

A REVIEW ARTICLE

On Reading Institutional Histories

by
Jeffrey P. Straub¹

A School of the Church: Andover Newton Across Two Centuries, by Margaret Lamberts Bendroth. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008. xiv + 210 pp. \$28.00.

An Uncommon Union: Dallas Theological Seminary and American Evangelicalism, by John D. Hannah. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009. 399 pp. \$24.99.

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary 1859–2009, by Gregory A. Wills. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. xiv + 566 pp. \$35.00.

As a historian of Christianity, I am generally interested in most any aspect of ecclesiastical history. As one involved in ministerial training, I am especially interested in the history of ecclesiastical education. I find it fascinating how this field has expanded since the first western university was birthed by the Church in the eleventh century. These schools tended to be places where both canon and civil law were studied. The first university in North America was Harvard, founded in 1636. While not exclusively focused on ministerial training, that component was significant in all the early schools. In the past nearly four hundred years, various ecclesiastical groups have seen the need to commence institutions for the training of men for ministry.

As these institutions grow, they become important influences to the movements that gave them birth, contributing an educated clergy who enter into the churches and shape future generations of ministerial candidates. In many ways these institutions were both shaped by their traditions but also served as the agents of change in the very groups that gave them life. As such, the study of the institutions within a particular tradition provides more than a mere survey of historical academy development. The reading of these histories becomes a lens through which their larger movements can be examined. Indeed

¹Dr. Straub is Professor of Historical Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Plymouth, MN.

Bendroth is correct when she declares “the real story of this book is about mainline Protestantism” (*A School of the Church*, p. xiii).

In the past couple of years, three such seminary histories within American Protestantism have been written. When juxtaposed, they offer interesting insights into twenty-first-century American Christianity. Two of the histories under consideration are historically Baptist, though Andover Newton today is less Baptist than Newton Theological Institution was at its inception. Arguably, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary is more baptistic today than it was twenty-five years ago as it has returned to its historic theological identity that had nearly been lost after more than three-quarters of a century of progressive theology. The third history, John Hannah’s treatment of Dallas Theological Seminary, offers a view of American evangelicalism proper, the movement that Dallas had most closely been associated with and with which both Andover Newton and Southern Seminary have intersected. In writing this review article, therefore, I want to briefly suggest the value of reading works of this nature beyond the mere curiosity of knowing a bit more about one’s alma mater. I want to demonstrate that these histories become important discussions of the larger theological traditions of which they are a part and as such ought to be read widely by both insiders and outsiders.

Margaret Bendroth’s history of Andover Newton is, in some ways, the most interesting of the three histories. Andover Seminary, founded in 1808, was originally intended as a conservative response to the encroachments of theological liberalism (specifically Unitarianism) that sought hegemony in New England Congregationalism. In 1805, Henry Ware, an avowed Unitarian, had assumed the Chair of the Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard. And within a few short years (1825), the American Unitarian Association would consolidate the gains that Unitarianism made in New England. Churches that were once centers of Calvinistic orthodoxy became lighthouses for radical Arminianism and Unitarianism.

Andover Seminary was also the first theological school in America. Although one of its primary purposes was to train New England clergy, Harvard did provide training for non-clergy vocations as well. Andover, on the other hand, was exclusively a school for ministers, as was its partner school, the Newton Theological Institution, which commenced in 1825. Baptists had started their own version of Harvard, the College of Rhode Island, in 1763, but were forced to send their ministerial candidates outside their ranks for special vocational training to schools like Princeton.

Bendroth skillfully weaves the story of Andover Newton from its beginnings in the early-nineteenth century to its bicentennial in 2008. In doing so, she chronicles the transition of American Protestantism from its Victorian-era orthodoxy to twentieth-century liberalism. The changes that took place in the school track with the changes that were occurring in American Christianity in general and among Congregationalists and Baptists in particular. The school was both a participant

in those changes and a recipient of the changes.

In recording the history of Andover Newton, Bendroth is not antagonistic to the current status of the school. As the executive director and librarian of the Congregational Library of Boston, she is intimately acquainted with the historical materials necessary to write this history and of the current nature of New England Congregationalism, and she provides an insider's look into the current state of New England Christianity.

On the opposite end of the theological spectrum is Greg Wills's *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*. Wills is also an insider, one of the new generation of conservative Southern Baptists scholars hired by R. Albert Mohler as part of his plan of restoring Southern to its theological foundations. As a conservative Southern Baptist, Wills chronicles the rise, decline and resurrection of Southern's theological history. Under its first two presidents, Southern remained committed to its Calvinistic roots, typical of mid-nineteenth-century American Baptists. But gradually things began to change. Under the leadership of E. Y. Mullins, the seminary's fourth president who began serving in 1899, the centrality of the *Abstract of Principles* lessened. By the time Roy Honeycutt became president (1982), the *Abstract* had become a smoke screen behind which professors feigned agreement while teaching views radically at variance with its declarations. Oftentimes, this practice was well-known but simply overlooked by later presidents such as Duke McCall and Roy Honeycutt.

