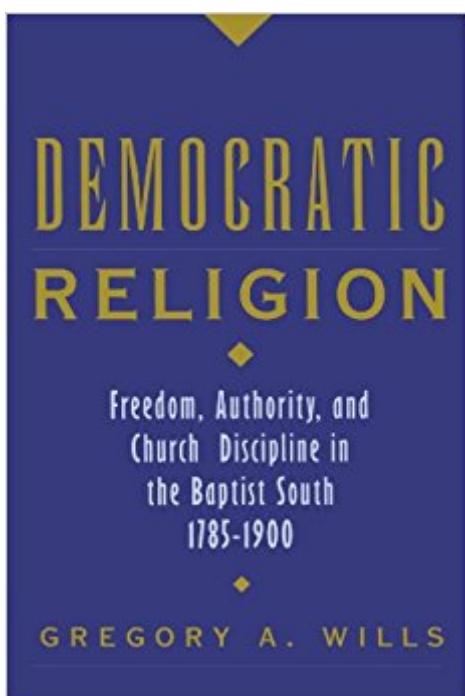


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# Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, And Church Discipline In The Baptist South, 1785-1900 (Religion In America)



## **Synopsis**

No American denomination identified itself more closely with the nation's democratic ideal than the Baptists. Most antebellum southern Baptist churches allowed women and slaves to vote on membership matters and preferred populists preachers who addressed their appeals to the common person. Paradoxically no denomination could wield religious authority as zealously as the Baptists. Between 1785 and 1860 they ritually excommunicated forty to fifty thousand church members in Georgia alone. Wills demonstrates how a denomination of freedom-loving individualists came to embrace an exclusivist spirituality--a spirituality that continues to shape Southern Baptist churches in contemporary conflicts between moderates who urge tolerance and conservatives who require belief in scriptural inerrancy. Wills's analysis advances our understanding of the interaction between democracy and religious authority, and will appeal to scholars of American religion, culture, and history, as well as to Baptist observers.

## **Book Information**

Series: Religion in America

Paperback: 208 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press (March 13, 2003)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0195160991

ISBN-13: 978-0195160994

Product Dimensions: 9.2 x 0.8 x 5.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars 8 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #517,862 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #119 in Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Christian Denominations & Sects > Protestantism > Baptist #1305 in Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Linguistics #1533 in Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Religious Studies > Christianity

## **Customer Reviews**

Wills's work is excellent, both in its scholarship and presentation.--Mississippi Quarterly Wills has produced a splendid study that should long serve as a model of how to research and to write religious history.--Baptist History and Heritage "Wills' work is a thoughtful analysis of an historical practice with decidedly contemporary implications."--Journal of Southern Religion "Well written, this book is a model of using church records as key sources. Important for students of southern religion

and culture and American religious life more generally."--Choice".will make a significant contribution to the field of American religious history."--Paul Harvey, Colorado College"It is excellent, a real breakthrough in the use of local church records. His impressively documented and compelling argument brings to light the practice of Baptist 'democratic' culture during the century in which the South took shape.... Structured as it is on an imaginative exploitation of rich local Baptist records, especially in Georgia, this innovative work will be welcomed by students of American religion and Southern culture alike." --Donald G. Mathews, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill"Wills uses the prism of church discipline to examine critical questions of race, theology, the role of women, and the nature of the church as addressed by nineteenth-century Georgia Baptists. His well-written work offers a critical case study in Baptist polity and popular religion. The book is a valuable contribution to studies in grassroots Christianity in the South."--Bill J. Leonard, Wake Forest University"This important study is going to generate a lot of rethinking and debate regarding the contested history of the Southern Baptist Convention."--George Marsden, University of Notre Dame

Democracy has not always fostered anti-authoritarian individualism. No American denomination identified itself more closely with the nation's democratic ideal than the Baptists. Most antebellum southern Baptist churches allowed women and slaves to vote on membership matters and preferred populist preachers who addressed their appeals to the common person. Paradoxically, no denomination wielded religious authority as zealously as the Baptists. Between 1785 and 1860 they ritually (and democratically) excommunicated forty to fifty thousand church members in Georgia alone. Wills demonstrates how a denomination of freedom-loving individualists came to embrace an exclusivist spirituality - a spirituality that continues to shape Southern Baptist churches in contemporary conflicts between moderates who urge tolerance and conservatives who require belief in scriptural inerrancy. Wills's analysis advances our understanding of the interaction between democracy and religious authority, and will appeal to scholars of American religion, culture, and history, as well as to Baptist observers. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Dr. Greg Wills has produced an important work documenting how Baptist churches in the South functioned between 1785-1900. If you are interested in the topic, especially how gender and race affected church governance or how church discipline was carried out, then grab a copy of this book. My one warning is that you shouldn't expect this to be a page-turner. Wills has tediously documented this data by pouring through the minutes of church business meetings from the time period, and the work reflects that. It is a lot of numbers and dates and at times seems repetitive, but

