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BETWEEN THE TIMES

In these last months the Seminary has been living in a very special sense "between the times." That is, of course, where life as a whole is being lived today. The war is over, but peace has not yet been established and no one knows when it will. In the meantime the parenthesis in which the world finds itself becomes steadily darker and more uncertain. But one thing this interim period is doing which is of the utmost importance for theological seminaries and the Christian Church as a whole: men are becoming aware of the bankruptcy of secular thought and the impotency of secular life. They are coming to recognize that our basic problems today are theological in character. They begin to apprehend that light must shine into contemporary darkness and love bind human hearts together. Otherwise mankind will be destroyed, not by its ignorance but by its knowledge, by the too great knowledge of Nature by men who own no allegiance to God. In such an interim period the Christian Church and its institutions have the greatest opportunity in their history to proclaim the Good News of God to a world in which bad news has become endemic.

There are other respects, however, in which the Seminary is living between the times. Decisions had been taken and preparations made to provide special courses for chaplains; however, the sudden ending of the War, long before its conclusion was expected, complicated the housing problem because it was necessary in mid-summer to assign available apartments to applicants on a long waiting list. Within a few months, however, the situation will have changed. In March there will be a considerable number of accommodations for chaplains and their families, and by the beginning of the summer term Princeton Seminary hopes to be able to accommodate all the chaplains who may desire to come for refresher courses.

The accelerated plan will be continued in the interests of chaplains and returning veterans. The Trustees and Faculty alike are resolved to leave nothing undone to facilitate and expedite the study of the men who gave several years of their manhood to the service of their country and now desire to equip themselves for the service of their God. But acceleration as a general policy will be discontinued at the earliest possible moment.

We are between the times, too, in respect to building projects. Quietly and unobtrusively much remodeling has been going on on the New Campus. By the Spring of 1946 the Old Gymnasium will begin to function as the new Administra-

A LAYMAN AMONG MINISTERS¹

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I

WHEN I was called from my vacation by your President to give this commencement address, I was, fittingly enough, meditating upon Irwin Edman's widely read book entitled *Philosopher's Holiday*. To tell the truth, the title of the present address was inspired by the title of an isolated chapter from Edman's book, one likely to prick anybody's curiosity—"An Irishman among the Brahmins." To me this chapter presents a perfect preview of the scenes of holy impatience which may later unfold among our returning veterans as they once more go to college—or to Church.

George O'Connor has gone to his professor, who tells us the story, to ask whether a course of his in the philosophy of religion was "worth taking," or whether it was "just another course." Now listen to the amplification rendered by our eager young student: Does this course, he asks, "really give you new ideas, or do something to your old ones? Does it make you over, or give you a new world?" Having finally tried the course—and a seminar besides—, having tried even to enter into the necessary discipline of this intellectual life, young George one day decides to leave the college with the remark intensely expressed: "I can't stand it any more, I don't see how you can. . . . The place is too confoundedly intellectual. All the intellectual words, but no ideas with life in them. Ghosts of the mind walking around the campus." Of course his professor sees him to be wrong, and he tries to make a case for his own philosophy of education.

As I read the story, however, I could not avoid thinking that even this distinguished scholar had not fully understood what the student was driving at. There was indeed much more involved in the case than the mere fact of academic regimentation admitted by the professor. The latter had missed the main point in the youngster's verdict.

How searching in this connection is the statement of Paul to Timothy concerning persons who are "ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." We have a name for such intellectuals: we call them *dilettantes*. For them speculation has become an end in itself; they *lend* themselves to all sorts of attitudes without ever surrendering to any cause whatsoever. Their playfulness borders on voluptuousness. We should not insist on this infirm state of mind, were it not so prevalent, though not always developed to the extreme. The progress of philosophy in stressing both the possibilities and the limitations of our human faculties has done much to encourage that skepticism we describe as "playful." The Greek word *skepsis* in fact means research, and research, like hunting and fishing, tends to develop into a pleasant occupation—with the difference that the hunter and the fisherman are as a rule interested in the result of their sport. Yet we know, do we not, that they would disregard the game or the catch, were it simply offered them for the asking.

¹ The Commencement address delivered to the graduating class of Princeton Theological Seminary, August 17, 1945.

