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The Inauguration of

JOHN COLEMAN BENNETT

As President of

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UNION SEMINARY ON THIS OCCASION gathers itself together to express once more its reason for being, to commit itself once more to the purposes of God as known in Christ, to declare once more its vocation as a servant of the world-wide Church.

The easiest of all things for this President of Union Seminary to do is to boast of his predecessors. Indeed as I contemplate this succession I am greatly inspired and even more humbled. I have known only two of my predecessors personally, Henry Sloane Coffin and Henry Pitney Van Dusen. President Van Dusen and I share feelings of love and admiration for President Coffin as one of the great men of the Church in our time. I have always marvelled at President Van Dusen's combination of qualities, as the formidable leader and administrator with a world-wide vision and as the Christian person whose sensitive caring for the individual has been known best by those most in trouble. This seminary was guided by Dr. Van Dusen with great strength and with remarkable versatility into a new stage of its life in the post-war world, with students and faculty more than doubled, and with significant new programs in theological education. My own personal gratitude to him for his friendship and encouragement, always without the least effort to control, during thirty-five years of close association can never be adequately expressed.

THREE ASPECTS OF UNION SEMINARY

UNION SEMINARY IS ALWAYS IN DANGER of trying the patience of other institutions by making claims to uniqueness. There are three aspects of its life and work of which I shall speak briefly, whether or not they are unique.

The first is that this institution is under no ecclesiastical authority and yet it is deeply involved in the life of the churches. It is as involved as it is independent. This independence has an interesting history, one episode of which is worth recalling. In 1893 Union Seminary had a very distinguished professor, Charles Augustus Briggs, who though actually a rather conservative theologian was

tried for heresy by the Presbyterian General Assembly and condemned. At that time the assembly had the right to veto elections to professorships at Union, but rather than sacrifice its professor, Union Seminary withdrew from this relationship with the Presbyterian General Assembly, though the seminary remained strongly Presbyterian. One of the most important moments in the history of the seminary came when Professor Briggs decided to join the Episcopal Church. For a while the directors and the faculty wavered as to what to do about this change of denominational allegiance on the part of its professor. (Remember that this was seventy-one years ago.) One proposal that had strong support among the seminary authorities was that he be made an instructor at half salary.¹ But wiser counsels² prevailed and he was retained as a professor and later a chair was named after him. The story had another chapter. Exactly fifty years after Professor Briggs was condemned and Union Seminary withdrew from its relationship with the Presbyterian General Assembly, the President of Union, Dr. Coffin, became moderator of that General Assembly. That fifty years was packed with history. Now to make the situation even more complicated, Auburn Theological Seminary, which is a Presbyterian institution, has moved to the Union Seminary buildings and lives in closest association with us. So we have the best of several worlds. Out of this history has come our ecclesiastical freedom and our churchly involvement (our involvement in the lives of many denominations). Out of it also has come the possibility of having presidents from outside the Presbyterian fold, of which I am the second. This may not be progress in detail—but at least it may be a desirable flexibility.

We may put this combination of freedom and involvement in another way. Union Seminary seeks to be committed and open—committed to what is regarded by its directors and faculty as the essential Christian faith, and open to truth from all sources. I should express this commitment more precisely. This is a Protestant institution, though it seeks to keep open to the world of Eastern Orthodoxy and to the world of Roman Catholicism. Representatives of Orthodoxy have long taught here and we have trained a number of

¹ This information is from Prof. Max Rogers who is writing a thesis about Prof. Briggs.

² These wiser counsels were chiefly the counsels of laymen. The role of laymen in Union's history deserves the highest praise! The laymen of the assembly who proved to be on the side of the future included two whose names are familiarly encountered in the Union quadrangle, D. Willis James and John Crosby Brown, for whom Union buildings have been named.

Orthodox students. I hope that it will not be long before a Roman Catholic scholar teaches on our faculty—we have already begun to receive Roman Catholic graduate students. We greatly welcome the presence of so many Roman Catholic friends on this occasion. There is continual cooperation between this seminary and the Jewish Theological Seminary, and we rejoice in the fact that it is so close a neighbor.

