

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## The Baptist Ecclesiology of E.Y. Mullins: Individualism and the New Testament Church

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*Most observers consider E. Y. Mullins to be the most influential Southern Baptist theologian and denominational leader of the twentieth century.*

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Even literary critic Harold Bloom has said that Mullins is America's most neglected theologian.<sup>1</sup> Mullins served as president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (1899 to 1928), the Southern Baptist Convention (1921-1924), and Baptist World Alliance (1923-1928) a worldwide Baptist community. His *Axioms of Religion* (1908) was hailed as virtual Baptist orthodoxy at home and abroad.<sup>2</sup>

Mullins still has admirers who value his focus on freedom and find the voluntary principle relevant to this postmodern age. Some believe that he models an effective theological method: a focused balance between individual religious experience and biblical authority that is firmly orthodox and warmly pietistic.<sup>3</sup>

Critics of Mullins have abounded in recent years across the theological spectrum. Mullins's focus on the individual has been described as a hyper-individualism that leads to doctrinal minimalism and the loss of biblical authority. According to critics, Mullins was seduced by the Enlightenment's obsession with the autonomous individual. The practical stress upon the individual's relationship to God "was to make every man's hat his own church."<sup>4</sup> Because Mullins authored a survey of theology without a separate

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 199.

<sup>2</sup> For a biographical overview of Mullins's life, see William E. Ellis, *A Man of Books and a Man of the People* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Russell Dilday, "Mullins the Theologian: Between the Extremes," *Review and Expositor* 96 (1999): 75-86; Timothy D. F. Maddox, "E. Y. Mullins: Mr. Baptist for the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *Review and Expositor*, 96 (1999): 87-108; and E. Glenn Hinson, "E. Y. Mullins as Interpreter of the Baptist Tradition," *Review and Expositor* 96 (1999): 109-22.

<sup>4</sup> Winthrop Hudson, *Baptists in Transition: Individualism and Christian Responsibility* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979), 142. For two harsh critics from different theological perspectives, see Curtis Freeman, "E. Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity," *Review and Expositor*, 96 (1999): 23-42 and Albert Mohler, Jr. "Baptist Theology at the Crossroads: The Legacy of E. Y. Mullins," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 3 (Winter 1999): 4-23. For a survey of the critics, see Russell Moore and Gregory Thornberry, "The Mystery of E. Y. Mullins in Contemporary Baptist Historiography," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 3 (Winter 1999): 44-57.

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chapter on ecclesiology, critics contend that he cared little for or had little or no doctrine of the church.<sup>5</sup>

Mullins would, of course, disagree with the critics of today. To follow his theological method would not lead to a loss of biblical authority or a vapid ecclesiology. On the contrary, Mullins believed that the proper focus on the voluntary faith of individuals was the simple and only model to embody the New Testament church—in his view the only authentic ecclesiology.

## Soul Competency

Some scholars call Mullins a "theologian of religious experience."<sup>6</sup> Methodologically, he considered religious experience to be the starting point for theological reflection. Experience was the "the holy of holies of theology."<sup>7</sup> Mullins unequivocally touted the authority of the scriptures and opposed modernist attempts to redefine elements of traditional historic orthodoxy, such as the deity of Christ. Mullins also argued that the truths of scripture were verified, not by an ecclesiastical authority or by church tradition, but by "discovery" through the "experience of His Grace working in us."<sup>8</sup>

From this experiential base, Mullins created and popularized the term "soul competency"—the term most associated with his legacy. He defined soul competency as the right of each individual (soul) to relate directly to God. Baptists, of course, had highlighted the idea of "soul liberty" and the sacredness of the individual conscience since their origins in the seventeenth century. In particular, Baptists had said that each person must be free to follow (or not follow) God according to the dictates of conscience because each individual will stand before the judgment seat of God. Consequently, Baptists

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<sup>5</sup> Some suggest that Mullins did not include a chapter on ecclesiology because it was not covered in his systematic theology course. Ecclesiology was a separate course at the seminary. E. C. Dargan had already written a textbook for ecclesiology. See E. C. Dargan, *Ecclesiology: A Study of the Churches*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Charles T. Dearing, 1905). There was also precedent among theologians—e.g., William Newton Clarke and James Boyce—for not having a separate chapter on ecclesiology in their systematics. Mullins's own *Axioms of Religion* (1908), while not a comprehensive look at the nature of the church, was clearly a book presenting his view of what a New Testament church looked like. For more on this idea, see E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, rev. annotated, ed. C. Douglas Weaver (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press), forthcoming.

<sup>6</sup> Leroy Moore, "Crazy Quilt: Southern Baptist Patterns of the Church," *Foundations*, 20 (1977): 20.

<sup>7</sup> E. Y. Mullins, "The Theological Trend: Address delivered by President Mullins, July 14, 1905," *Review and Expositor*, 2 (October 1905): 254. For example, Mullins said, "You can test the reality and power of Christ practically.... The man born blind did not have to accept any theory of Christ.... His faith worked." See E. Y. Mullins, "The Testimony of Christian Experience," in *The Fundamentals*, ed. R. A. Torrey, A. C. Dixon, and others, Vol. 3 (Chicago: Testimony Publishing Company, 1917): 85.

