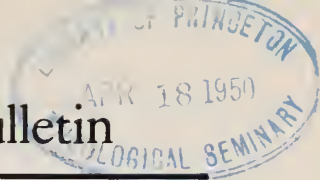


The Princeton Seminary Bulletin



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TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE	<i>Edward H. Roberts</i>	3
BASIC CHRISTIANITY	<i>John Alexander Mackay</i>	5
THE CHALLENGE TO OUR CULTURE	<i>Robert B. McClure</i>	14
MILLER CHAPEL	<i>H. L. Wilson</i>	24
BUT WHY NOT PRINCETON SEMINARY?	<i>Allan MacLachlan Frew</i>	28
PRINCETONIANA	<i>Lefferts A. Loetscher</i>	31
ALUMNI NOTES	<i>Edna Hatfield</i>	36
MEMORIAL MINUTES		40

BOOK REVIEWS

Pastoral Leadership, by Andrew W. Blackwood	<i>Harry Ray Anderson</i>	48
Makers of Modern Thought, by Gwilym O. Griffith	<i>William Hallock Johnson</i>	48
A Guidebook to the Bible, by Alice Parmelee	<i>Charles T. Fritsch</i>	49
History of New Testament Times with an Introduction to the Apocrypha, by Robert H. Pfeiffer	<i>John Wm. Wevers</i>	50
The Prophecy of Daniel: A Commentary, by Edward J. Young		50
The Glory of God in the Christian Calling, A Study of the Ephesian Epistle, by William Owen Carver	<i>Howard Tillman Kuist</i>	51
The Romance of New Testament Scholarship, by Wilbert Francis Howard	<i>Otto A. Piper</i>	52
The Life and Epistles of St. Paul, by W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson		52
St. Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen, by W. M. Ramsay		53
St. Paul's Gospel to the Romans, by Gwilym O. Griffith		53
Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas; the Text Edited with an Introduction and Commentary by Ernest Evans	<i>Bruce M. Metzger</i>	54

The History of the Primitive Church, by Jules Lebreton and Jacques Zeiller		54
The Ministry, ed. by J. Richard Spann	<i>Andrew W. Blackwood</i>	56
The Art of Readable Writing, by Rudolf Flesch		56
Dwight L. Moody. Volume I in Great Pulpit Masters		57
The Church's Ministry in Our Time, by Henry Knox Sherrill		57
The Minister's Job, by Albert W. Palmer	<i>Donald Macleod</i>	58
Weight of Glory, by C. S. Lewis		58
God Confronts Man in History, by Henry Sloane Coffin	<i>E. G. Homrighausen</i>	59
Let Me Commend, by W. E. Sangster		59
Christianity and American Education, by Edwin H. Rian		60
Evangelism According to Christ, by Gaines S. Dobbins		61
These Also Believe, by Charles S. Braden	<i>Norman Victor Hope</i>	62
Story of American Protestantism, by Andrew Landale Drummond		62
The Religion of Maturity, by John Wick Bowman		63
American Freedom and Catholic Power, by Paul Blan- shard		64
The Exile Heart, by Peter Marshall		64
Sam Higginbottom, Farmer. An autobiography	<i>J. Christy Wilson</i>	65
World Christian Handbook, edited by Kenneth G. Grubb and E. J. Bingle		66
In Our Image, Character Studies from the Old Testament. Illustrations in color, by Guy Rowe		67
Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, by Harry Austryn Wolfson	<i>Edward J. Jurji</i>	67

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THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN

Edward H. Roberts, Editor

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BASIC CHRISTIANITY¹

JOHN A. MACKAY

IT gives me the very greatest pleasure to welcome you one and all, in the name of our Faculty, to this new session of Princeton Theological Seminary. I wish to bid special welcome to those who are new in our midst, and first of all, to our new professor, Dr. George S. Hendry, who comes to us from a distinguished career and a rich background in Scotland. I wish to welcome all the new students from diverse parts of our country and from not a few different communions. And a very especial welcome I desire to extend to those students who have come to us from abroad. We hope that you in particular will find yourselves at home among us and that you will bring us some spiritual gift. And, then, I want to greet with affection and gratitude those who are in our midst during a little lull in their missionary career, whether they are staying in dormitories, or in the environs of Princeton, or in Payne Hall. Please remember that you missionaries, above all others, are most congenial guests of ours, and that all that we have is yours. For all of us together, members old and new of our Seminary family, may the year that now begins prove to be memorable as its weeks and months unfold.

