

Appendix A

How Edgar Young Mullins Destroyed Southern Baptist Theology

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DENNIS A. WRIGHT, DMIN



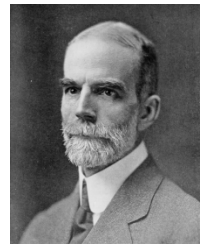
If you want to understand the history of the Southern Baptist Convention and the theological discussions among Southern Baptists in the past hundred years, you need to get acquainted with E. Y. Mullins. In my estimation, the Southern Baptist Convention has been more strongly influenced by Mullins than by any other theologian.

Trevin Wax¹



WHO WAS EDGAR YOUNG MULLINS?

Even literary critic Harold Bloom has said that Mullins is America's most neglected theologian.² 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.³



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.⁴

¹ Wax, Trevin (2012). <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/the-enigmatic-edgar-why-e-y-mullins-is-essential-to-understanding-southern-baptists/>. Retrieved March 27, 2025.

² Bloom, Harold (1992). *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post Christian Nation*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 199.

³ For a biographical overview of Mullins's life, see Ellis, William E. (1985). *A Man of Books and a Man of the People*. Macon: Mercer University Press.

⁴ 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 20th and 21st Century," *Review*

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.*"⁵

MULLINS'S MILD MODIFICATIONS

In a study of Southern Baptist theology entitled *Winds of Doctrine*, W. Wiley Richards locates the origin of Calvinism's decline in the middle half of the nineteenth century. His thesis is interesting, but his evidence is ambivalent.⁶ Only slight, isolated, and idiosyncratic declines from Calvinism entered Southern Baptist theology prior to the 20th century. No one of trend-setting influence seriously challenged the Calvinistic hegemony before the arrival of E. Y. Mullins as president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1899.⁷

*As a theologian, Mullins worked energetically to create a new theological paradigm for the defense of evangelical Christianity and in the process redefined both theological method and content for Southern Baptists.*⁸ He gradually steered the Southern Baptist theological ship in a different direction by imposing the New England Baptist reticence toward confessions and creeds characteristic of Francis Wayland and the philosophical personalism of Borden Parker Bowne, a professor of philosophy at Boston University.

and Expositor, 96 (1999): 87-108; and E. Glenn Hinson, "E. Y. Mullins as Interpreter of the Baptist Tradition," *Review and Expositor* 96 (1999): 109-122.

⁵ Hudson, Winthrop (1979). *Baptists in Transition: Individualism and Christian Responsibility*. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 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. Emphasis mine.

⁶ W. Wiley Richards, *Winds of Doctrine* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), pp. 45-59.

⁷ He had entered as a student in 1881, receiving his degree in 1885. His return as president came after serving pastorates in Baltimore, Maryland, and Newton Center, Massachusetts. During his 29 years as president, Mullins became a dominant force in Southern Baptist denominational life (convention president 1921-24) as well as a world-wide Baptist leader (president of the Baptist World Alliance 1923-28).

⁸ Emphasis mine.

EXCURSUS

EDGAR YOUNG MULLINS THE THEOLOGIAN

R. ALBERT MOHLER, PhD

As president of Southern Seminary, Mullins also served as chairman of the faculty—a responsibility which allowed him to set his own teaching agenda. At the onset Mullins declared his intention to teach theology, thus returning to the example set by founding president James P. Boyce.

But, if Mullins was determined to follow Boyce’s example in this regard, he was also to set a decisive change in theological direction for the seminary. Boyce was a classical Calvinist in the tradition of Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, and the other Princeton theologians. His evangelical Calvinism was the hallmark of theological conviction among educated Baptist theologians of the day, and matched the convictions of grassroots Southern Baptists as well.

Mullins greatly admired Boyce, and used a revised edition of Boyce’s *Abstract of Systematic Theology* as his textbook in theology until Mullins wrote his own textbook, *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression*, in 1917.⁹ This volume would remain in constant use at Southern Seminary for over 30 years. Though Mullins dedicated the book to Boyce’s memory, his new textbook charted a course away from Boyce’s theological system.

Through his studies under the founding faculty at Southern Seminary, Mullins had become thoroughly acquainted with the evangelical Calvinism Boyce and his faculty colleagues represented and taught. But in the fifteen years between his graduation from the seminary and his appointment as president, Mullins had been taking stock of other theological systems.

Most importantly, Mullins had come into contact with both evangelicals and liberals in the North. His pastorates in Baltimore and Boston exposed Mullins to the theological systems then current among northerners—systems which had scarcely touched Baptists in the South.

Furthermore, Mullins was also influenced by proximity to the faculties at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, and to the faculties at Boston and Harvard, as well as the Newton Theological Institute. Through these and other influences, Mullins began explorations in

⁹ Mullins, E. Y. (1917). *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression*. Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

the writings of European theologians such as Germans Friedrich Schleiermacher and Albrecht Ritschl. More directly, he was introduced to the pragmatism of William James at Harvard and the personalism of Borden Parker Bowne at Boston University.

These new streams in theology, philosophy, and psychology marked a revolution in thought on both sides of the Atlantic. The last decades of the nineteenth century were the high water mark of liberal thought in the wake of the Enlightenment. Confidence in the inevitable course of human progress was abundant, and a brave new world beckoned as the twentieth century dawned.

The Enlightenment's famed "turn to the subject" set the foundation for a revolutionary emphasis on human experience and the centrality of individual experience in all questions of knowledge. Thus, for Schleiermacher, theology was not, in essence, the systematic expression of revealed truth, but reflection upon religious experience.

Similarly, movements in psychology and philosophy followed similar patterns of development. William James, whose philosophy of pragmatism set the stage for dramatic change in several disciplines, insisted that truth and experience were inextricably linked. As Mullins would explain, pragmatism "renounces the idea that truths are ready made and given to us independent of and apart from our experience."¹⁰ (9) From Bowne, whose personalistic idealism led to theological conflict with conservatives, Mullins gained a critical appreciation for the centrality of the person as the starting point for theological understanding. As he explained, personalism "takes the individual and personal life of man as its starting point, the highest datum possible for any form of philosophy."¹¹

Bowne's personalism would become firmly established as a central influence in Mullins' theological system, affirming and undergirding Mullins' shift from the Calvinism of Boyce to a theological position centered—not on revelation—but on religious experience. Bowne explained the theological ramifications of his philosophical system as follows: "A world of persons with a Supreme Person at the head is the conception to which we come as the result of our critical reflections."¹² All knowledge is personal knowledge, and all personal knowledge comes through the medium of human experience. Religious experience is but one form of human experience, and it is the experience of human personality with the divine Personality. In order to see the dramatic impact of this worldview and epistemology on Mullins, note this statement from Mullins' major work

¹⁰ Mullins, E. Y. (1908). "Pragmatism, Humanism, and Personalism—The New Philosophic Movement," *Review and Expositor* 5, 503.

