

# *Forty Years Between*

## *Town and Gown:*

### *A Theological Perspective*

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John 18:33-38

Forty years ago I first became acquainted with the term "town and gown." As a freshman, I understood hardly any of its implications; today, I don't understand all it implies. Thirty years as a minister to the academic community has made me aware of a history which has ranged from antagonism to community for both church and university. They have created academic-theological mystery houses, but throughout this historical context have remained rebellious partners.

This assignment forced me to go and look again at my lectures, what I have written for student publications, and the thematic subject matter for students, pastors, faculty and administrators. One thread constantly wove itself through all the material: How the family of faith should bring to the university the One who said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." (John 14:6)

The university motto on my campus is "Seek the Truth." Truth should be the ultimate question of both higher education and the church. Truth is the final signpost to God; truth is the end of theology; truth is reality which points to the Christ who gives us abundant life.

### Introduction

The philosophical statement of Southern Baptist student work adds credence to this task. "Because the university is engaged in the search for truth, of which God is the source, the Christian perspective is essential to the realization of the ultimate purpose of higher education."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, as ministers to the campus, we should believe Jesus is "the truth."

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, long-time missionary to India and one of the spiritual giants in the early days of the ecumenical movement, thinks the Greek word for truth is best translated "reality." He said at Oxford University in 1976, "Truth in the New Testament—especially in the writings of John—means reality; therefore, Jesus really said, 'I am reality.'" Newbigin has further stated, "History is either the story of one person (reality) or it is the story of multiplied billions of people (realities)."<sup>2</sup> We should agree: the core of existence is Jesus the Christ. The message Christians carry to the ends of the earth and to the end of time is that Jesus of Nazareth is the "Christ of the Ages" including the university.

The haunting ghost of my career of thirty years in campus ministry has been the question Phillip Hammond, a sociologist, raised in his book, *The Campus Clergyman*. Why has not the campus ministry become a profession in view of the fact the first chaplain was appointed at Harvard in the early years of the nineteenth century?

My answer to that question has come from the basic assumption of my creating theological tension between Him who is truth and those who claim to be followers of the truth in the academy. This theological perspective climaxes where ultimate truth is examined against spiritual compromise. This establishes theological perspectives through dimensional tensions. So let me define tension and compromise.

Tension, in my vocabulary, is always positive; tension is a good word for those who represent "the word made flesh." William Hall Preston called it divine discontent. Tension causes us to strive to be above the *status quo*. Christianity is a striving faith and never an arriving one. This creates positive tension and thereby cancels compromise.

Compromise, in spiritual language, is the art of creating less tension now in the hope that more can be applied in the future.

Therefore, spiritual experiences become spurious. C. David Matthews, a South Carolina Baptist pastor, adds to this definition by saying, "Religious experiences of many people today are actually higher forms of escapism or exercises in narcissism-self-love."<sup>3</sup> The sin of compromise has not been overt; it has slipped in and has become a "Christian" life-style. The Apostle Paul would have accused us of missing the mark. Sin can be one of degree so we should beware when it dilutes the truth of the gospel.

Since Jesus is the truth, then we must bring Him to the university in order that students, faculty, and administration may have the same opportunity of those who inquired "We would see Jesus."

But modern day theology, in the midst of religious expressions of self-love, has lost Him. We, as Christians, find ourselves wallowing in Watergates of duplicity and degradation. Our Lord has been buried and we know not where to find Him. We have fragmentized theology; we have profoundly silenced the scripture; we have refused to rid ourselves of the God of the Gaps in the world in which we live; we have misinterpreted the New Testament doctrine of the church.

You may have chosen some other issues for a theological perspective but these are the elements of tension and compromise I feel as we enter the last quarter of the twentieth century. The only reason the university should be the object of these special concerns is that these significant issues have first been encountered on our campuses across the land. However, if we take the higher academic scene seriously it can become a rich instrument in the hands of God.

#### **Issues Between Truth and Compromise**

Theology has become an issue of its fragmentation. In fact, in the years between Bonhoeffer and Hans Kung we have suffered through theologies of description. We have killed God; we have dated the end of time; we have discovered the Holy Spirit through the charismatics; we have had hope, liberation, and crisis theology. We have even created theologies for the university—intellectual, philosophical, and educational ones. If you want a name, call it descriptive theology. Churchmen have taken one idea from the whole range of theology and majored on it. In fact, our souls have been bought by the prescription of description. We have lost all the other signposts which point us to Him who is all truth.