Our real orientation as an institution—if not our absolute commitment—can be defined even more narrowly. My two most recent predecessors were very proud of the name “liberal” in theology, though for a time there came out of this institution powerful polemics against some aspects of the liberal theology that was widely taught a generation ago. These polemics have caused sharp debates in the faculty. Perhaps we may say that the types of thought that have flourished here have been liberal, neo-liberal, post-liberal, but never pre-liberal.³ We might borrow the word that has become fashionable in Roman Catholic circles and say that we are a “progressive” institution. Catholics have little difficulty in telling us which theologians or bishops are “progressive” and which are not. Protestantism in this institution is as different from some other forms of Protestantism as Pope John’s encyclical, “Pacem in Terris,” is different from the famous Syllabus of Errors issued by Pius IX in 1864. I say this to suggest that Protestants are not the only people who have to make choices!

After saying this about our theological orientation I want to make clear that our faculty has no one theological line which it promotes. Students from many theological backgrounds can feel at home here, and most often the differences between them will not be expressed by saying: I am Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist or Episcopalian, but by saying: I have been influenced by Tillich, or Reinhold Niebuhr, or Barth, or Bultmann, or Bonhoeffer, or Whitehead or, perhaps most recently, the later Heidegger.

The first characteristic of Union—not a unique characteristic but one with its own history—is this combination of freedom and involvement, of openness and commitment. The possibility of this combination one may have to discover by living with it, rather than by *a priori* calculation.

The second aspect of Union Seminary is that it refuses to make the choice between being primarily a professional school that trains candidates for particular ministries in churches or primarily a graduate school of theology which, in association with Columbia

³ I should also add that many liberal motifs and themes are returning.

University, trains scholars for theological seminaries and for colleges and universities. Instead of choosing between these two roles and calling one the major role, Union Seminary makes much of the interaction between them. The kind of training for the parish ministry in which this institution believes, is guided by exacting standards of scholarship in the traditional disciplines of theology; and the kind of training for teachers and scholars in which it believes, is influenced by continuous contact with the living Church. Scholarship that is detached from a struggle for personal faith or from responsible relationships in some part of the Christian community is rare in this seminary.

A third, and perhaps on the surface the most obvious distinguishing mark of Union Seminary is its relationship not only with many denominations but also with the churches in many countries. We have chosen as one of our roles the training of leadership for churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and we have always preserved close contact with the British churches and with those on the European continent. More than a sixth of our candidates for degrees come from abroad. President Van Dusen embodies this ecumenical outreach of Union Seminary and I will do all that I can to continue it.

This ecumenical role is emphasized in order to serve the churches and Christian people abroad, to learn from them by living with their representatives here, and to demonstrate a form of unity in Christ, transcending geography and culture, that is already in being.

EMPHASIS ON THE TRADITIONAL DISCIPLINES

OFTEN WHEN PEOPLE think of Union Seminary they think of new experiments in theological education which have received considerable publicity; but actually, this is educationally a rather conservative institution. We put major stress on the traditional disciplines. I shall say a few words about the rationale of those disciplines.

The fact that the Christian religion is a historical religion and that Christians believe that grace and truth are mediated through Christ in a context of historical events controls the emphasis in theological education. To make this point clear, think of the effect of opposite religious assumptions. Suppose that it were our conviction that the most significant religious truth becomes available either to the speculations or insights of what claims to be universal reason, or to deep and disciplined introspection, or to some kind of mystical experience without important reference to history; if that

were the case, our theological curriculum would be entirely different from what in fact it is. The dependence of Christians on history means that central in a theological education must be the study of historical records and the reconstruction of the history out of which they came. What is given historically must be creatively interpreted and this task is never complete. Indeed, Protestants must realize that Catholics are right in believing that scripture cannot be received apart from the interpretation of the living Church, though Protestants would insist on an interpreting process that is not ecclesiastically controlled.

Biblical scholars cannot authoritatively determine what is true for the Christian but they do have an essential role in this continuous process of interpretation and re-interpretation. They are not independent of their own religious traditions nor are they independent of the intellectual climate that prevails at the time of their work, but their testimony does continually correct itself, and it has some objectivity in providing the materials for theological thought. Since their work is carried on chiefly within theological faculties, a theological seminary has a great responsibility to encourage both competence and freedom in biblical scholarship.

We do not have Christian truth in capsules of doctrine to be passed on from generation to generation. Always there must be fresh responses to the original sources of faith and revelation. Always the responses must be related to what is known of man and the world through the sciences and common experience. The theological seminary should initiate the student into the continuing process of interpretation and re-interpretation. It should be both an educational institution and a community of scholars who take initiative in this process. There should be much religious and theological ferment in such a community.