¹¹ Mullins (1908), 510.

¹² Bowne, Borden Parker (1968). "Personalism," in *American Protestant Thought in the Liberal Era*, ed. William R. Hutchison. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 87.

on revelation: “The bases of religious knowledge lie in personality and personal relationships.”¹³

This shift from biblical revelation to religious experience as the starting point and critical principle for theology represented a revolution from the influence of Boyce and Mullins’ other teachers at Southern Seminary. Though this revolution would not lead Mullins to reject their doctrinal system as a whole, it did mean that Mullins and his teachers were starting from radically different theories of knowledge and following very different theological principles.

This revolution did not necessarily make Mullins a theological liberal. Indeed, Mullins sought to be a defender of evangelical conviction against liberalism and the developing modernism. But Mullins’ reliance on religious experience did mean that his theological system and his defense of the faith would share a common starting point with the modernists.

Mullins sought to affirm the truthfulness of the Bible and its status as divinely inspired, without affirming any specific theory of inspiration. He described both verbal and “dynamical” theories of biblical inspiration and seemed to dismiss both, without identifying his own understanding. The fact of inspiration was, to Mullins, more important than any theory of inspiration. Mullins stalwartly defended the supernatural elements of the Bible and rejected those whose anti-supernatural bias led them to dismiss the miracles and other elements of Scripture as non-historical or untrue.

On the other hand, Mullins also accepted a division between scientific and religious knowledge. Scientific knowledge deals with the “facts” of the natural world, while religious knowledge is concerned with the “facts” of the supernatural world and human religious experience. Against the anti-supernaturalists and the worldview of scientific naturalism, Mullins argued that “Religion and science do not differ in the sense that science deals with facts, with forms of reality, while religion has to do with mere beliefs or fancies or forms of unreality.”¹⁴ Further, given his insistence upon the centrality of experience, Mullins was also able to claim that religion “too is empirical in that it starts from actually given data of experience.”¹⁵

Revelation is thus tied to religious “facts” and religious experience. This is Mullins’ claim concerning the veracity of biblical revelation. The religious truth in the Bible is secured by divine revelation mediated through the experience of the biblical writers—and

¹³ Mullins, Edgar Young (1913). *Freedom and Authority in Religion*. Philadelphia: Griffith and Rowland, 4.

¹⁴ Mullins (1913), 213.

¹⁵ Mullins (1913), 213.

mediated again through the religious experience of the reader. Mullins explicitly removed any claim of inspiration connected to what he saw as non-religious issues.

This methodological innovation left Mullins free to negotiate during the turbulent years of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. The single issue most contested in that controversy was evolution. Mullins' understanding of biblical revelation and authority led him to defend the divine creation of the natural world, but also to insist that science was free to pursue its own study of the natural world, without the necessity of conflict with biblical truth.

Mullins never declared himself on the evolution issue—insisting that as a theologian he would deal with other matters of religious interest. Nevertheless, he did castigate anti-evolutionists as “ill-advised” and he was also active within the Kentucky legislature, seeking to oppose anti-evolutionary legislation. Though his personal position was never clear—some claimed by intention—Mullins seemed to affirm some sort of theistic evolution, but only to the extent that such a position would not threaten the supernatural element in the Bible, nor identify him as an evolutionist.¹⁶ His position confused both the evolutionists and their opponents. During the infamous Scopes trial, Mullins refused to assist either William Jennings Bryan or Mullins' friend Shailer Mathews, dean of the University of Chicago Divinity School, who assisted Clarence Darrow. That both Bryan and Mathews thought Mullins could be of assistance indicates the opaqueness of Mullins' position.¹⁷

In his last book, *Christianity at the Cross Roads*, Mullins vigorously defended the truth of the Church's claims concerning Christ, over against the denials of the modernists. He insisted that science has nothing to do with the claims concerning Jesus Christ, for such claims were beyond legitimate scientific inquiry. He lamented the “reduced Christianity” and “reduced Christ” of the modernists and firmly landed on the evangelical side of the Christological divide. But, in order to do so, Mullins again insisted that no conflict between religion and science was possible, for religion was an autonomous discipline free from naturalistic investigation.¹⁸

In the eyes of some conservatives, Mullins was attempting to save Christianity from science by forfeiting its very foundation of truth. J. Gresham Machen, the scholarly fundamentalist who fought on the front lines of the controversy, acknowledged Mullins'

¹⁶ Space does not allow an adequate treatment of this issue. For further reading, see the work by Ellis listed above.

¹⁷ Mathews provided Mullins' name to Darrow as one who would defend evolution. Mullins responded with an immediate and unqualified rejection of evolution, and claimed that he was “not a theistic nor any other kind of evolutionist.” He affirmed the same to Bryan. See Ellis, p. 195.

¹⁸ Mullins, E. Y. (1924). *Christianity at the Cross Roads*. New York: George H. Doran.

intention and his recognition that “the religious issue of the present day is not between two varieties of evangelical Christianity, but between Christianity on the one hand and something that is radically opposed to Christianity on the other.”¹⁹

Nevertheless, Machen registered serious concern regarding Mullins’ separation of science, philosophy, and religion into three autonomous spheres. Most urgently, Machen was certain that Mullins’ principle separating science and religion would lead to the destruction of “the entire doctrinal or factual basis of the Christian religion.”²⁰ As Machen set his case: “This principle of the sharp separation between science and philosophy and religion leads, we think, logically into an abyss of skepticism.”²¹ Machen was confident that this was not Mullins’ intention, and that Mullins actually contradicts his own principle by insisting on the factual and historical basis of Christian doctrines. Religious “facts,” insisted Machen, are not different in essential nature from facts in any other area of life or thought.

