



THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Office of the President

The Burden of History & The Blessing of Heritage

Report from the President
to the Board of Trustees
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President

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*“And I prayed to the Lord, ‘O Lord God, do not destroy
Your people and your heritage, whom you have redeemed through your
greatness, whom you brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand.’”*
Deuteronomy 9:26

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary was established in the year 1859, just fourteen years after the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845. Both were established for the purpose of strengthening the ministry and extending the mission of Baptist churches in the South. The Seminary and the Convention are inseparable, and the Seminary has no existence apart from the Southern Baptist Convention and its churches. The SBC and Southern Seminary share both the burden of history and the blessing of heritage. These realities are also inseparable. Our responsibility is to be faithful stewards of both the burden and the blessing. This is no easy task, but this is our calling.

The burden of history is common to all humanity, but we must be honest and specific about the particular burden we confront. This burden is best described in the “Report on Slavery and Racism in the History of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary,” released in 2018. The report, produced after months of research and reflection, confronted the reality directly. As I summarized the key question explicit in that report: “How could our founders, James P. Boyce, John Broadus, Basil Manly Jr., and William Williams, serve as such defenders of biblical truth, the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the confessional convictions of this seminary, and at the same time own human beings as slaves—based on an ideology of race—and defend slavery as an institution?”

The report made the Seminary founders' complicity in race-based chattel slavery and white racial supremacy clear and unquestioned. Each was individually involved in slavery, each defended the Confederacy, and each expressed or supported the ideology of racial supremacy.

Furthermore, the report made clear that the legacy of racism did not end with the fall of the Confederacy. The Seminary followed the course of the American South through periods of organized white supremacy, racial segregation, and opposition to civil rights for Black Americans. In sum, the history implicated in this moral reckoning is not limited to the four founding professors of the Seminary. This is true for the Southern Baptist Convention and for the American South. It is true for the United States of America as a nation. Our responsibility is to reckon with this history in the present. What does this demand of us? How do we fulfill this stewardship?

Over the last decade, and with increasing intensity in the last five years, Americans confront calls to revoke names from buildings, take down statues, and remove monuments that honor individuals known to have been complicit in American slavery and racial supremacy. We must admit that this is not an easy demand to dismiss out of hand. We are responsible for choosing whom to honor and for making clear for what they are honored. We must admit that we have, for most of our history, just assumed that the answers to those questions are self-evident and sufficient. They are not.

At the present moment, we face calls to remove the name of James P. Boyce from the James P. Boyce Centennial Library and Boyce College, to remove the name of John A. Broadus from Broadus Chapel, to remove the name of Basil Manly Jr. from Manly Hall, and the name of William Williams from Williams Hall. The full scope of their names throughout the institution does not end there, but these are the most public commemorations of their legacies.

Similar calls have been directed at other institutions, and at the nation as a whole. Schools such as Yale University have removed some names (such as John Calhoun's name removed from Calhoun College) but not other names (including Elihu Yale himself, who was actually a slaver as well as a slave-holder). Former Yale Law School dean Anthony Kronman reminds us: "There never is a moment in our lives when we are not retelling the past. We are constantly reshaping its content and rephrasing its meaning."¹ But Kronman warns against trying to erase history, in the Marxist style. Interestingly, Kronman (who does not write as a Christian) also speaks of the gap between ideals and reality in history: "Morally serious people want to close this gap. They want to make the world more just. But changing the name on a building does little to achieve this result. It may even distract attention from more serious problems and create the self-satisfied illusion of progress where none has been made."²

¹ Anthony Kronman, *The Assault on American Excellence* (New York: Free Press, 2019), p. 166.

² Kronman, p. 176.

Also writing from a secular perspective, Rebecca Solnit expresses frustration that, “It would be impossible and unwise to erase all signs of ugliness of this country’s past; success would be a landscape lobotomy.”³

Closer to home, I was deeply moved by the words of historian Beth Barton Schweiger, writing as a Christian historian. With remarkable insight she writes: “In history, the call to love one’s neighbor is extended to the dead. For the Christian, knowledge about the past, as any knowledge, should serve the ends of love.”⁴ This does not mean that we make no moral judgments in our reckoning with history. It does mean that we acknowledge that “our distance from the dead makes them difficult to see” and that we owe to all “charitable ways of knowing.”⁵

As stewards of a Christian institution committed to the church of Jesus Christ, we also bear a stewardship of the dead. Names of founders are on our buildings. Names of slaves are on the census documents. Our names are listed according to our roles in Southern Seminary. We will one day be dead. Someone will bear the stewardship of dealing with us. God have mercy.