<sup>8</sup> E. Y. Mullins, "Why I Am a Baptist (1926)," *The Whitsitt Journal*, 15 (Spring 2007): 3.

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believed they were upholding the essentials of the Protestant Reformation when they advocated the sole authority of the Bible and insisted upon the right of individual interpretation of the scriptures. Mullins continued each of these ideas with even greater focus on the individual's direct relationship to God.<sup>9</sup>

Mullins highlighted soul competency as the "peculiar teaching" of the Baptist tradition and the "religious axiom" of the "axioms of religion," a set of six principles that he considered to be the essence of New Testament Christianity.<sup>10</sup> Soul competency, according to Mullins, was not simply individualism, because a human "is more than an individual. He is a social being. He has relations to his fellows in the Church, and in the industrial order, and in the State."<sup>11</sup> Mullins actually used 'individual' freely in his writings—often as an interchangeable synonym of soul competency—but he made a concerted effort to insist that soul competency was not excessively individualistic.

Much has been written, by supporters and critics, about how much Mullins was indebted to Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of modern liberal theology, who articulated an experiential-based methodology.<sup>12</sup> Mullins indisputably frequently cited numerous nineteenth-century theologians, especially Schleiermacher and pragmatist William James. Mullins asserted that his focus on the individual, however, was New Testament Christianity rather than the pantheistic subjectivism of modern liberalism.<sup>13</sup> According to Mullins, the "corrective" to excessive individualism was loyalty to the Lordship of Christ and to the Bible. A personal experience and relationship with Jesus Christ—the heart of Christianity and the conversionist base of Baptist life—was guided by the Holy Spirit and

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<sup>9</sup> Baptist pioneer Thomas Helwys insisted on the right of individual conscience because each person would be judged individually by God. References to Helwys and others who followed suit can be found in C. Douglas Weaver, *In Search of the New Testament Church: The Baptist Story* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Mullins's axioms were: 1) The theological axiom: The holy and loving God has a right to be sovereign. 2) The religious axiom: All souls have an equal right to direct access to God. 3) The ecclesiastical axiom: All believers have a right to equal privileges in the church. 4) The moral axiom: To be responsible man must be free. 5) The religio-civic axiom: A free church in a free state. 6) The social axiom: Love your neighbor as yourself. See E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1908).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 51.

<sup>12</sup> Three dissertations have dealt with Mullins's theology. See William Carrell, "Edgar Young Mullins and the Competency of the Soul in Religion," Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, 1993; Russell Dilday, "The Apologetic Method of E. Y. Mullins," Th.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1960; Bill Clark Thomas, "Edgar Young Mullins, A Baptist Exponent of Theological Restatement," Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1963. Carrell suggested that Mullins drew upon the writings of several American Baptists to coin the term soul competency. For a concise overview of Mullins's thought, see Fisher Humphreys, "E. Y. Mullins," in *Baptist Theologians*, eds. Timothy George and David Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> E. Y. Mullins, *Freedom and Authority in Religion* (Philadelphia: Griffith and Rowland, 1913), 41-53.

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was anchored to the objective revelation of "facts" about Jesus Christ recorded in the Bible.<sup>14</sup> Loyalty to Christ was the "center of liberty."<sup>15</sup>

Could soul competency be abused? Of course, but the freedom inherent in biblically based regenerate individualism—a voluntary personal relationship with Jesus Christ—was worth the risk. In vivid terms, Mullins wrote that when a person was denied the right to think for him or herself, the person would "remain intellectually and spiritually a moron under a system of compulsion and repression."<sup>16</sup> Mullins also acknowledged the risky but necessary freedom found in the corollary of soul competency: the right to the private interpretation of scripture:

The right of private judgment is a dangerous word, but it is a winged and emancipating word. It is the sole guaranty that man will pass out of the childhood to the manhood stage of religion. ... It was the hammer with which Roger Williams broke the chain which united church and state. ...

The right of private judgment kindled the vision of world evangelization to the faith of William Carey and transformed western Christianity. The right of private judgement; yes, a dangerous word, but a word which started man on a new voyage of spiritual discovery. ... It is true it produced the sects of Protestantism. But these, after all, are not comets or wandering stars without central control, plunging blindly through space. ... Loyalty to Christ balances their right of private judgment and is the guaranty that the faith of the New Testament shall not perish from the earth.<sup>17</sup>

## An Authentic New Testament Church

*A Spiritual Community.* According to Mullins, voluntary individual faith did not lead away from the church, but led toward the creation of an authentic New Testament church. While Mullins willingly employed a "Baptist definition" of the church as "a voluntary association of believers united together for the purpose of worship and edification," he emphasized that the church was a spiritual community grounded in a common individual experience of grace, a common faith and a common loyalty to Jesus

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<sup>14</sup> Mullins, "Why I Am a Baptist," 4-5; Mullins, *Freedom and Authority*, 31-32; E. Y. Mullins, *Christianity at the Crossroads* (Nashville: SSB of the SBC, 1924), 259; E. Y. Mullins, *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression* (Philadelphia: Roger Williams Press, 1917), 77-78.

<sup>15</sup> E. Y. Mullins, "Baptist Life in the World's Life," *Review and Expositor*, 25 (1928): 300-14.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 312. Baptists had followed the Protestant emphasis on private reading of scripture since their infancy. William B. Johnson, the first president of the SBC, called it a Baptist distinctive.