Mullins sought to establish a mediating position in relation to the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. Clearly not a modernist, Mullins nonetheless pursued friendly relations with modernists in the North—especially those at the University of Chicago Divinity School—until those relationships cooled in the early 1920s. Within the Southern Baptist Convention’s evolution controversy of the same decade, Mullins staunchly defended the inherent supernaturalism of the Scriptures, while resisting those who wanted the Convention to take an official stance on evolution.

In relation to the authority and truthfulness of the Bible, Mullins affirmed the position essentially known as functional inerrancy, though he did not use the term. Resisting the precise formulations of the Princeton theologians, Mullins dealt with the issue by means of what he identified as an “inductive method” which affirmed the truthfulness of Scripture while acknowledging that the biblical writers “employed the language and forms of speech in common use in their own day to convey their religious message from God.”²² He further identified his inductivist position with James Orr, and cited Orr to affirm that the Bible “is free from demonstrable error in its statements, and harmonious in its teachings.”²³

Perhaps the most significant feature of Mullins’ thought concerning Scripture is his refusal directly to identify the Bible as revelation. This point is nuanced, but of extreme

¹⁹ Machen, J. Gresham (1926). “The Relation of Religion to Science and Philosophy,” A Review of *Christianity at the Cross Roads* by E. Y. Mullins, *Princeton Theological Review* (January 1926), 38.

²⁰ Machen (1926), 46.

²¹ Machen (1926), 46.

²² Mullins (1913) *Freedom and Authority*, 380.

²³ Mullins (1913) *Freedom and Authority*, 381.

importance. The founders of Southern Seminary, in keeping with the consensus of evangelical theology, identified the Bible as God's written revelation, inspired in a manner both verbal and complete, or "plenary." Instead, Mullins affirmed that the Bible is the *record* of revelation. As Mullins stated: "We have in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments the record of God's revelation of himself to his people."²⁴ Elsewhere Mullins would speak of the Bible as revelation, but these statements were of a more general nature.

The lack of precision in Mullins' position has allowed variant interpretations and reconstructions of his view. One recent interpreter judged that "The idea of inspiration played a very minor role in Mullins' system of theology."²⁵ Another argues that "Even though Mullins himself stopped short of arguing for the doctrine of inerrancy, it is extremely doubtful that he would set himself against it."²⁶ The very nature of Mullins' mediating position allows for such disparate interpretations. In the "inerrancy" controversy which occurred within the Southern Baptist Convention during the 1980s and 1990s, both conservatives and moderates claimed Mullins as an ally—and both parties could supply evidence for the claim.

As has already been indicated, another feature of the new theological paradigm Mullins developed was a shift from the Calvinism of his teachers to a more modified position on doctrines such as election, atonement, and predestination. Nevertheless, Mullins remained within a generally Reformed or Calvinistic system. He continued to affirm depravity, perseverance, and unconditional election. At times, his words sound almost like Boyce, as when Mullins asserted that "God's choice of a person is prior to that person's choice of God, since God is infinite in wisdom and knowledge and will not make the success of the divine kingdom dependent on the contingent choices of people. God does not fling out the possibility of salvation among human beings, say, like a golden apple, and leave it for people to use or not to use as they will. God's own hands are kept on the reins of the divine government."²⁷

The turn of the new century brought a fervent progressivism to theology—as to virtually every other realm of thought and knowledge. Mullins was a champion of this progressivist impulse, even though he did not accept the anti-supernaturalism of the modernists. "Truth," asserted Mullins, "does not change, but we apprehend truth with

²⁴ Mullins (1917), *Christian Religion*, 140-141.

²⁵ Moody, Dwight A. (1994). "The Bible," in *Has Our Theology Changed? Southern Baptist Thought Since 1845*, ed. Paul A. Basden, Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 17. Moody also stated: "Mullins had virtually [sic.] nothing to say in reference to the inerrancy of Scripture" [p. 25].

²⁶ Nettles, Tom J. (1995). "E. Y. Mullins—Reluctant Evangelical," *Baptist Review of Theology* 5, 84.

²⁷ Mullins, E. Y. (1912). *Baptist Beliefs* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1925 [1912]), 26.

increasing clearness.”²⁸ This optimistic understanding of doctrinal progress led Mullins to believe that he could transcend the Calvinism/Arminianism controversy. Noting the “remarkable revolution” in theology during the late nineteenth century, Mullins advocated a new method and approach to theology as a discipline.

Mullins thought that this new approach, self-consciously influenced by Schleiermacher, would allow him to rise above the theological traditions and patterns of the past. He argued that “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 learning to discard both names and to adhere more closely than either system to the Scriptures, while retaining the truth in both systems.”²⁹

This mediating approach left Mullins open to the charge that he attempted to resolve every theological debate by negotiating a middle position—an inherently unstable and unsatisfying method. His new paradigm also allowed Mullins to redefine certain doctrines in order to reframe long-standing traditions, including the Calvinist legacy. Concerning the doctrine of election, Mullins suggested that God chose certain persons for salvation, because of their potential influence upon other persons.³⁰ He rejected limited atonement and appeared to reject irresistible grace—at least in part because he had redefined terms of the debate. Yet, Mullins was no Arminian. His continued advocacy of election as a central doctrine of the Christian faith demonstrates his continuity with the Calvinistic tradition, even if this continuity was significantly modified.³¹ Mullins explicitly denied that election is based upon God’s foreknowledge of an individual’s response of faith. He affirmed that the gospel “is efficacious with some and not efficacious with others because God’s grace is operative in the one case beyond the degree of its action in the other.”³²

Clearly, the underlying issue in Mullins’ shift on these issues is his theological paradigm’s dependence upon the autonomous individual and his or her religious experience. Placing

²⁸ Mullins (1917), *Christian Religion*, vii.

²⁹ Mullins (1917), *Christian Religion*, vii.

³⁰ Mullins (1917), *Christian Religion*, 352-253.

³¹ This brief consideration of Mullins’ theological system does not allow for a more extended treatment of his comprehensive system, which covered virtually every doctrine, except the doctrine of the church, an omission of great importance.

