

*Anti-Intellectual*

**BAPTISTS ARE  
ANTI-  
INTELLECTUAL**

**Rosalie Beck**

## **Baptists in America have lived with the myth that they are anti-intellectual,** that they “fear”

higher education and theological education. Many young persons headed for school or seminary have been warned, “They’ll ruin your faith if you’re not careful!” The notion that Baptists are anti-intellectual carries great power in the lives of many people and needs to be exposed as a myth. Baptists have valued education as part of the growth of a Christian. They have supported, and continue to support, education at every level: from Latin grammar schools to seminaries to doctoral-degree-granting universities.

While anti-intellectualism and anti-education are not exactly the same, the result of both attitudes is the same: distrust of educated lay or clergy leaders and the glorification of a lack of formal education as a symbol of someone who truly follows the leadership of the Holy Spirit in ministry and life. While gifted leaders with no formal education fill a real place in the work of the Kingdom of God, most Baptists traditionally affirm that persons seeking an education to enrich their gifts and sharpen their talents for the Lord’s work should be encouraged. Supportive of both education and the intellectual life of a believer, Baptists founded scores of schools across America and provided needed funds to help the “called” gain an education so they could be better ministers.

### **Why Baptists Support Education**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Edgar Young Mullins modeled the commitment of Baptists to an intellectual life. President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, pastor, teacher, Baptist statesman, and educator, Mullins earned the respect of Baptists, north and south. And he believed that Baptist doctrine called for a serious commitment to education at all levels: “Baptists in a very special sense are under obligation to foster Christian education.”<sup>1</sup>

Mullins taught that Baptist beliefs lead to an emphasis on education. Baptists believe in a regenerate church membership. A regenerate life is one that grows and unfolds; a person needs an education to meet the demands of such a life. Baptists hold a symbolic view of the ordinances. This perspective implies that the believer is a thinking person and educated enough to understand how a symbol functions and what it means. The Baptist view of local church autonomy—self-governance—requires education. For people to govern themselves, they need the ability to think through issues. Baptists do not believe in a hierarchy of authority for ministers; therefore, an educated minister is needed in order to deal with the responsibilities of leadership. The Baptist commitment to each person interpreting the Scripture necessitates thought, and thoughtfulness is spurred and aided by education.

For Mullins the basic reason to nurture the educational process was to ensure that Baptists could both carry out the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 and could teach and preach the gospel. As he noted, “All institutions for the diffusion of knowledge are the direct and logical outcome of the work of evangelization.”<sup>2</sup> The Baptist commitment to missions and evangelism, currently and in the past, fuels the need for educational institutions to provide trained Christians to fulfill the Great Commission.

### **The Roots of the Myth**

Like most myths, the idea that Baptists are anti-intellectual has a basis in history. H. Leon McBeth, in his important work, *The Baptist Heritage*, outlined the background of the perceived antipathy of Baptists toward the intellectual life and toward education, noting that the anti-intellectual bias occurred more easily among Baptists in the South, a rural and less-educated part of American Baptist life. Folks voiced an anti-intellectual bias for a number of reasons:

1) smoldering resentment against persecution by state-

church ministers who met academic, but not spiritual, qualifications; 2) the rough individualism of Southern Baptists that bred pride that they were “mostly educated between the handles of a plow” and not in a seminary; and 3) fear that educated pastors would require a living wage and would look down on their uneducated lay people.<sup>3</sup> As Baptists, north and south, accepted the idea of paid clergy, and the education standards that went with salaried ministers, anti-intellectualism diminished.

### **Baptist Commitment to Education**

British Baptists began organizing schools in the late 1600s. In 1679, Edward Terrill of Bristol set up a trust to provide for ministers-in-training to apprentice with the pastors of the Broadmead Baptist Church. In the early 1700s, this trust became the foundation for Bristol Baptist College.<sup>4</sup> When the state schools of Oxford and Cambridge opened to non-Anglican students, Baptist ministers also attended those universities.

In America the first Baptist school began in 1756. The Philadelphia Baptist Association, the oldest association in the colonies, voted to establish a Latin grammar school under the direction of Isaac Eaton, pastor of the Baptist church in Hopewell, New Jersey. The major purpose of this entry-level school was to train ministers for the association.<sup>5</sup> Upon completing Eaton’s school, the students entered colleges like Princeton to finish their theological education.

