

**The Individual and Authority**

The History, Individualism, and Authority of Soul Competency in the theology of Edgar Young  
Mullins

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## **Introduction**

“He read widely; he thought carefully; he was constructive; he spoke to the concerns of his time; he was not rationalistic, narrow, vague, or overly defensive; he was a great Baptist theologian.”<sup>1</sup> These words are the reflections of Fisher Humphreys on the life and work of Edgar Young Mullins. The early decades of the twentieth century were a turbulent time in American Christianity. Mullins helped lead the Southern Baptist denomination through the liberal/fundamentalist debates by appealing to the concept of soul competency and proper religious experience. Through his substantial influence over the denomination, Mullins largely achieved a consensus based on common tasks rather than doctrinal agreement. This preserved the unity of the Southern Baptist church through the hottest fires of the fundamentalist debates. However, questions remain about Mullins’ theology and its consequences. First, critics allege that Mullins invented the doctrine of soul competency and that it has little to no historical moorings. Is the doctrine of soul competency a historical Baptist concept? Secondly, does Mullins’ emphasis on the individual sacrifice the church’s ability to speak authoritatively on doctrine? This paper contends that E.Y. Mullins’ concept of soul competency has legitimate historical foundations in Baptist life; however, that same concept also leads to a weakened ecclesiology that significantly hinders the authoritative voice of the church in doctrine.

## **Biography**

### **Childhood, Education, and Early Ministry**

Edgar Young Mullins was born on January 5, 1860 in southwestern Mississippi to Seth and Sarah Mullins. Mullins was the fourth of eleven children. Seth Mullins, an 1857 graduate of

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<sup>1</sup> Fisher Humphreys, “Edgar Young Mullins,” in *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, Rev. ed., ed. Timothy George and David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2001), 199.

Mississippi College, was a second-generation Baptist preacher. Seth supplemented his preaching income by farming and eventually teaching grammar school. In 1869 the family moved to Corsicana, Texas for unknown reasons.<sup>2</sup>

Mullins' first taste of education was from his father. Seth encouraged his son to read for intellectual advancement. Seth's own literary tastes were more refined than what might be expected of a rural Baptist preacher and he encouraged his son to read works by authors such as Jared Sparks and Henry George.<sup>3</sup>

A few years after grammar school, Mullins enrolled in the first class at the newly assembled Texas A&M College in 1876. The first president of A&M, Thomas Gathright, generally ignored the implied agricultural and engineering purposes of the college and provided a liberal arts education within a military atmosphere. Many of the professors were former Confederate officers and the "Lost Cause" of the Confederacy pervaded the college's atmosphere.<sup>4</sup>

Mullins was a successful student at Texas A&M and especially enjoyed holding debates in the Stephen F. Austin Literary Society.<sup>5</sup> Mullins graduated from A&M in 1879 and returned home. He began reading to prepare for a career in law, but his life took an abrupt turn when he was converted at a revival meeting in Dallas.<sup>6</sup>

Seth and Sarah had resolved that they would not force their faith on their children, but their piety pervaded the household. Mullins described his conversion as his religious convictions

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<sup>2</sup> William E. Ellis, *A Man of Books and a Man of the People: E.Y. Mullins and the Crisis of Moderate Southern Baptist Leadership* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), 4. Ellis speculates that the general economic, social, and political climate of Mississippi probably contributed to the move, but no concrete reasons are known.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Humphreys, 182.

finally conquering his intellectual doubt.<sup>7</sup> Mullins was baptized by his father in 1880 and prepared to enter into the ministry.

Desiring a seminary education, Mullins enrolled at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1881. Due to his maturity, his classmates elected him to act as the manager in the men's dormitory.<sup>8</sup> He was also elected to speak at his graduation in 1885. His topic was "Manliness in the Ministry" and focused on the "strengths" of masculinity, which was reflective of the era.<sup>9</sup>

After seminary, Mullins intended to become a foreign missionary in Brazil for the Foreign Mission Board. However, the Board lacked the funding to send him and a doctor advised that his health would suffer in South America.<sup>10</sup> Instead of mission work, Mullins entered the pastorate of Harrodsburg Baptist Church in Kentucky. Harrodsburg was a rural setting and Mullins spent two years in the pulpit there.

While in Harrodsburg, Mullins married Isla May Hawley, a woman he had courted in Louisville while in Seminary. The couple's marriage was successful and happy as they shared many of the same interests. However, they suffered great grief when both of their sons died early deaths from illness.

