

FORTY YEARS (ALMOST) ON THE FIRING LINE

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In the early fall of 1972, after driving from Nashville, I found myself in the parking lot of the University Church fresh out of Graduate School ready to teach. All of my earthly belongings, save a few cases of books in storage, were in the car. My appointment at the Biblical Studies Center (BSC) was for one year. Little was I to know, or even conceive, that I would be here for the entirety of my academic career.

Today I would like to share some reminiscences of the last four decades as well as engage in some serious reflection on what has been accomplished. Forty years is a long time. Just think how much Austin has changed. The BSC, our teaching center for many years, was newly renovated at the time. Now, worn out, it was recently torn down and demolished. The school has moved to a different locale. But the central focus of our school continues: to give instruction in the Bible and the historic Christian faith. Although there remains much to be done; and we certainly could have done more, and done it better, this teaching is our legacy.

In order to give some shape to this talk I will divide my remarks into two parts. The first part of my talk will deal with what we may call the Bible Chair period from about 1972 until 1987. 1987 was a key year, because that was the year when the Bible Chair closed. Much of our effort during this period was closely connected with the University of Texas. On the other hand, the last twenty-three years are what may be called the Seminary years. Since 1987 we existed on our own. Here the main focus has become preparing students for ministry. Of course, there is continuity and overlap; but it does seem appropriate to make this distinction for rhetorical purposes and to reflect on the two different orientations of the school over the last generation.

THE BIBLE CHAIR PERIOD, 1972 –1987

When I finally got settled in Austin I found that things were a little different than what I expected. I thought that I was coming to a sleepy little Bible Chair on the edge of the University. But what I found were several hard driving visionaries who had great plans for this place. Since 1917, off and on, University Church had supported a teacher who was allowed to offer courses in Bible for lower-division undergraduate credit in the University. This was known as the Bible Chair arrangement. Other mainstream religion groups clustered around the campus did the same thing. I quickly got to know the Paulist Fathers, teachers at the Austin Seminaries, and Campus ministers who served as colleagues in a kind of quasi-

departmental status. But the visionaries really emerged at the BSC. Paramount among these was Claude Hocott. In 1970 Claude Hocott was making noises about retiring from Exxon and returning to Austin. Pat Harrell, Minister at Bering Drive, in close liaison with Hocott, began teaching here in 1971. The intent was to have Bible teaching of the highest caliber at our Chair. Harrell had a Th.D. and an interest in scholarship. Graduate students from nationally recognized schools were recruited as the teachers at the BSC. I came with Jim Reynolds in 1972. Then followed a whole sequence of names well known in these parts. James Thompson and Michael Weed in 1974; Tony Ash, Pat Graham and Rick Marrs were others who made major contributions during these years. I think it is important to note that it was no accident that these people arrived in Austin. The Christian colleges were frankly reluctant to hire young men who were perceived to have a little bit of an edge. Hocott and those around him took advantage of this. They were not afraid to act on the conviction that the best of scholarship and Christian Faith can be successfully integrated. We owe these men a debt of gratitude for holding these convictions. It has had an important impact on Churches of Christ. We need to remember this was a not always the popular thing to do. They risked suffering financially for it.

The story of the response of students in the Bible Chair to this new scholarly approach to Bible teaching at the University has often been told. These were our golden years during the twentieth century. Many of my courses quickly closed and we got to be well known throughout the University. There were marvelous memories like the University football player who would pick up six large donuts at our desk downstairs before a Tuesday-Thursday class. Then, stacking them on his desk, he always quietly finished the whole pile by the end of class. Patricia couldn't believe it until she saw it with her own eyes. Neither did Mike Weed believe the reputed size of Earl Campbell's thighs. Mike would stand at the top of the stairs every morning watching him come to class.

With the huge growth in numbers came notoriety. I knew something was happening when one day I went to a big downtown bank to do some business. I greeted the young woman cashing my check and remarked, "You look familiar!" "Yes," she said, "I had your Jesus class when I was at the University. Not only that," she said, "all six women who work at the front desk with me had the same class." That was the good news. But there began to develop a more sinister underside to all of this. Our Dean was the much loved Elspeth Rostow. She and I had a good relationship and she even invited me to major receptions. There I met many people that Elspeth and Walt (her husband) knew from two presidential administrations. This was heady stuff. One day we were talking and she said, "I have to give you a warning. I was at a party the other night and Frank Erwin went

on and on about the Bible Chairs. He said that we would never be a great university until we (the University of Texas) fully controlled any teaching of religion that takes place here.” We now know that it took a while, but Erwin and his acolytes finally got their way.

Two points stand out for me about the Bible Chair years. First, besides the great University people we taught we had some other remarkable students. Especially memorable for me were the Jovanovic family and the Patas. We take the credit for discovering the Jovanovic family; and as many know, they went on to become the backbone of the Restoration movement in Central Europe. Patricia and I had lunch last week with Jane Pata. Their work continues to be a significant light in the middle of Buenos Aires. As you know the great growth in the Church now is overseas. From Europe to India and Africa our students have excelled. I am proud of that. The second point I would make about the Bible Chair days can be capsuled in my brief attempt to describe what we were trying to do. I will state my understanding of it simply. We (the teachers) all had a loyalty to our religious heritage: the Churches of Christ. What we were really trying to do was to say to our own people -- and the significant number from other traditions that came our way -- we want to showcase the Church at its best. We can teach a way to study the Bible and live by its precepts that allows us to be comfortable with the conviction that we are not intellectually inferior to anyone. For some of us, our scholarship gained recognition in wider circles. But it was always done in the framework of the Church. That context is what carried us through the years. It allowed us to keep our heads among both the compliments and the snide remarks that are always present around a place like the University.