³² Mullins (1917), *Christian Religion*, 343. The preceding section makes the point clear: “Does God choose men to salvation because of their good works or because he foresees they will believe when the gospel is preached to them? Beyond doubt God foresees faith. Beyond doubt faith is a condition of salvation. The question is whether it is also the ground of salvation. The Scriptures answer this question in the negative.”

experience as the first principle of a theological system would necessarily shift attention away from divine sovereignty in favor of human decision.³³ The free human agent becomes the focal point of theological consideration. God's sovereignty is redefined—but never denied—in order to accentuate the centrality of the human decision as an act of the religious consciousness. Schleiermacher's emphasis on religious experience over revealed knowledge so shaped Mullins' theology that, though points of continuity remained, his teachers could not have recognized their own theological system behind that of their student.

The focus on autonomous individualism led to another theological development which would form the central thrust of Mullins' conception of Baptist identity. Writing in his most influential book, *The Axioms of Religion*, Mullins would state his case in these words: "The sufficient statement of the historical significance of the Baptists is this: The competency of the soul in religion."³⁴ This notion of "soul competency" was interpreted by Mullins to mean that each individual soul is independently competent to adjudicate all matters of religious importance. "Religion," argued Mullins, "is a personal matter between the soul and God."³⁵ Mullins even described the idea in terms of "self-government in religion."³⁶

Such a conception ruled out all hierarchies and religious authorities, and led, Mullins argued, to congregationalism and democracy in the religious life. By means of this principle of soul competency, Mullins even claimed to have taken the principle of justification by faith "far beyond the dreams of Luther and other reformers."³⁷

Mullins' influence on these issues was not limited to the classroom, nor to his theological writings. His role as chairman of the committee which presented the 1925 "Baptist Faith and Message" statement as the Southern Baptist Convention's first official confession of faith furthered the process of shifting from a Calvinistic to a more modified position, indicating the shift of authority toward the individual. This was accomplished by basing

³³ This is well described by Thomas J. Nettles: "Emphasis on human consciousness and experience so predominate in Mullins's theology that human decision and freedom eventually overshadow and crowd our effectual divine activity. This is evident in his view of Scripture, justification, and the panorama of theology, but is especially clear in his exposition of the doctrine of election." See Thomas J. Nettles, *By His Grace and For His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), p. 247.

³⁴ Mullins, E. Y. (1908). *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith*. Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 53.

³⁵ Mullins (1908). *The Axioms of Religion*, 54.

³⁶ Mullins (1908). *The Axioms of Religion*, 55.

³⁷ Mullins (1908). *The Axioms of Religion*, 58.

the “Baptist Faith and Message” on the New Hampshire Confession of Faith rather than the Philadelphia Confession, which was more thoroughly Calvinistic.

At base, however, it was the totality of Mullins’ theological system which was in large part responsible for the theological consensus which shaped the Southern Baptist Convention well into the twentieth century. That consensus would be doctrinally conservative, but the shift to a foundation in Christian experience would lead to a rugged theological individualism which would later threaten to dissolve into doctrinal ambiguity.

Timothy George notes that E. Y. Mullins “hoped that his theology would serve the cause of irenicism and denominational unity in a time of tension and schism.”³⁸ In a very real sense, Mullins’ new theological paradigm accomplished what he intended. But his emphasis on personal experience and “soul competency” would later operate to undercut the very consensus Mullins worked so hard to achieve.³⁹

MULLINS’S VIEW ON THE BIBLE

His experientialism softened the belly of apologetics for biblical revelation as he created a superficial identity between argument for biblical authority and an unwarranted imposition of religion on the conscience. Defenses of biblical authority, or inerrancy, which relied on *a priori* reasoning, or syllogisms, were counterproductive to real spiritual life, in Mullins’s view. Truth must be assimilated experientially, he reasoned, not “imposed by authority of any kind, whether pope or church or Bible.”⁴⁰

³⁸ George, Timothy F. (1985). “Systematic Theology at Southern Seminary,” *Review and Expositor* 82, 39.

³⁹ Mohler, Albert (July 16, 2009). Retrieved November 6, 2024.

<https://albertmohler.com/2009/07/16/e-y-mullins-the-axioms-of-religion/>

⁴⁰ Mullins, E. Y. (1974). *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression*. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 10-11.

Mullins struggles long and honestly with the relation between subjectivity and objectivity in developing a concept of biblical authority. In the end, however, subjectivity and intuition win and an inerrant Bible as a foundation for doctrine becomes unhandy baggage in Mullin’s view of true religious experience. He believed that the whole of Christian apologetics resided in the “practical” life. When the “whole” is transferred to the practical life, human consciousness becomes the final criterion of truth and pragmatic existentialism practically governs the life of the individual and the church. Both the meaning and the truthfulness of the Bible recede in importance and give way to the authority of the visceral sensation.

MULLINS AND SOUL COMPETENCY

Mullins highlighted soul competency⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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.”⁴³ 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.

Though the idea of soul competency was muddled during the recent controversy within the Southern Baptist Convention, soul competency meant that “the individual is competent to believe and thus to experience the truth of Christianity.” Though soul competency, thus defined, would seem merely to provide a basis for the free offer of the gospel to all people, Mullins used “soul competency” to assert a radical individualism from all external authorities. Mullins wrote in *Axioms of Religion* that “direct access to God through Christ is the law of the Christian life. It is a species of spiritual tyranny for men to interpose the church itself, its ordinances or ceremonies, or its formal creeds between the human soul and Christ.” Human beings were free to interpret the Scriptures for themselves: “Since the Reformation this axiom has found expression in nothing more than in the exercise of the individual’s right of private interpretation of the Scriptures. It

⁴¹ 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 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.

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 Weaver, C. Douglas (2008). *In Search of the New Testament Church: The Baptist Story*. Macon: Mercer University Press.

⁴² 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 Mullins, E. Y. (1908). *The Axioms of Religion*, Philadelphia: Judson Press.

⁴³ Mullins (1908), *The Axioms of Religion*, 51.

guarantees the right of examining God's revelation, each man for himself, and of answering directly to God in belief and conduct."⁴⁴

Thus, we must conclude that, "*Human beings served as the center and the final judge in Mullins's theology!*"⁴⁵

C. Douglas Weaver⁴⁶ reminds us that "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.⁴⁷ 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."⁴⁸

Weaver asks: 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."⁴⁹ Mullins also

⁴⁴ Mullins, *Axioms of Religion*, 94–95; Freeman, "The Siren Songs of Modernity," 34–37; William D. M. Carrell, "Edgar Young Mullins and the Competency of the Soul in Religion," (Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, 1993) 98; E. Glenn Hinson, "E. Y. Mullins as Interpreter of the Baptist Tradition," *Review and Expositor* 96 (1999) 109–122; James Dunn, "Church, State, and Soul Competency," *Review and Expositor* 96 (1999) 61–74; Molly T. Marshall, "Exercising Liberty of Conscience: Freedom in Private Interpretation," in *Baptists in the Balance: The Tension Between Freedom and Responsibility*, ed. Everett Goodwin (Valley Forge: Judson, 1997) 141–150.

