

# **THE STORY OF SOUTHEASTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, 1950-2010**

By Nathan A. Finn

## **A Seminary in the Southeast, 1950-1974**

The year 2010 marks the sixtieth anniversary of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. During the mid-1940s, Southern Baptists operated three seminaries in Louisville, Kentucky, Fort Worth, Texas, and New Orleans, Louisiana. A growing number of Baptists recognized the need for a seminary in the Southeast, the cradle of Southern Baptist life. North Carolina Baptists took the lead in promoting the idea, and in 1950 the SBC chartered Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. The Convention purchased the historic campus of Wake Forest College for \$1.6 million and the seminary began classes in the fall of 1951. From 1951-1956, the two schools shared the campus. When the college, now Wake Forest University, relocated to Winston-Salem in 1956, the seminary took sole possession of the Wake Forest property, where it has been located ever since.

Southeastern's founding president was Sydnor L. Stealey, formerly professor of church history at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. The first degree the school offered was the Bachelor of Divinity. A Master of Theology degree was added in 1954 for students who intended to pursue further academic studies. The seminary grew every year, especially following the relocation of Wake Forest College. Sociology and ethics professor Olin T. Binkley was named the first academic dean in 1958. Binkley had previously taught on the faculties of Wake Forest College and Southern Seminary. That same year, Southeastern received full accreditation from the American Association of Theological Schools, the chapel was renovated, and the Ruby Reid Child Care Center was constructed. Stealey served twelve years as president, during which time enrollment grew to approximately 800 students. Stealey retired from office in 1962, but not before Wait Hall, the school's administrative building, was renamed Stealey Hall in his honor.

In 1963, Olin Binkley was elected Southeastern's second president. Binkley was a popular leader, as evidenced by his election as president of the American Association of Theological Schools in 1964. Enrollment continued to grow, new faculty members were continually added, and additional buildings were constructed to accommodate the growing campus community. In 1966, a women's dormitory was constructed and new campus duplexes were built. A new student center was constructed in 1967, named Mackie Hall in honor of benefactor and onetime campus physician George Mackie. In 1968, a new campus health center was opened and the library's building was named in honor of Emery B. Denney, long-time friend of the seminary and former chief justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court. The following year, the seminary chapel was named in honor of President Binkley. Academic changes also occurred; the Bachelor of Divinity was renamed the Master of Divinity in 1967, reflecting the wider trend in theological education. To meet the growing demand for continuing education for ministers, Southeastern added a Doctor of Ministry program in 1971.

Despite signs of growth, Southeastern's faculty became entangled in a divisive theological controversy. By the early 1960s, three of Southeastern's New Testament professors were suspected of heterodoxy. Specifically, the professors were accused of holding to German scholar Rudolf Bultmann's "demythologized" interpretation of the New Testament. Many

considered Bultmann's theology to be inconsistent with Southeastern's statement of faith, the Abstract of Principles. The timing was significant. Following the Elliott Controversy at Midwestern Seminary in 1961–62, Southern Baptists were becoming increasingly concerned over alleged liberalism in the seminaries. Tension increased among both trustees and faculty, many of whom were concerned that public scrutiny would be brought to bear upon Southeastern. Binkley insisted that the professors teach in accordance with the seminary's confession or relocate to another institution. The accused professors opted for the latter, each departing between 1964 and 1966. Further controversy ensued in 1964 when two Southeastern professors participated in the ordination ceremony for Addie Davis at Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham. Davis, a Southeastern student, was the first Southern Baptist woman to be ordained to the ministry.

### **Seasons of Controversy and Change, 1974-1992**

Upon President Binkley's retirement in 1974, trustees elected Randall Lolley, then pastor of First Baptist Church of Winston-Salem, as the seminary's third president. The seminary experienced numeric growth during much of Lolley's tenure. Enrollment reached almost 1300 in 1982, which remained the record until the mid-1990s. In the early 1970s, a fully-accredited Associate of Divinity program was initiated to help educate non-traditional students who already possessed some ministry experience. In 1983, Southeastern launched a new faculty journal titled *Faith and Mission*. But by the early 1980s, the seminary was engulfed in another theological controversy, this time a Convention-wide imbroglio over theology and denominational politics. The election of Memphis pastor Adrian Rogers as SBC president in 1979 began a succession of conservative presidencies that continues to the present. All of the seminaries were accused of employing liberal professors who denied biblical inerrancy and embraced other left-of-center views. Southeastern was widely considered to be one of the most liberal of the seminaries. In response to conservative criticism, SBC "moderates," a coalition of theological progressives and other Baptists committed to the pre-1979 status quo, branded the conservative dissenters as "fundamentalists" and accused them of hijacking the SBC through secular political tactics. Lolley publicly sided with the moderates.