After a couple of years in Harrodsburg, Mullins accepted a call to be pastor of Lee Street Baptist Church in Baltimore, Maryland. It was in Baltimore that Mullins' career began gaining momentum. Mullins attended lectures at the nearby Johns Hopkins University. He enjoyed the urban social life with Isla May. He also started publishing sermons in periodicals.

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<sup>7</sup> Ellis, 5; 9.

<sup>8</sup> Humphreys, 182.

<sup>9</sup> C. Douglas Weaver, "Introduction," in *The Axioms of Religion*, ed. C. Douglas Weaver (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ellis, 17.

Mullins left Lee Street to take a position with the Foreign Mission Board in Richmond, Virginia. Mullins was only at the Foreign Mission Board for a few months before he moved to Newton Centre Baptist in Massachusetts. Newton Centre was near Harvard and the congregation was highly educated. Mullins thrived in the intellectual environment.

### **Presidency at Southern Seminary**

While Mullins was living in the north, Southern Seminary was experiencing a crisis in leadership. William Whitsitt, the president of Southern Seminary, was embroiled in a debate with Landmarkist Baptists. Whitsitt eventually stepped down from the presidency. Mullins was nominated to fill the president's office because he was separated from the controversy during his time in Massachusetts.<sup>11</sup>

Mullins became the fourth president of Southern Seminary in 1899. He chose to teach theology in addition to serving as president in the mold of the seminary's founder, James P. Boyce.<sup>12</sup> In addition to his teaching and administrative duties, Mullins wrote all six of his major works while at Southern.

During his tenure at Southern, the seminary experienced dramatic growth in enrollment, finances, and stature. Mullins guided the seminary (and exerted great influence over the Southern Baptist denomination as a whole) through a number of theological crises. He navigated the Calvinist/Armenian divide, the Landmarkist controversy, and the liberal/fundamentalist debate.<sup>13</sup>

### **Presidency of the Southern Baptist Convention**

Mullins also served as the President of the Southern Baptist Convention from 1921 to 1924. It has been rare for an academic to serve as the president of the convention over the course

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<sup>11</sup> Ellis, 36.

<sup>12</sup> R. Albert Mohler, "Baptist Theology at the Crossroads: The Legacy of E.Y. Mullins," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3 no. 4 (Winter 1999): 7.

<sup>13</sup> Humphreys, 183-185.

of its history. His election to the post indicates the influence and respect Mullins held within the denomination. He served at a critical time and was able to forge a consensus between dueling parties and keep the denomination together while Baptist congregations in the North were splitting along liberal/fundamentalist lines.<sup>14</sup>

After his term as president ended, Mullins was appointed to chair a committee to produce the first *Baptist Faith and Message*, a statement of the denomination's general beliefs. Mullins guided to the committee to adopt a modified version of the New Hampshire Confession (1883), which was much more theologically ambiguous compared to the much more specific Philadelphia Confession (1742). He also avoided making any specific claims concerning the controversial scientific topics of the time such as evolution.<sup>15</sup> In steering this middle course, Mullins maintained a "large tent" under which diverse views could legitimately claim a seat within the denomination.

### **Mullins Theological Principles and Methods**

The moderate course charted by Mullins in his denominational leadership reflects his personal theology. According to Al Mohler, "His climatic declaration of Baptist principles, *The Axioms of Religion*, was as much a personal anthem as a denominational interpretation."<sup>16</sup> Central to *The Axioms of Religion* was Mullins' consideration of soul competency. The concept of soul competency "asserts the inalienable right of every soul to deal with God for itself."<sup>17</sup> Mullins argued that soul competency was the historic contribution of Baptists to religion in general. Why would Mullins make such an argument?

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<sup>14</sup> Mohler, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

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

<sup>17</sup> Edgar Young Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2010), 88.

## The Landmark Controversy

Mullins arrived at Southern Seminary when it was under the cloud of controversy. The previous president, William Whitsitt, had resigned under extreme pressure from Landmarkists. Landmarkism was a movement in the nineteenth century that sought to establish historical relevance for the Baptist denomination. The movement's primary early voice was J.R. Graves and his publication, *The Tennessee Baptist*.<sup>18</sup>

Landmarkists insisted on the necessity of baptism, but they went further than most in their fanaticism. Relying on a rigorous Biblicism, Landmarkism held that the only proper mode of baptism is immersion. Further, the only proper subject of baptism is a confessing believer. Finally, the only legitimate administer of baptism is the ordained Baptist minister who has also been properly baptized. In regard to the Lord's Supper, it is a closed table to all except those who have experienced a proper baptism. Given these views, Landmarkists insisted that the only true church throughout history have been those that practiced believer's baptism by immersion.