It would be strange, of course, if in the span of the past year there had come into our midst no note of sorrow or regret. Since this time a year ago a number have passed away into the higher realm.

¹ Address delivered at the opening of the Seminary on September 27, 1949.

In the course of the past year the Seminary lost by death a most loved and valued member of the Board of Trustees in the person of Frank B. Bell. Mr. Bell was one of the finest examples of a great layman who was willing to give time to Christian causes.

There has passed away too a much esteemed professor of my own and of some others of us here, who for thirty-nine years taught Biblical Theology in this Seminary, Dr. Geerhardus Vos. Dr. Vos passed away in Michigan a few weeks ago in the eighty-seventh year of his age. I think of one who was a colleague of many of us, and a teacher of some who are here present, Dr. John E. Kuizenga. He passed away in the plenitude of his powers in the very early seventies; and our Princeton Seminary circle throughout the country is much the poorer for his decease. I think also of another nearer at home who left us, Mrs. Piper, the wife of one of our distinguished Faculty members. In the course of the year she had a sudden call of the Lord, and left behind her the very fragrant memory of having been to many a true mother in Israel. And then, last of all, there died just a week ago one who belonged only indirectly to our Seminary family—Mr. Logan, the father of Mrs. Hope. He spent the better part of a year with us not so long ago and identified himself so closely with our Seminary community that one of the campus clubs made him an honorary member. Our deep sympathy goes out to Mrs. Logan and to Dr. and Mrs. Hope in their fresh sorrow.

I.

I have selected as my topic for this opening address what might be called "Basic Christianity." What is basic Christianity? What is that Christianity which may be regarded as basic, as essential, as fundamental? How can we find basic Christianity? What is it when we do find it? What is its significance for our time in particular? These are the questions which I propound and which in turn, within the limits imposed by the span of an ordinary lecture period, I will attempt to answer.

How do we find basic Christianity? What, in other words, is the method of our approach to it? It is quite clear that we do not find it as we find basic English. Basic English is an attempt to select those words in the English vocabulary which are of a character so simple that they are understood by the learned and unlettered alike.

But by such a process we cannot possibly find basic Christianity. Were we to follow that particular analytical method it would be necessary to discover what that form of Christianity is which would be universally accepted by everyone bearing the Christian name in every time and in every place. But such a resultant, one is bound to say, would give us something utterly colorless, utterly innocuous, and utterly sterile. That is to say, by no lowest common denominator process is it possible to find that which is basic, nuclear, fundamental in the Christian religion. Not by going in quest of the lowest, but by seeking the highest do we find what Christianity basically is. And that, of course, would be the method to be pursued if we wanted to discover what true life is, that is, anything worth calling life in human terms. We do not seek it

in a sprawling jelly-fish in the shallow waters of the shore, but in a Saint Paul or a David Livingstone.

So, too, with that thing we call basic Christianity. How do we find it? The only authoritative source of information about the core of the Christian religion is the Bible, Holy Scripture. What do we seek when we take up the Bible? We endeavor to find out what it says, what its basic message is. We discover when we take the Bible seriously and listen to it that it is basically a book about a person, Jesus Christ. When we fix our attention upon him, he becomes the clue to our understanding of the Bible and also the core of the message of the Bible. What is the highest thing that the Bible says about Jesus Christ? We hear its central affirmation in four momentous words of St. Paul: "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Philippians 2:11). That is basic Christianity. *Jesus Christ is Lord*. That is the first creed in point of time, and the basic creed for all time.

Now what is it that this early, this timeless, this most basic Christian creed is saying? It says that Jesus, diversely known as "the Galilean," "the Nazarene," "the Carpenter," who at the last was crucified, is the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah of Israel. He to whom historians paid no heed is affirmed to be, by his resurrection from the dead, the one who fulfilled Jewish history and the man of destiny who would shape all history. And the creed goes beyond even that. He who was the Messiah of the Hebrew people and the man of destiny for all peoples, is declared to be the "Kurios," the Lord. This term *Kurios* was used by the Greek translators of the Old Testament to designate Jehovah or Yahweh, the Lord God of Israel. In the first century of our era it was applied also to the

imperial Caesars. So what the creed really says, is that Jesus the Christ, the risen, living Jesus Christ, was God manifest in the flesh, the God and Lord of all.