TWO KINDS OF CONTROVERSY

I MAY HAVE SEEMED TO SUGGEST too much openness or too wide a spectrum of theological convictions. Let me speak for a few minutes on the other side. Actually each generation has to struggle with theological controversies of great moment for the teaching of the Church. I shall speak of two kinds of controversies, though I realize that in some circumstances they cannot be separated. There are the controversies that concern the tendency to identify Christian faith with some social or political ideologies or patterns of action that are widely supported in a particular nation or culture. Lines have to be drawn to protect the integrity of the faith and of the Church. And there are controversies on a more technical, theological, level

which may be quite remote from immediate cultural and political pressures, though the outcome of these controversies may in the long run make the church more or less vulnerable to such pressures.

A major example of the first type of controversy was the struggle of the Churches in Germany over the attempts of the party in the Church known as the German Christians to restate Christian doctrine in terms of National Socialism. We can easily recognize what a great heresy this was because today no one is tempted by it. The resistance of part of the German Church to this heresy and to the power of Hitler's state was one of the noblest chapters of modern church history.

In our country today we have at least two controversies of this latter type, though they are less explicitly ecclesiastical or theological in form. In neither case does the heresy that is involved have any support either from theologians or from any very representative unit of the Church, though many members of churches are swept along by them at the grass roots level. The first is the acceptance of white supremacy, or of the idea that support of racial segregation is at least an optional position within the Church. Local churches, conniving with the police, turn away from their doors racially mixed groups on this basis. The other heretical tendency is more pervasive in the United States, but fortunately many who adopt its slogans are not very consistent. I refer to a false identification of Christian ideas of personal freedom with a one-sided economic individualism that is reminiscent of nineteenth century Social Darwinism. This position takes to itself the name conservatism but it is remote from the traditional conservatisms which have, at least, a strong sense of human interdependence. Almost all of the alumni of Union Seminary, when they confront these distortions of Christian ideas locally are led by their convictions to struggle against them, often at real cost to themselves.⁴ In the circles in which these heresies flourish, Union Seminary is a target for attack and it is fitting that this is so.

THREE TENDENCIES REJECTED

IN CONTRAST to these controversial issues I shall mention three issues that are debated in sophisticated theological circles—issues which will cause much discussion in this and other seminaries. I can raise these issues most sharply if I speak of three positions which I reject. There will be full freedom of teaching in regard to them

⁴ We often find these two heresies—white supremacy and individualistic conservatism—reinforcing each other. They make a destructive compound to have to deal with in a church.

in this seminary but if one or another of them is persuasively presented, I should hope to be able to encourage a countervailing opinion.

The first is the tendency to discount the importance of the historical basis of the Christian faith. We can expect many differences of opinion among biblical scholars and theologians about how much can be known concerning the events on which Christian faith is founded. Honest struggling with this problem that may lead to quite radical conclusion needs to receive full expression on a theological faculty. It is when interpreters assume that historical knowledge of events is not ultimately significant for Christian truth that the sharpest questions need to be raised.⁵ I often state what needs to be defended by quoting this sentence by Reinhold Niebuhr: "The Cross could not have the symbolic significance for Christian faith if the life and the doctrine were not consistent with it."⁶

The second tendency may surprise many of you. One finds it in popular beliefs, and in theological circles influenced by various forms of analytical philosophy which lead to complete metaphysical scepticism. It is the tendency to deny any knowledge of a divine reality that transcends ourselves and our history. It is one thing to be sceptical of particular philosophical arguments and speculations; but it is another thing to try to develop a faith and a theology while ignoring faith in God as the Creator and Redeemer who precedes and transcends us. Neglect of the Old Testament vision of God and of religious experience of God as ultimate reality, combined with a failure of metaphysical nerve, sometimes makes a shambles of Protestant theology. Perhaps Roman Catholic thinkers who are now freed from too tight a rationalism in philosophy may make helpful contributions to Protestant thinking. I am not interested here in attacking individual thinkers and I do not want to discourage the real ferment of thought that surrounds these ultimate issues connected with the doctrine of God, but I do want to emphasize the need for the theological courage to develop a Protestant theology that can make sense of the relation of God as revealed in Christ to nature and the general history of mankind, and of the relation of the source of redeeming grace to the maker of heaven and earth.

The third tendency which I reject is the kind of theology which proclaims a Gospel of Grace that obscures the judgment of God

⁵ It is not sufficient to stress the one event of the crucifixion as the historical substance of the faith.