Landmarkist argued that a very small minority throughout history practiced proper believer's baptism. They endeavored to show an unbroken connection in adherence to believer's baptism between the contemporary Baptist church and the ministry of Jesus. This sets up a baptismal succession analogous to apostolic succession in which there is a constant line of properly baptized administrators of the sacrament.<sup>19</sup> Typical of this effort is the 1931 book, *The Trail of Blood* by James M. Carroll.<sup>20</sup>

There are obvious problems with Landmarkism. They begin with an *a priori* assumption that the true church only practiced believer's baptism and insisted that it must have been

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<sup>18</sup> David W. Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 97.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

practiced throughout church history.<sup>21</sup> William Whitsitt, a church historian trained in an inductive approach, argued that historical scholarship cannot support Landmarkism's claims. According to Whitsitt's research, the English Baptist church did not practice believer's baptism until 1641 and Roger Williams was most likely sprinkled in America.<sup>22</sup>

Unfortunately for Whitsitt, his ideas ran afoul of many in the general Baptist population and a few well-placed Landmarkists, all of whom felt he was questioning the very foundation of their Baptist identity. One of those well-placed individuals was B.H. Carroll (brother to James mentioned above), the president of Baylor University. Carroll headed up a campaign calling for Whitsitt's dismissal.<sup>23</sup>

Instead of enduring a grueling battle, Whitsitt stepped down from his post. This opened the door for Mullins. However, Mullins was not a Landmarkist. He had supported Whitsitt from his position in Massachusetts. Even though he did not support their position, Mullins felt the same pull as the Landmarkist to establish the historical significance of Baptists.

### **The Historical Foundations of Soul Competency**

In seeking historical relevance for Baptists, Mullins looked for a Baptist principle rather than a practice. He sought the truth behind the Baptist practice of the ordinances, which can be historically verified.<sup>24</sup> The form of Baptism was secondary to the truth that undergirds the ritual. Mullins states, "The attempt is rather to state our case in the light of primary and universal

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<sup>21</sup> Bebbington, 98.

<sup>22</sup> Ellis, 33.

<sup>23</sup> Bebbington, 98.

<sup>24</sup> William D.M. Carrell, "Edgar Young Mullins and the Competency of the Soul in Religion" (PhD diss., Baylor University, 1993), 31-33.

principles, and to show the relation of the ordinances and polity to these principles.”<sup>25</sup> Mullins found his quintessential Baptist principle in the concept of soul competency.

Mullins found the historical significance of soul competency in its corollary of religious liberty. In *The Axioms of Religion*, Mullins quickly notes that English Baptists in the seventeenth century argued for religious liberty. He then moves to the influence Baptists had on the American concept of the separation of church and state. He argues that the seeds of the concept were planted in America by the founding of the Rhode Island colony by Roger Williams.<sup>26</sup> He also appeals to the example of Virginia Baptists during the period of the framing of the American constitution.

Mullins does not mention any of the Virginia Baptists by name, but it is safe to assume he is referring to the group of Baptists led by John Leland. Leland persuaded Thomas Jefferson to establish a full separation of church and state in Virginia.<sup>27</sup> Mullins argues that it was Virginia and Rhode Island that lead the way toward true religious liberty in the United States, and that was due to the influence of Baptists.<sup>28</sup>

For Mullins, religious liberty in the state is the political expression of soul competency.<sup>29</sup> No state authority should interfere with the religious conscience of its subjects. To Mullins, this was the irony of the Landmark position. They were attempting to impose a view of the church on others in order to defend Baptist tradition, and, in doing so, violated the central Baptist tenet of

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<sup>25</sup> Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, 47.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>27</sup> Bebbington, 204-205.

<sup>28</sup> Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, 63-64.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

liberty.<sup>30</sup> Mullins insists that Baptists have always held to soul competency without “stain.”<sup>31</sup>

However, there are complications to Mullins’ historical picture.