Southern Baptists formed a Peace Committee in 1985, which was comprised of representative conservatives, moderates, and those heretofore neutral. That committee issued a report in 1987 that cited doctrinal issues as the root cause of the controversy. Southeastern was among the seminaries where the Peace Committee discovered pervasive progressive theology and open opposition to SBC conservatives. Several incidents raised the ire of conservatives, including a pro-feminist chapel service in 1984, the hiring of a female liberation theologian that same year, a controversial Sunday School lesson written by an Old Testament professor in 1985, and the establishment of a chapter of the American Association of University Professors in 1987. In the fall of 1987, conservatives claimed a majority on the seminary's trustee board. Controversy reached a head in November 1987 when both Lolley and academic dean Morris Ashcraft announced their resignations. Lolley subsequently pastored moderate North Carolina Baptist churches in Raleigh and Greensboro, respectively.

In 1988, trustees elected Southern Seminary evangelism professor Lewis A. Drummond Southeastern's fourth president. Drummond was a theological conservative with close ties to Billy Graham. Southwestern Seminary philosophy professor L. Russ Bush was hired as the new academic dean in 1989, despite a vote of "no confidence" from the faculty. Bush had co-

authored the influential *Baptists and the Bible* (1980), a treatise arguing biblical inerrancy was the historic conviction among most Baptists. The already declining student enrollment continued to plummet, though the number of new student applications was rising. The pre-Drummond faculty began to retire or relocate, several of the latter choosing to teach at newly established moderate schools and programs such as the Baptist Theological Seminary of Richmond and the Baptist House of Studies at Duke Divinity School. A Center for Great Commission Studies was founded in 1990, reflecting Drummond's longtime interests in evangelism and missions. Under the leadership of newly hired preaching professor Wayne McDill, Southeastern began to emphasize the importance of expositional preaching, a trend that continues to the present day. In 1992, Drummond announced his retirement and Criswell College president L. Paige Patterson was elected the seminary's fifth president. Patterson was a respected evangelical theologian and a key architect of the conservative resurgence in the SBC.

### **The Fastest-Growing Seminary in America, 1992-2003**

Under Patterson's leadership, the faculty completed its transition from theologically moderate to conservative. In addition to the Abstract of Principles, Patterson required all faculty members to sign the Baptist Faith and Message (2000). Southeastern experienced remarkable growth during the 1990s. Though only 555 students matriculated the semester before Patterson's arrival, by spring 2000 Southeastern enrolled almost 2100 students; Southeastern was the fastest-growing seminary in America in the 1990s. Major improvements were also made to several campus buildings. In 1995, the seminary renovated the Manor House, a large house used for lodging prospective students visiting Southeastern. In 1997, Bostwick Hall, one of the oldest remaining building on campus, was extensively renovated and converted into apartments. Binkley Chapel was renovated in 1998 and construction began on two new apartment complexes. The next year, Mackie Hall was renovated into faculty offices and renamed Stephens-Mackie Hall. In 2001, the seminary dedicated Jacumin-Simpson Missions Center, a building housing faculty offices, a state-of-the art auditorium, and the Center for Great Commission Studies, now named in honor of former president Lewis Drummond.

New academic programs were also initiated during the Patterson administration. Southeastern expanded the Associate of Divinity program into a fully-accredited four-year college in 1994, now called The College at Southeastern. The following year, the seminary established a Doctor of Philosophy program. In 1999, Southeastern added a Master of Arts in Christian School Administration to equip teachers and administrators to serve in Christian private schools. That same year, a Women's Study Program was established under the leadership of seminary first lady Dorothy Kelley Patterson; the program included graduate courses and a Certificate in Women's Studies for student's wives and other laypeople. Southeastern also became the first SBC seminary to embrace the Biblical Counseling paradigm for Christian counselors. Several faculty members assumed leadership positions in the Evangelical Theological Society and other professional scholarly organizations. Russ Bush and John Sailhamer served as presidents of the ETS in 1994 and 2001, respectively, and Andreas Köstenberger edited *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*.

An emphasis on evangelism and missions continued to permeate the campus. The seminary installed evangelism professor Alvin Reid into the Bailey Smith Chair of Evangelism in 1995, the school's first endowed chair. That same year, Southeastern added a Master of Divinity with International Church Planting, the first degree of its kind at a Southern Baptist

seminary. This course of study is popularly known as the 2+2 Program because the degree requirements include a two year term of service with the International Mission Board. In 1997, Southeastern established a partnership with the New Hampshire Baptist Convention in an effort to plant SBC churches in New England; other similar partnerships soon followed. In 1999, the seminary partnered with the North American Mission Board's Nehemiah Project and added the Master of Divinity with North American Church Planting. Patterson continued to exercise leadership in the wider SBC, and from 1998-2000 he served as president of the Convention, the first seminary president to have that honor since 1924. In 2003, Patterson resigned in order to accept the presidency of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

### **Every Classroom a Great Commission Classroom, 2004–Present**

In January 2004, Daniel L. Akin was elected the sixth president of Southeastern Seminary. Akin, a professor of both theology and preaching, previously served as Southeastern's dean of students from 1992–1996 before serving eight years as the academic vice president at Southern Seminary. Akin furthered Southeastern's theological renewal by requiring all professors to sign the Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy and the Danvers Statement on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood in addition to the school's two confessions of faith. In February 2005, Southeastern hosted its first annual 20/20 Collegiate Conference, an event that annually draws over 1000 college students. Also in 2005, Southeastern adopted a new campus master plan and completed construction on a new building to house the facilities and campus housing departments. That fall, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Southeastern sent several student teams to do construction work and outreach in the Gulf Coast and on the campus of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary; total gifts and labor amounted to over \$750,000. In 2006, Southeastern furthered its longstanding commitment to missions and evangelism by adopting a new institutional mission statement: *Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary seeks to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ by equipping students to serve the Church and fulfill the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20)*. The seminary's informal motto became "every classroom a Great Commission classroom."