The reason for a fragmentized theology is the silence of the scriptures in our churches.<sup>4</sup> Those of us who work in the academic



community are aware of the woeful ignorance of students concerning basic Biblical knowledge. Not long ago a history professor and I were talking. He said, "Fifteen years ago I would use a Biblical illustration to point out something in History; today I wouldn't dare because students don't know about what I am speaking." This brings up a more serious question: If the academic community has no Biblical knowledge, how can it interpret God's Word? John A. T. Robinson says in his new book that four positions have emerged because of confused ignorance. "These are what might be called the cynicism of the foolish, the fundamentalism of the fearful, the skepticism of the wise and the conservatism of the committed."<sup>5</sup> Whatever these tendencies are, they are pulling us apart as a Biblical people and, in my opinion, distorting the truth.

Robert Proctor, at Southern Seminary, adds his thoughts to the issue of silence. After saying several important things he concludes that some people have said Bible study is irrelevant because scholarship has destroyed our faith in the Bible. This excuse of silence is because of the controversies surrounding the "search for the historical Jesus." Proctor says, "To them the idea that Jesus' words may be the writers' interpretation . . . rather than a transcript of his exact words is unthinkable. . . ."<sup>6</sup>

Such reactions are the result of the general public not knowing the riches and reverence of competent Biblical scholars. Lesslie Newbigin says, "If Jesus had wanted an exact transcript, He would have furnished one. Then we would have an equivalent Koran. But a startling thing would have happened theologically. The Word would have become word; the Word would not have become Flesh!"<sup>7</sup>

Proctor concludes, "A laity that is ignorant of the true message of the Bible will be easily 'tossed to and fro by every wind of the doctrine'."<sup>8</sup> I would have said, "A laity that is ignorant of the *total* message of the Bible. . . ." This has caused the drifting from main-line churches into the para-church groups.

The silence of the Bible is, perhaps, the most important tension we are experiencing in the academic community today. We are at a loss to find ways in which we can develop students unless we approach them theologically and Biblically.

Thirdly, Biblical faith, as we have understood it, is being challenged by the world in which we live. If I would have only one phrase to describe our world today, I would call it *bio-medical*. Spurious Biblical faith has caused us to worship the God of the Gaps. As science has filled those gaps, we have wondered about the place

of God. Once it was God's will when children came; today, we have the Pill. Once it was God's will that physically and mentally handicapped people were born; today, the fault is in our genes and the whole field of genetic manipulation is polarized by either doomsday or brightday geneticists. This has also presented us with a new phenomenon—social biology. Escapism is prevalent. Flip Wilson, the comedian-theologian, said, "The Devil made me do it." That's passe; now we say, "My genes made me do it." Once it was God's will when death came; today, through good and bad means, we prolong life and this decision is made by either the physician or a member of the family.

This tension has caused academic Christians to reassess God's place in the world and to learn that the knowledge we have been given comes from Him. I am not on the side of those of our day who discuss the late planet earth as if Satan has won. Knowledge brings on responsibility and it can be used to further Biblical truth. Scripture adds to my belief that the earth is the Lord's. "Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for as the waters fill the sea, so shall the earth be full of the knowledge of the Lord." (Isaiah 11:9)

We must rid ourselves of the God of the Gaps for He is no more—if He ever was. We must learn how to be faithful to Him who is all truth with the knowledge he has graciously given us in the latter days of our century.

Finally, and to get to where we live daily, we must look once again at the doctrine of the church in relation to campus ministry. Historically, at this point, there has always been tension.

A casual glance at the history of all student movements—not just the program of Southern Baptists—will reveal this tension as a continual one. Early student movements were founded for only two purposes: to save the student for his denomination and to protect him from what others have called "the corrosive acids of rationalism"—in other words, the university.<sup>9</sup> For good or ill, these early times set the tone for such terms as "mission to the church," "the arm of the church," "the link to the church" and, consequently, gave us a problem in theology to this present day.