First, the historical figures he appeals to represents a small sample size. A wider survey of Baptist history complicates Mullins’ historical foundation. First, John Smyth, the leader of the first English Baptists was not a proponent of religious liberty. In his *A Paterne of True Prayer*, he writes, “the Magistrates should cause all men to worship the true God, or else punish them with imprisonment, confiscation of goods, or death as the quality of the cause requires.”<sup>32</sup> Baptists were to pray for their leaders’ conversion; and, if they did convert, presumably Smyth would not take issue with them giving preferential treatment to Baptist practices. Smyth would modify his position to resemble that of Mullins’ only when he was trying to join the Mennonites.<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that Thomas Helwys, Smyth’s immediate successor, espoused a much more liberal view of the separation of church and state that accords with Mullins.<sup>34</sup>

The testimony of Roger Williams also presents significant complications to Mullins’ historical justification of soul competency. Curtis W. Freeman uses the work of LeRoy Moore Jr. to argue that Mullins’ portrait of Williams is romantic and ultimately anachronistic.<sup>35</sup> Moore argues that these romantic portrayals “disclaim the whole theocentric structure of his ideas, opting for an enlightened, secular liberal who would hardly be recognizable to Williams

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<sup>30</sup> Carrell, 31.

<sup>31</sup> Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, 59.

<sup>32</sup> John Smyth, *The Paterne of true Prayer*, in *The Works of John Smyth fellow of Christ’s College, 1594-8*, vol. 1, ed. W.T. Whitley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), 166. Spelling in the quotes from this work is modified to adhere to modern norms.

<sup>33</sup> Bebbington, 198.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 198-199.

<sup>35</sup> Curtis W. Freeman, “E.Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity,” in *Through a Glass Darkly: Contested Notions of Baptist Identity*, ed. Keith Harper (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2012), 100.

himself.”<sup>36</sup> The problem is that Mullins is interested in the theological implications of Williams rather than interpreting him as a politician or philosopher. Moore’s critique does not immediately apply because Mullins is arguing that Williams’ primary theological tenet of Jesus Christ as king is central to the idea of soul competency because it excludes the possibility of the state being a compelling authority on the autonomous religious conscience.

Roger Williams is also problematic because his Baptist credentials are questionable. Four months after he underwent believer’s baptism, Roger Williams left the Baptist church he founded and regretted the experience. His primary expression of religious liberty, *The Blounty Tenent*, was written after he had disavowed the Baptist denomination.<sup>37</sup> It cannot properly be called a Baptist work, but it did influence a great number of Baptists in America.

The diversity of Baptist beliefs on religious liberty and thus soul competency appears greater than Mullins is willing to admit. However, John Leland of the Virginia Baptists and Thomas Helwys in England do fit within the framework of the portrait that Mullins is painting. Religious liberty is not the only manifestation of soul competency in religious life. For example, democratic polity is another derivative of soul competency. The earliest Baptist congregation that formed under Smyth in 1607 developed a dramatic democratic polity in which every member bore responsibility for preaching, prophecy, and prayer.<sup>38</sup> One could argue that Baptists have been more consistent on democratic polity than religious liberty. The fact that elements of soul competency legitimately appear in Baptist history answers a common criticism of Mullins and soul competency.

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<sup>36</sup> LeRoy Moore Jr., “Roger Williams and the Historians,” *Church History* 32 no. 4 (December 1963): 443.

<sup>37</sup> Bebbington, 200-201.

<sup>38</sup> Stephen Wright, *The Early English Baptists, 1603-1649* (Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 2006), 32.

Curtis Freeman contends, “Mullins invented the myth of soul competency.”<sup>39</sup> He then read this myth back into Baptist history. Winthrop S. Hudson makes a similar argument that Mullins’ soul competency was “derived from the general cultural and religious climate of the nineteenth century rather than from any serious study of the Bible.”<sup>40</sup> These critiques both claim that soul competency does not have historical moorings in Baptist life and is rather an invention of Mullins and his time.

There is certainly some truth to Hudson’s accusation. Mullins was influenced by his context. No one ever truly escapes his or her own situation. Mullins concept of soul competency did share affinities with late nineteenth century thought. One strong area of influence is the thought of Francis Wayland (1796-1865). Wayland was a Baptist pastor, educator, economist, and president of Brown University. Wayland’s theology was highly individualistic and viewed a person capable of living up to the moral code outlined in the New Testament.<sup>41</sup> There are echoes of soul competency in the thought of Wayland. His individualistic system does inherit many of the problems for ecclesiology that are also apparent in Mullins. However, Wayland was a Baptist of the generation previous to Mullins’ own. The fact that Mullins and Wayland’s theologies resonate could be seen as evidence that Mullins’ conception of soul competency does have a legitimate Baptist foundation.

