

**Freedom and  
Responsibility  
in a  
Denominational  
Seminary**



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**F**reedom and responsibility are twin themes woven into the fabric of the biblical revelation. They bind both believers and congregations into a covenant relationship with God and each other. No view of persons nor of institutions which abandons either of these fundamental principles can claim legitimate consistency with the biblical view. In the creation narrative of Genesis 2-3, in the teachings of our Lord (*Matt. 21:28, 24:45; John 8:32*), in the exhortations of the apostles, persons are both free and responsible (*2 Cor. 3:17; Gal. 5:13; 1 Peter 2:16*).

Southern Seminary exists as a community of faith and learning in which freedom of inquiry rests squarely upon the Gospel itself. Faith seeks understanding which requires openness of mind guided by the Holy Spirit. Christian faith directs all thought and life toward God who is the source of truth, the judge of all human thoughts, the ultimate end of all theological inquiry.

The primacy of Scripture and the liberty of conscience are crucial to this task. These establish both the basis and the parameters of freedom and responsibility. As the earliest statement of faith in the Southern Baptist Convention affirms:

*"The scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were given by inspiration of God, and are the only sufficient, certain and authoritative rule of all saving knowledge, faith and obedience." (Abstract of Principles, I)*

Regarding liberty of conscience, that statement insists:

*"God alone is Lord of the conscience, and He hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in anything contrary to His Word, or not contained in it." (Abstract of Principles, XVIII).*

Baptist life and thought have been shaped around these principles, creating a heritage that champions freedom with responsibility.

While faculty responsibility at Southern Seminary must ultimately be realized through the spirit and loyalties of individuals, it takes form and is protected through concrete standards of practice within the institution. Consistent with this assumption, the founders of the Seminary sought to assure faculty responsibility through the fundamental laws written into its Charter on April 30, 1858:

*“Every professor of the institution shall be a member of a regular Baptist church; and all persons accepting professorships in this Seminary shall be considered by such acceptance, as engaging to teach in accord with and not contrary to the Abstract of Principles hereinafter laid down, a departure from which principles on his part shall be considered ground for his resignation or removal by the trustees.*

Admittedly, the Abstract of Principles is not infallible. Even so, it serves a normative role as an institutional contract. It always stands under the judgment of Holy Scripture, consistent with the Abstract’s own emphases on the primacy of Scripture and the liberty of conscience. Confessional statements have historically served a limited and restricted role in the life of Baptists. Seldom has anyone clarified the role of Baptist confessions more pointedly than did E. Y. Mullins, the fourth President of this institution, in “The Baptist Faith and Message” adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1925. When revised in 1963, the statement reiterated Mullins’ view that our confessions of faith:

*“ . . . constitute a consensus of opinion of some Baptist body, large or small, for the general instruction and guidance of our own people and others concerning the articles of the Christian faith which are most surely held among us. . . we do not regard them as complete statements of our faith, having any quality of finality or infallibility. . . the sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Confessions are guides in interpretation, having no authority over the conscience.”*

In Southern Baptist seminaries— and in confessional seminaries generally— such statements of faith help maintain theological continuity with their denominational heritage.

This establishes important parameters for theological education and those who teach in this context. When joining the faculty, the individual declares basic agreement with the theological perspectives set forth in the Abstract. This public declaration assures continuity with the theological consensus which characterizes the seminary. The Southern Seminary Abstract of Principles is an historical statement of those articles of Christian faith “most surely held” by those who teach here. By accepting a teaching post, each faculty member agrees to teach in accord with and not contrary to those principles. Such commitment is verified by the public signing of the original copy of the Abstract, whereupon appear the signatures of all tenured professors, beginning with that of Southern Seminary’s founder, James Pettigru Boyce.

Acknowledging both that they are a guide to interpreting Scripture and that

they are provisional in nature, the 20 principles in the Abstract of Principles are nonetheless an *officially approved consensus* of those articles of faith which persons who teach at Southern Seminary affirm. Assuring compliance with the Charter's mandate requires both the conscientious commitment of individual faculty members and the integrity of administration and trustees.

**T**he Abstract of Principles has never been used to stifle responsible scholarship or participation in contemporary social and political issues. Indeed, a succession of dedicated ministers/scholars has brilliantly demonstrated that assumption for over a century in the life of this seminary. Broadus, Carver, Robertson, Mullins. . . all demonstrated intellectual vigor and spiritual acumen in their commitments to theological scholarship. Each taught "in accord with and not contrary to" the Abstract. They compromised neither personal integrity nor scholarly endeavor. Their classrooms were characterized by open inquiry into biblical truth, a common commitment to fundamental principles of our Baptist heritage and an unfaltering loyalty to the lordship of Christ.

Southern Seminary has consistently sought persons for faculty positions who understood and pursued that valued tradition. The Abstract of Principles is not intended to stifle inquiry but to establish norms by which responsible freedom may be maintained in the context of Seminary education. Every member of the faculty is

*"... free to teach, carry on research,  
and to publish, subject to his adequate  
performance of his academic duties as  
agreed upon with the school."*

Repeatedly affirmed by the trustees, this guideline seeks to preserve a positive balance of freedom and responsibility which will assure the continuation of historic Baptist emphases on the primacy of Scripture and liberty of conscience, while maintaining theological continuity with the cardinal principles which Baptists hold in common.

Ideally, nothing should stand between a Baptist and the Bible other than the Holy Spirit. Yet to emphasize only the primacy of Scripture is much like trying to sit on a one-legged stool. Why is this true? All interpreters are fallible. So, no person should seek to make his or her private interpretation of Scripture tantamount to absolute truth for all of God's people.

In addition to the primacy of Scripture there are at least two other forces for our guidance. First, the counsel of believers through succeeding generations can counterbalance an exclusively "private" interpretation of the Bible. God may reveal an altogether new insight or doctrinal notion to a believer. Great epochs such as the Reformation or the modern missionary movement have thus had their genesis. Nonetheless, the distilled wisdom of those who have preceded us are tests for the validity of our conclusions. Our freedom is held in balance with responsibility by reference to a rich heritage of faithful interpreters. This is a primary function of the Abstract, for it is the consensus of one group of Baptists of "those articles of the Christian faith most

surely held among us" (Mullins).

Second, the present community of believers is yet another witness by which to evaluate our views. To insist that one's private interpretations alone are legitimate needs the corrective witness of the contemporary community of faith. The corporate body of believers helps to deliver interpreters from faulty conclusions while not restricting their liberty under Christ.

There appears to be no better resolution to the difficult challenge of functioning with integrity as a seminary professor, or as any Christian believer, for that matter, than to emphasize both freedom and responsibility.

**What other Scripturally supportable alternatives are there?**

The faculty of Southern Seminary is and should continue to be both responsible and free.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Roy L. Honeycutt". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "R" and a long, horizontal flourish at the end.

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*Adopted by the Board of Trustees of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in April 1983, as the official position statement on Freedom and Responsibility at Southern Seminary*



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