As history moved along it became obvious, as multi-churches developed near academia, that campus ministry could not "deliver" students to a particular church. Dr. Doyle Baird, Church-Campus Consultant in the National Student Ministries Department, has



written, "The organization (B.S.U.) should not be thought of as merely a 'pipeline' to be used to 'funnel' students into the church. The emphasis in the organization must magnify the church's role to students."<sup>10</sup>

This idea solved the pragmatic problem of the multi-church situation. It, also, coined a new word in Baptist campus ministry—church relatedness. The link idea had heard the toll of death.

However, the theological problem is still with us. What is the church? Does the word church connote place or purpose? What about the promise of Jesus when he declared, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them." (Matt. 18:20). I agree with Dr. Leo Armstrong, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Denton, Texas, "Too long we have skirted the theological implications of BSU and the doctrine of the church. they may be both and the same."<sup>11</sup>

In my opinion, Baptist campus ministry is church; it is an organism with Christ at the helm. We bring Him who is truth to the academic community and student movement history shouts the fact He has sanctified us.

Now let us be clear. I have purposefully been careful not to use the articles "a" or "the" when saying church. Actually, we should all be committed institutionally to the bride of Christ despite its many weaknesses. The church in the New Testament is always a visible one with visible witnesses.

That is the reason I have deep reservations about student churches. The witnesses of Christ must gather not at the place of many levels (the university) but at the place of no levels (the institutional church). Witnesses of Jesus should not confine themselves continually to a one age range but to a many age group—from nursery to senility, if you please. This idea is a "safe-guard" one, if nothing else. It distinguishes the mission of Christians to the university from a group of transient people; it makes transition to church after university days almost painless. So the theological problem of the "place" of the church can be solved easily if we all seek Him who wants us to know all truth.

Pragmatically, then, the church is Baptist campus ministry on campus during the week; Baptist campus ministry meets in the churches on Sunday and at various other times. This is not two programs—it is one: a united effort to magnify Him who is truth.

### Conclusion

A theological perspective for campus ministry has to be one that is dimensional. One doesn't have to point to the uneducated, Cajun in south Louisiana or the hill-billy in northern Arkansas to find a need for the "simple gospel." We can find our targets in academia in the Ph.D. Chemistry professor who says, "One thing I don't go to church for is to think!"

On the other hand we ought to be aware of a statement Dr. Frank Stagg has made many times, "The simple gospel is profound." Because of our failure to understand this, Baptists have lost a great many devout intellectuals and not just those in the university. Also, thinking people are not confined to the adult academic group; there are many students from freshmen on in this category. As Dr. Daniel Grant, president of Ouachita Baptist University, wrote a decade ago, "Most college students do not ask the important question: 'Can I be a Baptist and be intellectually respectable?' They ask, 'Will I be branded as anti-intellectual if I remain a Baptist?'"<sup>12</sup>

This makes the whole theological atmosphere of the campus ministry very turbulent. We are on the horns of a dilemma. Let me illustrate. John Smith arrives at Everyman's University, sees the sign Baptist Student Center, and reacts in one of two ways. The first one is "I'll bet they are just like my home church and I came to college to escape the exhaustion of every night activity in order to be labeled 'good Christian.' *I will not go over there.*" The other reaction is "Fantastic! I'll bet the BSU is just like my home church! I'll be there all the time I'm not in class." Alas, the B.S.U. is not like home. *I will not go over there again!*

This dilemma forces us into a theology of dimensions. We have to start where a student or a faculty member is and provide the tension of truth. I would be foolish to conclude this paper by listing answers to this problem; I am forced to search the heart of every member of the university. We cannot choose to be "simple" or "complex," "shallow" or "deep." Therefore, it is erroneous to use terms such as "a theology of the academic community." "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." (John 14:6) This is the simple gospel.

But Baptists need to be reminded of the profoundness of the simple gospel. This is another dimension and, perhaps, the one which will ease the tensions in the areas already discussed. Every effort should be made to disprove our image of anti-intellectualism.



As bad as this image has been, historically, something has happened that is even worse. We lose profound thinkers because we act as if they are troublemakers within our fellowship. Dr. Grant has made the observation that our attitude is one of "good riddance," and certainly we will lose those whom we do not really want to lose.

