

Evolution, Legislation, and Separation: Correspondence between Billy Sunday and E. Y. Mullins

E. Y. Mullins (1860-1928) was President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1899-1928, President of the Southern Baptist Convention from 1921-1924, and President of the Baptist World Alliance from 1924-1928. His influence on Southern Baptists as a leader and scholar was enormous.

Editor's Note: The following correspondence between E. Y. Mullins and evangelist Billy Sunday (1862-1935) is a good example of Mullins's view of the link between the separation of church and state and the preservation of religious liberty. The exchange was precipitated by Sunday's fear that Mullins was conceding the legal battle against the teaching of evolution in public schools. Although slight changes were made to standardize punctuation and spelling, the original wording has been maintained.

January 29, 1927

Dear Dr. Mullins,

I have always had the greatest admiration for you and confidence in your views and faith in your teaching, but I do not agree with you when you urge the church to cease her fight on the Darwinian theory of Evolution.

You would not advise the police to cease fighting crooks, would you? Neither would you advise the doctors to cease fighting disease.

You say the provocation is great when wanton attacks are made on the Christian Religion by teachers in state schools, but the Christian religion calls for Spiritual weapons, not legal.

What are we to do when these state schools will hire only such men and teachers who believe and teach Evolution and

will not allow the Bible to be taught? The above is true even in some so-called church schools.

If the Bible can not be defended in schools, attacks upon it should not be allowed. You know as well as I that there never has been a time when the vital truths of Christianity were attacked as much in and out of the church as now.

If the Bible is worth believing it is worth defending, no matter who attacks it. And if the heads of our great schools will not defend it or are lukewarm, where will the church drift to? Evolution, if consistently believed, makes it impossible to believe in the Bible. Evolutionists as a body are almost without exception slipping into an anti-miracle religion and an anti-Bible God and Christ.

With assurance of kindest personal regards,

Sincerely yours,
W. A. Sunday.

February 1, 1927

My Dear Brother Sunday,

Thank you for your letter of recent date. I appreciate your writing me regarding the report on my speech at New Orleans. I agree with practically everything you say in your letter, except that I am opposed to laws controlling the interpretation of the Bible. I believe there is a better way to handle the problem. The best of all meth-

ods, in my opinion, is to get boards of education in towns, cities, counties and states to discipline teachers in public schools who abuse their opportunities and privileges and teach atheism and attack Christianity and the Bible. To my own personal knowledge this has been done many times successfully. My objections to laws on the subject are numerous.

First of all, it is contradictory to Protestant principles to get legislatures to interpret the Scriptures for us. This is the first step toward a state church, which has been the bane of Europe through the centuries. It is Roman Catholic and not a Protestant principle.

Secondly, Baptists have fought this battle throughout their history. Roger Williams was banished from Massachusetts and established the Commonwealth of Rhode Island on the principle of absolute separation of church and state. He made a distinction between the first and second tables of the Ten Commandments. Laws were all right against the offenses mentioned in the second table, that is, murder, theft, adultery, etc. But he held strenuously that legislatures and courts had absolutely nothing to do with the first table of the Ten Commandments dealing with man's relations to God and religion.

In the third place, there is no limit to where this practice would lead us. Where in the majority, Mormons might demand that the legislature safeguard their doctrines and interpretations of the Scripture in a way which would contradict what you and I believe. In Catholic communities, where there are a majority on the Catholic side, a law favoring some Catholic interpretation of the Scripture would be quite logical. In a community where Atheists or unbelievers might be in the majority they would have the right to

demand that the legislature pass a law interpreting the Scripture according to their view.

Insofar as it is possible for legislatures and courts to deal with these matters, the utmost limit to which they can go, in my judgment, is in passing a law prohibiting attacks upon religion. This would be a law simply in keeping with the bill of rights of various states, and with the constitution of the United States. But when such a law becomes specific and introduces a particular doctrine, whether they be that of the creation as recorded in Genesis, or the virgin birth, as recorded in the Gospels, or the deity of Christ or any other particular doctrine, it goes beyond its powers and introduces an exceedingly dangerous principle. In Kentucky an anti-evolution law was under consideration, and I persuaded the committee fostering it to substitute a bill prohibiting attacks upon religion in public schools. Both bills were defeated, but we learned afterward that Kentucky already had a law protecting religion against attack. In my opinion such a law would be just as effective as anti-evolution laws which give specific and definite interpretations of Genesis. Of course I am not arguing about the doctrine of direct creation, which I accept heartily. I am talking about the functions and duties of legislatures.

One of the greatest dangers facing us now is that Christian people will be diverted from their task of saving souls into lobbying around legislatures and making out a program for the statute book rather than a program for the salvation of the world. In your letter you write: "I do not agree with you when you urge the church to cease her fight on the Darwinian theory of evolution." In this sentence you have completely misstated my position. I do

not urge any such thing upon the churches. I merely point out what I regard as a grievous mistake in the method of waging the war. I think the method which resorts to acts of legislation will widen the breach between Christians and others and get us nowhere in the fight against evolution. This method tends to drive many people into evolution. It is not a question, therefore, of ceasing to fight, but of finding the right method of fighting. I am thinking of the millions of young people in our country who are in danger of being misled, and who are in danger of getting completely false views regarding the true issues. We must have a wise and discriminating method of handling the whole problem. It would be easy to destroy many young lives by the other method. If your potatoes had potato bugs on them you would use a method which would kill the bugs and spare the potatoes. You would scarcely use a shotgun on the potato bugs. If so you would ruin your potatoes and do little harm to the bugs.

In conclusion please be assured that I am thoroughly with you in your fight against every form of infidelity and unbelief, but I think many brethren are committing a grievous blunder in their method of dealing with the evolution question. In fact the best answer possible to evolution is a complete statement of all the facts about it. Unbiased minds reject it when the facts are placed before them.

I was sorry that I could not stop over and attend your meetings when I was in Louisiana last week, but I rejoiced to know that you were carrying on a fine work in Mobile.

Cordially and sincerely yours,
E. Y. Mullins

February 5, 1927

Dear Doctor Mullins,

I have your interesting letter in reply to mine and appreciate the fact that you would take time to dictate at such great length. And I am grateful to you for the ideas you put in my mind.

I see what you are aiming at. And I agree with you fully. We do have to watch the tendency to let the state interfere with religion. I like your statement that the best attack on Evolution is to let folks see what it is. From that viewpoint I, for the life of me, cannot figure why any High School student, even, shouldn't scoff at it. It seems to me it hasn't a leg to stand on.

I want you to know how much I value and appreciate your friendship. And thank you again for this letter.

Sincerely yours,
W. A. Sunday