



Southern Baptist Seminary 1859-2009

Gregory A. Wills

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With 16.3 million members and 44,000 churches, the Southern Baptist Convention is the largest Baptist group in the world, and the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. Unlike the so-called mainstream Protestant denominations, Southern Baptists have remained stubbornly conservative, refusing to adapt their beliefs and practices to modernity's individualist and populist values. Instead, they have held fast to traditional orthodoxy in such fundamental areas as biblical inspiration, creation, conversion, and miracles. Gregory Wills argues that Southern Baptist Theological Seminary has played a fundamental role in the persistence of conservatism, not entirely intentionally. Tracing the history of the seminary from the beginning to the present, Wills shows how its foundational commitment to preserving orthodoxy was implanted in denominational memory in ways that strengthened the denomination's conservatism and limited the seminary's ability to stray from it. In a set of circumstances in which the seminary played a central part, Southern Baptists' populist values bolstered traditional orthodoxy rather than diminishing it. In the end, says Wills, their populism privileged orthodoxy over individualism. The story of Southern Seminary is fundamental to understanding Southern Baptist controversy and identity. Wills's study sheds important new light on the denomination that has played - and continues to play - such a central role in our national history.

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