⁴⁵ Lucas, S. M. (1999). "Christianity at the Crossroads: E. Y. Mullins, J. Gresham Machen, and the Challenge of Modernism." *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, Volume 3, 3(4), 54–74. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁶ Weaver, C. Douglas (2008). "The Baptist ecclesiology of E. Y. Mullins: individualism and the New Testament church: most observers consider E. Y. Mullins to be the most influential Southern Baptist theologian and denominational leader of the twentieth century." *Baptist History and Heritage*, December 22, 2008.

⁴⁷ 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).

⁴⁸ Mullins, E. Y. (1913). *Freedom and Authority in Religion*. Philadelphia: Griffith and Rowland, 41–53.

⁴⁹ Mullins, E. Y. (1928). "Baptist Life in the World's Life," *Review and Expositor*, 25 (1928): 311.

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.⁵⁰

But in advocating this concept, Mullins has indeed opened a Pandora's Box of theological error!

Indeed, Mullins advocated: "*You may choose to believe in God or choose not to believe. Again the choice is in the highest degree momentous. You may freely will to believe in God. Indeed, when we look at the spiritual nature of man closely it becomes quite evident the he is so made that faith is the natural or normal expression of his nature. There are certain deep instincts in him which cannot be evaded. They impel us to believe in God ... in all these deeper impulses we find a vindication of his right to believe in God. Faith in God is his inalienable right. The instinct of thought and of conscience, the instinct of prayer and of suffering, the instinct of courage and of hope—all these vindicate man's right to believe. The whole make and trend of his soul impels him to God.*"⁵¹

Really?

In his 1940's Broadman book, *Christ and Human Liberty*, Adiel Moncrief spoke of Jesus' view of man in these terms: "Belief in human liberty and in man's free institutions

⁵⁰ Mullins (1928), 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.

⁵¹ Mullis, Edgar Young (1930). "The Right to Believe," *Faith in the Modern World* (Nashville: Baptist Sunday School Board, 1930), 11–12, 21. Emphasis mine.

involves the greatest measure of faith in man. Jesus has that measure of faith in man. *He believes in the boundless possibilities of mankind to become free sons of God.*"⁵²

Does He, now?

Is this the same Jesus who said, *"All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out"* (John 6:37) and *"And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day"* (John 6:39) and *"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day"* (John 6:44)?

Mark Coppenger says, "It is good to note that man's will is free in the sense that his choices flow freely from his character or nature, whether regenerate or unregenerate. But today the spiritual freedom of fallen man is being woefully overrated and, consequently, saving grace is being tragically underrated. Let us not underestimate our own freedom to address this imbalance, to the magnification of God's grace and the praise of His glory."⁵³

MULLINS'S THEOLOGICAL LEGACY



Whatever his intention, this massive methodological shift in theology set the stage for doctrinal ambiguity and theological minimalism.

R. Albert Mohler, PhD⁵⁴



Although Mullins' greatness as a denominational leader is "secure," his theological legacy cannot be ignored, Mohler asserts. "The central thrust of E.Y. Mullins' theological legacy is his focus on individual experience," Mohler writes. *"Whatever his intention, this massive methodological shift in theology set the stage for doctrinal ambiguity and theological minimalism."*⁵⁵ The compromise Mullins sought to forge in the 1920s was significantly

⁵² Adiel Moncrief, "Christ & Human Liberty," *The Loving Christ in the Life of Today* (Nashville: Broadman, 1941), 21. Emphasis mine.

⁵³ Coppenger, M. (1996). "The Ascent of Lost Man in Southern Baptist Preaching." *The Founders Journal: The Ascent of Lost Man in Southern Baptist Preaching, Summer*, 25, 9–19.

⁵⁴ <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/10-2-97-mohler-analyzes-e-y-mullins-in-baptist-classics-series/> Retrieved March 27, 2025.

⁵⁵ Emphasis mine.

altered by later generations, with personal experience inevitably gaining ground at the expense of revealed truth.

“Once the autonomous individual is made the central authority in matters of theology — a move made necessary by Mullins’ emphasis on religious experience — the authority of Scripture becomes secondary at best, regardless of what may be claimed in honor of Scripture’s preeminence,” Mohler continues. “Either personal experience will be submitted to revelation, or revelation will be submitted to personal experience. There is no escape from this theological dilemma, and every theologian must choose between these two methodological options.”⁵⁶

Mohler⁵⁷ further explains: Another feature of the new theological paradigm Mullins developed was *a shift from the Calvinism of his teachers to a more modified position on doctrines such as election, atonement, and predestination*.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Mullins remained within a generally Reformed or Calvinistic system. He continued to affirm depravity, perseverance, and unconditional election.

The turn of the new century brought a fervent progressivism to theology—as to virtually every other realm of thought and knowledge. Mullins was a champion of this progressivist impulse, even though he did not accept the anti-supernaturalism of the modernists. “Truth,” asserted Mullins, “does not change, but we apprehend truth with increasing clearness.”⁵⁹ This optimistic understanding of doctrinal progress led Mullins to believe that he could transcend the Calvinism/Arminianism controversy. Noting the “remarkable revolution” in theology during the late nineteenth century, Mullins advocated a new method and approach to theology as a discipline.

Mullins thought that this new approach, self-consciously influenced by Schleiermacher, would allow him to rise above the theological traditions and patterns of the past. He argued that “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

⁵⁶ <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/10-2-97-mohler-analyzes-e-y-mullins-in-baptist-classics-series/> Retrieved March 27, 2025.

⁵⁷ Mohler, R. Albert (2009). © 2025, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Retrieved March 27, 2025. <https://albertmohler.com/2009/07/16/e-y-mullins-the-axioms-of-religion/>.

⁵⁸ Emphasis mine.