THE SEMINARY YEARS

As early as 1974 there was a move to make available advanced teaching to students at the BSC as a basis for preparation for ministry. Michael Weed and soon Tony Ash were involved in this in the early days. We called this The Institute for Christian Studies. At the beginning, accreditation came through an association with ACU. One of the fortuitous events that took place is that we gained full accreditation in 1987: the very year that the University closed the Bible Chairs.

It seems hardly possible that almost a quarter of a century has gone by since we became a freestanding theological college or seminary in our own right. In these days it is not easy to start a business, a school, or anything else for that matter from scratch. But more or less we did it. One of the advantages we had from the beginning was that we were experienced in teaching people from other faith

traditions in the Bible Chair. For years we did religious profiles of the students in the Bible Chair. We always had more Methodists than anyone else. About 20 to 25% of our students were Catholic. Even though Austin Graduate School of Theology is a seminary associated with the Churches of Christ, over the past 25 years the ecumenical flavor of the school has continued. Aside from a couple of years as a teaching assistant at ACU there have been few classes in all my years in teaching when the majority of my students have been connected with the Churches of Christ.

We were not to know this at the time, but this has become a trend in seminary education in the United States. More and more students, rather than relocating, seek their theological teaching in the city where they live regardless of the denominational identity of the school. By and large this has been a selling point for us. In Central Texas we live in a rapidly growing area and function as the only graduate school of theology that has a strong conservative orientation. Our special expertise remains in the area of biblical studies and interpretation of texts. People who come here know they will get reliable information about the Bible. We need to expand our offerings in a wide number of areas. And eventually as well as on-line courses we need to begin to make offerings available in other places, as do most of the seminaries in Texas. I have San Antonio and Houston especially in mind. But as we grow I pray we will continue our mission in making biblical study central in everything that we do.

In thinking about our years as a theological college or seminary it may be helpful to frame these closing comments primarily in brief reflection about the present situation and challenges.

First, as I look at seminary education today in Texas I am struck by the immense challenges posed by the actual students that come our way. This is not going to change. It used to be that if you were involved in graduate education you could expect the students to have a certain competency in the basic skills of writing, knowledge of literature and history; and even a basic familiarity with the norms of our culture. It did not hurt that this culture was sympathetic to Bible study and Christian faith. No more! The nation is at present going through a massive debate about the need to improve the basic skills level of the students emerging from our public schools and colleges. Believe you me it is real. The level of general educational competence of students in our public schools has dropped remarkably in the last forty years. That is a fact. I love our students. Some could do well at the best schools in the country. But many have gaps in basic educational competence. Teaching today is a much more challenging enterprise than in the past. Teachers have to be more hands-on than before. More and more

teaching is becoming integrated with technology. In fact, soon you will have to go through technology to get the students to learn. Old models for doing research papers have become relics in many schools. That is just the way it is. As we seek to add new faculty, all this will have to be kept in mind. More than ever the future of this school will revolve around the quality and competencies of our teachers. Whoever is in the classroom has a job ahead of them.

Second, I would like to stress that we need to broaden our course offerings into considerably different areas. This poses both challenges and opportunities. The challenges I have in mind are easily identifiable. Our constituency is no longer only your old 95% white church at 5th and Main. Christianity today is growing massively in Latin America, Africa, India, and China: the most populous areas on earth. We are already experiencing in Austin the effects of migration into our city from these places. Many of these people are open to Christian faith. There are plenty of schools that can prepare preachers to do ministry in Belton or Corsicana. But who is going to prepare a preacher who can speak intelligently to his Islamic neighbor about the Christian Faith; to our teenagers who come under the influence of the new atheism; or the increasing number of Hindus who are flooding into my neighborhood? What about the African-American Church, which is undergoing massive changes in worship styles and its role in the community? Recently Southwestern Baptist Seminary started a full undergraduate program (no, I am not speaking about the one in prisons) for Mexican-Americans. They discovered hardly any of their prospective Spanish-speaking preachers had ever been to college. These realities pose not only challenges; but there are also immense opportunities. May God give us the vision and resources to meet them.

Finally, let me return to the earlier references I made to the people I called the visionaries. People like Claude Hocott, Bill Shive, Bill Millican, and the tiny army of others who have supported what we were doing down through the years. A number of you are here today. We thank you. We appreciate deeply your trust in us. We have kept the faith and encouraged others to do so. Despite the fact that some have questioned our theology (I remember a brother in San Antonio once writing a 300-page book to refute a 20-page paper I gave), loyalty to Christ and the Church remains our polar star.

All the years I have been here the school has battled financially. But somehow we are still here. I will always believe if you are doing it right the resources will be there.

I have come to the twilight of my career and am ready to hand on the torch to others. There are challenges: no doubt about it. This semester we are working

through the text of Matthew in one of my classes. Just before the selection of the twelve, Jesus challenges the disciples:

The harvest is plentiful enough, but the laborers
are few; you must ask the Lord to whom the harvest
belongs to send laborers out for the harvesting.

That is what we are about here -- we are sending out laborers for the harvest.
May God give us the grace to continue.

AJM/dk
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