



Faith Pulpit

Waving the Flag, Part I

It is instructive to study the history of institutions to see how they have broadened and moved away from the original vision of their founders. Such a study is important because this process is taking place in many organizations whose heritage is one thing but present reality is another. Many view this broadening as progress, but others who cherish the founding ideals with their parameters, are saddened. The founding statements of institutions such as Harvard (which speak of Christ as the foundation for learning and one reason for the institution's founding being a "dreading an illiterate ministry"—that is, a fear that they would not have educationally qualified pastors to guide them—) when compared with the institutions today, demonstrate only too well just how far the broadening can go.

What is it that allows this process to take place? While many factors may be involved, surely a key matter is tolerance on the part of those charged with an institution's oversight. While in some contexts tolerance may be a virtue, when it comes to keeping an institution true to founding principles, tolerance becomes a vice, and intolerance—the steering of a determined course—becomes a virtue.

The early forms of tolerance are usually not in doctrinal areas but are in areas of attitude. Attitudes may not always be easily defined or detected. This may be seen in times of silence when one ought to speak up, or it may be seen in the raising of a question rather than in a forthright declaration. This reflects one's priorities and sense of importance regarding an institution's formerly cherished ideals. In reality, it is a move away from militancy. A teacher with a moderate attitude said to his more militant friend, "The difference between us is not in what we believe but in what we are willing to tolerate. You are more of a flag-waver than am I." The forced resignation of Increase Mather from Harvard's presidency in the late 1600s and the appointment of Samuel Willard in his place was not due to doctrinal differences between the men, but due to the degree of their willingness to tolerate the looser views of the younger resident tutors at the school.

This tolerance by leadership results in the bringing on board of others who are also tolerant. It is soon noticed that there develops a more widespread tolerant attitude toward the question of just how important are the old standards (which many thought had been clearly articulated and decided) and the doctrinal convictions which had guided the institution in the past. Some begin to ask if all those who are part of an organization really need to believe the old views—especially if they have responsibilities which do not require them to speak publicly to those things. Public lip service is often given to the old convictions, and past leaders who have defended these ideals are honored, but what they stood for is no longer the exclusive position. It is strange indeed to hear of institutions which loudly proclaim that they haven't changed, and yet where once traditional doctrines were clearly taught as truth, today there is more of a buffet approach to acceptable doctrine. For example, in schools where books written by Alva J. McClain and Lewis Sperry Chafer were standard texts, they have more recently been replaced by those written by people like George Eldon Ladd and others who are not sympathetic to the traditional dispensational approach.

Eventually persons are brought into the organization who not only have hesitations about the old ways but actually challenge their legitimacy. One new president of a seminary, known for its strong founding distinctive which I shall call “doctrine X,” said that (“doctrine X”) “...is a scare word. I'm not sure we're going to make ('doctrine X') a big part of our marquee as we talk about our school...” When an interviewer noted that the founder of the institution probably wouldn't recognize the way a major founding distinctive teaching was being taught there today and then asked if the term is going to disappear as well, the seminary's new president responded with, “It may, and perhaps it should.” (See *Christianity Today*, October 25, 1993, p. 14.)

There becomes, then, a willingness to tolerate what originally would have been unthinkable. One is reminded of the words of Alexander Pope, in his *Essay on Man*, when he said, “Vice is a monster of such frightful mien, as, to be hated, needs but to be seen; yet seen too oft, familiar with her face, we first endure, then pity, then embrace.”

Is this really happening today? Yes, it is. Fuller Seminary, for example, is very different today with regard to some of the priorities of its founders and early faculty. George Marsden's history of Fuller Seminary as recounted in his *Reforming Fundamentalism* demonstrates the major changes there.

It is clear to many that at some schools the traditional kind of dispensationalism taught in earlier years does not have the prominent focus that it once did. Some see these changes as advancement and needed correctives. The incoming president of one such prominent institution related that he wanted “to drain the moat and get rid of the alligators; drop the bridge; let the people in; open the windows; let the sunshine in—” (See: “A Special Interview—,” audio cassette tape, 1994.) He doesn't seem to realize that what he perceived as repelling some people was due to significant and specific doctrinal convictions which earlier leaders had thought important!

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