Such "playfulness," combined in various degrees with a false objectivity and attended by a natural instinct for a sheltered life and the usual anxiety to be intellectually respectable, makes up a certain type of "academic" attitude which is, alas, widespread. Professor Theodore M. Greene of Princeton University seems to me to have happily defined this detached and essentially cowardly attitude, when he branded it "one of endless investigation and argument without decision or commitment—of never taking sides on anything, of never committing oneself to anything." In similar terms President John A. Mackay has denounced what he calls a life enjoyed on a balcony as opposed to a life of commitment on the road. If I sense accurately the feelings of our returning veterans—God bless them!—they will have but little patience with this variety of tight-rope acrobatics, which the mere academicians of yesteryear seemed to consider a pre-requisite to the granting of Ph.D. degrees.

Kierkegaard would help us throw light on such tragic misunderstandings, as he draws a dividing line between scientific matter, which naturally becomes an object of acquisition to which the personal life of the teacher is accidental, and ethico-religious matter, realities wherein commitment is the essential thing.

In the same vein, Pascal had already laid down the principle that it was necessary on the one hand to restore to experimental science the naturalistic and rationalistic method which properly belong to it; on the other hand to restore to theology the authority that is its proper due. As we take this position three centuries after Pascal, however, it must be with the frank admission that a part of what Pascal classified under the heading of theology has now been claimed by new disciplines. Nevertheless the basic principle formulated by him is left intact. It remains truer than

ever that, having safeguarded each and every privilege of the most exacting scholarship, we should reserve for "the mysteries of faith . . . that submission of mind which extends our belief to those mysteries which are hidden from sense and from reason."

Kindly notice therefore—and this is important—that *scholarship is not at stake*. In no point is it being questioned in connection with our faith. Indeed the critical approach to the New Testament's literary and historical problems is as legitimate and proves as useful as scientific investigation in the realm of physics and astronomy. It is not condemnable in itself. The time has come for fundamentalists to realize that it is as bad to denounce the New Testament scholar as it was for short-sighted men in the past to denounce and condemn the system of Copernicus or to force the abjuration of Galileo. The fact is that we should in this connection carefully ponder Galileo's treatise on *The Authority of Scripture* defining the relations between physical science and Holy Writ. It is humiliating that a book need ever have been written on *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*.

Scholarship is not at stake, but there is indeed a tremendous issue at stake. And it is on this very issue that the George O'Connors as well as the enlightened men and women of our day crave an authoritative message. In the words of Professor Theodore M. Greene, they expect both "decision" and "commitment," the two being inseparable. They may have read Kierkegaard and approved of what he says about "realities wherein commitment is the essential thing," but they want to make sure of such realities. They would probably, as we do, subscribe to the strong reservation made by Pascal as to "those mysteries which are hidden from sense and from reason," but they want to know whether

such mysteries veil any deeper reality at all, or whether Voltaire, Thomas Paine, or W. E. H. Lecky are right in their denials concerning them. The issue is more or less clearly defined in their mind, *but it is there*, and in the last analysis it must be met with yes-or-no simplicity. No evasion, however clever, will any longer do. At this juncture the last word in intellectual honesty is called for.

II

This is more true today than it ever was. The returning veteran has seen his "buddy" fall at his side. He himself has repeatedly seen death face to face. He has to know whether Jesus Christ is truly the Resurrection and the Life, or whether, in the words of James Thompson in his *City of Dreadful Night*,

"None can pierce the vast black
veil uncertain
Because there is no light behind
the curtain;
. . . all is vanity and nothing-
ness."

It is very natural, then, that the less educated should turn to our great seats of learning for an answer. Alas, they are due for disappointment. It is not so much that college professors are the atheists they are said to be. Many of them are indeed religious people, but somehow they are for the most part careful to hide the fact. The late beloved Professor William Lyon Phelps tells in his *Autobiography* how he was invited to teach in a certain college and asked if he could keep his religion out of the class room. On telling this to President Dwight he laughed and remarked: "My own observation shows that college teachers who are religious never mention it in the class room; the pupils never find it out, whereas those who are antireligious impress their views on the students and talk about it constantly." We must admit

the fact that for all practical purposes the naturalistic faith is nowadays the only one looked upon with favor in academic circles. College men are encouraged to carry over into their entire sphere of influence the rationalistic presuppositions of pure science according to which subject matter is depersonalized in order to become socialized. As they disregard the pertinent reservations made by men like Pascal and Kierkegaard, it follows that their whole life seems to be based on the assumption that man is the measure of all things.