Who are we honoring with historical references, and why? The James P. Boyce Centennial Library was built in 1959 and dedicated as part of the Seminary’s centennial year. It was named for Boyce, not just because he was the founder of the Seminary and first president, but because his own personal library became the nucleus for the Seminary’s library and its premier collection. The library started, quite truly, as his own library.

Boyce College was established in 1998 as a fully-accredited four-year institution awarding the baccalaureate degree. It was a major development in Southern Seminary history, but it is organically related to the Boyce Bible School established decades earlier as a pre-seminary program without degrees. The Boyce name was attached to the Boyce Bible School because the mission of education at the pre-seminary level was central to his vision for the Seminary, expressed in his 1856 address at Furman University, “Three Changes in Theological Institutions.”

Broadus Chapel, also dedicated in 1998, was named for John A. Broadus, not only for his role as a founding faculty member but also as the Seminary’s second president. Broadus was the most famous Baptist preacher of his day in the United States, and his classic text on preaching, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, remains the most widely published work on homiletics in Christian history. It began as Broadus’s notes for a preaching class he taught at Southern Seminary during difficult days. He had only one student in the classroom. Broadus was singularly important in establishing the young Seminary’s academic reputation. His move to the

³ Rebecca Solnit, “The Monument Wars,” *Harper’s* (January 2017). <https://harpers.org/archive/2017/01/the-monument-wars/>

⁴ Beth Barton Schweiger, “Seeing Things,” in *Confessing History: Explorations in Christian Faith and the Historian’s Vocation*, edited by John Fea, John Green, and Eric Miller (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), p. 62.

⁵ Schweiger, p. 64.

infant seminary from the faculty of the University of Virginia was, as Boyce understood, the most significant development in the Seminary's development, and second only to Boyce's role as founder.

Williams Hall and Manly Hall, both part of the larger Mullins Complex housing Boyce College, were named for the other two members of the founding faculty in 1859. Of the two, Williams is lesser known, and the Harvard Law School graduate later left to become pastor of the First Baptist Church of Albany, Georgia. Manly, however, would serve the Seminary in a more instrumental way. Manly was the author of the Abstract of Principles, the Seminary's crucial confession of faith. Furthermore, Manly was crucial in establishing the theological credibility of the Seminary in the aftermath of the controversy over Crawford Howell Toy. Manly returned to the Seminary after serving as president of Georgetown College and wrote his historic defense of verbal inspiration and the inerrancy of the Bible, *The Bible Doctrine of Inspiration*. Manly was instrumental in defining the theological convictions of the Seminary, not once, but twice.

These represent the major commemorations of the four founding members of the faculty. Thus, these constitute the presenting issue as posed to Southern Seminary and the Southern Baptist Convention.

There is a larger context, of course. The burden of history is not unique to Southern Seminary or the Southern Baptist Convention. It is borne by the United States, and by every culture in its own measure. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and their colleagues as founders of the United States of America were either slave holders (such as Washington and Jefferson) or complicit in the defense of slavery or, at the very least, its acceptance in the American order at the time. And yet, I would not support renaming Washington, DC or removing the Washington Monument, tearing down the Jefferson Memorial, or taking down statues of figures ranging from John Adams to Abraham Lincoln. The burden of history does not end with the founders of the United States, nor with the founders of Southern Seminary. Nor does the blessing of heritage.

We cannot tell the story of the American republic without constant reference to George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, to name just two of the crucial founders. And it is not just that these names are necessary to tell the story; it is that they, along with others, *are* the story. The constitutional provision for the American presidency was made politically possible only because the founding generation trusted George Washington, singularly, as trustworthy to fulfill the office and to define it in his person. Similarly, we cannot remove Thomas Jefferson from the meaning of the Declaration of Independence, nor explain it without him. I believe that the American experiment in constitutional self-government has been the greatest historical development of the last several centuries. I affirm that it must be continually improved in fulfillment of its promises (as did the founders), but I reject the claim that it must be deconstructed and replaced with another. I do not believe that the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial should be removed. I do believe that we must bear the burden of history honestly, telling the entire story as best we can achieve, and acknowledging the mixture of good and evil that is evident in every human life. I believe we must also commemorate those who have shaped our history, and that we must do so in a truly Christian manner. We know no heroes but

God. But we do know human beings who have demonstrated heroic service and achievement in the human scale. Rome had its Caesars, and committed sin by idolizing them. We dare not idolize, but we dare not forget.