⁵⁹ Mullins, E. Y. (1917). *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression*. Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, vii.

learning to discard both names and to adhere more closely than either system to the Scriptures, while retaining the truth in both systems.”⁶⁰

This mediating approach left Mullins open to the charge that he attempted to resolve every theological debate by negotiating a middle position—an inherently unstable and unsatisfying method. His new paradigm also allowed Mullins to redefine certain doctrines in order to reframe long-standing traditions, including the Calvinist legacy. Concerning the doctrine of election, Mullins suggested that God chose certain persons for salvation, because of their potential influence upon other persons.⁶¹ He rejected limited atonement and appeared to reject irresistible grace—at least in part because he had redefined terms of the debate. Yet, Mullins was no Arminian. His continued advocacy of election as a central doctrine of the Christian faith demonstrates his continuity with the Calvinistic tradition, even if this continuity was significantly modified.⁶² *Mullins explicitly denied that election is based upon God’s foreknowledge of an individual’s response of faith.* He affirmed that the gospel “is efficacious with some and not efficacious with others because God’s grace is operative in the one case beyond the degree of its action in the other.”⁶³

Clearly, the underlying issue in Mullins’ shift on these issues is his theological paradigm’s dependence upon the autonomous individual and his or her religious experience. Placing experience as the first principle of a theological system would necessarily shift attention away from divine sovereignty in favor of human decision.⁶⁴ The free human agent becomes the focal point of theological consideration. God’s sovereignty is redefined—but never denied—in order to accentuate the centrality of the human decision as an act of the religious consciousness. Schleiermacher’s emphasis on religious experience over revealed knowledge so shaped Mullins’ theology that, though points of continuity

⁶⁰ Mullins (1917). *The Christian Religion*, vii.

⁶¹ Mullins (1917). *The Christian Religion*, 352-353.

⁶² This brief consideration of Mullins’ theological system does not allow for a more extended treatment of his comprehensive system, which covered virtually every doctrine, except the doctrine of the church, an omission of great importance.

⁶³ Mullins (1917). *Christian Religion*, 343. The preceding section makes the point clear: “Does God choose men to salvation because of their good works or because he foresees they will believe when the gospel is preached to them? Beyond doubt God foresees faith. Beyond doubt faith is a condition of salvation. The question is whether it is also the ground of salvation. The Scriptures answer this question in the negative.” Emphasis mine.

⁶⁴ This is well described by Thomas J. Nettles: “Emphasis on human consciousness and experience so predominate in Mullins’s theology that human decision and freedom eventually overshadow and crowd out effectual divine activity. This is evident in his view of Scripture, justification, and the panorama of theology, but is especially clear in his exposition of the doctrine of election.” See Nettles, Thomas J. (1986). *By His Grace and For His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 247.

remained, his teachers could not have recognized their own theological system behind that of their student.⁶⁵

FRAYING LOOSE ENDS

Nettles succinctly demonstrates the sad theological heritage of Edgar Young Mullins: The clear and precise commitment of Southern Baptists to Calvinism diminished rapidly after the time of Mullins. Preachers and teachers began to dismiss even the remnants of Calvinism remaining in Mullins. Dale Moody's *The Word of Truth* gloried in the fact that it was the first theology by a Southern Baptist completely to dismiss all "five points" of Calvinism, including Perseverance of the Saints.⁶⁶ Nothing more antithetical to the position of Dagg and Boyce, indeed to their entire understanding of the spirit and fabric of the Christian faith, could be produced. Herschel Hobbs, in his reworking of Mullins's *Axioms of Religion*, focuses on man's freedom over God's sovereignty when he pictures God's activity as limited simply to offering "every incentive." "The final choice," however, "lay with man. God in his sovereignty set the condition. Man in his free will determines the result."⁶⁷

Another striking example of this is seen by comparing Mullins's treatment of the potter and the clay with that of Wayne Dehoney. Mullins describes the potter as working toward beauty if the clay is "yielding and plastic." Should the clay be refractory, the goal is not accomplished — "all of which means that God will not do violence to the will of man. His sovereignty is holy and loving; it respects human freedom."⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Mohler (2009). <https://albertmohler.com/2009/07/16/e-y-mullins-the-axioms-of-religion/>

⁶⁶ Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 337-65. Moody's hostility toward historic Southern Baptist Calvinism was strong and his caricatures of the system were grotesque. "Many... see a picture of an arbitrary tyrant on his hellish-heavenly throne watching mankind march by. Number six—you are in a fix! Number seven—you go to heaven! Why? God just decreed that all number sixes go to hell and all number sevens go to heaven." [p. 337]. The confessional past of the chair in which he taught he felt was an obstacle necessarily to be overcome. "In brief the system of Calvinism cannot be patched with new cloth. The new wine cannot be put in old wineskins. That is what too many do when they try to torture the texts of the Bible to agree with some creed or confession of the past. I cannot say this too strongly" [p. 347].

⁶⁷ Herschel Hobbs and E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1978), p. 72. Hobbs purports to be doing an exegesis of [Eph. 1:3-13](#) showing how there is no conflict between sovereignty and free will. In this section he has quoted Mullins's *Christian Religion* at the point where Mullins says, "Election is not to be thought of as a bare choice of so many human units by God's action independently of man's free choice and the human means employed. God elects men to respond freely" [p. 347]. It is clear from his discussion that Hobbs completely misses the thrust of Mullins's argument.

⁶⁸ *Axioms*, p. 90.

Wayne Dehoney employs the same biblical picture with similar conclusions but with a kerygmatic flair. After describing the potter's patient work resulting only in a destroyed vessel, he says: "Herein is an awesome truth! You and I, finite beings, can thwart the purpose of the Almighty God! We can resist and rebel and cause God himself to fail in our lives!"⁶⁹

Later Dehoney applied this same idea by pressing his hearers to yield to a God who "is subject to your will, your response, your decision! By yielding to him in confession, repentance and faith, he will make you over and you can begin again, today!"⁷⁰

None of Mullins's concern for the efficacy of God's holy and loving sovereignty is retained; only the dominant anthropocentric concern for freedom remains.⁷¹

CONCLUSION

Nettles concludes: "Southern Baptist beginnings were self-consciously and vigorously Calvinistic. This is reflected in the confessions, the associations, the preachers, and the theologians. The changes that have come could with clear justification be called "theological apostacy." Some feel the force of this historical reality and with both conscience and conviction desire to restore the spiritual dynamic of the living truth of the documents. Others would rather ignore the implications of this theological matrix. As the outworkings of this apostacy have established themselves, we should see that the changes have not contributed to our health but have spawned a climate of theological disunity, rampant absenteeism, a circus mentality in much evangelism, and a justified distress concerning the spirituality of professing Christians.

