

Book Review

Gregory A. Wills, *The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary 1859-2009* (Oxford University Press, 2009): 566 pp.

This book is the definitive 150th anniversary history of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS), the flagship theological education institution of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). Wills' history is thorough, meticulously researched, and well written. In many ways it offers a perspective not only of the seminary but also of the denomination and even of American religion in general.

The work is arranged in the format of a rather straightforward chronological survey, from the seminary's founding in 1859 in Greenville, South Carolina under the leadership of James Petigru Boyce to its current thriving circumstances in Louisville, Kentucky under the leadership of Albert Mohler. Indeed, Wills' central thesis is that after decades of doctrinal compromise, the SBTS of 2009 has returned to the conservative, evangelical, and reformed roots of 1859. The last line of the narrative reads: "Under Mohler's leadership, Southern Seminary was once again Boyce's seminary" (p. 547).

The clear hero of the early days, according to Wills, is Boyce. He provided the vision for centralized seminary education among Baptists in the South. He also provided the doctrinal guidelines, administrative leadership, and fundraising efforts not only to begin the seminary but also to see its rebirth during the difficult post-war years of Reconstruction. Boyce also insured that the seminary's faculty would be guided by a confessional standard, the Abstract of Principles. Wills' obvious admiration for the seminary's founders does not mean, however, that he airbrushes the picture of the past. He notes, for example, that according to the 1860 census, all four of Southern's founding faculty members were slaveholders, observing that "The Faculty, like southern evangelical clergy generally, did not believe that slavery was intrinsically evil" (p. 57).

Wills sees the dismissal of Crawford H. Toy from the SBTS faculty on charges of theological liberalism in 1879 as a pivotal and defining moment in the school's history. He calls Toy "modernism's first martyr." He also presents the early conflict over the understanding of Baptist origins that led to the resignation of William Whitsitt as President in 1898 as anticipating future conflicts between elitist progressives and grassroots Southern Baptists for control of the seminary's direction.

The primary responsibility for leading SBTS away from its conservative and orthodox heritage is placed on the shoulders of E. Y. Mullins. According to Wills, Mullins is "one of the more difficult and contested figures in American religious history" (p. 231) who "led Southern Baptists away from traditional orthodoxy in significant ways and reshaped Southern Baptist theology" (p. 230). Under Mullins, Calvin was replaced by Schleiermacher. This doctrinal shift also resulted in pragmatism. W. O. Carver introduced the social gospel view of missions and ministry. The music and religious education schools developed in the 1940s and 1950s under the leadership of Ellis A. Fuller. The historical criticism of the secular academy eventually entered the classroom at full tilt. A

detailed account is provided of the power struggle in 1958 that occurred under the leadership of Duke K. McCall that resulted in the dismissal of thirteen dissident faculty members in the so-called “massacre on Lexington Road.” Though many interpreted the purge as saving the school from liberalism, Wills quips, “The orthodox soon discovered, however, it was not a case of once saved, always saved” (p. 404)!

Perhaps the most engaging sections of the book are the closing chapters that tell the story of the seminary’s experience during the “conservative takeover” of the SBC and its aftermath. Wills chronicles what he believes to be Roy Honeycutt’s rather disingenuous efforts at denominational diplomacy and the radical transformation that eventually came in the hiring of a then thirty-three year old Albert Mohler to take the reins of seminary leadership. Wills provides an insider’s perspective through private letters, trustee records, and interviews on the upheaval of those times including the dismissal of liberal faculty members like Paul Simmons and Molly Marshall and Mohler’s infamous confrontation with Diana Garland and the social work school. When one reflects on the transformation of SBTS from of an essentially moderate-liberal, mainline type seminary into the robustly evangelical school that it is today, he can only conclude that the redirected trajectory has been miraculous. The impact on Southern Baptist churches will be felt for decades to come.

This history of SBTS is simply and engagingly written. Wills provides the reader with mounds of anecdotal information and insights along the way. This is a history and not a “tell all” book, but Wills is unafraid to offer frank and candid assessments of various historical fact, figures, and incidents. So, for example, he describes revered pastoral care guru Wayne Oates as “a political operator and rather a prima donna” (p. 423). He also provides behind the scenes insights into the kind of academic politics that are typical of higher education institutions, even of seminaries. An example would be the rejection of Scott Hafemann, a bona fide and credentialed New Testament scholar who did not pass muster with the old liberal SBTS faculty on gender issues (p. 510). Wills generally offers the reader plain assessments and not hagiography. This is admirable although, no doubt, there will be those who dispute some of both his descriptions and conclusions. One might well make an argument that he is sometimes more severely critical of moderate foibles than of conservative ones.

The book also raises a number of more speculative questions in my mind. Here are a few to consider: Was it a wholly positive move for Southern Baptists to establish centralized seminary education along the model of colleges, universities, and divinity schools? What would the trajectory of the SBC had been like if theological education would have been left with Baptist colleges or with private tutelage under veteran pastors within local churches? Although the dismissal of Toy from SBTS was a watershed, does his hiring and retention until protested by grassroots Southern Baptists give evidence of denominational diplomacy even among the founders (like Boyce and certainly Broadus)? Does the desire to be engaged with secular scholarship in the academy even among the current theologically conservative faculty present the risk that future generations might also be tempted to compromise? Is the Abstract of Principles robustly Calvinistic or confessional enough to maintain doctrinal fidelity at SBTS?

As an alumnus of SBTS who studied with the old moderate faculty and who graduated in the Honeycutt years, the book provided an intriguing opportunity to evaluate and understand my own experience of my seminary days. Moderates have bemoaned the loss of the old, moderate SBTS. Some doubted that the school would be able to attract credible scholars who held to things like inerrancy, the sanctity of human life, and complementarian views of manhood and womanhood. The scholarly acumen of Wills' work is in itself a repudiation of that charge and evidence that the scholarly output of SBTS's faculty has improved rather than declined under conservative leadership. Disgruntled and bitter ex-Southern Baptist moderates would profit greatly from reading this book to understand why conservatives consider changes at SBTS and in the SBC not as a "takeover" but as a "restoration" effort.

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