In recent years, Southeastern has continued to educate students and develop creative new initiatives. In 2006, Southeastern established the L. Russ Bush Center for Faith and Culture in honor of longtime academic vice president Bush, who passed away in 2008 following a bout with cancer. Southeastern also began cultivating a number of international partnerships dedicated to helping provide theological education to pastors and other church leaders in the Majority World. In 2008, the seminary opened Patterson Hall, a classroom and office building named in honor of Paige and Dorothy Patterson. Patterson Hall houses the Center for Faith and Culture, The College at Southeastern, and the school's doctoral programs. Also in 2008, Southeastern launched an official faculty blog titled "Between the Times" (<http://www.betweenthetimes.com>). During Akin's tenure, Southeastern has added two additional endowed chairs: the Richard and Gina Headrick Chair of World and Missions (2007), occupied by Bruce Ashford, and the Johnny Hunt Chair of Biblical Preaching (2010), presently held by Greg Heisler. In 2009, Southeastern entered into an ongoing partnership with 9Marks Ministries to host a series of annual conferences promoting gospel renewal and local church health. After a twenty-five year run, *Faith and Mission* was disbanded in 2008 and was replaced in 2010 with a new refereed scholarly journal titled *Southeastern Theological Review*.

During Akin's tenure, non-residential education opportunities have been significantly expanded to include online, extension, and hybrid course offerings in almost every degree

program. Akin has also announced an initiative for Southeastern to partner with at least one hundred local church “equipping centers” by the year 2015. Students will be able to receive a significant portion of their seminary education through local church internships and creative course delivery systems. In part because of Southeastern’s Great Commission priorities, the seminary has been at the forefront of advocating a Great Commission Resurgence in the SBC. This movement, championed by Akin and recent SBC president and Southeastern alumnus Johnny Hunt, intends to build upon the theological renaissance of the previous generation by prioritizing evangelism and church planting among unreached people groups in foreign nations and underserved regions in North America.

As of fall 2010, Southeastern Seminary has a total enrollment of almost 2700 students. Thousands of Southeastern graduates serve as pastors and other staff in Southern Baptist churches and other types of congregations. Approximately five hundred Southeastern students and graduates currently serve as foreign missionaries, the vast majority through the International Mission Board. Dozens of graduates serve as North American church planters in urban centers such as Boston, Chicago, Tampa, Atlanta, Richmond, and Nashville, as well as underserved rural areas in the Midwest and New England. Almost one hundred students have been awarded the Doctor of Philosophy and now serve in seminaries, colleges, pastorates, and denominational leadership positions all over the world. Hundreds of Southeastern students participate annually in short-term mission trips sponsored by the seminary or local churches. Numerous Southeastern professors regularly lead mission trips or teach short-term in overseas settings. God has been very gracious to Southeastern. Should the Lord tarry, it is our hope for sixty more years of “equipping students to serve the Church and fulfill the Great Commission.”

### **Recommended Reading:**

Blackmore, James H. *The First Fifty Years of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1950-2000*. Unpublished manuscript, Special Collections, The Library at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, North Carolina.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.” In *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists*, vol. III, edited by Davis C. Wooley, 1962-64. Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1971.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.” In *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists*, vol. IV, edited by Lynn E. May Jr., 2459-61. Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1982.

Bland, Thomas A., ed. *Servant Songs: Reflections on the History and Mission of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1950-1988*. Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1994.

Crane, Lauren. “Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary: Devoted to the Great Commission.” *SBC Life* (April 2010). Available online at <http://www.sbclife.net/Articles/2010/08/sla5.asp>.

Duncan, Pope A. “Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.” In *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists*, vol. I, edited by Davis C. Wooley, 1239-42. Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1958.

Harper, Keith and Steve McKinion. *Then and Now: A Compilation and Celebration of Fifty Years at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary*. Wake Forest, NC: Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2000.

Hefley, James C. *The Truth in Crisis: Controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention*, vol. 3. Hannibal, MO: Hannibal Books, 1988. See chapter 9.

Martin, Ray. "Southeastern Seminary Turns 60." *News and Observer* (October 23, 2010). Available online at <http://www.northraleighnews.com/2010/10/23/4934/southeastern-seminary-turns-60.html>.

Shimron, Yonat. "Man on a Global Mission." *News and Observer* (July 19, 2010). Available online at <http://www.newsobserver.com/2010/07/29/602069/man-on-a-global-mission.html>.

Nathan A. Finn serves as Assistant Professor of Church History and Baptist Studies at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he has taught since 2007. He is a two time graduate of Southeastern Seminary.