"The two generations of Mullins and his successors succeeded not in perpetuating but in altering historic theological commitments of Baptists."⁷² The microcosm of diversity

⁶⁹ Dehoney, Wayne (1974). *Preaching to Change Lives*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 120.

⁷⁰ Dehoney (1974), 124.

⁷¹ Nettles, Thomas J. © Founders Ministries. Retrieved March 7, 2023.

<https://founders.org/articles/the-rise-demise-of-calvinism-among-southern-baptists/>

⁷² A recent publication by Broadman has given substantial space to describing some aspects of the change described in this article. The basic pattern of early uniformity in doctrine to a progressive diversification is documented in *Has Our Theology Changed? Southern Baptist Thought Since 1845*, ed., Paul Basden. Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994. It specifically highlights "Predestination," "Atonement," and "Perseverance." The statement made about predestination is typical of the chronicle of doctrinal shift: "Although Southern Baptists consciously adhered to Calvinism for their first sixty or seventy years, their most recent theologians have rejected it in favor of an Arminian approach to predestination" (71). The editor, Paul Basden, indicates that the approach of the book was "to trace the development of those doctrines which Southern Baptists have seen change in the last century and a half" (2) and concludes that "Southern Baptists have significantly changed their beliefs on many of the

embodied in Mullins was not reflective of an existing condition in Southern Baptist life. Rather, he was the seminal power in the procreation of a diversity innately centrifugal. The ideas which supported his treatment of biblical authority, the use of confessions, and divine sovereignty had no cohesive power. Though often scintillating, they were so individualistic that they had no hope of serving as an effective unitive force for a denomination intent on eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of its people in one sacred effort for the propagation of the gospel.”⁷³

A FINAL THOUGHT



So the king appointed an official for her, saying, “Restore all that was hers, together with all the produce of the fields from the day that she left the land until now.”

2 Kings 8:6



In 1976, Noel Wesley Hollyfield, Jr., wrote his thesis⁷⁴ for a Master of Divinity degree from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Hollyfield’s thesis was titled, “A Sociological Analysis of the Degrees of ‘Christian Orthodoxy’ Among Selected Students in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.” His thesis was read and approved by the SBTS committee composed of G. Willis Bennet, chairman, E. Glenn Hinson, and Henlee Barnette. Their approval indicates that they believe that the contents were accurate, and the conclusions validated.

The thesis was prepared because a debate had begun as to whether or not all Southern Baptists believe about the same things. Thus, the student made the study for the thesis “...to decide the true nature of Southern Baptist ‘Orthodoxy’ and diversity.” He also sought to determine if the amount of education the students obtained at Southern Seminary had any effect on their “Orthodoxy.” His study revealed that the more seminary education the students received, the less they believed. The student reported in his: “Discussion. All statistical results indicated that there were significant differences in ‘Orthodoxy’ as the variable of higher education changed and that the differences were such that as higher education increased, ‘Orthodoxy’ decreased.” “Not only was this true

doctrines related to the Calvinist-Arminian debate” (3). Sadly, Basden believes that Southern Baptist pragmatism (as misguided and destructive as it may be) will preclude any serious consideration of a return to historic Southern Baptist theology in an extensive way. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, however, and is not concerned with our assumptions of value built on pragmatic utility.

⁷³ Nettles, Thomas J. © Founders Ministries. Retrieved March 7, 2023.

<https://founders.org/articles/the-rise-demise-of-calvinism-among-southern-baptists/>

⁷⁴ Hollyfield was no conservative, which makes this thesis all the more remarkable.

across the four levels of higher education, but even within one of the levels. There was a definitely less 'Orthodox' report from final year M.Div. students than from first year M.Div. students." (p. 18)

"While the Ph.D—Th.M. students were less 'Orthodox' than any of the other three levels of higher education and the M.Div. students were less 'Orthodox' than the Diploma students..." (p. 18) The student states in his: "Summary of Findings:" There is a "...diversity of belief among Southern Baptist students. In addition, a trend toward doctrinal liberalism was discovered in the Th.M—Ph.D. students and the variable of higher education was found to be reciprocally related to 'Orthodoxy' to a highly significant degree.'" (p. 26) He also states in his "Conclusions and Implications," "The present study confirmed that diversity to an even greater degree and also found that the variable of higher education was reciprocally related to 'Orthodoxy' to a highly significant degree." (p. 31) "Not only was this finding true across four levels of higher education, but even within one of the levels. There was a definitely less 'Orthodox' report from final year M.Div. students than from the first year M.Div. students." (p. 31) Thus, since this "Orthodoxy" thesis was read and approved by the official committee of professors—the thesis is positive evidence that the more seminary education the students receive, the less they believe! The higher the education—the lower the "Orthodoxy." For example, 66% of the first year M.Div. students said it was completely true that Jesus was born of a Virgin. But after listening to their teachers for three years and reading the books suggested, only 33% still believed Jesus was born of a Virgin!⁷⁵

Messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention (hereafter SBC) in Los Angeles, June 1981, were shocked to learn that Duke McCall, president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky had resigned. McCall had been president of this, the oldest Seminary of Southern Baptists, for over 25 years. In that time, he had led the Seminary squarely into the camp of liberalism. According to the *Southern Baptist Journal* (April/May 1981), a man who had been a trustee of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (hereafter SBTS), said, "I've heard Duke make statements that he has brought the Seminary into the liberal camp." The trustee further remarked, "He said he had turned us around—that they are very liberal and that we are now in the mainstream of Christianity, whereas we were not so before."

This, then, was the legacy of Edgar Young Mullins at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

⁷⁵ <http://baptisthistoryhomepage.com/sbc.current.battle.so.bapt.journal.html>. Retrieved March 27, 2025.