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Christ. The church was the "spiritual home of the saved."<sup>18</sup> There could be no community of faith without converted individuals. The church was a believers' church. In Baptist lingo, it had a "regenerate church membership."

The church was created by the "initiative of the Holy Spirit": "Individual believers were inevitably drawn together by spiritual affinity in fellowship; their renewed spiritual natures then impelled them to associate themselves together as a church."<sup>19</sup> As a spiritual community, the church's tasks were spiritual: missions, evangelism, and holy living. The church was God's organ for advancing the Kingdom of God. In a community of believers, "social relations are reconstituted in Christ." The social axiom, "Love your neighbor as yourself," could then authentically occur.<sup>20</sup>

**Democratic Congregationalism, Local Church Autonomy.** The focus on the regenerated individual not only led to the creation of the church; it also led to a specific type of church polity: democratic congregationalism and local church autonomy. The right of each individual to go directly to God meant that all believers were spiritually equal and must therefore have equal privileges, including equal voice in church government.<sup>21</sup> According to Mullins, the decisions of the local congregation on ecclesiastical matters were the "consensus of the competent."<sup>22</sup> Voluntary "liberty, equality, fraternity" were at the heart of New Testament churches. In these little "spiritual democracies," there existed a "priesthood of all believers" where "rich and poor, bond and freed, patrician and plebeian, Greek, Roman, Jew, Barbarian sat together equal before God."<sup>23</sup> Or in the words of

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<sup>18</sup> Mullins, *The Christian Religion*, 346; E. Y. Mullins, *Why is Christianity True?* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1905), 156; E. Y. Mullins, *Soul Freedom Applied to Church Life and Organization* (Nashville: Baptist 75 Million Campaign, n.d., c.a. 1920), 4-5.

<sup>19</sup> Mullins, *Axioms of Religion*, 35, 133.

<sup>20</sup> Mullins, *The Christian Religion*, 165, 430; Mullins, *Why is Christianity True?*, 166, 349. Mullins did not write extensively about the social gospel. He rarely cited the work of Northern Baptists such as Walter Rauschenbusch, perhaps because of its theological liberalism, but Mullins did participate in social ministries while a pastor, and the seminary developed courses in social thought during his presidency. In the dominant evangelical fashion, Mullins supported social ministry as an outgrowth of redeemed individuals: "The noble and self-sacrificing work of caring for the social wreckage of our time, the poverty-stricken and the outcast, must not cease." See E. Y. Mullins, "A Message of the Baptist World Alliance To the Baptist Brotherhood, To Other Christian Brethren, and to the World," in *Third Baptist World Congress, Record of Proceedings* (London: Kingsgate Press, 1923), 226.

<sup>21</sup> Mullins, *Soul Freedom Applied to Church Life*, 5-6; Mullins, *Axioms of Religion*, 127.

<sup>22</sup> Mullins, *Axioms of Religion*, 56.

<sup>23</sup> Mullins, *Why is Christianity True?*, 351.

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Mullins's ecclesiastical axiom: All believers have a right to equal privileges in the church.<sup>24</sup>

Mullins contrasted the New Testament model of Baptist democracy with any and all hierarchical church structures. A New Testament church had no use for priests, bishops, or Pope that might "lord it over the conscience of the individual" or come between a local congregation and God. In an era of typically harsh rhetoric in Protestant-Catholic relations, Mullins was especially critical of the "incompetence" of the Roman Catholic Church, which promoted priestly mediators between God and believers and consequently denied individuals direct access to God.<sup>25</sup>

Congregational democracy was not freedom without boundaries, however. Mullins pictured the church as a paradox between the "absolute monarchy" of Christ and the "autonomy of the soul."

Because the individual deals directly with his Lord and is immediately responsible to him, the spiritual society must needs be a democracy. That is, the church is a community of autonomous individuals under the immediate lordship of Christ held together by a social bond of common interest, due to a common faith and inspired by common tasks and ends, all of which are assigned to them by the common Lord. The church, therefore, is the expression of the paradoxical conception of the union of absolute monarchy and pure democracy. This we might say is the formula of the church. Every form of polity other than democracy somewhere infringes upon the lordship of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

On the Baptist front, Mullins noted that cooperation with associations or conventions beyond the local congregation was important, but it must be voluntary. Since the local church was to be loyal to the Lordship of Christ, its independent democratic decision-making must never be stifled by other institutions. The church was the institutional

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<sup>24</sup> Mullins, *Axioms of Religion*, 127. E. C. Dargan, who taught ecclesiology during the first few years of Mullins's seminary presidency, had already mentioned two of Mullins's themes: equality of all believers and the freedom and responsibility of individual Christians. See Dargan, *Ecclesiology: A Study of the Church*, rev. ed of 1897 original (Louisville, KY: Charles T. Dearing, 1905), 35.

<sup>25</sup> Mullins, *Axioms of Religion*, 60. Arguing for the priesthood of all believers Mullins (p. 56) said, "No human priest may claim to be mediator between the soul and God because no possible reason can be assigned for any competency on his part not common to all believers."

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 129. Walter Shurden noted that Baptists before Mullins had emphasized this paradox of absolute monarchy and pure democracy. See Walter Shurden, "The Priesthood of All Believers and Pastoral Authority in Baptist Thought," *Faith and Mission*, 7 (Fall 1989): 36-37.

