

but he also resisted the serious challenge to orthodoxy from the extreme right where radical fundamentalists threatened true biblical authority with a rigid creedalism. While he was willing to identify certain essential truths for teachers to affirm before they were employed in Baptist schools, he strongly repudiated creedalism, suggesting that no creed except the Scriptures could be set up as final and authoritative.

Rejecting inadequate alternatives, Mullins centered religious authority first in the will of God. This will is embodied in Jesus Christ, the absolute religious authority. The authority of Jesus is expressed historically and objectively in the Scriptures, so the Bible also becomes the authority for Christians.

Mullins made it clear that the Bible is authoritative because it leads persons to God through Christ and relates them to redemptive forces. The Scriptures do not and cannot take the place of Jesus Christ. Persons are not saved by belief in the Scriptures, but by a living faith in Christ.

He saw the fundamentalist view of the Bible as rigid and mechanical. Rather than impose on the Bible a preconceived scheme based on reason, a better approach was to let the Bible speak for itself. Mullins preferred the dynamic theory of inspiration. He believed the writers were enabled to declare truth unmixed with error but were permitted to convey their ideas in the forms of their own selection; therefore, the Bible is both a divine and a human book. He was quick to add, however, that no theory can adequately explain inspiration, and that it is better to be concerned with the result than with the process of inspiration.

The authority of the Bible, according to Mullins, is not based on abstract, rational theories but on the Bible's function and purpose. This functional authority of the Bible is affirmed by study which takes into account all the facts of Scripture and experience and lets them speak for themselves.

### His Influence on Later Southern Baptist Theology

Mullins' influence on later Southern Baptist thought is clear. His theological legacy was preserved through two of his "disciples," W. T. Conner, who taught systematic theology (1910-49) at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Harold W. Tribble, his successor in the chair of systematic theology at Southern Seminary. For many years Tribble continued to use Mullins' *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression* as his basic

seminary textbook. While Conner was more prolific than Tribble, the latter was a faithful advocate of Mullins' method of theology. In the introduction to Conner's *Christian Doctrine*, which set the tone for his teaching of theology at Southwestern, he dedicated his book to Mullins as one of his "teachers."

Assuming that Mullins' view is representative, it seems fair to conclude that he and the Southern Baptist theologians whom he influenced have given their denomination a distinctive understanding of theology, particularly in the Southern Baptist approach to biblical authority. That theological distinctive places Southern Baptists in the mainstream of conservative theology.

Reflecting the pattern of Mullins, Southern Baptists have generally avoided extremes at both ends of the theological spectrum regarding the Bible. They have rejected the liberal, humanistic position which makes the Bible little more than another ancient book, full of errors and contradictions, and, therefore, not authoritative. They have also rejected the tendency to elevate the Bible to a level it never claims for itself, in some cases to a position even above God himself.

### Conclusion

While Mullins was not able to shape a moderate conservative consensus which would successfully bring together Southern Baptists on the left and the right, he did help the denomination avoid a serious schism during this troublesome period. He was called upon to chair the committee that successfully framed in 1925 the first fully developed statement of faith ever adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention. In addition, through his widespread, respected leadership in every area of denominational life, he helped his fellow Southern Baptists maintain organizational unity until the controversies of the 1920's diminished.

Southern Baptists can learn from Mullins' example. He had little patience for what he called "abnormal doctrinal sensitiveness" which he encountered in certain of his brethren. "I maintain that I have no right to refuse to call a Baptist my brother merely because he does not happen to be my twin brother, and I also maintain that another Baptist has no right to refuse to call me brother (and nag and torment me) because I am not his twin."<sup>4</sup>

Mullins helps Southern Baptists understand that although they are theologically diverse, they are practically unanimous in their commitment to the Bible as the divinely inspired, sufficient, certain,

and authoritative guide for faith and practice. If there were no other contribution, that insight alone would be enough to appraise the theology of E. Y. Mullins as highly significant.

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<sup>1</sup>E. Y. Mullins, letter to Livingston Johnson, July 3, 1925.

<sup>2</sup>E. Y. Mullins, letter to George C. McDaniel, July 25, 1925.