One of Wills's most significant contributions is providing a lens through which the Southern Baptist Convention's recent theological shift may be studied. The seminary in Louisville was the denomination's flagship school, and it is little wonder that its faculty and alumni have had such a profound impact on the denomination as a whole. Not surprisingly, very many of the Baptist churches in the greater Louisville area, especially in the early 1990s, were utterly unsympathetic with the conservative resurgence then taking place at Southern. These churches had had a string of recent Southern graduates, most of whom embraced the progressive theology characteristic of the school before Mohler began to lead. Mohler was virtually alone in his bid to reform Southern, having only the backing of the trustees at large and conservatives across the convention. But he had few supporters in Kentucky.

Finally, the history of Dallas Seminary by John Hannah deserves notice. Hannah is a capable historian and has left an interesting, if a bit over-studied, survey of the early history of Dallas. Unlike either Bendroth or Wills, Hannah provides details about institutional growth that border on the statistically pedantic. He provides numerical details of student body growth within the text (pp. 218–22) that could have been relegated to an appendix to allow for a better flow of the historical narrative. Other such minor details occasionally hinder the overall readability of the story unlike either Bendroth or Wills, but the story of American evangelicalism still emerges from within the account of (arguably) its leading non-denominational seminary.

Hannah's history of Dallas is the most traditional of the three institutional histories, chronicling the birth and expansion of the Dallas Theological Seminary. While more space is given to the mundane details of academic development than in either Bendroth or Wills, it should be noted that Dallas is significantly younger than either of the other schools and, to date, it has not experienced the theological upheaval that characterized the others. Liberalism has not really been an internal problem for Dallas. However, Hannah's history of Dallas does offer us a glimpse into what could be argued was the coming of age of American evangelicalism in the twentieth century. Dallas offered one major variation of the conservative response to the encroaching liberalism within American Protestantism. As conservatives abandoned their own theological schools, they often sought refuge in transdenominational efforts such as Dallas. So as Hannah rightly notes, "the lines between the seminary, evangelicalism and fundamentalism overlap" (*An Uncommon Union*, p. 17).

Several important historical lessons may be noted especially through the record of Andover Newton and Southern. First is the role of the creed or confession. What place did the creed or confession play in maintaining the orthodoxy of the institution? From the story of both institutions, the creed is only as good as the will of those who were charged with its care. In the case of Southern, both Duke McCall and Roy Honeycutt used the *Abstract* as a ruse by allowing professors to sign, while writing in the margins, stating their exceptions to the statement. Dale Moody, for instance, spent years teaching contrary to the *Abstract*, while affirming it for the record. In Hannah's treatment of Dallas, the question of the creed comes up in the discussion of the inerrancy debate. Clearly, one issue that arose as a result of the creeping liberalism that invaded twentieth-century Protestantism was to what extent could the Bible be said to be without error—in its religious content or in all its affirmations and denials, whether religious, historical or even scientific?

A second important lesson to be learned is the power of influence, especially of the faculty over the next generation of ministers. In the case of both Andover Newton and Southern, liberal faculties believed they could leaven their denominations by sending out young ministers with altered sensibilities that would support and sustain their professors' liberalized theological agendas. As the seminaries changed, so too did the churches. The resistance from the churches came when changes were pushed through too rapidly or too publicly. A creeping gradualism was what was needed to effect long term, permanent change. Both Newton and Southern had their early martyrs in the contest for theological progress. Ezra P. Gould at Newton and Crawford H. Toy at Southern were in the vanguard of the theological drift and paid a heavy price—termination—for being on the front line. But in time, changes came. Andover Newton today is still committed to a progressive theology in keeping with the trajectory set by presidents like George Horr while Southern has been returned of late to the theology

of its founders.

Thus the reading of these three books together provides a unique survey of twentieth-century Protestantism. While not telling the whole story, they nevertheless contribute important chapters to the story as the theological seminaries involved were in the vanguard of the forces that shaped their respective traditions. To understand the schools is to better understand their respective movements. The Andover Newton story describes a tradition that veered leftward into liberalism. The Southern story tells of a solidly conservative beginning that followed a similar trajectory but in the end was reclaimed to its theological heritage. The Dallas story offers the narrative of response on the part of some who abandoned their declining traditions to seek for a place where their ministers could be trained in an atmosphere that still held the Bible in high esteem.