The Bible offers us the key, I believe, to seeing our way through. There is no hesitation in the Bible to point to Abraham's honor as patriarch – the man through whom God made the covenant fulfilled in Israel. But the Bible is also honest about Abraham's great sin. The same is true of Moses, the man to whom God spoke through the burning bush and the leader of Israel in the Exodus. But the Bible reveals the sin of Moses, and does not allow us to turn our head.

What can we say of King David, the man after God's own heart? His sin was so great, but the Messiah rules forever on David's throne.

In Hebrews, we are told that Abraham, "who had received the promises," and Moses, who "considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt," and David were "men of whom the world was not worthy." [Hebrews 11:37]

Surely this is the pattern of honor that we should see throughout history, and especially the history of the church. The church, beginning with the Apostles, has been led by pastors, taught by preachers, and nourished with the blood of the martyrs. Every one of these human beings is, as a believer in Christ, both saint and sinner. Our task is to honor the saintly without condoning, hiding, or denying the sinful. We have not done this well in the past. We must do better in the present and be more faithful in the future.

For one thing, we need to ask why we are honoring anyone in any way? What are we commemorating? We must be clear: We are not honoring the Confederacy. We are not honoring the horrible institution of American slavery. We are not honoring any form of racial supremacist ideology – specifically, we are not honoring white supremacy. We must condemn any form of racism and racial supremacy and we must condemn the American institution of race-based chattel slavery as an abomination.

We honor the founding of this Seminary, their sacrificial devotion and leadership. Boyce devoted not only his life, but the better portion of his personal wealth to this school. His personal tenacity alone explains, humanly speaking, the existence of this school. As Broadus said of Boyce, "to him, more than any other, the seminary owes its existence."

Without Boyce, we have no way of describing the founding vision of the Seminary. It is to Boyce that I take every prospective seminary faculty member, walking them through the vision of Southern Seminary as a confessional institution, committed to unquestioned theological orthodoxy. I invoke Boyce's specific words of regulative confessionalism and theological fidelity many times a year, but particularly at Opening Convocation and the inauguration of every new academic year. Those words form the confessional identity of the Seminary. As Boyce stated: "You will infringe the rights of no man, and you will secure the rights of those who have established here an instrumentality for the production of a sound ministry. It is no hardship to those who teach here to be called upon to sign the declaration of their principles . . . and none need accept your call who cannot conscientiously sign your formulary. And while all

this is true, you will receive by this an assurance that the trust committed to you by the founders is fulfilled in accordance with their wishes, that the ministers that go forth have learned to distinguish truth from error, and to embrace the former, and that the same truths of the Bible which were so dear to the hearts of its founders, and which I trust are equally dear to yours, will be propagated in our churches, giving to them vigor and strength and causing them to flourish by godly sentiments and emotions they will awaken within them.”

We honor John Broadus for his equal devotion to the Seminary and its existence, his service as champion of conservative hermeneutics and his unqualified affirmation of the centrality of preaching to the church and the centrality of the inerrant Bible to preaching. Broadus also served to great personal sacrifice, and it was he who, in the ruins of war, argued: “Suppose we quietly agree that the Seminary may die, but we’ll die first.” He is commemorated as preacher and New Testament scholar with a chapel that bears his name.

Without Basil Manly Jr., we have no way of explaining the precision and origin of the Abstract of Principles, of which he was primary author. The theological recovery of Southern Seminary in the last three decades rested upon the confessional basis of the institution. We did not have to invent a proper confession, we had to *return* to it. Some outside our denomination and the evangelical tradition have argued that the theology of the founders was itself responsible for white supremacy. This is the product of a form of deconstruction that is toxic to both truth and reason. The Abstract of Principles was essential, then and now, as a Baptist statement of classical biblical Christianity – in the tradition of the Apostles, the Reformers, and the Baptist heritage. The entire point of the Abstract was that it was *not* an innovation, but a clear Baptist statement of the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

As also mentioned, Manly’s role in defending biblical inerrancy and verbal plenary inspiration was crucial – and not only in the founding era, but in the Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention. Manly’s work was proof that biblical inerrancy was central and non-negotiable in the SBC from its founding, and that the words infallible and inerrant and their cognates were not impositions upon the Baptist tradition.

William Williams is honored for his role in founding the school and serving as professor of church government. We know less of him, and his contribution was less significant than the other three. He shares their complicity in the defense of the South and in slavery. He also shares in their commitment to the birth and infancy of the Seminary. For this his name has been affixed to Williams Hall since 1927.

So, what now?

We must be clear in our heartbreak and horror in the face of racism and racial supremacy. This is part of the burden of history. We must be clear in our embrace of the priceless legacy left us by those who founded this institution and sacrificed so that it would survive – who defined our convictions and laid foundations for theological faithfulness. This is the blessing of heritage.