I wish I had time to uncover for you the pathetic cases of students going to their advisers under the pretext of conflict in their schedules, or some such trifle, but in reality looking for some opening in the wall of academic objectivity. Once in a while the Christian convictions of the adviser are revealed and then—what blessed encounter in the office now become a sanctuary wherein naked soul meets naked soul in the hallowed presence of the Saviour! Personal confessions give you an entirely new outlook on the campus and into the fraternities where the midnight oil often burns over prolonged religious discussions—as though God were to be found at the end of a syllogism! Again you hear about the student's friends, and people in town, and about the folks at home. The spiritual need of our age is progressively brought into the open, and looms larger than ever.

One thing is certain. That need is not being met in our school system, surely not in our great seats of learning, except in a semi-clandestine fashion, which proves altogether insufficient. It is true that, thanks to a splendid corps of chaplains who have risen up to unique opportunities, the need is now being met in the Army, Navy, and Air formations. While this situation is only temporary, I see great possibilities for the future. On the whole, however, the tremendous spiritual vacuum of our age

calls for total surrender on the part of the ministry.

III

On this point I will abstain from any criticism. In the first place, who am I that I should feel entitled to judge? In the second place, criticism is hardly, if ever, constructive. Do not criticize me. Love me, and help me. Like Herodotus in his *History* I shall not dispute whether ancient tales be true, but will begin rather with those wrongs whereof I myself have knowledge. In the manner of Socrates, at the beginning of Plato's *Apology*, all I ask is that you take heed and mark whether what I say is just. Some of the commonplace suggestions made herewith are meant to meet the needs of the situation as I have learned to appreciate the latter.

What happens here and now is as solemn an occasion as can arise anywhere at any time, and should be considered most seriously by every one of us. As you are about to enter into your ministry, our living God has appointed a layman—a most humble, unworthy one—to lay bare in your sight the dire need of his sheep. In his name I would charge you, and you, and you, to make sure of his commission and of its nature and responsibilities. In his name I say to you that the ministry you are about to enter upon is going to be either the most unique opportunity that ever was under his high heaven—or the most terrible curse in your life and on the lives of the flock to be entrusted you. The question before you is not one of “more or less,” but of “either, or.”

Be not deluded into believing with current writers who force the contents of the Holy Book into categories foreign to its central message, that the God of the Old Testament was first “conceived of” as an awe-inspiring divinity finally to become in modern man's enlightened understand-

ing an “invisible Friend” no longer to be feared. The plain truth is that fear as well as love enters into the revealed notion of that which is called “sacred.” While it is true that we have in the Bible a progressive revelation culminating in the incarnation of the Son of God, nevertheless God remains, even and especially in the teaching of Jesus, the awe-inspiring Sovereign to be feared. Be God-fearing ministers! As such, rest assured that he remains from everlasting to everlasting, a Consuming Fire. It is still true that to fall into the hands of the living God is a terrible thing. Yield yourselves obedient unto him without striving, and live every moment of your ministry in the firm assurance that, in the words of Queen Ann, there is not one circumstance so great as not to be subject to his power, nor so small but it comes within his care. You may very well ponder therefore over the implications of your total surrender to his service.

From then on, like Abram, you will be living in tabernacles because you look for a city. Abram, let it be remembered, was nicknamed “the Hebrew” because, as the ancient Greek translation of Genesis expresses it, he was “the man from the other side.” You will likewise no longer be *of* the world, but still *in* the world. This plain statement implies at the same time the sacred character of your ministry and the terrible hardships it involves. From the very outset men will look to you as to a man. We know only that which we are. Only they will be infinitely more severe to you than to any ordinary man, and as you are the man of God, whatever judgment they pass on you will reflect upon their view of our holy religion.