The Philadelphia Baptist Association set the pattern for helping young people gain a ministerial education by establishing an Educational Fund upon which ministerial students could draw for support during their education. For example, in 1803, “Brethren Bryan, Vanhorn, and Lahatt” requested aid “for the improvement of Thomas Brown, a member of the church at Newark, he being a young man of very promising gifts for the ministry.”<sup>6</sup> Colonial Baptists supported education, especially for the ministry.

Baptists also supported the idea of liberal arts

higher education for their youth. In the 1770s, Baptists, north and south, perceived the need for a college to educate their youth in a Baptist Christian context. Discussions between the Philadelphia and Charleston Associations resulted in the decision to found the college in Rhode Island because of that colony’s ties with the Baptist ideal of religious liberty. Rhode Island College (now Brown University) opened in 1764 in Warren. Moving to Providence in 1770, the college became the major training center for Baptist youth, north and south, for decades.<sup>7</sup>

As slavery became a division point, Baptists in the South decided they needed their own schools to ensure that educated leaders remained in the South. Furman University grew out of Furman Academy and Theological Institute founded in Edgefield, South Carolina, in 1827. Moved to Greenville in 1850, the university became the home of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1859.<sup>8</sup> The establishment of Furman presaged a movement across the South that gave birth to colleges with theological departments from Texas to Virginia. Even after the Civil War, Baptists continued to found Baptist schools in an effort to assure that Baptist youth would have an opportunity for an excellent general and theological education.<sup>9</sup> The 1900s saw even more schools and seminaries established by Baptists, north and south.

### **Theological Education**

Theological education draws the most criticism from Baptists, and this criticism supports the myth of Baptist anti-intellectualism, especially in the South. From the resignation of C. H. Toy from the Southern Seminary faculty in the late 1870s (over the use of biblical critical methods) to the Ralph Elliott crisis at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in the early 1960s (over the interpretation of Genesis 1-11)

to the faculty firings in the 1990s and early 2000s at Baptist seminaries, theological education proved problematic for some Baptists.

According to Arthur Walker, Baptists demonstrated ambivalence toward theological education in the twentieth century by voicing concern that education led to formal worship, a hindering of the working of the Holy Spirit in the message, the minister, and the life of the congregation.<sup>10</sup> Some Baptists were concerned about the doctrinal positions of some faculty. Yet, money kept arriving to support theological education.

Are Baptists “anti-intellectual”? No! Baptists may disagree over the type of education a minister should receive, but education itself is not an issue. Most Baptists agree with Herschel Hobbs’s analysis: “The broad scope of Baptist influence and effectiveness has been elevated through an educated ministry and other leadership in churches and in the denomination.”<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

Baptists approach the issue of education, liberal arts and theological, with mixed feelings, but most are not anti-intellectual. Supporting the tradition of all persons having the responsibility to proclaim the gospel, regardless of their level of education, does not conflict with the belief that education hones and builds up the gifts for ministry and life that God bestows.

E. Y. Mullins understood the importance of education for Baptists when he wrote, “The denomination of Christians which most widely and thoroughly promotes education will most deeply impress the world.”<sup>12</sup> For more than 200 years, Baptists in America have built and supported educational institutions to help young believers gain the tools they need to live as Christians and serve as ministers in order to “deeply impress the world.”

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1. E. Y. Mullins, *Baptist Beliefs* (Louisville, Ky: Baptist World Publishing Company, 1912), 75-76.

2. *Ibid.*, 74.

3. H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 441-42.

Part of the fear of educated ministers was that they could not hold a real job, that they were lazy and unable to do anything that required real work.

4. William H. Brackney, “Higher Education,” in *Historical Dictionary of the Baptists* (Lanham, Md: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1999), 206-07.

5. William H. Brackney, “Eaton, Isaac (1724-1772),” in *Historical Dictionary of the Baptists* (Lanham, Md: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1999), 140.

6. A. D. Gillette, ed., *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association: 1707-1807* (Springfield, Mo: Particular Baptist Press, reprint 2002), 381.

7. F. M. Perko, “Brown University” in *Dictionary of Baptists in America*, ed. by Bill J. Leonard (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 67. The school was renamed Brown University in 1804 when Nicholas Brown saved the school from bankruptcy with a \$5,000 gift.

8. John A. Broadus, *Memoir of James Petigru Boyce* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1893), 100-01.

9. McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 444. For example, Texas Baptists founded fifteen new Baptist colleges after the Civil War. Most did not survive to the present, but the desire to educate the youth was clearly present.

10. Arthur L. Walker, “Southern Baptist College and University Education,” *Baptist History and Heritage*, 29 (April 1994): 16.

11. Herschel H. Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1971).

12. Mullins, 76.

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