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embodiment of the Kingdom of God; consequently, the equality manifested in congregational democracies was crucial to the life of Christianity.<sup>27</sup>

**Religious Liberty.** Spiritual democracy rooted in soul competency also meant support for the traditional Baptist distinctive of religious liberty and the separation of church and state. According to Mullins, the state, like ecclesiastical hierarchies, was "incompetent" to judge spiritual matters. The union of church and state actually encouraged atheism because the hypocrisy of its coerced faith drove away persons who knew the value of individual freedom.<sup>28</sup> Not surprisingly, scholars have observed that Mullins, with an ebullience bordering on religious nationalism, joined forces with other Americans who touted uncritically the worldwide triumph of political democracy. Because of their heritage of individualism and local church independence, Mullins declared, Baptists were uniquely able to show the world "the efficiency of democracy in church life."<sup>29</sup> When a group of Protestant scholars were asked what was the "clear and urgent duty of the Church" in light of World War I, Mullins, without hesitation, expressed the hope that the "democratic forms of Christianity found in the New Testament could be propagated throughout all European countries." The "consensus of the competent" in an atmosphere of religious liberty was vital to the stability of Europe.<sup>30</sup>

**Ecumenism.** Historically, Baptist authors have noted that the New Testament spoke predominantly of the local church rather than of a universal church that referred to Christians of every era and every place, that is, "the totality of believers both in time and

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<sup>27</sup> Mullins, *Soul Freedom Applied to Church Life*, 5-10; Mullins, *Axioms of Religion*, 36. Baptists since their origins had affirmed local church independence. Mullins seems to have coined the phrase "local church autonomy." An example of an earlier Southern Baptist who affirmed local church independence was A. E. Dickerson in Jeremiah Jeter, *Baptist Principles Reset* (Richmond: Religious Herald, 1901), 260.

<sup>28</sup> Mullins, *Why is Christianity True?*, 166; E. Y. Mullins, "The Vision of the Preacher Against the Background of the World War," *Baptist World*, 22 (June 13, 1918): 4.

<sup>29</sup> E. Y. Mullins, "Baptists in the Modern World," *Review and Expositor*, 8 (July 1911): 348; E. Y. Mullins, "Wanted: A Baptist Denomination," *Baptist Standard*, 2 (January 1919): 1. For an analysis of Mullins's identification of political and religious democracy, see Christopher Canipe, "A Captive Church in the Land of the Free." E. Y. Mullins, Walter Rauschenbusch, George Truett, and the Rise of Baptist Democracy, 1900-1925," Ph.D. Diss., Baylor University, 2004. Mullins did tell ministers to beware of blindly following the government. He said that Christians, while patriotic, should not follow the adage, "My country, right or wrong." "My country always, of course, in the sense that I am for her, but not for her in her wrong." See E. Y. Mullins, "Leadership in the Ministry (Concluded)," *Record of Christian Work*, 48 (March 1929): 161.

<sup>30</sup> Mullins, "The Clear and Urgent Duty of the Church in the Present World Crisis," *The Homiletical Review*, 78 (January 1917): 20-25. Mullins claimed that "No nation with spiritual churches could ever have accepted the German ideals which brought on the great conflict." See also Mullins, "The Vision of the Preacher," 1.

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in eternity."<sup>31</sup> Mullins assumed the presidency of Southern Seminary in 1899 when his predecessor had resigned due to the influence of Landmarkism among Southern Baptists. Landmarkism focused solely on the local church and denied that the New Testament spoke of a church universal. Mullins's affirmation of the universal church on behalf of the seminary in a 1903 Kentucky Baptist news magazine was consequently significant.<sup>32</sup>

Mullins distanced himself from other Landmark tendencies. He refused to equate the Kingdom of God with the sum total of local Baptist churches. Instead, he countered that the Kingdom of God was "practically identical with the spiritual or universal church."<sup>33</sup> Mullins also ironically identified Landmarkism as a Baptist form of Roman Catholicism. According to Mullins, both groups incorrectly exalted tradition above scripture when they asserted that a New Testament church had to have a traceable unbroken historical succession of churches back to Jesus.<sup>34</sup>

According to some scholars, Mullins was ecumenical for his day. He had friendly relations with persons of other denominational groups. He easily recognized that no denomination had a monopoly on biblical truth.<sup>35</sup> Speaking on a worldwide stage at the third Baptist World Congress (1923), Mullins affirmed that "all who truly are joined to Christ are our brethren in the common salvation, whether they be in the Catholic communion, or in a Protestant communion, or in any other communion, or in no communion."<sup>36</sup> Mullins has been credited with being primarily responsible for the most ecumenical statement that Southern Baptists have produced, the "Pronouncement of Christian Union and Denominational Efficiency" (1914). The statement acknowledged that divisions in Christianity were lamentable and that Jesus' prayer that believers "may all be one" (John 17:21) was a constant reminder of the importance of unity. Focusing on the spiritual unity of grace found in personal religious experience, the statement declared, "We are also in hearty accord with every movement and cause in which Christians of every name may take part without doing violence to the sacred mandates of conscience and without impairing their sense of loyalty to Christ." Nevertheless, Mullins and the

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<sup>31</sup> E. Y. Mullins, *Baptist Beliefs* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1912): 64.

