roger Williams, who was baptized in 1639, therefore could not have been immersed. This was significant because Landmarkers held that the validity of baptism and the validity of the churches depended on an unbroken succession of immersion baptisms extending in perfect continuity to the apostles. Whitsitt repeated his arguments in an 1893 encyclopedia article.

Shortly after Whitsitt became president of Southern Seminary in 1895, Landmarkers began

criticizing Whitsitt's historical arguments. They then discovered that Whitsitt was the author of the 1880 articles. Whitsitt made it worse when he said that he had written the articles "from a pedobaptist standpoint." He quickly lost the trust of Southern Baptists, including a large number of non-Landmarkers. He resigned as president and professor in 1899. He afterward taught philosophy at the University of Richmond until his death in 1911.

If Whitsitt could drive out Landmarkism, perhaps the denomination would be ready for a more enlightened approach to the faith. Whitsitt in fact sympathized with the emerging liberalism, though he acknowledged that orthodoxy possessed some truth (126). He hoped to reform the denomination toward a more progressive faith, but believed that this would take time. Liberalism had advanced through the recent "progress of many stirring events in the Christian church" (109), and "its time will come but not yet" (126). He viewed Christianity as the "best religion" but was untroubled at the real prospect of its future "disintegration" (108-09).

Outwardly however Whitsitt professed his complete adherence to traditional evangelical orthodoxy and Baptist principles. He kept his progressive sympathies to himself. Southern Baptists were so hostile to progressive ideas, Whitsitt believed, that open expression of progressive views would result in his crucifixion. The journals uncover Whitsitt's remarkable secret life.

In the journals, for example, Whitsitt characterized the temperance movement as "insanity" (126). Those who promoted it were "fanatics" and "Bedlamites" (111). But in public he was careful to insinuate his support for temperance in order "to keep out of the clutches of the fanatics. . . . It is lawful to employ expedients to allay the ferocity of insane people. Whatever I may do or say in any temperance emergency may be explained by reference to this policy" (126).

He sneered at the prejudices of the "evangelical public" who would not tolerate enlightened opinions (110). Baptists especially were "poor silly

creatures” and “stupid blockheads,” given to “preposterous literalism” and to “logical stupidity and sectarian arrogance” (112-14). He judged that Baptists were mistaken in ascribing authority to apostolic practices. There was “no good reason” for their insistence on immersion baptism and on baptism as a prerequisite to participation in the Lord’s Supper (113). Outwardly he professed complete sympathy with Baptist principles.

Whitsitt professed outwardly great respect and affection for his seminary colleagues, but he secretly despised them. He thought Boyce, who was one of the most effective leaders Southern Baptists have ever known, “such a dunderhead” as was “rarely ever known” (117). To enlightened progressives, any person who retained traditional orthodoxy was nearly by definition a dunderhead.

He acknowledged some ability in Broadus alone, though he pitied condescendingly Broadus’s “physical defects,” which amounted to an “ungainly figure” who walked with a “rapid hitch” that was a “spectacle to watch” (122). When Broadus stood with Boyce against Toy and in favor of the traditional view of inspiration, Whitsitt believed that Broadus should have supported Toy. He thought that Broadus and Boyce conspired to dupe Toy into resigning and that Broadus merely feigned grief at Toy’s departure. Since Whitsitt apparently sympathized with Toy’s views, he thereafter distrusted Broadus (82-84).

He considered Basil Manly Jr., one of Southern Baptists’ most effective institution builders, a “bungler” in everything he attempted (116). He considered Toy, whose scholarship was sufficiently impressive to his Harvard colleagues, to be a “man of common caliber” with an “average” mind (85). He was “ashamed” of A. T. Robertson’s inaugural address (159). He was embarrassed by his colleagues’ mediocrity.

His contempt derived largely from his conviction of his own superiority. He complained that Toy “enjoyed higher success than I have though I consider him but an ordinary mind” and that Boyce “obtained a far superior station though I

can see hardly any but ridiculous features about him” (122). When his salary remained lower than those of his older colleagues, he became bitter because it implied his inferiority (116).

The most startling feature of Whitsitt’s secret journals does not consist in the contemptuous criticisms of his colleagues—most are facially discreditable, based on self-interested speculation and misanthropic prejudice. The most startling feature consists rather in Whitsitt’s unembarrassed sense of superiority, an arrogance unencumbered by self-consciousness or self-criticism. He entertained no doubts regarding his judgments of his colleagues or his own superiority.

He felt that he had heroically suffered many indignities. The backwardness of Southern Baptists had forced him to hide his enlightened opinions, to endure subordination to his inferior colleagues, and to resign from his position of honor in the denomination. He had complete conviction that history would vindicate him. The secret journals served finally as a plea for vindication.

Like all books, *W. H. Whitsitt: The Man and the Controversy* has its shortcomings. It fails to evaluate Whitsitt’s opinions and interpretations. Whitsitt’s is nearly the only voice. Attention to the writings and correspondence of Boyce, Broadus, Robertson, Dargan, and Eaton, and to important secondary sources, would afford a reasonable basis for historical evaluation. Its chronological treatment of material in the diaries produces a disorganized arrangement of subjects and impedes the development of a coherent story. The reader is thus left alone to piece together the patterns, ironies, and errors of Whitsitt’s life.

Readers should be aware that the index is inaccurate—most entries occur in the text one to two pages later than the index indicates.

Despite the shortcomings, the book provides an important service and deserves careful attention. It enriches and alters the historiography on Whitsitt. Among other things, it reveals that the Whitsitt of memory is not the Whitsitt of history.