Another influence on Mullins was the Personalism of Borden Parker Browne. This philosophical system took as its starting point the absolute value of the person. For Mullins, Personalism’s “conclusions are that the ultimate reality is a Person; that we as the creation of his

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<sup>39</sup> Freeman, 99.

<sup>40</sup> Winthrop S. Hudson, “Shifting Patterns of Church Order in the Twentieth Century,” in *Baptist Concepts of the Church*, ed. Winthrop S. Hudson (Chicago: The Judson Press, 1959), 215.

<sup>41</sup> Norman H. Maring, “The Individualism of Francis Wayland,” in *Baptist Concepts of the Church*, ed. Winthrop S. Hudson (Chicago: The Judson Press, 1959), 140-142.

hands are true persons; that we are endowed with freedom; that the divine Person is working out a purpose in human society; and that the goal of history is a perfect society of men and women in fellowship with God.”<sup>42</sup> Mullins definitely agreed with much of the outcomes of Personalism. He particularly utilized Personalism’s expanded epistemology and its ability to articulate the potential of the relationship of human persons to the Person of God. However, Mullins was not influenced by Personalism so much as he utilized it. It provided him with a defense of human knowledge gained in experience, which is a critical component to Mullins framework.<sup>43</sup>

The legitimate aspects of soul competency found in Baptist history frustrate Freeman’s argument. It is true that the language of soul competency originates with Mullins. However, Freeman himself admits that Mullins concept of soul competency proved extremely influential and became the canonical reading of Baptist history.<sup>44</sup> Why did it prove to be so popular? I would argue that Mullins’ conception resonated with Baptists because he hit upon a thread of Baptist tradition that had a particular power to address his contemporary situation.

Examples have already been mentioned among the earliest Baptists in England who adhered to a democratic polity and a concept of religious liberty. English Baptists were in the left wing of the English Separatist movement and followed the dictates of their conscience regarding the pure worship of God despite the consequences. Breaking away from the established state church, they developed the idea of an autonomous church. When a democratic polity based upon a very inclusive interpretation of the priesthood of believers is combined with the principles of an autonomous church and religious liberty, the concept of the autonomous religious individual is easily deduced. Even though the historical picture is muddled, it is disingenuous to argue that

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<sup>42</sup> Edgar Young Mullins, *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1917), 112-113.

<sup>43</sup> Carrell, 84.

<sup>44</sup> Freeman, 99.

Mullins fabricated the concept of soul competency out of thin air. He is drawing on “hidden assumptions underlying Baptist life.”<sup>45</sup> Mullins legitimately gathered the seeds of a latent concept in the history of Baptist theology and gave it a full-throated voice.

### **Addressing the Liberal/Fundamentalist Divide**

Mullins is drawing on these latent seeds in Baptist history in order to address the present. Mullins has a “conviction” that “Christian bodies give a fresh account of themselves to the world.”<sup>46</sup> Mullins is not interested in resting on past laurels, but in pressing forward in service to the church and the world. Mullins is arguing that Baptists have contributed the concept of soul competency to the religious world in its purest form. He also believed that the concept provided a clear path to navigate between religious fundamentalism and a growing liberalism.

At heart, Mullins was a mediating theologian. He was a true moderate who could see the truth in each side of an honest debate. Curtis Freeman invokes the ancient sailing metaphor of Scylla and Charybdis to describes Mullins’ situation. A more modern expression would be “stuck between a rock and a hard place.” Freeman argues that Mullins was largely successful in leading Southern Baptists on a course that did not capitulate to either fundamentalism or liberalism.<sup>47</sup>

Mullins perceived a distinct problem among fundamentalists and liberals. They were both on different routes to the same fate. They relied on the Enlightenment principle of foundationalism, which requires beliefs to be based upon universal axioms.<sup>48</sup> Both liberals and

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<sup>45</sup> Humphreys, 188.

<sup>46</sup> Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, 47.