The Apostle Paul, who is Christianity's supreme servant and interpreter, applies the term "Lord" two hundred and fifty times to Jesus Christ. To be able to make that affirmation truly, he says, is salvation. "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved" (Rom. 10:9). He says also that no one can sincerely make that momentous affirmation without the direct influence of the Holy Spirit. "No man," he affirms, "can say that Jesus is the Lord but by the Holy Ghost" (I Cor. 12:3).

At this point let us pause a moment. There was one thing the early Christians knew perfectly when they made their daring affirmation. Men who knew Jewish monotheism and Roman imperialism were aware that no one could become a Christian in truth by affirming a creed as a mere statement of belief. They were perfectly clear that to say "Jesus Christ is Lord" as a conceptual formula, however true and orthodox, did not make one a Christian. Nor does it make one a Christian now, any more than it made one a Christian then. It is quite possible to affirm that Jesus Christ is Lord as the cold formula of a scholastic orthodoxy. We become Christian in the New Testament sense, only when we bow ourselves adoringly in the totality of our selfhood, before the living reality of Jesus Christ the Lord, into whose presence we are guided by Holy Scripture. Basic Christianity thus involves an apprehension of Christ and a commitment to Christ, nei-

ther one without the other. If you want a simple description or illustration of the word "existential," you have it here. It is the difference between a purely conceptual Christianity which affirms a creedal truth, and an Apostolic, Pauline Christianity which in affirming the creedal truth makes also a commitment of life in its wholeness to Jesus Christ the Lord. To say that Jesus Christ is Lord is no mere formula that gives us orthodox standing, but a submission to his sway who gives us vital being.

It was said recently by a New Testament scholar that the word "Lord" has become a very lifeless and, we might add, a quite sinister, word in our time. In the secular order the word has an evil odor because it is associated in some places with an irksome and outworn feudalism, and in others with the development of new forms of totalitarian lordship which are unworthy and deadly. "But," says this same student of the New Testament regarding this earliest and most basic creed, "to enter into its meaning and give it practical effect would be to recreate in great measure the atmosphere of the Apostolic age." That is true, but there is more at stake than recreating, whether for sentiment or research, the *atmosphere* of Apostolic Christianity. What we really need to do in our time is to recreate the *reality* of Apostolic Christianity. And that can only be done when we realize and take seriously the importance of that early creed, which is the timeless creed, *Jesus Christ is Lord*.

II.

We thus come to what is really our main inquiry. What is the significance of Jesus Christ being Lord? What does the Lordship of Jesus Christ mean in the concrete situation in which we find

ourselves today as representatives of our era, as people already engaged in ministerial tasks or preparing for Christian service? What is the special import of this truth for us today?

There are two main respects in which Jesus Christ is Lord. He is the *Lord of thought*, and he is the *Lord of life*.

Jesus Christ is the supreme authority for all thinking about ultimate things. As the Lord of thought he said two things which are supremely important for us today. They are basic in themselves and they are of supreme relevance for us in our time.

The first I would put thus—and pardon the abstractness of the formulation—because I feel it is the only way in which it can be put. Jesus Christ said, not in so many words, but by implication, that *reality is hierarchical*. That means that you have in the universe a graded scale of being. You have God, you have man, you have animals, you have matter; you have also spirits, angelic and satanic. There is an hierarchical nature of things in which true order is achieved when the lower gives obedience to the higher. Around the question as to whether the universe is hierarchical or not, and if so, in what form, the fiercest issues of our time are being waged.

Looking at this question, as we must, from the perspective and problem of man, man is truly man and fulfills his nature in the hierarchical scheme of things, when, recognizing his creaturehood, he loves and obeys his Creator, and when he loves his fellow men as his equals and promotes their true interests.

It is at this point that Jesus Christ, as the Lord of thought, takes issue with everything that is “existential” on the contemporary French model. For the French existentialist, Jean Paul Sartre,

there is no hierarchy in the universe. Because there is no God, there is no essential human nature. It is up to man himself to move from mere existence into essence and to make himself and all other things what they should be. Let man recognize his real situation amid universal purposelessness, let him accept his responsibility and show by his actions the path of life. Let every man say to himself, “Am I really the kind of man who has the right to act in such a way that humanity might guide itself by my action?”