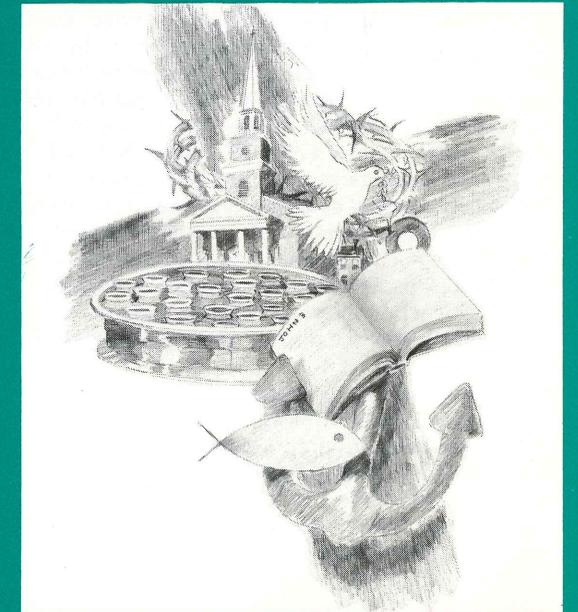
<sup>3</sup>E. Y. Mullins, letter to J. Frank Norris, April 16, 1926.

<sup>4</sup>E. Y. Mullins, "Baptists and Higher Education in Kentucky," an unpublished address, 1906, pp. 17-18.

## Shapers of Southern Baptist Heritage

# E. Y. MULLINS

## Shaper of Theology

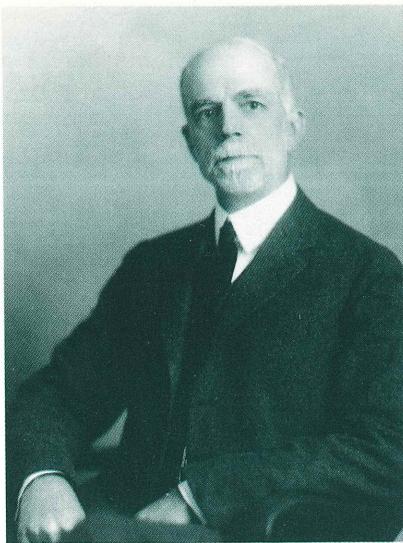


This pamphlet is one of ten in a series designed to help readers understand and appreciate the Baptist heritage.



**THE HISTORICAL COMMISSION  
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## E. Y. Mullins: Shaper of Theology

Russell H. Dilday

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary library has on file copies of three Louisville, Kentucky, newspapers dated November 23, 1928. All three give top headlines to the announcement of the death of Edgar Young Mullins on that day. *The Louisville Times* headline, bright red and one-inch high, reads, "DEATH ENDS MULLINS' SERVICE." Page after page carries tributes from pastors of leading evangelical churches, bishops of the Roman Catholic Church, Jewish rabbis, mayors, judges, businessmen, club women, university professors, and politicians. Tributes from around the world prove how widespread was the influence of this Southern Baptist theologian, philosopher, statesman, and pastor.

Mullins was born the fourth child of Seth Granberry and Cornelia (Tillman) Mullins on January 5, 1860, in Franklin County, Mississippi. He moved with his family to Texas when he was eight years old. Later, he worked as a telegraph operator to pay his way through Texas A & M College (1876-79) and the study of law.

At the age of 18, Mullins attended evangelistic services at First Baptist Church, Dallas, where he was converted. He was baptized in Corsicana,

Texas, in 1880 by his father who was pastor of the First Baptist Church there.

Following a convincing call to preach, in 1881, Mullins entered Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (B.D. degree, 1885). The faculty consisted of James P. Boyce (the president), John A. Broadus, Basil Manly, Jr., William H. Whitsitt, and George W. Riggan. During his third year, he met Isla May Hawley, a fellow student, who shared with him an ambition to go to Brazil as a missionary. When that plan did not materialize, Mullins accepted the call of the Harrodsburg Baptist Church in central Kentucky to be their pastor. Soon after, in June, 1886, he married Hawley. He later accepted pastorates (1888-99) in Baltimore, Maryland, and Newton Center, Massachusetts, with a brief intervening position as associate secretary of the Foreign Mission Board in Richmond, Virginia (1895-96).

Mullins was elected president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, in the summer of 1899. He also became the Joseph E. Brown Professor of Theology. For 29 years, from 1899 to 1928, Mullins served as administrator, teacher, and theologian in Southern Baptists' oldest theological institution.

Honorary degrees conferred upon Mullins included the D.D. by Carson and Newman College in 1896 and the LL.D. by Richmond College in 1900 and by Baylor University in 1900.

Mullins was among the last "national Baptist leaders" in that he served in both Southern and Northern Conventions. During his tenure as president of Southern Seminary, he saw the Southern Baptist Convention make its final move for full independence from Northern Baptist influence and toward a separate identity. As a denominational statesman, he served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention (1921-24) and president of the Baptist World Alliance (1923-28).