<sup>47</sup> Freeman, 84.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

conservatives appealed to reason. In both camps, “it is the rational agent who is the measure of all things.”<sup>49</sup>

Mullins appealed to experience to escape the foundering rocks of Enlightenment foundationalism. This “turn to the subject” is surprising and Mullins even appeals to the father of liberal theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher, as sounding a “true note” in describing religion as the “feeling of absolute dependence.”<sup>50</sup> Mullins does not accept Schleiermacher without reservation. He is still an evangelical who places an emphasis on conversion. Therefore, “Christian experience arises as the result of the response of our entire nature to the gospel.”<sup>51</sup>

There is a distinct difference between natural and regenerate conscious experience. For Mullins, “Converted men who have an intelligent grasp of the nature of the change which has taken place in them, are immovably confident of the divine factors in conversion.”<sup>52</sup> There is confidence in knowledge gained through Christian experience. This change from the natural man to the regenerate only takes place through divine power. Even though Mullins has found partial truth in Schleiermacher, unlike the imminent German theologian Mullins does not believe that all humans are deriving truth from a common experience. The distinct difference between the natural and regenerate experience is a significant difference.

Experience enlarges the epistemology available to Mullins compared to the foundationalist. It does not contradict science or reason, but it does operate in a different sphere. “Religious experience knows more than biological science has discovered. It knows that a universe flattened down to the level of the law of continuity does not represent all the reality that

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<sup>49</sup> Freeman, 92-93.

<sup>50</sup> Mullins, *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression*, 61.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

is.”<sup>53</sup> Mullins’ appeal to experience would cause controversy among his fellow conservatives. J. Gresham Machen argued that the separation of science and religion into different spheres was extremely problematic and threatened the foundations of Christianity. He argued that the facts of science and religion share the same nature. The resurrection was a religious fact, but also one to be established by “science.”<sup>54</sup>

Ironically, Mullins believed that Machen was operating with the same reduced epistemology that ultimately would not survive modern science. However, it is true that Mullins’ appeal to experience brought him perilously close to liberalism. Despite this, Mullins could never be called a liberal. One example of his conservatism is his ardent defense of supernaturalism in the Bible.<sup>55</sup> Mullins also argues stridently for personality in God. He contends, “In religion the core and center of all is fellowship with God. This necessarily implies personality in God.”<sup>56</sup> He believed in the virgin birth, miracles, the divinity of Jesus, the resurrection, and other doctrines traditionally associated with evangelical Christianity. These are just a couple of the “evangelical cords” that Mullins uses to lash himself to the ship in order to resist the sirens of modernity.<sup>57</sup>

For Mullins, his concepts of Christian experience and soul competency allow the religious person to address the perils of modern society. Soul competency protects the individual from outside compulsion in religious affairs, which also allows for the individual to be fully accountable to God. Christian regenerate experience informs that individual. It expands his or

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<sup>53</sup> Edgar Young Mullins, *Christianity at the Crossroads* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1924), 97.

<sup>54</sup> Sean Michael Lucas, “Christianity at the Crossroads: E. Y. Mullins, J. Gresham Machen, and the Challenge of Modernism,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3 no. 4 (Winter 1999): 68.

<sup>55</sup> Mullins, *Christianity at the Crossroads*, 114.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>57</sup> Freeman, 93.

her epistemological framework beyond the reduced Christianity that depends on foundationalism (whether conservative or liberal). It bestows confidence in doctrines that ran afoul of modernity because regenerate experience convinces the believer of their truth. It also allows modern enterprises such as science to proceed largely unhindered because they operate in a different epistemological sphere than religion.

### **Problems with the tension between the individual and authority in Baptist life**

Unfortunately, Mullins' solution to modernity found in Christian experience and soul competency also exposes some potential cracks in the foundation of Baptist beliefs. It has been argued above that the seeds of soul competency are present in the diverse experience of early Baptist life. However, the doctrine of soul competency with its focus on the autonomous individual significantly calls into question the authority of the church. It leads to a weakened ecclesiology.

The vigorous debate over the concept of the priesthood of all believers during the conservative/moderate debates in the Southern Baptist Convention during the last decades of the twentieth century illustrates that the concept of soul competency is problematic for authority in the Church. Mullins believes that soul competency infers that "all men have an equal right to direct access to God."<sup>58</sup> This equality makes all believers priests and calls into question the authority of the ministers of the church. For Mullins, ministers are set apart "for the sake of convenience or expediency in the church."<sup>59</sup> He also argued that the minister's "authority is that of influence and leadership rather than official."<sup>60</sup> Shurden argues that Mullins stands firmly

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<sup>58</sup> Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, 88. The gendered nature of the statement is in the original. Mullins is asserting a general principle for all humans.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>60</sup> Edgar Young Mullins, *Baptist Beliefs* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2009), 57.

within the stream of Baptist history in his view of the priesthood of all believers and the role of the minister within that common priesthood.<sup>61</sup>

Conservatives within the denomination were unsatisfied with this portrayal of the common priesthood and ministry. They successfully passed a resolution in 1988 meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention that called the emphasis on the priesthood of the believer a “recent historical development” that “can be used to justify the undermining of pastoral authority in the local church.”<sup>62</sup> Again, there is a debate concerning the history of Baptist belief. In reality, both sides are appealing to different traditions within Baptist history. There is a tension in that history between the authority of the Church and the freedom of the individual.