As I must be brief, restricting myself to bare essentials, what I have to say on this point will be readily summed up in three words—the first, *work*—the second, *work*—and the third also *work*. On the human level, which is where we must

stand, I know of no greater curse to the ministry than that of laziness.

Visit every home represented in your congregation at least once a year. Let me cite to you as an example a good friend of mine who is a Methodist minister. When he set out in his ministry, being assigned to a village, he forthwith visited every house in the community except one—an awe-inspiring mansion evidently inhabited by the most influential people in the neighborhood. Finally one day, after a long prayer, he went to the door and knocked. As the door was being opened by an imposing gentleman, a big dog rushed through almost passing between the legs of our friend. The scared preacher, trying to regain his wits, just blurted out: "Excuse me, I did not know that the *other* dog would come too!" The gentleman of the house was amused. He smiled. Soon everybody joined in the conversation, and the whole household found their way to church.

Should you object to the pressure of time, then remember with Marcus Aurelius, that the greater part of what we say and do is unnecessary; and that, if this were only omitted, we should have more leisure and less disturbance. This applies to our thoughts also, for impertinence of thought leads to unnecessary action.

Pulpit preparation is of capital importance. It is hard for me to refrain at this point from making a few drastic statements, but I shall only remark that nothing is so painful to the churchgoer, and nothing more destructive of the respect normally enjoyed by a minister than the unprepared sermon. Paraphrasing Machiavelli's *Prince*, we would say that the best fortress a new minister can have is not to be despised by his congregation. The worst of it all is that the less prepared the preacher, the more he will talk, and the more harm he will do to himself and to

the cause of the Gospel. Let me now give the example of the minister who played a great part in my own conversion. After days of preparation on one particular occasion, he was inspired in the prayer with which he always began his work, to shelve the almost finished sermon and prepare another, doing it very thoroughly. The following Sunday, at the close of the service, after having apparently taken leave of every worshipper, he saw a woman coming out of the shadow into the aisle. She pressed his hand and gave him thanks as she declared her faith. She had come to church, as she thought, for the last time that Sunday, intending to commit suicide immediately after the service. To grasp the full impact of this minister's message and its effect on one lost soul among others, we should look into his own personal life. For during the last war he underwent a great spiritual struggle. He had lost his soldier son—a splendid boy whose letters were later to be released for the edification of Christians. His wife had died of a broken heart. As the remains of the son were to be brought back from the battlefield, a joint burial was decided upon for mother and son. Ministers from miles around offered their good services but were kindly declined one by one. During the entire week this bereaved man of God had hardly left his study. As you must have surmised, he was the one to officiate at the funeral. There, before two open graves, he proclaimed his faith in him who is the Resurrection and the Life. And this he did in an impeccable sermon. How many sheep were saved through the pastor that day, only God knows. Yet you will agree that on this particular occasion, our old French friend had some cause for not exerting himself.

Pulpit preparation implies that a minister never stop praying, studying, and reading. Reading in turn implies writing, and this leads me to think of our religious

periodicals and of our book reviews. For they are a real issue to me, as I compare our Protestant journals with similar publications on display in university libraries. How many book reviews consist merely in a reproduction of the advertising material usually found on the flap of the book cover; thank God that *Theology Today* is bringing about a change in this situation. A great opportunity is yours, my young friends, in this extremely important phase of the ministry.

Underlying all the preceding considerations is the constant implication that the minister can exult in Paul's great motto: "To me to live is Christ." For the "realities wherein commitment is the essential thing," according to Kierkegaard's classification, those realities described by Pascal as the "mysteries which are hidden from sense and from reason," may be summed up in the expression *mysterium Christi*. Paul has just defined Christianity for us, as Christ himself—Jesus Christ, belonging to the category of the divine, indeed in a class by himself, and as such finally inexplicable.