Dr. Wills is documenting the evidence that he found through what I can only imagine was a ton of man hours. Expect this going in and enjoy the book for what it is and you will find it very helpful

Helpful and illuminating history of the Southern Baptist denomination's astute conviction for church discipline. Dr. Wills' analysis of Southern Baptist democratic religion was extremely helpful in giving me a better context for denominational polity and the moral/theological erosion of SB denomination with the increase of urbanization and bombardments of a pervasively progressive culture.

Helpful, but gets a little bogged down in the details and drags a bit. In particular, the chapters on African-American churches and women in democratic, Baptist churches were insightful.

Great and useful book!

Great product, thank you. I am glad for the opportunity to have come into contact with this item.

Great seller.

Democratic Religion is an interesting discussion on the topic of Church discipline and the authority that Church governments exerted over memberships in the 19th century. Gregory A. Wills, the author, wrote the book from a point of interest discovered when writing a short article on the subject of a nineteenth century preacher. Wills' study expanded into a book on the story of nineteenth century church polity focusing on the peculiarities of Georgia churches. Nevertheless, the book is also a commentary by way of implication of the status of the church today. Readers will not be able to help but examine their own churches in the light of some of the positive aspects of 19th century religious life and find their own experience a little lacking. Lacking primarily in the advantages of a strong religious authority over church members and a measure of real accountability added to that authority. The first three chapters deal generally with a form of uniquely American church government. The author was influenced by the book The Democratization of Christianity, by Nathan Hatch. Hatch evidently suggested that American preachers developed a cultural contextual style of preaching and church government, casting the gospel in a "new, populist, individualist form." However, Wills is not trapped by the motif of Hatch and clearly communicates that southern Baptists were not entirely democratic in the administration of church polity. Meaning that Baptists tended to also hold to the traditions of the reformation by asserting tremendous authority over church memberships by the adherence to and practice of strict disciplinary procedures. These disciplinary

procedures where in the form of "trials" or "dealings" and each church had its own way of dealing with what Wills calls "the texture of discipline" (23). Nevertheless, "trials" were informal events which strove to hear and answer charges, render verdicts, and (hopefully) restore the accused to fellowship. The authority of these proceeding rested in their jurisdiction, over the membership only, and in their ability to either forgive or excommunicate members. The ultimate outcome of these proceedings tended to be restoration and renewal of the church in terms of real revival. In the forth and fifth chapter the authors turns his attention to, first, the role of women in church polity, and then the role of black slaves. Women seem to have had some degree of freedom to participate in the democratic process of discipline but less ability to participate in matters of church government-the same double standard was applied to slaves as well. Southern whites considered slaves to have enhanced spirituality in matters of basic morals yet unable to rule because of their low intelligence. The sixth chapter briefly describes the struggle of their system of ecclesiastical authority to "ensure pure belief as well as pure deportment" (84). The seventh chapter describes the southern Baptist practice of adhering strictly to creeds, associational authority over local churches, and the issues of Calvinism. Ironically, and in contrast to anti-creed sentiments of the post-modern era, 19th century Baptists seemed to use creeds very prolifically. Finally, chapter eight tells the story of declining church discipline practices which would cease, for all practical purposes, by 1920.

The research in this book is impressive and makes for a fascinating read. Wills argues that the Baptists in the south resisted the influence of modernism and maintained the purity of their churches by practicing biblical church discipline. There are a lot of lessons to be learned from the book that have bearing on contemporary issues. These Baptists, like many churches today, had to battle against the temptation to do let pragmatism reign in ministry. The Baptists resisted for awhile but many ended up losing the battle in the early 20th century. Even if you don't like what these Baptists did, the book is informative and insightful.

I grew up in a Southern Baptist Church hearing that Southern Baptists oppose all use of creeds, don't practice church discipline, and don't believe in a Calvinistic view of God's sovereignty. A lot of people try to argue that as well as being like this today, Southern Baptists were always like that. Gregory Wills totally undermines these understandings of Southern Baptist history. Unlike modern SBC historians who take an understanding of Baptist life that has existed only since 1900 and assume things have always been that way, Wills does exhaustive research into the way local churches in Georgia actually believed and behaved in the 19th century. Wills proves that most SBC

churches in Georgia held to Calvinistic beliefs, regularly practiced church disciplined, and favored the disciplinary use of creeds. This book is essential reading for any Southern Baptists interested in the reformation of our denomination.

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