



# Faith Pulpit

## Learning From the Closing of Des Moines University

On Saturday, September 30, 1989, the alumni of Des Moines University held their last reunion. This might not seem so remarkable, but for the fact that the school closed in 1929. For the last sixty Years the alumni have faithfully commemorated their school. Since now they are all in advanced age, they determined that their sixtieth reunion would be their last. The beautiful shaded campus is long gone with barely a trace. All the old buildings but one have vanished, and you need to look closely to find the one shell that remains. Even the old bitterness that once focused on the Baptist Bible Union has all but faded, and those who remember it seems hard put to recall their reasons for being bitter.

If it is trite to use the phrase “Passing of an era,” at least the event has significance for our association, since the closing of DMU bare so heavily on our founding. It is worth our attention, and not just in nostalgia, to review the events. We might learn a number of lessons from what happened when the school closed.

### **I. What They Had**

In 1929 Des Moines had on its north side a small Baptist university that traced back to 1865. Some five mergers had brought it to its size, with some four hundred students using some seven spacious buildings. The school was located at Second and Euclid, at the end of the trolley line. The neighboring streets still are named Oxford, Cambridge, Cornell, Columbia, Bowdoin, and Amherst.

To listen to the old grads gives the impression of leisurely campus life and middle- class, midwestern values. It was a liberal arts college, nominally Baptist, not very religious, but by current values, innocent. Long before the days of platoon football, it had a high standard of athletics, still amateur. The yearbooks show some fifteen clubs and societies. The teachers left the impression of dedication and competence; the school of pharmacy was probably the best in the state. And in 1927 the school opened

its new gymnasium, bought with a grant from the New World Movement of the Convention.

## **II. What They Did Not Know**

Research on the school of those days gives insights that did not surface at the last two alumni reunions. The years just before 1927 had brought great difficulties. It was clear that the Baptists in Iowa simply were not going to support their school. In the thriving twenties this would seem odd, but through the years few of Iowa's Baptists have shown much passion in giving money to their schools. In addition to that apathy or frugality was the creeping idea that the students were not as strict as the churches. Not only that, but at least half of the teachers were Modernists. As a result, the trustees had in desperation spent every asset they could pawn. By May 1927, the school was broke. The board had voted to lay off the staff and close it up.

A second fact, all but forgotten was that the Baptist Bible Union almost turned it around. Voted onto the board in June 1927, those men rehired every teacher who could sign the doctrinal statement, and their chairman, T. T. Shields, set about to raise money. He was so successful that he raised some \$80,000 that first year, and despite the debts, had the school almost solvent.

A third little known fact was the deep misunderstanding between the administration and the school. What the students saw as optional, the board held by deep conviction. Neither side seemed to appreciate the distance between a Fundamentalist and a moderate. Shields thought the school would go along with him, and that is what they did, but not from conviction. On the other side, the school first welcomed, then tolerated, the people who had for the moment rescued their school.

A fourth fact is that the president whom Shields hired in 1928 had left a sorry record as president of William Jewell College. Yet to Des Moines University he seemed vastly preferable to the Bible Union men.

A fifth fact is the differing values of the two parties. At the reunion grads remembered the talent program at which a coed performed a tap dance and cartwheels—in the presence of the Secretary of the Board. To the students it was a lark; to the secretary it was pure shock. And while it was fun to shock the secretary, they seemed not to realize that they were chopping away the support of the school they professed to love.

By 1929 the tensions reached the breaking point, and Shields persuaded the board to fire the president and declare all faculty positions vacant—teachers who wanted to could reapply. This led the students to riot, with a violence that would do credit to the revolts of the 1960's.

When the school closed after the riots, the students felt they had pressing grievances against Shields. Had it been a state school, they could have expected new infusions of money to repair the administration building and hire a new president. They forgot or ignored the fact that Shields as board

chairman had been almost the sole money-raiser. Yet on the trains to Chicago and Toronto, he was convinced that the rioters would have killed him. The mood of the rioters was that of young people having a marvelous campus prank that it would all come out right at the end. How painful later when they realized that the game was not for fun but for keeps.

### III. Lessons For This Generation

In a broad sense, Des Moines University was another case of a Christian liberal arts college that went under because it lost its founding values. Why should the constituency support a school no longer based on salvation by grace through faith? But certain other lessons deserve our attention.

1. We need to remember the difference between a militant and a moderate. To forget this is to risk terrible miscalculation. Both profess to believe right, and it may be true that they do. But while the militant looks with trust at his moderate brother, the moderate will look with distrust at the militant and will think that his own real interests lie in other loyalties. The militant has convictions he will suffer for; the moderate professes to accept the same ideas, but he is hardly willing to suffer for them.
2. We need to walk softly. Arrogance is dangerous; pride goeth before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall. Shields had abundant warnings of the dangers he faced; but the warm feeling of being a university president seems to have obscured the minefield through which he was striding. For that his reputation paid dearly.
3. We should select personnel with extreme care. Strong leaders have often hired on impulse, confident that they could easily get rid of people who did not work out. That hubris has given new meaning to the word catastrophe.
4. The key to a school's continuance is more with the faculty than with the board. If the board needs eternal vigilance, how much more those who interview new teachers.

When in 1932 the GARBC succeeded the Bible Union, it salvaged nothing from DMU. In Iowa it took years to recover from the bad feeling. Hardly anyone remembers anymore.

### Dr. Robert Delnay

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