Nowhere is this tension more evident than in a discussion of the practice of church discipline in Baptist history. The early Baptists practiced a form of discipline modeled on Jesus’ instruction in Matthew 18:15-20. In *Principles and Inferences Concerning the True Church*, John Smyth writes, “The chief care of every member must be to watch over his brother in bearing one another’s burden, admonishing the unruly, comforting the feeble minded, admonishing the excommunicate, [and] restoring them that are fallen.”<sup>63</sup> Sin was a corporate concern that was not simply left up to the religious conscience of the autonomous individual. The congregation had the authority to discipline sin. There is still an element of democratic individualism. The individual is competent to admonish another’s sin; however, there is potential

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<sup>61</sup> Walter B. Shurden, “The Priesthood of All Believers and Pastoral Authority in Baptist Thought,” in *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: The Priesthood of All Believers*, ed. Walter B. Shurden (Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys Publishing, 1993), 147.

<sup>62</sup> “Resolution on the Priesthood of the Believer,” San Antonio – 1988, accessed May 1, 2016, <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/872>.

<sup>63</sup> John Smyth, *Principles and Inferences Concerning the True Church*, in *The Works of John Smyth fellow of Christ’s College, 1594-8*, vol. 1, ed. W.T. Whitley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), 261. Spelling and punctuation in the quotes from this work are modified to adhere to modern norms. The inline proof texts from Scripture are also removed.

for the congregation to exercise improper authority over the dictates of a competent religious conscience, who is accountable only to God.

The Southern Baptists of the nineteenth century continued this practice of church discipline. Gregory A. Wills examines the disciplinary proceedings of nineteenth century Southern Baptists in Georgia in *Democratic Religion*. Through extensive primary source research, he discovered that Southern Baptists disciplined its members for a number of ethical concerns (some of which border on the absurd). He also determined that churches disciplined members for theological opinions that deviated from the typical Calvinist framework of the churches at that time.<sup>64</sup> Church discipline largely faded from practice in Southern Baptist churches in the twentieth century as the focus in ecclesiology shifted towards efficiency and the individual's competency in religious matters (under the influence of Mullins).

Modern conservative Southern Baptists have reasserted the need for discipline. John S. Hammett believes church discipline plays an integral role in restoring a high view of regenerate church membership, which provides integrity to the church's witness in the world.<sup>65</sup> These modern conservative advocates of church discipline emphasize the authority of the church over the competence of the individual.

Mullins' emphasis on soul competency can provide a check on improper authority, but it can also lead to a weak and impotent ecclesiology. Many critics have noted the absence of ecclesiology in Mullins' systematic work, *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression*,

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<sup>64</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 90.

<sup>65</sup> John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2005), 114; 124-126. Hammett is not alone. The point of Gregory Wills' research on church discipline is to argue for its reinstatement. For other prominent examples see R. Stanton Norman, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2005), 64-83; and Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 181-205.

and there are a number of possible answers to the question of its exclusion.<sup>66</sup> It is true that soul competency atomizes religious experience and “makes every man’s hat his own church.”<sup>67</sup> Mullins never acknowledges this and perhaps was blind to it. In a telling statement in *Baptist Beliefs* Mullins writes, “The church has no power of coercion in the religious life of the individual. Individuals stand or fall to their own Master, and are judged only by God.”<sup>68</sup> This is a classic statement of soul competency. However, he directly follows that line arguing, “the right of the church, however, to protect itself against the disorderly individual [as in Church discipline] is an unalienable right in Christ.”<sup>69</sup> However, the second statement is completely inert if the “disorderly” is following the dictates of his or her religious conscience. The conscience belongs to the religious sphere in which the individual reigns supreme in Mullins’ formulation.

In *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression*, Mullins defined sin as that which causes a breach between the sinner and God.<sup>70</sup> This definition of sin appealed to biblical teaching in the Old and New Testaments. However, biblical interpretation is subject to the principle of soul competency. The unfettered right to the private interpretation of Scripture is a foundational principle of soul competency.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, Mullins’ individualism strains the ability of the church to agree upon and enforce any concept of sin.

