

5-2014

Book Review: A Blessed Company: Parishes,  
Parsons, and Parishioners in Anglican Virginia,  
1690-1776 by J. Nelson

Laverne Smith  
*Liberty University Baptist Theological Seminary*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/jlbts>

 Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), and the [Church History Commons](#)

**Recommended Citation**

Smith, Laverne (2014) "Book Review: A Blessed Company: Parishes, Parsons, and Parishioners in Anglican Virginia, 1690-1776 by J. Nelson," *Eruditio Ardescens*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 5.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/jlbts/vol1/iss2/5>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Liberty University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Eruditio Ardescens by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Liberty University. For more information, please contact [scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu](mailto:scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu).

Nelson, J. *A Blessed Company: Parishes, Parsons, and Parishioners in Anglican Virginia, 1690-1776*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

John Nelson, professor emeritus of history at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, looks at the life and function of the Colonial Virginia Anglican Church during the long eighteenth century in this book. The text is divided into four parts: the Parishes; the Parsons; the Divine Services; and the Parishioners. Helpful appendices provide biographical data on Virginia's parish clergy and statistical tables on levies and taxes, children "bound out," baptisms, marriages and grand jury presentments. The notes and an index conclude the volume, making it useful for focused research into this timeframe (the Glorious Revolution to the Rebellion).

Nelson's "Prologue" overviews the sections of the book. He notes that scholarship on religion in this period appears to have a decidedly dissenter slant. This, he says, is a disservice to the richly complex lives of Virginians. He aims to present a case that Colonial Anglican adherents in Virginia were more spiritual and took their faith seriously, based on evidence that can be inferred from their everyday life.

The section on parishes focuses on their function within the colony's governing structure, how they were formed, the role of the vestry, the local government functions for which the vestry was responsible, and how they secured their parsons, supplied equipment for divine services, and took care of the people in the parish. The parish was the smallest unit of government, and closest to the people. The colonial government, in Williamsburg, laid out specific responsibilities that were the charge of the parish: collecting the annual levy; setting up and maintaining among parishioners a paid social safety net for the indigent, widows, and orphans; commissioning new churches or chapels (depending on the location and size of a new population within a parish); and last but not least building and maintaining roads. Nelson notes that vestries were very stable bodies and took their responsibilities seriously. They did not appreciate it when Williamsburg tried to interfere with matters delegated to them by the Governor or the House of Burgesses, particularly the placing of a new clergyman in a parish. There was no separation of church and state; civil and religious were not distinct categories. The county and the parish worked together to govern local issues.

The section on parsons covers their origins (immigrants and Virginia born), their preparation for ministry, how they were recruited and placed, their social status, and norms of acceptable behavior. It concludes with a few vignettes of clerical lives. Nelson outlines their origins: most were English, but there were Welsh, Scots, Irish, French, and Germans in the mix. As the colony developed, some Virginians sent their sons to England for ordination. Soon Virginia-born

clergy were serving the more settled Tidewater parishes; clergy who migrated here filled positions in more remote locations. Vestries, with the help of the Commissary, Governor, and Bishop of London, took responsibility for recruiting their clergy; they maintained the right of refusal if they found a recommended candidate unsuitable. Nelson's summary of this process indicates parish vestries were very careful to keep the initiative in the recruiting process.

A clergyman, once recruited to a parish, was considered a gentleman due to his preparation and education for ministry. Many were sons of clergy and such service was a family tradition. They often married planter's daughters. Nelson notes, however, that inclusion among the gentry had a major drawback: it was difficult to preach sermons that confronted influential parishioners with a sin issue in their lives. With no incumbency in many parishes, this forced clergy to choose their words wisely. Nelson notes that Virginia clerics worked to earn respect as professionals through organizing with the blessing of the Bishop of London. They created a widows' fund to support the surviving family of their fellow parsons. Nelson argues that the picture of Anglican parsons as drifters who could not make it in England is completely inaccurate; most poured their lives into Virginia. Chapter 13, which follows the lives of specific clergy, backs up this claim.

The third section of the book, the briefest, covers the nature of the weekly worship service. It was a social occasion, both before and after church. The King James Version Bible was worked into the liturgy for each Sunday in the Book of Common Prayer. The service was not dependent on the personality of the parson. If a parson was not available, vestry-appointed readers would read the service without the inclusion of a sermon. Critics called such recitation mind-numbing and not a genuine religious experience.

The church was intimately involved in the rites of passage: birth, communion, marriage and death. While some parents requested baptism at home, record books indicate that multiple baptisms often took place at church. Parsons were instructed to train children in the catechism in preparation for confirmation. Confirmation was, however, a function of the bishop, who was not physically present during the colonial period. No adaptation was implemented; and sometimes due to distance, catechism was left up to parents.

The last section of the book deals with the sorts of people that make up the parish. Everyone, who lived in the geographical area, was a resident of the parish: adherents, women, African Americans, miscreants, dissenters, etc., all were part of the mix. Parishes did not keep membership records, but they did keep weekly attendance figures. Everyone who lived in a parish was required to pay a levy to support the parish, and to attend at least church services once every other month. This was not closely adhered to, particularly in areas with a strong population of dissenters. Nelson notes that prosecutions for non-attendance indicate that Virginians were not "indifferent" to church attendance. Women had no leadership role; though sometimes they were paid sextons. They were often secured by the

vestry to care for the parish elderly and orphans. African American involvement depended upon the permission of slave owners. Sometimes ministers were allowed to catechize the slaves on a plantation. Adult slaves were considered tithables, and their owners were obligated to pay their tax obligation to support the church. Owners sometimes feared conversion because Christianity might make improve a slave's self-image.

There were no ecclesiastical courts, so moral offenses were addressed by civil courts. Presentments covered drunkenness, sexual immortality (especially of women), and breaking the Sabbath by not attending church. Gentry were not exempt from such discipline. The fines for such offenses were paid to the Parish warden for relief of the poor.

According to Nelson, dissenters did not prove much of a problem until mid-eighteenth century. Often immigrants who were not English (Germans) were provided a parish of their own, with a preacher of their own faith community. Huguenots from France eventually blended Parish communities.

One weakness in Nelson's presentation is his failure to note the presence of General Baptists, who were less vocal and critical of the establishment than the Separate Baptists, who are included in the narrative. Dissenters were required to pay the parish tax along with everyone else. It should be noted that an impoverished dissenter was not excluded from parish support.

Nelson concludes with a summary of each section, focusing on one point. The Anglican Church in Colonial Virginia, he says, was remarkably adaptive to colonial conditions. However, when the Revolution changed the governance of Virginia, the people of Virginia turned from the Anglican church because, as a functioning unit of British government, it was closest to their daily lives and they rejected it along with every layer of British government above it. Indeed, the Anglican Church in Virginia, like the mythical Phoenix, was reduced to ashes. What had once been a healthy tax-supported institution, whose main purposes were to unify the populace around the King's authorized form of Christian worship and to serve as the social safety net, had to redefine itself in the wake of the people's rejection of King George III and all in authority under his reign.

Nelson's book provides a good counter-balance to the narratives which describe Virginia as a spiritual wasteland before the Great Awakening. It does describe the challenges the Church experienced finding its legs as a missional enterprise; sent out from London with men whose primary aim in settlement was wealth creation for themselves and their sponsors. By the eighteenth century, the Church was well established in Virginia, and was part of the weekly lifescape of most of her inhabitants, rather like the local school building is today.

Laverne Smith, Liberty University Baptist Theological Seminary