Mullins wrote 17 books and numerous articles and essays. *Why Is Christianity True?* (1905), *The Axioms of Religion* (1908), *Freedom and Authority in Religion* (1913), and *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression* (1917) are usually considered his most important publications.

Addressing the crowded congregation who attended Mullins' funeral service at the Broadway Baptist Church in Louisville, George W. Truett, noted pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, spoke of Mullins' influence as "distinctive beyond that of any other Baptist in the world in recent years." Mullins was buried in Louisville's Cave Hill Cemetery where his tombstone describes

him as "Preacher, Teacher, Scholar, Administrator, Christian Statesman, World Citizen, and Servant of God."

### *The Denominational Context in Which He Served*

The "Modernist-Fundamentalist" controversy dominated most denominations in America in the 1920's and embroiled them in fierce theological debates. The issues being debated at the time Mullins assumed leadership in the Southern Baptist Convention at the beginning of the century sound remarkably similar to those now being debated during the last years of the century. Arguments focused on such subjects as credalism, faith and science, biblical authority, inspiration, and inerrancy. There were also accusations of liberalism in the seminaries, political conspiracies to control the Convention by electing trustees of agencies, confrontations between fundamentalists and moderate conservatives, threats to withhold funds from the agencies, and conflicts over church-state issues.

Because the issues Mullins faced are so similar to those confronting Southern Baptists today, his scholarly, conservative, centrist method of dealing with them provides a timely model for present denominational leaders. His method represents the unique theological approach which has historically characterized mainstream Baptist life through the years.

Mullins became a spokesman for those who were called the "moderate conservatives." He rejected modernism on the left with its denial of supernaturalism, and rejected fundamentalism on the right with its legalistic approach to scholarly inquiry. He was neither a hardened traditionalist nor a faddish liberal, but a positive conservative who sought to communicate the Christian faith in intelligent and contemporary terms.

Mullins stood strongly for the fundamental doctrines of evangelical theology. He was even enlisted to write one of the 12 small volumes (1910-12) in the series entitled *The Fundamentals*, sometimes called the "Bible of fundamentalism." Still, he refused to be pigeonholed or arbitrarily labeled by any theological faction.

Mullins strongly opposed theological liberalism. With impressive scholarship, he spoke out intelligently against the negative influences of evolution apart from God, higher criticism based on reason alone, and the unbiblical tenets of the social gospel. He believed these liberal theological develop-

ments called for a thoughtful restatement of biblical authority.

Mullins also strongly opposed the legalistic, reason-oriented position of the fundamentalists which he saw as a serious threat to Southern Baptist theology. He objected when fundamentalists on the seminary board set up what came to be called a "smelling committee" to visit faculty members periodically in a search for heresy.

During convention debates, he openly worked toward the "defeat of Radicals and Extremists whom he accused of putting thumb screws on everybody who does not agree in every detail with their statements of doctrine."<sup>1</sup> He described the fundamentalists as "hyper-orthodox," "ultra-brethren," "lacking in common sense," and as "big 'F' fundamentalists who agitate for control of the Convention and seek to harass and muzzle teachers in the schools."<sup>2</sup> Rebuking one extremist, he wrote, "some of you brethren who train with the radical fundamentalists are going over on Catholic ground and leaving the Baptist position. . . . A man who tries to pin his brethren down to stereotyped statements, such as your letter contains, has missed the Baptist spirit."<sup>3</sup>

In his ongoing conflict with one fundamentalist leader, Mullins pointed out that he rejected both the "half Baptist" (or liberal) who never emphasized doctrinal belief, and the "Baptist and a half" (or fundamentalist) who overreacted to doctrinal differences.

Mullins took the moderate conservative position in defending the responsible use of biblical criticism in the study of the Word of God. Recognizing the destructive potential of critics who approached the Bible from an anti-supernatural bias, he still acknowledged that biblical criticism in the hands of reverent scholarship could be helpful. For him, the authority of Scripture was not threatened by open investigation of authorship, date, text, etc.

Mullins faulted both fundamentalists and liberals for their extremism which led to name-calling rather than fruitful communication. He represented the historic Baptist approach when he identified the safe leaders of thought as those who stand between the extremes. They both sympathize with those who are perplexed by the difficulties to faith occasioned by modern science and philosophy, and resolve to be loyal to Christ and His gospel.

### *His Doctrine of Biblical Authority*

Mullins spoke out against the threat of liberal theology which failed to take the Bible seriously,