

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Ten Baptists Everyone Should Know: Edgar Young Mullins

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1



Edgar Young Mullins may seem a strange choice to wrap up this “Ten Baptists Everyone Should Know” series. In order to get a sense of the significance of Mullins in Southern Baptist life, consider the evaluation rendered by famed literary critic Harold Bloom:

Edgar Young Mullins I would nominate as the Calvin or Luther or Wesley of the Southern Baptists, but only in the belated American sense, because Mullins was not the founder of the Southern Baptists but their re-founder, the definer of their creedless faith. An endlessly subtle and original religious thinker, Mullins is the most neglected of major American theologians. Pragmatically he is more important than Jonathan Edwards, Horace Bushnell, and the Niebuhrs, because Mullins reformulated (perhaps even first formulated) the faith of a major American denomination.

Mullins was born on January 5, 1860 in Franklin County, Mississippi. He was the first son out of four children born to Seth and Cornelia Mullins. Seth Mullins was a teacher, farmer, and Baptist minister. Seth and Cornelia dedicated their newborn son to Gospel ministry.

The young Mullins was a member of the first class to ever enter Texas A&M in 1876 and he completed his degree in 1879. He had begun to prepare for a career in law when he was converted at the age of twenty at a revival meeting in Dallas, Texas. He was baptized by his own father and soon felt the call to Christian ministry. In 1881 Mullins entered The

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary which had relocated to Louisville, Kentucky four years earlier.

Mullins' background gave him a maturity beyond his years and he excelled as a leader on campus at Southern. Mullins had originally planned to be a missionary, but those plans were abandoned because of health concerns. After graduation, Mullins became the pastor of the Harrodsburg Baptist Church in Harrodsburg, Kentucky. While there he married his wife, Isla May Hawley. The couple had two sons together who both died young.

In 1888, Mullins and his family moved to Baltimore to pastor the Lee Street Baptist Church. After serving there for seven years, he worked for a few months for the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention in Richmond, Virginia. In 1895, Mullins became pastor of the Baptist church in Newton Centre, Massachusetts, before eventually assuming his lifework as the president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1899.

Mullins remained president of Southern Seminary until his death in 1928. He also served as professor of theology during that same period. The seminary grew dramatically during his presidency in terms of its endowments, size of faculty, and student body. Another accomplishment of Mullins' administration was the move to the present location from a downtown location to the fifty-eight acre lot known as "The Beeches."

As president of the flagship seminary of Southern Baptists, Mullins exerted a tremendous influence on Baptist and public life. Mullins served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention from 1921 to 1924 and of the Baptist World Alliance from 1923 to 1928. The city of Louisville declared one day as "E. Y. Mullins Day" and W. O. Carver described him as "the best known Baptist in the world" who was "unsurpassed in influence for good by any man in his denomination."

There were three major theological issues to which Mullins responded in his day. In all three he seems to have assumed a mediating role. The first was the issue of Calvinism. When Mullins became president of Southern in 1899, he inherited a strongly Calvinistic institution. Although Mullins continued to use James P. Boyce's (the founding president of SBTS) strongly Calvinistic *Abstract of Systematic Theology* as a textbook in his theology classes for several years, he took a mediating position somewhere between Calvinism and Arminianism himself. He described his own position as follows:

For example, Arminianism overlooked certain essential truths about God in its strong championship of human freedom. As against it, Calvinism ran to extremes in some of its conclusions in its very earnest desire to safeguard the truth of God's sovereignty. We are

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

learning to discard both names to adhere more closely to the Scriptures, while retaining the truth in both systems (Mullins, *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression*, vii).

Mullins' moderate position between Calvinism and Arminianism eventually became the dominant view in Baptist life.

Another theological issue which Mullins faced in his day involved the Landmark interpretation of Baptist history. Landmarkists believed that only local congregations of baptized believers were authorized by the New Testament. They also believed that the only true churches were those which could trace their lineage back through a succession of congregations to the first century. Mullins was diplomatic in his treatment of this issue. He avoided the controversial topic by electing not to include a chapter on the church in his systematic theology, *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression*.

The third theological issue which Mullins faced was the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. This issue involved the reliability of the Bible and the church's understanding of it. Mullins took the moderate position here as well, resisting both the naturalistic reductions of Christian faith and the full rejection of the claims of history and science.

Recommended Resources

Surprisingly, there has not been a recent major critical study of the life of Mullins. His wife, Isla May Mullins, authored *Edgar Young Mullins: An Intimate Biography*, which was published by the Sunday School Board a couple of years after his death. The most thorough study of Mullins' life remains William E. Ellis' *A Man of Books and a Man of the People: E.Y. Mullins and the Crisis of Moderate Southern Baptist Leadership*, originally published by Mercer University Press in 1985.

The memorial written by the faculty of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary shortly after Mullins' death listed six of his books with the note: "These are not all of the books he wrote, but they show the ripeness and profoundness of scholarship that signaled his intellectual life." These books were: *Why is Christianity True?* (1905), *The Axioms of Religion* (1908), *Baptist Beliefs* (1912), *Freedom and Authority in Religion* (1913), *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression* (1917), and *Christianity at the Cross Roads* (1924). All of these books are available on Google Books for free and are linked below.

In [*Why is Christianity True?*](#), Mullins argues that Christ is the essence of Christianity and that the Christian experience of regeneration verifies the New Testament. Mullins is concerned in this work with what Lewis would later call "mere Christianity". Mullins was heavily influenced by the writings of William James and F. D. E. Schleiermacher. He

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

defends Christianity as an apologist, but for Mullins, Christian experience is the ultimate standard.

In *The Axioms of Religion*, Mullins argues that the most distinctive and important of all Baptist beliefs as “soul competency” or the freedom of each person to respond to God on their own. This work, more than any other, has helped define Baptists in the twentieth century. It has been called “a very American” and “a very Baptist” book.

In *Baptists Beliefs*, Mullins interpreted the “excellent Baptist creeds” which are “now in existence in common use among us.” It is “folk theology at its best.” The emphasis on Christian experience seen in his other works is barely visible in this volume.

In *Freedom and Authority in Religion*, Mullins argues the thesis “that Jesus Christ is the religious authority for Christians and that he exercises his authority in such a way as to give Christians freedom rather than deprive them of it.” *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression* is the largest of all of Mullins’ books. This was his systematic theology.

The last of Mullins’ works was *Christianity at the Cross Roads* which dealt with the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. Interestingly, in Mullins’ final book, he positioned himself more on the Fundamentalist side of the controversy of his day. The book is a polemic against naturalism and modernism. Gone is the moderation of his earlier days, as he defends the traditional, conservative views of Christianity.

This is Part Ten of ten of an ongoing series by Steve Weaver.



Steve Weaver

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