<sup>32</sup> E. Y. Mullins, "President Mullins Interviewed About the Spiritual Church," *The Baptist Argus* (January 22, 1903): 1.

<sup>33</sup> Mullins, *Baptist Beliefs*, 56. Mullins asserted that Ephesians 5:25-27, which described the church as the Bride of Christ, was an indisputable reference to the universal church. An imperfect universal church in the present will one day be the perfected glorious church. See E. Y. Mullins, *Studies in Ephesians* (Nashville: SSB or of the SBC, 1935), 72, 126.

<sup>34</sup> E. Y. Mullins, "A Roman Catholic Party among the Baptists," *Religious Herald* (July 16, 1896): 1.

<sup>35</sup> E. Y. Mullins, "Baptist Theology in the New World Order," *Review and Expositor*, 17 (October 1920): 402. See Jerry M. Stubblefield, "The Ecumenical Impact of E. Y. Mullins," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (Spring 1980): 96.

<sup>36</sup> Mullins, *Third Baptist World Congress*, 224.



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1914 statement generally followed the Baptist caution regarding ecumenical dialogue.<sup>37</sup> While he respected other Christians, he believed it was the responsibility of Baptists "to show them certain great truths fundamental to Christianity in its pure form."<sup>38</sup>

Mullins and other Southern Baptists adamantly opposed "church union" in this era in which denominations were beginning to participate in interdenominational national organizations. He believed that the doctrinal compromise necessary to have such a group undercut the goal of restoring the authentic New Testament church. A Baptist simply could not unite with churches that practiced infant baptism and thus failed to practice voluntary faith and maintain a converted church membership.<sup>39</sup> Such an approach was following the "law of convenience" rather than the New Testament. What was at stake in refraining from church union because of differences over baptism, according to Mullins, was obedience to Christ. Authentic Christian unity was impossible without obedience to Christ.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the centralizing tendencies of the ecclesiastical bureaucracy of "church union" undercut voluntary religion. Capitulation to ecclesiastical authority would trump the New Testament church model of decision making rooted in local church autonomy.<sup>41</sup> Ultimately, Mullins declared, genuine ecumenism would be Baptist in form: spiritual unity in the broader church would be based on the New Testament church's principles of voluntary participation and preservation of "soul competent" individualism.<sup>42</sup>

**Church Leadership.** Mullins followed the traditional Baptist view that pastors and deacons were the ordained leaders of a congregation. While he barely discussed ministerial leadership in his books, Mullins wrote frequently in journals about pastoral ministry. He believed that the call to ministry—the call to pastor and preach—was special. Preaching was a "higher calling" than other professional fields like medicine or teaching. Like reading the Bible, worship, and practicing the ordinances, preaching was a "means of grace" that God used to reach people. Preaching was the most "romantic"

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<sup>37</sup> Raymond O. Ryland, "Southern Baptist Convention," in *Baptist Relations with Other Christians*, ed. James Leo Garrett (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1974), 72-73. Ryland notes that the most stringent part of the 1914 statement comes in the section on denominational efficiency penned by J. B. Gambrell.

<sup>38</sup> E. Y. Mullins, *A True Denominationalism* (Nashville: SSB of the SBC, 1952), 10.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>40</sup> E. Y. Mullins, "Baptism and Christian Union," in *Christian Union Relative to Baptist Churches*, ed. J. M. Frost (Nashville: SSB of the SBC, 1915), 64. See also Jerry Stubblefield, "The Ecumenical Impact," 100.

<sup>41</sup> Mullins, "Baptists in the Modern World," 350. E. C. Dargan had also made this point about local church independence. Dargan, *Ecclesiology: A Study of the Churches*, 244-46.

<sup>42</sup> Mullins, "Baptists in the Modern World," 350; E. Y. Mullins, "Recent Tendencies among Southern Baptists, No. 7, The Individual, The Church and the Convention in Cooperative Christian Work," *The Baptist World* (January 29, 1914): 7.

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thing a minister could do because it produced "surprises and glorious results."<sup>43</sup> Pastoral ministry was "heart" experiential religion at its best. In the course of ministry, the pastor, like Christ himself, bore the griefs and carried the sorrow of many people in his own heart. Because of this need for strength, ministry needed "manliness" and was not for the "effeminate young man."<sup>44</sup> The pastor, of course, should be trained in spiritual matters, but he should also know how to navigate the waters of civic leadership. According to Mullins, the "minister should inspire ethical and social ideals in the civic arena."<sup>45</sup>

Despite these indications of high regard for the pastor, Mullins had no interest in elevating clergy above laity. According to Mullins, pastors "are not masters, but servants; they are not rulers, but guides; they are not officials clothed with authority, but teachers. They are simply first among equals, selected to perform certain duties because of their special fitness, and not because they exercise any authority. They are spiritual leaders."<sup>46</sup> In a New Testament church, Mullins said, pastors as spiritual leaders deserved loyalty and support from the congregation. He contended, however, that there was no place for hierarchy and special clerical authority because these diminished the equality of "soul competent" believers. Anything beyond a first-among-equals role for the pastor was unwarranted. Biblical faith revolved around the congregation, not church officers who claimed apostolic succession.<sup>47</sup> Because of the universal priesthood of all believers, ministers could not claim special "sacerdotal powers."<sup>48</sup> In a spiritual congregational democracy, each believer should exercise shared authority in order for the church to most effectively follow God's leading.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> E. Y. Mullins, "A Dynamic Ministry," *Record of Christian Work*, 47 (January 1928): 35; Mullins, *The Christian Religion*, 363.

