

Faith Pulpit

Waving the Flag, Part II

What is happening today is not new, and it is not isolated to only a few rare incidents. Let us note and learn from some examples from the past.

Andover Seminary. Andover was started in 1807–1808 because a Unitarian had been appointed as professor of theology at Harvard. Every attempt was made to safeguard the new school's orthodoxy. Yet within 75 years, the school's faculty was promoting views way out of line with traditional orthodoxy, and during its 100th anniversary year—1908—it became identified with and moved back to the Harvard campus! (See: Ernest Gordon, *The Leaven of the Sadducees*, Chapter VI, “The Looting of Andover.”)

Rochester Seminary. Rochester Seminary had as its president from 1872 to 1912 (a forty year period) the wellknown systematic theologian, Augustus Hopkins Strong. Strong's *Systematic Theology* is still required reading in many conservative colleges and seminaries today. Yet we are told, “Strong was in his own mind generally open to the consideration of new ideas, and his students were taught to think for themselves, so that, as one alumnus wryly reported, ‘in from one to ten years after graduation a goodly crop of ‘heretics’ is found on the alumni roll.’” (See: “Academic Freedom...” by LeRoy Moore, Jr., *Foundations*, January–March, 1967, X, #1, p. 66.) When Henry Vedder wrote his stinging attack upon the Bible and its essential teachings he dedicated that book (*The Fundamentals of Christianity*) “...to my teacher in theology, Augustus Hopkins Strong,” as did also Walter Rauschenbusch, the well-known prophet of the Social Gospel, in his book on *A Theology for the Social Gospel* where he states: “This book is inscribed with reverence and gratitude to Augustus Hopkins Strong...my teacher, colleague, friend...” Yet Dr. Strong, after touring several mission fields later in life, spoke out against liberalism. He observed:

What is the effect of this method [higher critical approach to the Bible] upon our theological seminaries? It is to deprive the gospel message of all definiteness, and to make professors and students disseminators of doubts. Many a professor has found teaching preferable to preaching, because he lacked the initial Christian experience which gives to preaching its certainty and power. He chooses the line of least resistance, and becomes in the theological seminary a blind leader of the blind. Having no system of truth to teach, he becomes a mere lecturer on the history of doctrine. Having no key in Christ to the unity of Scripture, he becomes a critic of what he is pleased to call its fragments, that is, the dissector of a cadaver. Ask him if he believes in the preexistence, deity, virgin birth, miracles, atoning death, physical resurrection, omnipresence, and omnipotence of Christ, and he denies your right to require of him any statement of his own beliefs. He does not conceive it to be his duty to furnish his students with any fixed conclusions as to doctrine. . . .The apostle Paul was not so reticent. . . . It is no wonder that our modern critics cry, 'Back to Christ,' for this means 'Away from Paul.' The result of such teaching in our seminaries is that the student, unless he has had a Pauline experience before he came, has all his early conceptions of Scripture and of Christian doctrine weakened, has no longer any positive message to deliver, loses the ardor of his love for Christ, and at his graduation leaves the seminary, not to become preacher or pastor as he had once hoped, but to sow his doubts broadcast, as teacher in some college, as some editor of some religious journal, as secretary of some Young Men's Christian Association, or as agent of some mutual life insurance company. . . .The theological seminaries of almost all our denominations are becoming so infected with this grievous error, that they are not so much organs of Christ, as they are organs of Antichrist. (See: A. H. Strong, *A Tour of the Missions*. Philadelphia: Griffith and Rowland Press, 1918, pp. 189–191.)

How could Dr. Strong bring someone like Walter Rauschenbusch to his seminary faculty and still speak out years later against the results of liberal theology? Part of the answer is that, as one writer describes A. H. Strong, "Having secured a man whom he thought competent, he left him free to do his work in his own way." (See LeRoy Moore, Jr., p. 66.) In other words, as a leader he was tolerant of views which were broader than his own. And in that the liberals Vedder and Rauschenbusch could rejoice.

Union (NYC) Seminary. When professor Charles A. Briggs in 1891 delivered an address attacking conservative views of the Bible, Union Seminary's leadership was pressured to dismiss him from the faculty. One report states:

The president of Union Seminary was Dr. Thomas S. Hastings, son of the hymn writer of the same name. Dr. Hastings was a gracious, mild-mannered gentleman who apparently had not himself accepted critical views of the Bible, and some feared whether his leadership in the crisis would be sufficiently aggressive. But as events unfolded he proved to be almost as firm as he was gentle, and won the nearly universal acclaim of the seminary's friends. (See L. A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954, p. 53.)

Here is a leader, then, who believed in the Bible's integrity, but also was willing to tolerate (and defend) much broader views by his faculty. It was at this critical juncture in the school's history that public administrative decisions solidified the institution's future direction.

Princeton Seminary. While most Presbyterian schools had begun tolerating theological liberalism by the 1920s, Princeton Seminary stood out as one that had not. By the middle 1920s a division was evident among its faculty over whether liberal views should be tolerated in their denomination and in their school. Princeton Seminary's President was J. Ross Stevenson who led the school's minority faculty viewpoint urging toleration. The conflict over whether liberalism should be tolerated led to the denomination's reorganizing of the Seminary in 1929, and the appointing to the newly formed Board of Directors, two who had signed the Auburn Affirmation, a document urging the toleration of liberalism in the denomination. While there were formal assurances that the school would maintain its traditional orthodoxy, within ten to fifteen years men like Emil Brunner were brought to teach at Princeton, and it became a leading center for theological neo-orthodoxy. (See: Loetscher, pp. 136–148 and Wm. K. Selden, *Princeton Theological Seminary*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 88-121.) What allowed this to happen? It was tolerance on the part of those charged with the institution's oversight which provided the occasion for change.

Some Observations

First, institutions normally do not change radically overnight. The change is usually gradual and continues over a lengthy period of time.

Second, institutions move toward liberalism under trusted conservative administrators who tolerate agents of change.

Third, because the changes are gradual and take place under conservative leadership, many do not understand the significance of what is happening. When people speak out, they are viewed as extreme and disloyal. Only after significant time has passed are others willing to recognize and admit the changes which now are firmly in place.

Fourth, what needs to happen, then? Early on in the process and throughout an institution's history and life there needs to be a lot of flag-waving going on! Unless a firm commitment to founding convictions is voiced and consistently practiced by those who can do something about it—rather than tolerating ideas and persons who wish to broaden or modify—the tragic story of what has happened elsewhere will be repeated.

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