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<sup>66</sup> Humphreys, 185. Humphreys argues that Mullins excluded theology from the work because *The Christian Religion* was meant as a textbook for Mullins’ theology course and ecclesiology was taught in another course at the time. Freeman argues more negatively that Mullins might have realized that ecclesiology was outside of his theological grasp given his emphasis on soul competency. See Freeman, 100.

<sup>67</sup> Winthrop S. Hudson, “Shifting Patterns of Church Order in the Twentieth Century,” 216. Gendered pronouns are retained from the original.

<sup>68</sup> Edgar Young Mullins, *Baptist Beliefs*, 56.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>70</sup> Mullins, *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression*, 288-295.

<sup>71</sup> Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, 89.

Given a strong emphasis on soul competency, the resulting ecclesiology is based on consensus rather than authority. Mullins defines the church as “a community of autonomous individuals under the immediate lordship of Christ held together by a social bond of common interest, due to a common faith and inspired by common tasks and ends, all of which are assigned to him by the common Lord.”<sup>72</sup> Consensus emerges around common tasks.

Walter B. Shurden argues that the consensus that emerged in the twentieth century among Southern Baptists was missional rather than doctrinal.<sup>73</sup> This fact is highlighted by the Cooperative Program of the Southern Baptist Convention. The Convention operates on the principle that every local church is autonomous and freely chooses to associate with other churches. The Cooperative Program is a single fund in which Southern Baptist churches voluntarily donate money to finance the Convention’s various boards, agencies, and seminaries. In the Cooperative Program, churches of diverse theological inclinations pool their resources in order to more efficiently pursue missional efforts. Thus, the driving force behind cooperation among Southern Baptists in the twentieth century was efficiency in missions. However, in this appeal to efficiency, the Convention acquiesced to a weak ecclesiology that leaves the local church with little authority in matters of doctrine.

The conservative faction of the Convention in the late twentieth century was not happy with this arrangement. They believed the emphasis on soul competency had been abused to the point where any belief was permissible so long as the person was invested in the mission efforts of the Convention.<sup>74</sup> Al Mohler, a leading conservative, concedes that Mullins did achieve his goal of denominational unity based on common tasks, but “his emphasis on experience and ‘soul

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<sup>72</sup> Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, 110.

<sup>73</sup> Walter B. Shurden, “The Southern Baptist Synthesis: Is It Cracking?!” in *Not an Easy Journey: Transitions in Baptist Life* (Macon, GA: Macon University Press, 2005), 210.

<sup>74</sup> cf. “Resolution on the Priesthood of the Believer” in footnote 61 above.

competency' would later operate to undercut the very consensus Mullins worked so hard to achieve."<sup>75</sup> Mohler's statement is only partially true. Mullins did achieve a consensus based on experience and soul competency. However, that consensus was undercut because conservatives chose to deny Mullins' emphases in favor of reverting back to the foundationalism of fundamentalists like J. Gresham Machen. The Conservative Resurgence/Takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention happened within a democratic polity. It was based on the grassroots consensus of a large group within the denomination. However, that consensus formed around doctrinal agreement and authority as opposed to the consensus based on efficiency proposed by Mullins.

### **Conclusion**

The shadow of E.Y. Mullins looms large over the history of the Southern Baptist Convention in the twentieth century. His emphasis on soul competency gave him the framework to guide the denomination through the troubled times of the fundamentalist/liberal divide without completely capitulating to either side. His influence would be viewed positively in the middle decades of the century. However, the consensus that Mullins helped achieve was broken by conservatives who rejected his concept of soul competency and emphasis on experience. The denomination looks very different in the twenty-first century with individual religious beliefs reigned in by theological boundaries established during the Conservative Resurgence/Takeover.<sup>76</sup> There is a way forward for moderate and conservative Southern Baptists. It is unlikely that Southern Baptists will ever give up the idea of a free church. A free church will always fundamentally be based on a consensus among its members. Doctrine should

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<sup>75</sup> Mohler, 13.

<sup>76</sup> This is particularly true of denominational leaders and professors in Southern Baptist seminaries.

be intentionally worked into the dialogue of the church. Hopefully, generous dialogue will lead to a doctrinal consensus in an organic fashion rather than being the result of a contentious political process. Mullins exemplifies the spirit of generous dialogue. He was a friend to both conservatives and liberals learning from everyone. Mullins' example still gives the Southern Baptist Convention a blueprint for progress in troubled times.

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