⁶ Niebuhr, Reinhold, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. II, Scribner's, 1941, p. 74. The reference in the context is to the life and teachings of Jesus.

and the role of the moral law or of Christian ethics. Fortunately those who represent this tendency are not very consistent. They are quite rightly in rebellion against static forms of legalism, and against the idea that law in itself has the power to save. It is their slogans often borrowed from Luther that do the most damage. Surely we may say that the grace of God revealed in Christ is never far from divine judgment and the call to repentance. The one who in His forgiving love was so hospitable to the publicans and sinners could lash out against the sins of the respectable and the strong and could say: "but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung about his neck and he were thrown into the sea" (Mark 9:42). Judgment is never far away. Those who emphasize Paul as the teacher of grace are very selective when they ignore his teaching of a Christian law in chapter after chapter of his great epistles of grace. Surely he is speaking to us when he says: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2).

RELATING NEW WITH OLD

ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT ISSUES confronting theological education is to relate the new to the old. The temptation is strong to follow current trends, to put the emphasis on keeping up to date, to seek immediate relevance above all else. Often professors turn out to be most relevant when they do not emphasize relevance at all but simply reveal what they have found in their studies of the eighth century B.C. or the first century A.D., or some other period in the past—that is, if they are not antiquarians, but lively minds that ask modern questions of the materials they study. Recently one of our most up-to-date students told me that a sentence from St. Augustine that had been ringing in his ears for some time had proved to be the needed word in dealing with one of his own personal intellectual dilemmas. It should be a concern of a theological administrator to have a good proportion of scholars of this type on a faculty. It is not the type that grows most easily in our culture. We need to make sure that there is a balance between those scholars who concentrate on trying to understand the first century through the eyes of the twentieth, and those who concentrate on trying to see the twentieth century through what they have learned of the revelatory events in the first. Administrators must defend the scholars who seek to withstand the pressure in these days to be continually in the air or on the air.

It is necessary to introduce new subjects into the theological curriculum; one realizes the importance of this after encountering a theological curriculum in which little that has happened since 451 A.D. is taken seriously. Union Seminary has added not only courses but departments dealing with such subjects as religion and psychiatry, religion and the arts, church and community, and a School of Sacred Music. This is desirable; but a proper balance should be preserved in the educational program of each student, and those who teach in the new fields need to keep themselves related to the old. A theological faculty should live between two worlds. Unlike the Roman Catholics who can assign persons to a great variety of tasks on the frontiers of thought and action, Protestants, for this work on the frontiers, have to depend to a large extent upon over-worked theological faculties and upon a few hard-pressed bureaucrats.

THE NEED FOR REFORMATION OF THE CHURCH

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION should always have in view the continuous reformation of the Church. Today anyone who doubts the possibility of reformation should take heart from the fact that the Roman Catholic Church which Protestants believed to be irreformable by definition has taken us all by surprise, as it begins to experience a massive reformation. Indeed, it may have taken itself by surprise. It has become remarkably self-critical; its thinkers are taking great freedom; it looks upon those outside the Church not only with charity but also with an unexpected degree of acceptance; it is seeking to overcome an excessive hierarchical centralization and to rediscover the active congregation; its treasures of wisdom and grace have become available in a new way to us all; and in some countries it has come to inspire with greater effect than formerly, movements for justice in the social and political spheres,⁷ and in other ways it is undergoing modernization in the best sense. Karl Barth, who was even more sure than most Protestants that the Roman Catholic Church had domesticated the Word of God from which reformation can be expected to come to a Church, has been so much impressed by these developments that he has asked: "What if we should discover that the voice of the Good Shepherd should find a clearer echo over there than among us?" This is a good Protestant question in these days.

⁷ I have in mind new Catholic social and political movements in Latin America especially.

REFORM IN CITY AND SUBURB

I SHALL POINT to one type of reformation that is required of Protestantism and is very close to the life of this seminary in this city. The sharpest critics of the American churches and of seminaries are often those who work in the inner-city. They speak for the people who are most neglected, for the minorities that have not begun to move up the American ladder, for the so-called "invisible poor" (that is, the poor who are invisible to most of the makers of public opinion), for the hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of children who are condemned to scandalously inferior schools in vast ghettos and who, lacking proper educational opportunities, now face a bleak future.