You all know as well as I do, that when scholars have done their best—or their worst—and come to the beginnings of Christianity through the Gospels and the Epistles, through early collections of the sayings of Jesus, and notes on his life possibly written in Aramaic, they must witness that this "Gospel before the Gospels" remains *the* Gospel. Therein, indeed, early believers have testified to the supernatural Being clearly pictured from one end of the New Testament to the other, and responsible for its unity. The early Church, as she stood praying to her unique, absolute, final, and cosmic Lord, who could say "Before Abraham was, I am," was truly a remnant. According to Gibbon, this remnant made the record that it did through its inflexible and uncompromising zeal. It remained separate and exclusive;

it refused to *appease*, as we have now learned to put it. To the extent that conflict, nay, death, was willingly undergone so that Christianity might *displace* other religions, men were won to the living Lord through the living Lord. Gibbon further mentions as causes for the rapid growth of the Church the pure and austere morals, the union and discipline of the Christian remnant, the miraculous powers ascribed to it, and its doctrine of a future life. In his excellent book on *The Apostolic Preaching*, Professor C. H. Dodd of Cambridge has clearly shown that there was no deviation from the original content of the Gospel as found in I Cor. 15:1-11: "Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures," etc. As the Passion narratives are now shown to have been among the first New Testament documents to be written down, the burden of the original message delivered by the Apostles was that of "Jesus and his resurrection," that of the redemption wrought by him as Lord and Saviour. This dynamic faith, releasing as it did the power of the triumphant Lord in heaven, was quick to generate and sustain Christianity in the mission field when there was not in evidence the grave question of "re-thinking missions." It is such genuine faith which fills Churches in our day, such genuine faith which will surely fill *your* Church if *you* abstain from "re-thinking your ministry" on this basic, *sine qua non* point.

For this *is* the Christian faith. The Christ did not come to found one more

religion better than others and comparable to them. He came as the self-revelation of the Father. He is all we know of God. Furthermore since according to Scripture the main function of the Holy Spirit is to bear witness of the Christ with our spirit, the Son is truly the God of men. You must therefore insist on what our admirable layman, Robert E. Speer, calls *The Finality of Christ*, which is the title he has given to his best book. Let me ask from you as a very special favor this day, always to keep that book on hand, right on your desk, near your Bible.

Do you not see, my friends, the world outside is groping for truth and *you are going out in the world with the final truth*. All other masters are only human masters. They must give way to your master, to the one Lord in whom all our questions are answered. In its original and authentic form, Christianity is incommensurable and unique, like the Christ. Such uniqueness, in fact, not only explains but necessitates the resurrection. The weakest point in David Hume's famous essay "On Miracles" is his central statement as to the impossibility of the fact that a dead *man* should come to life, because that has never been observed in any age or country. It reminds one of Richard Jeffries' *Story of a Boy* in its reference to the cruelty of Crucifixion, to the effect that "if God had been there, he would not have let them do it!" The whole point is that none other than God was there; and precisely because he was there, he could not *stay* there in utter defeat and shame. Therefore Paul's assertion underlies and undergirds your whole ministry: "If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins."

I say to you that if this is not your faith, your personal religion may indeed be beautiful and highly respectable among men, but it is not Christianity. You have no good news to proclaim to a needy world.

Rather go and sell real estate! Waste no time giving lectures about the latest schemes of social improvement. Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* is to me one of the most boring things to read and suggests one of the most disappointing places to live in. Your message of the Kingdom of God owes no apologies to Bacon's *New Atlantic*, Campanella's *City of the Sun*, or to the idealizations of William Morris and H. G. Wells. I repeat that there is no question of more or less involved at this crucial point in the ministry: there is only a question of "either—or." At this very moment then, here and now, may you come face to face with our living Lord and not be found wanting. For you are going to have before you eager eyes and anxious faces—anxious, that is, according to the original text, expressive of division against self—a congregation of souls pleading to be made whole again. You cannot evade their quest. You cannot lie to them and to yourself Sunday after Sunday. In their name I ask you: Is this your faith? Is it?

If so, go to them with all you have because you have everything. What a glorious, comforting thing it will be indeed for you to take your place in a heavenly fellowship, carried forward by eighteen centuries of this Christian experience! To feel Paul, and Augustine, and Calvin, and Pascal, and Wesley, and an immense army of other great servants of the living Lord back of you! You will be one of them. You will speak their language because their experience is being repeated in your own, because it confirms your own, and your own is a confirmation of theirs. Oh, the glory of it all for you, a Christian warrior in the front line, backed up by such stupendous reserves and in the words of the old hymn, with the "Cross of Jesus going on before," with the Lord of Life ahead.