Nettles affirms about Mullins: “In his areas of most lasting influence, however, he succeeded not in perpetuating but in *altering*⁷⁶ historic theological commitments of Baptists. The microcosm of diversity embodied in Mullins was not reflective of an existing condition in Southern Baptist life. Rather, he was the seminal power in the procreation of a diversity innately centrifugal. Neither his paradigm for epistemology and apologetics nor his treatment of biblical authority, confessional unity, and divine sovereignty had cohesive power. Though often scintillating, their highly individualized implications created an atmosphere in which *unity could only center on function and organization, not theology*.⁷⁷ Definition of ‘Baptist’ had less and less to do with doctrine and more and more to do with the correlation of spheres of freedom. His system seemed more congenial to the well-developed modernism of the day than it did to a Baptist identity built on Scripture as a regulative principle. Conceived as a model for inclusiveness and broad unity in the denomination, Mullins’ theology tended to doctrinal reductionism creating a hazy uncertainty in the truth-center requisite for eliciting and combining the energies of its people in one sacred effort for the propagation of the gospel.”⁷⁸

The answer for Southern Baptists—and all other churches and denominations that have slipped their moorings—is to return to the faith of our Founders and their commitment to the Bible as the verbally inspired, inerrant, infallible and all-sufficient Word of God. Jesus the Christ founded His church upon Himself—the Living Word of God—and intends for us to focus on the Written Word of God as our sole source for faith and practice. Pragmatism, like any other “ism” is just stuff and nonsense what always leads to destruction.

Jesus said:

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Emphasis mine.

⁷⁷ Emphasis mine.

⁷⁸ Nettles, Tom (2007). *The Baptists: The Modern Era*. Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 3:197-233.

⁷⁹ Matthew 7:24-27.

A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT



One of the definitions of the word *idol* found in the dictionary or thesaurus is “a false conception.” What false conceptions of God has 1 John revealed in your heart? If you have difficulty answering this question, think back to the things you fear. Remember that our fears are based in some false conception of God’s character, what do your fears reveal about wrong ideas of God you may be holding onto?

Jen Wilkin⁸⁰



Could it be that the modern church has made an idol of pragmatism?

Could it be that the modern church has succumbed to the heretical ideas of Charles Grandison Finney and his “new measures”?

Could it be that the modern church has lost sight of the Savior and has instead adopted the mindset of New Age mysticism?

Could it be that Southern Baptists let Edgar Young Mullins absquatulate from the faith of the Reformers and plant the seeds of destruction in the SBC?

Could it be that the modern church has so dumbed down and compromised the Gospel message that all that is left is the smoke and mirrors of that master of deception known as Lucifer?

Could it be that the modern church has a “false conception” of the character of God and His Sovereignty?

Could it be?

Indeed, it could very well be that all this is true. But it does not have to stay that way!

SEVEN SIGNIFICANT SUMMARY STATEMENTS

1. **E.Y. Mullins’ Influence on Southern Baptist Theology:** Mullins significantly shaped Southern Baptist theology by steering Southern Baptist theology away from its Calvinistic roots. By emphasizing individual religious experience and “soul

⁸⁰ Wilkin, Jen (2023). *Abide: A Study of 1, 2, & 3 John*. Brentwood: Lifeway Press, 132.

competency,” he shifted the focus from divine sovereignty to human autonomy. His ideas led to a theological paradigm that prioritized personal experience over revealed truth. While he retained some Calvinistic doctrines like depravity and perseverance, he redefined key concepts such as election and atonement, emphasizing human decision and individual religious experience over divine sovereignty. This shift marked a departure from the theological system of his predecessors, such as James P. Boyce.

2. **Soul Competency and Individualism:** Mullins introduced the principle of “soul competency,” which asserts that every individual has the inherent ability to relate directly to God without external authorities like the church or creeds. This idea became central to Baptist identity, promoting individual freedom in interpreting Scripture and fostering congregational democracy. While this principle emphasized freedom, critics argue that this radical individualism undermined theological unity and opened the door to doctrinal ambiguity.
3. **Shift from Calvinism to Modified Theology:** Mullins redefined doctrines like election and atonement. Mullins emphasized religious experience as the foundation of theology, influenced by thinkers like Friedrich Schleiermacher and William James. He argued that truth must be assimilated through personal experience rather than imposed by external authority, including the Bible. This methodological shift led to a diminished focus on biblical inerrancy and a reliance on subjective interpretation. Though he retained some Reformed elements, his focus on human decision and experience diluted traditional Calvinist teachings.
4. **Impact on Biblical Authority:** Mullins viewed the Bible as a record of revelation rather than revelation itself, emphasizing experiential understanding over strict doctrinal inerrancy. This methodological shift weakened the foundation of biblical authority in Southern Baptist theology. As chairman of the committee that drafted the 1925 “Baptist Faith and Message,” Mullins influenced the Southern Baptist Convention’s first official confession of faith. By basing it on the New Hampshire Confession rather than the more Calvinistic Philadelphia Confession, he further shifted the denomination toward individualism and away from its Calvinistic heritage, and further still from the historic 1689 London Baptist Confession. Critics argue that Mullins’ emphasis on personal experience over revealed truth weakened the authority of Scripture and fostered doctrinal disunity. His legacy is seen as a turning point that led to the decline of Calvinistic theology among Southern Baptists and the rise of a more pragmatic, individualistic approach to faith.
5. **Theological Minimalism and Doctrinal Ambiguity:** Mullins sought to mediate between Calvinism and Arminianism, as well as between Fundamentalism and

Modernism. He advocated for a balanced approach that retained elements of both systems while discarding extremes. Mullins' focus on individual experience and his methodological innovations led to a theological legacy characterized by ambiguity and minimalism. However, this mediating stance was criticized for being unstable and contributing to doctrinal minimalism. Mullins' emphasis on personal experience led to a reductionist approach to theology, creating a legacy of doctrinal ambiguity and theological minimalism within the Southern Baptist Convention. Later generations of Southern Baptists moved further away from Calvinism, embracing doctrines that emphasized human freedom over divine sovereignty. This shift contributed to a fragmented theological identity within the denomination.

6. **Decline in Orthodoxy with Higher Education:** A study revealed that Southern Baptist Theological Seminary students became less orthodox in their beliefs as their education progressed, highlighting the influence of liberal theological trends in higher education.
7. **Call for Return to Foundational Beliefs:** This document advocates for a return to the faith of the Reformers and a commitment to the Bible as the verbally inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word of God, warning against pragmatism and theological compromise.

These takeaways highlight Mullins' profound influence on Southern Baptist theology, both in terms of his contributions and the controversies surrounding his ideas. His legacy continues to shape discussions on theology, individualism, and denominational identity.



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