<sup>44</sup> E. Y. Mullins, *Choosing a Life Calling: An Address to Christian Young Men*. Baptist Theological Faculties Union of the United States and Canada (n.p., 1907): 8-11; E. Y. Mullins, "Manliness in the Ministry," *Western Recorder* (June 4, 1885): 2; Mullins, *The Christian Religion*, 363. Mullins added that a pastoral leader needed a strong personality, intelligence, and character. See E. Y. Mullins, "Leadership in Ministry," *Record of Christian Work*, 49 (February 1929): 94.

<sup>45</sup> E. Y. Mullins, "Training the Ministry for Civic Leadership," *Religious Education*, 9, 6 (December 1919): 559. Mullins said that the gift of mediation, rather than partisanship, was the wisest course for a pastor's involvement in political issues. In defense of participation in the legal battle against alcohol, Mullins said that preachers could be active in politics when a basic, moral principle was attacked by a political party. However, "mere party-ism is, of course, out of place in the pulpit." See E. Y. Mullins, "Preacher and Politics," *Western Recorder* (August 23, 1928): 7.

<sup>46</sup> E. Y. Mullins, "Baptist Theology in the New World Order," 404.

<sup>47</sup> Mullins, *Baptist Beliefs*, 67; Mullins, "Leadership in the Ministry," 93.

<sup>48</sup> Mullins, "A Message of the Baptist World Alliance," 224.

<sup>49</sup> In his *Axioms of Religion*, Mullins did not discuss the role of ministers in the church. Walter Shurden concluded that "the subordinationism of clergy to congregation in Mullins's thought is impossible to dispute." See Shurden, "The Priesthood of All Believers," 36-37.

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**Ordinances.** A New Testament church, according to Mullins, had two symbolic ordinances: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Mullins exclaimed that "sacramentalism"—viewing the sacraments as vehicles of grace through the mediation of priests/ministers—violated the direct relation of God to an individual believer. While not salvific—salvation was by faith in Christ alone—ordinances were to be practiced because obedience to Christ according to the standards of the New Testament demanded it.<sup>50</sup>

In typical Baptist fashion, Mullins asserted that baptism was for professing believers and by immersion. Infant baptism had no place in New Testament Christianity; it repudiated the regenerate nature of the church and made evangelism unnecessary.<sup>51</sup> Mullins noted that scholars in all denominations acknowledged that immersion was the mode of baptism practiced in the New Testament. It was a symbolic representation of an inward spiritual change that had already occurred. To ignore the proper form of baptism by baptizing infants was to destroy the meaning of the ordinance.<sup>52</sup>

Baptism was an individual act: it expressed the spiritual "mystic fellowship" of a Christian with Christ. However, baptism was also corporate in nature with its connection to church membership since a New Testament church was constituted upon the baptism by immersion of individual believers. There is one body, one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Eph. 4:4-5).<sup>53</sup> Mullins believed that open membership—the practice of granting church membership to persons who had been baptized as infants and who had not submitted to believer's baptism—also undercut the regenerate nature of the church and facilitated a misguided individualism that deemed the structure of a New Testament church irrelevant. According to Mullins, "It (open membership) dissolves the church as the social expression of the life of the kingdom of God into an individual and subjective principle which leaves each man free to do as he wills."<sup>54</sup>

With baptism highlighting individual faith, the Lord's Supper attended to the social aspect of the gospel in church life.<sup>55</sup> Communion was a shared dramatic memorial of Christ's death. Baptism and the Lord's Supper were companions. Baptism symbolized initiation; the Lord's Supper symbolized nourishment and progress. Proper observance of the symbol was necessary to embody a New Testament church. Mullins advocated "closed communion": the view of most Baptists of that day that only believers correctly

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<sup>50</sup> Mullins, *Axioms of Religion*, 43.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 124-25.

<sup>52</sup> Mullins, "Why I Am a Baptist," 5.

<sup>53</sup> E. Y. Mullins, "The Spiritual Meaning and Value of Baptism," in *Christian Union Relative to Baptist Churches*, ed. J. M. Frost (Nashville: SSB of the SBC, 1915), 87.