Sometimes this type of criticism suggests that almost all is lost in the suburbs where churches flourish externally but are said to lose their souls. Sometimes those who live with the problems of both city and suburb suggest that the local residential church is a relic of the past. They often prescribe new patterns that are still vague, involving a leap into situations that have not yet appeared and leaving behind concrete congregations that do exist. One of the greatest defects of local congregations is their social homogeneity; often a congregation is a group of people drawn from the same race, similar in interest, prejudice and even income. What is needed is not to abandon these congregations, but to find ways of relating them to each other across the usual barriers that separate people. Sometimes the critics speak as though it were a pity that so many people go to church, for they are sure to go for the wrong reason. People have always gone to church from mixed motives. Surely we may be thankful that there are so many people within reach of our churches, within hearing distance of the Gospel. In Europe the usual complaint is that the churches are too remote from the people and often too empty. Instead of rejecting the local churches, why should we not emphasize the larger units of the church as being primary, the regional units that include both inner-city and suburb? Such denominational bodies as the Presbytery or the diocese or the association and local councils of churches, given greater churchly dignity and more work to do, can relate the Christian people in what are now separated congregations, in a more inclusive community. This points to one type of reform that is greatly needed in American Protestantism. An important part of theological education should be the preparation of students to take part in this fluid situation with criticism of existing structures, but without cynical attitudes toward existing congregations of Christian people. Martin Marty does well to remind us that "the local

church is people,"⁸ and this is true even in suburbs. I pay tribute to the inner-city pastors and leaders, many of whom are our alumni and with whom our faculty has been in continuous consultation, who keep needling all who are protected by suburbs or quadrangles from the realities of the modern city, and who are so deeply committed to the redemption of its people.

REFORM IN CIVIL RIGHTS

THERE IS ANOTHER DIMENSION of reform, related to the problems of the city to which I have referred, and that is the equipment of the Church to participate more fully in the civil rights revolution. Already a very large part of the leadership of the Church is alert on this issue. As one who knew this seminary during the period of the depression in the 1930's I have a sense that in many ways history is being repeated here in the 1960's. It is often said that "the Social Gospel" is back again, and there is truth in this. The commitment of Union Seminary to the movement for civil rights is today very similar to its concern for the victims of the depression in that earlier period. But the issues today are clearer and they lead to much less conflict of opinion here. There is much more of a common mind among students, faculty and directors than there was in the 1930's. Clarity on this one issue is sure to lead to a socially responsible conception of the Church, and a socially responsible theology. There are fewer illusions than in the earlier period because we know that there are no over-all or final social and political solutions. We know that when the victories are won in principle on the level of law and politics, the approach to such problems as *de facto* segregation will just begin in both North and South. Also those who live with these problems realize that in the next period the Negroes will be the articulate and politically organized representatives of the poor and deprived in the United States, and that the civil rights revolution cannot go far in the economic sphere until there is a more radical facing of the causes of American poverty in general. This American form of the world-wide social revolution is very close to Union Seminary. I shall do all that I can to help our students prepare to participate in it wherever they are.

THE WIDER WORLD

I HAVE CHOSEN THIS OCCASION to emphasize aspects of the reformation of the Church that are related to the problems of our

⁸ Marty, Martin, *Second Chance for American Protestantism*, Harper & Row, 1960, p. 141.

American urban society. In conclusion I shall point beyond to the wider world. Just as suburban Christians and inner-city Christians must come to share a common life if they are to realize what the Christian faith means, so must Christians who live in the richer nations share a common life with Christians in nations that are at the beginning of a revolutionary struggle to overcome poverty and hunger, and to establish new political and economic institutions. One by-product of this experience may be that our American congregations may be delivered in part from the American provincialisms, from the ideological blinders and myths that make it so difficult to understand the world in which our power is so fatefully exercised. We should be concerned at the same time for the Church and for the world, for the communication of the gospel and for the healing of the nations. When we emphasize the Christians in other countries, this is not to drive a wedge between them and non-Christians; rather to us in the Church the Christians abroad represent the needs and aspirations of all of their non-Christian neighbors.

Old themes are returning with some differences in theological halls, and this is true especially of the current emphasis on Christian solidarity with the poor and oppressed in our cities and across the world in an age of revolution, and we are led to use still older words as we speak about this theme.

“He opened a book and found the place where it was written:
‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has annointed me to preach good news to the
poor,
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and
recovering of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the
acceptable year of the Lord.’” (Lk 4:17b-19)