James Patterson’s study on the life of J. R. Graves is more than a recounting of a historical figure – it is a lesson in historiography. Patterson’s account of the man who made his mark by setting Baptist boundary markers is written clearly enough for the layperson to enjoy and yet it includes critical reflections that will educate even the professional historian. This combination of crystal clarity and intellectual heft enables the story of Graves to be appreciated by those living within earshot of Landmark churches while at the same time refusing the legacy of Graves to be hijacked by those who equate any form of separation with separatism (197-199).

Due to the absence of personal papers or private diaries left behind by Graves, Patterson’s work is admittedly more thematic than biographical in nature (xv). Thus the details of his early life, including his birth in 1820 and the death of his father that same year, his conversion and baptism in 1834, his licensure and ordination in 1842, along with his marriage and move to Tennessee in 1845, are all woven into the larger story of ecclesiological developments in the pre-SBC era. By the time Graves turned 25 years old, Patterson notes, the groundwork of Baptist dissent had already been laid by Isaac Backus; the idea of Baptist localism had been promoted by Francis Wayland; and the notion of Baptist boundary marking had recently formed in reaction to Alexander Campbell (7-29).

Graves’s next 17 years in Nashville were the most momentous according to Patterson, since it was during this time that he became editor of the Tennessee Baptist, the vehicle through which Graves promoted his Landmark perspective. Patterson observes that Graves was controversial from the beginning, envisioning himself as a “watchman on the wall” stationed to warn God’s people of imminent danger (43). That he had mettle for the task became clear
as he openly targeted the causes of Baptist distress – namely, the theological encroachment of Paedobaptists, Roman Catholics and Restorationists. Graves not only held a view of the church contrary to that of the aforementioned groups, he also adopted a contrarian perspective in light of their presence: “There, where several denominations aggressively competed for adherents in a pluralistic setting, he brazenly staked out the lines that separated Baptists from their rivals” (3).

In addition to describing how Graves interpreted the Bible’s teaching on the church, Patterson explores why Graves understood the Bible as he did. His emphasis on the local church to the exclusion of the universal church coalesced nicely with the political currents of his day, where individualism was not merely cherished but prized in such a way that even hierarchical church structures were seen as a threat to republican government (86-89). This double-edged concern enabled Graves to double-down on his warnings about wolves in sheep’s clothing while at the same time providing him with the added bonus of promoting Baptists as the true church. Graves conveniently cited their record of defending religious liberty as that which breathed life into the American experiment (93).

Patterson further describes how Graves’s “unequivocal penchant for stirring up religious controversy” contributed to disputes among Baptists, in particular his public feud with R. B. C. Howell, the pastor-statesman who had first opened the pastoral and editorial doors for Graves (123-128). Their clash was prompted by Howell’s return to First Baptist Church, Nashville, and was ignited by disagreements over the newly formed Southern Baptist Sunday School Union, a Landmark leaning agency. The competing visions between these two larger than life personalities typified the ongoing struggle for Southern Baptist identity, which included the question of denominational mission entities and the binding authority of local church discipline (150-154).

Although Southern Baptists eventually took a different path than the one advocated by Graves, his impact was felt in many areas, including pulpit affiliation, alien immersion, and closed communion (174). Patterson also details the lingering but waning influence
of Graves’s legacy through issues like the Whitsitt controversy and the establishment of the Cooperative Program, both of which ultimately undercut Graves’s successionist claims and isolationist tendencies (191-196).

Patterson concludes his study with the following observation: “The problem was not that he set borders for Baptist faith and practice, for that legitimate enterprise has been an ongoing one since the early seventeenth century. Graves’s shortcoming was that he ultimately skewed some of those boundaries because he relied on flawed historical markers” (203). Patterson’s judgment can be viewed as definitive, coming as it does from one so well-versed in the writing of history.

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