<sup>54</sup> Mullins, *Axioms of Religion*, 240, 248.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

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baptized should receive the Lord's Supper. Ordinances were observed only in the context of local church discipline in which a person's profession of faith could be ascertained.<sup>56</sup>

*Creeds.* Mullins's perspective on the use of creeds was tied to his understanding of the voluntary nature of faith in a New Testament church. He said that creeds could occasionally be useful, and any attempt to deny believers the freedom to formulate them should be resisted.<sup>57</sup> A denomination was not a "free-lance" club; freedom was social, involved relationships with others, and did not equal "exaggerated individualism." A group, like an individual, had the "right of self-protection." Some creeds, the early ecumenical creeds, for example, had served to defend and propagate the faith.<sup>58</sup>

The use of a creed must be rooted in the voluntary principle, however. No Baptist body could impose belief on a congregation or an individual believer. Mullins affirmed that a local church could affirm a confession of faith as a means of articulating a doctrinal identity, but this was never a requirement to be a church. Affirmation of a doctrinal statement for church membership, he noted, was rarely the case.<sup>59</sup> If heresy was ever an issue, confessions/creeds were not to be used as binding authority. They were *credita*, never *credenda*. The New Testament was the norm and standard for faith and practice of that faith.<sup>60</sup> Tradition was "utterly unsafe" as a spiritual authority.<sup>61</sup>

Mullins was clearly willing to articulate belief in statements of faith, but he essentially articulated an anti-creedal ecclesiology that preserved the voluntary nature of individual faith and voluntary cooperation within the body of Christ.<sup>62</sup> Creeds, like sacraments,

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<sup>56</sup> E. Y. Mullins, "The Baptist Position as to Restricted Communion," in *Christian Union Relative to Baptist Churches*, ed. J. M. Frost (Nashville: SSB of the SBC, 1915), 92-97.

<sup>57</sup> Mullins, *Freedom and Authority*, 302. Mullins's leadership in helping craft the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message of the SBC is well-known. This statement has a strong preface noting the voluntary nature of confessions.

<sup>58</sup> Mullins, *Freedom and Authority*, 301.

<sup>59</sup> E. Y. Mullins, "Baptists and Creeds," *Western Recorder* (October 13, 1921): 4. See also E. Y. Mullins, "The Voluntary Principle and Creeds," *Western Recorder*, (December 18, 1921): 3.

<sup>60</sup> E. Y. Mullins, "The Contribution of Baptists to the Interpretation of Christianity," *Review and Expositor*, 20 (1923): 390.

<sup>61</sup> Citing the doctrine of tradition in Catholicism, Mullins added, "Unwritten tradition is always colored and transformed by the medium through which it passes." See Mullins, *Freedom and Authority*, 349.

<sup>62</sup> Tom Nettles contended that Mullins's warnings about the possible killing effects of creeds overwhelmed his attempts to present a balanced view of their usefulness. He "treated the worst possible scenario as the most possible scenario." See Thomas J. Nettles, "E. Y. Mullins—Reluctant Evangelical," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 3 (Winter 1999): 24-42. On the contrary, Mullins cited misuses of creeds in history, not simply some "worst case scenario" that rarely or never occurred. Mullins presented a balanced-pros and cons-view of faith statements. For example, see Mullins, *Freedom and Authority*, 301-302.

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usually fostered an oppressive lordship of ecclesiastical authority that denied the voluntary principle. In a John Leland-like speech to the Baptist World Alliance, Mullins connected anti-creedalism to religious liberty, the guarantor of all genuine liberties. When creeds "are laid upon men's consciences by ecclesiastical command, or by a form of human authority, they become a shadow between the soul and God, an intolerable yoke, an impertinence and a tyranny."<sup>63</sup> Throughout his writings, Mullins warned that creeds led to a barren intellectualism and a dead orthodoxy. Whenever a church or individual was coerced, creeds were "lashes to chastise others" and they were "death masks for defunct religion" and were barriers to a genuine spirituality in which "all believers are priests because of the free access of all to God by faith."<sup>64</sup>

Mullins often opposed creeds when affirming democratic congregationalism.

Again, democracy in the church emancipates from the authority of creed makers. With Baptists there is no authoritative creed except the New Testament itself. For convenience, men sometimes draw up articles of faith, but no article of faith thus drawn up can ever be made binding upon the consciences of men. They are purely voluntary in character. The principles of the direct relation of the soul to Christ and the right of private interpretation of Scripture enter in to the very genius of democracy in the church, and thus foster man's freedom in all its spheres and his emancipation from all oppressive agencies and influences.<sup>65</sup>

Mullins's fear of creeds was consistent with the strong objections he had to anything that added hierarchy between equal believers and God. Private judgment in religious matters has created more than one church, he admitted, but only when individuals voluntarily came together in obedience to Christ was the New Testament church a possibility.<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusion

The ecclesiology of E. Y. Mullins was simple. He meant it to be that way. Mullins believed that the church must "restore original Christianity."<sup>67</sup> It did so by embodying "the simple undeveloped polity of the New Testament."<sup>68</sup> This polity had minimal structure: a membership of professing believers, democratic congregationalism, local church independence, two symbolic ordinances, two types of leaders (pastors, deacons), and the

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<sup>63</sup> Mullins, "The Baptist Conception of Religious Liberty (1923)," in *The Life of Baptists in the Life of the World*, ed. Walter B. Shurden (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985): 59.

<sup>64</sup> Mullins, *Baptist Beliefs*, 9; Mullins, *Freedom and Authority*, 302.

<sup>65</sup> Mullins, *Soul Freedom Applied to Church Life*, 14.

<sup>66</sup> Mullins, *Baptist Beliefs*, 7-8.

<sup>67</sup> Mullins, *Axioms of Religion*, 65.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 229; Mullins, "Baptist Life in the World's Life," *Review and Expositor*, 25 (1928): 301.