To be human is to see this mixture in humanity. To be Christian is to see it with biblical clarity. To be faithful as a Christian is to see it in ourselves.

Sin and human greatness are not distributed in equal measure. Slavery in the United States was a horror for which generations of Americans bear responsibility, and the legacy of slavery and racism remains a stain on the nation. Abraham Lincoln understood this clearly, and with a broken heart. We must share this confession.

Is the burden of history and the blessing of heritage best served by removing the names of the founders? I believe not. Instead, I believe it would lead to Southern Seminary becoming a very different institution, and one that is less faithful in doctrine and confession.

Our challenge is to be, simultaneously, the school of Boyce and Broadus and Manly and Williams – and yet *not* the same school with respect to racism, slavery, segregation, and other sins. What concrete steps can we take? I offer the following suggestions:

First, we should express lament over the sinful dimensions of our legacy and pledge to be ever more faithful in serving the Body of Christ by the education of godly ministers.

Second, beginning in academic year 2022-2023, we should set aside \$1,000,000 of endowed and restricted funds to serve as an endowment for assistance to qualified Black students at Southern Seminary through the Garland Offutt Scholars Program, rightly honoring the legacy of the first African-American full graduate of Southern Seminary, having received the Master of Theology degree in 1944 and the Doctor of Theology in 1948. Further, we set the goal of adding an additional \$1,000,000 restricted to this fund every three years until a goal of \$5,000,000 is reached. [The time issue here is due to uncertainty of endowment income during the current economic crisis in the nation.]

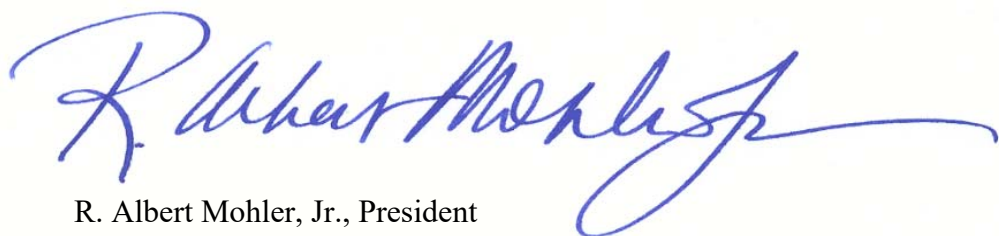
Third, we pledge to be more faithful in telling our story, and the story of our founders with accuracy and biblical wholeness. This means contextualizing and it implies humility. The “Report on Slavery and Racism in the History of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary” is a starting point. Telling the story with faithfulness is an ongoing project and commitment—and will be until Jesus comes.

Fourth, we must ask whether any name is wrongly commemorated in our institutional life. We would have to admit that possibility as we ask these hard questions. The one name that raises the hardest questions is Joseph Emerson Brown, who as Governor of Georgia made the massive investment of \$50,000 in the 1870s, thus in Boyce’s words, saving the Seminary. The challenge with Governor Brown is that he was controversial in his own day, due to his involvement in the convict labor system, widely described as a functional continuation of race-based slavery. Governor Brown’s name has been attached to our history as the oldest endowed chair in the Seminary’s history. In financial terms, there is no means at present of accounting for the status of all the funds in the Brown legacy through more than a century. Functionally, the question would be whether the chair should be occupied or unoccupied. I was very honored when the Board of Trustees elected me to this chair. It has been held, for example, by James P. Boyce and E. Y. Mullins as presidents. I did not then know of the depth of Governor Brown’s role in the convict labor system, though I did know of his role in the Confederacy. The question for the Board of Trustees is whether the Seminary is most faithful by leaving the chair occupied

or unoccupied. I leave that to the discretion of the Board, but I would suggest that another very legitimate question is the present value of this name for Southern Seminary. There is a distinction between telling the history and honoring a name. With pain, I do advise the Board that in my view this name is problematic. One solution would be to declare the Joseph Emerson Brown chair vacant at present and elect the President to another chair. One potential name for the chair would be the Centennial Chair of Christian Theology, connecting the chair to the history of the Seminary and its observance of one hundred years in 1959. This decision is at the pleasure of the Board of Trustees.

The burden of history and the blessing of heritage are our responsibility now. This is the duty of the living, the stewardship of the present moment. Other sincere and faithful believers might well make other decisions in fulfillment of this stewardship. We respect that fact and respect those faithful believers who may have decided the issues otherwise. I pray that our Lord will find us all faithful as we serve The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in these crucial days.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "R. Albert Mohler, Jr.", with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President

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