It seems to me that Southern Baptist polity would offer the greatest latitude for people of all dimensions of theology. We do believe in the priesthood of the believer, in the absence of authoritarianism and creeds, and in religious freedom. This appeals to profound thinkers; however, we have the task of continuing to improve our credibility in respect to theology.

Dr. Larry Baker, at Glorieta Student Week, told a story about a letter Will Campbell received concerning his "Christian acrobatics." Curious as to what "acrobatics" were, Campbell went to a circus and interviewed those involved.

The acrobatics' leader was the middle generation of the team and the spokesman. Campbell asked, "Why do you go up there and risk your life?" The man replied, "Well, I have a crazy wife, an irresponsible daughter, and a father with a heart condition."

Campbell started to walk off and suddenly it occurred to him to ask, "Then why do they go up there?" The leader replied, "Well, you see I have a drinking problem." I thought, that's theology in dimensions.

#### Footnotes

- 1 J. P. Edmunds, "The Philosophy of Southern Baptist Student Work," *Quarterly Review*, January-March, 1963, p.1.
- 2 See *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Volume 4) for further illumination. (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 1962.
- 3 C. David Matthews, "Religious 'experiences' are not Number One Priority," *The Religious Herald*, July 28, 1977, p. 14.
- 4 James D. Smart *The Silence of the Bible in our Churches*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973)
- 5 John A. T. Robinson, *Can You Trust the New Testament?*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977). p. 5.
- 6 Robert A. Proctor, Jr., "Sunday School is a waste of time", *The Baptist Message*, June 14, 1977, p. 12.
- 7 Sam Sanford, "Notes from Oxford, 1976."
- 8 Proctor, *op. cit.*
- 9 See an early book, Shedd's *The Church Follows its Students* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1938) and Cantelon's *A Protestant Approach to the Campus Ministry* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964).
- 10 Doyle Baird, Ed., *Resource Book for Workers with Students in Churches Affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention*, 1964, p. 32.
- 11 Les Armstrong, speaking at a church-campus seminar at Northeast Louisiana University, Monroe, Louisiana.
- 12 Dan Grant, "Are Southern Baptists Losing the Intellectuals?" *The Baptist Program*, March 1966, p. 4.



## Response

The purpose of campus ministry has appeared to change through the years as we have gone through various stages. Sanford's opinion that Baptist campus ministry is church has value because I believe that this is the pivotal point from which we work and relate to the institutional church. We are church in an academic setting which very often does not have a concept of community other than the one we model.

A theological perspective for campus ministry, I would agree, has to be dimensionally based on the simple gospel. Campus ministry by its very definition works with people from all educational levels and many cultures. The challenge of communicating the gospel to this vast diversity of people is overwhelming.

Basic ignorance of the Bible or of a faith interpretation of life is increasing both by students and faculty. Many of those who are into religion use it as an escape. These factors make it necessary for us to have a strong understanding of why we are there.

I very much like Sanfords' definition of tension as positive. I think it is positive and that there should always be such a tension between the university and campus ministry. Part of the role of campus ministry is to be both a prophet and an interpreter to the university. Significant issues dealing with the meaning and value of life are often first raised on the college campus. Campus Ministry needs to call the academic community into question when it devalues individuals or human life. This is a way of combating the "God of the gaps," and it points

repeatedly to the profoundness of the simple gospel when it is fully interpreted.

A theological perspective on campus ministry does include truth as reality. College students and faculty need to deal with a real world. The institutional church also needs to deal with reality and ultimately they (the church and the academic community) will discover that they are both in the same process of seeking to better understand the truth.

I do find myself at somewhat of a loss as to what pulls this article together. I understand the definition of truth, tension, and compromise and the issues between them. I agree with the conclusion but I am not sure how we got there.

I have problems with the stated question of Phillip Hammond as to why the campus ministry has not become a profession. I fail to see why one can not be a professional and also create the tension which leads us into our whole purpose in the college community. It takes a professional to understand both the historical and theological perspective of the church and the complexity of the academic world and to try to bring them together in the reality of the gospel.

We, as Southern Baptists, have a proud heritage and need make no excuses in the academic setting for being Baptist. The God we represent is dimensional in His acceptance of people. This is my perspective.

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