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separation of the church from the governance of the state. Mullins said that a New Testament modeled church was rooted in freedom. Consequently, the simple ecclesiology of the New Testament had no room for decision making restricted to ecclesiastical oligarchies (sacerdotalism) and had no room for anything that hindered the voluntary nature of faith (infant baptism; sacramentalism; coercive creedalism).

Mullins's ecclesiology was rooted in his "axioms of religion." The axioms, the essence of New Testament Christianity, highlighted the paradox of the Lordship of Christ and the freedom of the individual. In particular, the religious axiom, "All souls have an equal right to direct access to God," provided the basis for cooperative fellowship in the community of faith seen in the ecclesiastical axiom, "All believers have a right to equal privileges in the church." Soul competency demanded the spiritual democracy of congregationalism and servant pastoral leadership.

Mullins, unlike some Baptists, was not afraid to affirm the concept of the universal church. He maintained, however, that the dominant ecclesiastical focus in the New Testament was the local church. According to Mullins, ecumenical church union was extremely problematic because it would require Baptists to sacrifice what little church organization they had. They would practically become "a disembodied spirit."<sup>69</sup> If Baptists ignored the errors of infant baptism and "sacerdotal" authority, ecclesiastical integrity would be lost to an unbiblical church order.

Long before Mullins, Baptists had affirmed congregationalism and a focus upon the individual. Mullins intensified these concepts in the context of Baptist battles and a cultural milieu that promoted the benefits of political democracy. In an era of intense denominational competition, he also attempted to clarify, yet maintain, the historic claim that Baptists were the best hope to restore New Testament faith and ecclesiology.<sup>70</sup>

Landmarkism was Mullins's Baptist opponent concerning ecclesiology. He opposed the "Baptist tradition" of Landmarkism that asserted that Baptists were the New Testament church because they could trace an unbroken line of churches back to the apostolic era. Mullins believed that his non-Baptist opponent was Roman Catholicism.<sup>71</sup> Waves of Catholic immigrants had entered the United States by the turn of the twentieth century. Protestant-Catholic rhetoric, volatile and derogatory since the days of the Protestant Reformation, continued unabated on both sides. Writing during this era of Vatican I

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<sup>69</sup> Mullins, "Baptists in the Modern World," *Review and Expositor*, 8 (July 1911): 350.

<sup>70</sup> The Baptist desire to be the New Testament church—evident throughout Baptist history—is a part of the larger "restorationist" theme prevalent in Christian history. See C. Douglas Weaver, *In Search of the New Testament Church: The Baptist Story* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008).

<sup>71</sup> Mullins also spoke against Protestant groups that promoted episcopacy and infant baptism, but he found Catholicism the most blatant denier of soul competency.

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Catholicism, Mullins opposed the "Catholic tradition" of apostolic succession that emphasized an unbroken line of churches back to the New Testament. He contended that the Catholic Church's centralized hierarchical leadership threatened and badly contradicted the simple polity of the New Testament church. Ultimately, Mullins believed that Baptists could be the New Testament church without recourse to bad history. The key to restoring a New Testament church was a voluntary personal faith that embodied the "axioms" of religion.

The relevance of Mullins for contemporary Baptists will continue to be debated. Mullins's ecclesiology will not meet the needs of those today who demand that freedom be for the community rather than the individual. His focus on individualism is indeed extensive—he reflected his Baptist heritage and his culture—but to discard him for hyper-individualism and to blame him for social isolationism is to distort his legacy.<sup>72</sup> Mullins's individualism reflected the historic Baptist distinctives of the sacredness of the individual conscience and the need for personal conversion. There must be freedom for an individual to relate authentically to God—even if this meant lonely dissent. No church could tell a believer what to believe—each individual would be judged by God at the Last Judgment. At the same time, although he never used this language, Mullins held that the spiritual egalitarian democracy of the local church was the "Baptist bishop." Converted individuals were "impelled" to be a part of a community of faith. The stress upon the individual's relationship to God does not have to make "every man's hat his own church." Loyalty to Christ and the scriptures guided the individual and the church. Baptist ecclesiology in the twenty-first century will do well to incorporate a balance between the individual and the community of faith.

In a postmodern age when simple ecclesiology seems quaint, Baptist triumphalism about being the New Testament church sounds embarrassing, and when ecumenical dialogue, study of Christian traditions, and greater recognition of the universal church are readily accepted, many friends of Mullins's views realize that his thought must be contextualized, broadened, or revised in contemporary settings. Still, Mullins's focus on freedom for the individual-voluntary personal faith under a biblically understood

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<sup>72</sup> In many ways, Mullins has become the straw man blamed for the South's failure to engage in social action against racism and other problems. Most critics cite the example of Douglas Hudgens, pastor of influential First Baptist Church, Jackson, Mississippi, for his failure to fight racism during the Civil Rights era. Hudgens, according to Charles Marsh, embodied the tragic legacy of Mullins's soul competency that divorced individual faith from social action (Marsh notes that Mullins would not have agreed with Hudgens's approach). See Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 8991. An individualistic ethic can surely lead to social isolation, and can be seen as part of the slow Baptist response to social issues. However, blaming Mullins, soul competency, and Baptist individualism seems simplistic. Other factors were also at work; America was captive to cultural and economic forces that affected all denominations, including Baptists, long before and after Mullins's day.

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Lordship of Christ—and freedom for the church to be a community of faith sound applicable to any age.

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