7-3-2018

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Abstract
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Keywords
In All Things, book review, Demanding Liberty, United States, religion, freedom, Brandon J. O'Brien

Disciplines
Christianity

Comments
*In All Things* is a publication of the Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College.

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The Past Speaks to the Present: A Review of “Demanding Liberty”

Scott Culpepper

Title: *Demanding Liberty: An Untold Story of American Religious Freedom*
Author: Brandon J. O’Brien
Publisher: Intervarsity Press
Publish Date: April 24, 2018
Pages: 192 pages (Paperback)
ISBN: 978-0830845286

The idea behind *Demanding Liberty* excites me. Like most Christian historians, I long to see important Christian leaders from the past receive the popular attention they deserve today. Christians remain shockingly ignorant of their own past, and we need what Brandon O’Brien offers here. While there are some ways O’Brien might have served us better in the fulfillment of his project, the overall tone and content of *Demanding Liberty* delivers the solid biographical treatment of Isaac Backus that O’Brien promises while also delving into timeless questions regarding religious freedom.

O’Brien, who serves as Director of Content for Redeemer City to City in Manhattan, brings a pastoral tone to his historical topic. He also communicates in a manner familiar to millennials by posing his own questions as the starting point of his historical journey. This style strikes the academic historian like fingernails scraping across a chalkboard, an analogy that probably would not resonate with the audience that O’Brien is trying to reach. It is an adaptation to contemporary culture that is difficult for me to accept. On the one hand, O’Brien frames his study in a way that draws the reader in because he uses history to address contemporary questions, surely one of the main reasons we study history. On the other hand, such an approach can tend toward the utilitarian and
the narcissistic. If not done with care, we may bend our interpretation of history to meet our own questions, losing sight of the reality that the historical personalities we study may not have had the same questions we do—or, they couched them in entirely different ways than we do. O’Brien gains immediacy and intimacy by adopting this style; however, he runs the risk of projecting our own world into the past by offering case studies at the beginning of each chapter, which are meant to connect the theme of that chapter with current issues. Sometimes the connection that is forged is clear and makes sense; other times it feels a little strained and very open to interpretation.

The narrative of Isaac Backus’ life in *Demanding Liberty* proves fascinating and even entertaining. O’Brien explored Backus’ early life and conversion with the keen sympathy of a pastor and the curiosity of a scholar. He does well in regard to setting Backus firmly in his eighteenth century historical context and connecting his story with the broader trends of the period. As an academic historian, I appreciate O’Brien’s obvious familiarity with the secondary literature on this period of American history. I can recognize the work of Thomas Kidd, John Fea, Nathan Hatch, and Amanda Porterfield in his discussion of colonial and revolutionary American culture. All of these sources can be found in his notes and, since one purpose of the book is to introduce the uninitiated to Backus, it might be helpful for O’Brien to include an accessible list of secondary sources in the next edition to encourage readers to explore the scholarship produced by historians. Much of that work is very readable and would serve well to guide O’Brien’s readers to a deeper exploration of the themes he summarizes. O’Brien’s command of the primary sources strengthens the book in every way. He has lived with Backus for a while and intimately knows his mind and heart through his writings. The quotations from Backus, especially from his journal, serve as a reminder that Backus was a man with little formal education who thought deeply and made an indelible impact on his world.

The injustice of the congregational establishment in colonial and early republican New England stands revealed in all its infamy as O’Brien chronicles the indignities suffered by dissenters like Backus. The imprisonment of his mother Elizabeth appears often in accounts of his life, but O’Brien relates it and other stories of persecution with an empathy that make the reader feel the oppressiveness of the atmosphere. When making their arguments for religious liberty, one of the disappointing tendencies of some Christian writers and historians is that they fail to note that persecution for religious views in American history generally involved one Christian group persecuting another. Secular inquisitions that target Christians have become stuff of myth and paranoia rather than reality in American history. However, O’Brien faces this ugly truth boldly and as a faithful Christian who recognizes that Christians are not perfect or always on the right side of history.
Brandon O’Brien’s *Demanding Liberty* reintroduces us to a forgotten hero who deserves to be remembered and emulated. Isaac Backus found the courage through his faith and earnest conviction to pursue religious liberty for all Americans. He was willing to work with Deists and anyone else who would help to ensure that all Americans could choose to either worship God or not based on the dictates of their conscience rather than the demands of the majority. In these days of hyper-partisanship, it is important to be reminded that we can only secure freedom for ourselves when we secure it for all. Brandon O’Brien achieves this and more in his excellent popular biography of Isaac Backus. I recommend it for your reading pleasure as we prepare to celebrate our nation’s birth.