One thing is clear. Such a view could only emerge in an anarchic epoch, as a heroic protest against a defeatist, despairing mood. It is equally clear that if heroic human atoms try to achieve essence by such a course they can achieve neither true manhood nor true society. Jesus, although he did not speak in abstract terms, unveiled both directly and by implication the crux of the human problem. Man has failed to recognize his place in the supreme hierarchy. He has acted and continues to act as a rebel. Man as we know him is man in revolt against hierarchical relations. He rejects the human obligation of love and obedience towards God. The Lord of thought addressed a question to his contemporaries, a most tremendous question which he addresses also to our generation. “What shall it profit a man though he should gain the whole world and lose his own soul?”

Ponder that question. Pry into it. What is the insight it unveils? Here the piercing glance of the Lord of thought lays bare the innermost reality and central urge of human nature. What man aspires after supremely is power, power to rule, to dominate, to be master of the world, or of his world. Follow that insight deep enough and far enough. Con-

sider in the light of it what recent history has made manifest about human nature in individual personalities and social groups. Man in the abysmal depths of his nature seeks more than happiness. What he really seeks is power, and if he gets power he is willing to sacrifice happiness.

Man's basic lust for power constitutes one of the great insights of John Milton, whose basic inspiration was biblical. For several generations Milton was in eclipse in literary circles. His critics did not like his hierarchical world view. But Milton is coming back because his insight into the nature of spiritual evil, as manifested in particular in the character of Satan, has been borne out by recent happenings. What is amazing about the extraordinary portrait of Satan which Milton paints, is that evil has become good. "Evil be thou my good," says the "lost archangel." And again, "Better to rule in Hell than serve in Heaven." There you have it, the passion of a fallen spirit totally unhappy, but unwilling to accept the conditions of happiness, and irrevocably committed to the pursuit of power to the end of the road.

In these tremendous, revolutionary days, this lust for power lies at the heart of many world leaders and world movements of quite diverse ilk. I do not believe that the great Nazis at the height of their power were really happy men. I do not believe that Marxist Communists of the Russian variety are at bottom happy men, but they are committed to achieve and to retain the power to rule. Let us recall the admission of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevski's novel that he and others had to lie and make themselves unhappy in order to control men and do for them what they believed should be done. Ac-

ording to reports from Russia Dostoevski's works, at first hailed as precursors of the Revolution, are now on the Sovietic index of forbidden books.

Rarely have I received such an awesome impression as when I read this last summer the biography of Karl Marx by the German Marxist, Otto Rühle. The book was published in the 'twenties. Marx appears as one of the unhappiest, one of the most unlovely, one of the most misanthropic, you might say also, one of the most parasitic, of men. But he was committed to the proposition that man, collective man, disinherited man, must rule, that the universe is not structurally but only dialectically hierarchical. He believed that in the cosmic process the dialectical hour had struck for the world's proletariat to rule. The rejection of the structural hierarchy of love and obedience proclaimed by Jesus Christ and re-echoed by John Milton leads to the dialectical hierarchy of Karl Marx and Joseph Stalin. The view that at different times in the historical process different social groups acquire absolute significance and the cosmic right to rule justifies the assumption of power by the group whose hour has struck. No matter what the ethics of the situation may be or the character of those involved, there must be established in our time—so this philosophy declares—a dictatorship of the masses which is inspired by hate and implemented by power.

God forbid that we should ever fail to have measureless sympathy with the social aspirations of men. But there is something literally satanic in the pretension that people committed to a policy of hate and of organized deceit, should be the hierarchical lords of history. In God's world only doom awaits

any such pretension, yet before this particular hierarchical pretension has worked itself out on the plane of history, the earth may be strewn with still more wreckage. We must ever be on the watch for any pretension on the part of a human individual or a human group to exercise sovereign lordship in God's hierarchical world. For man can be truly man only when he fits into his Creator's scheme of things, only when he loves and obeys God and in love serves the best interests of his fellowmen. Failure by man to recognize the hierarchical scheme of which he is a part, and to accept the conditions of his finitude, leads inevitably, as we have seen it lead actually, to "lostness," to a nihilistic vacuum, to the disintegration and dehumanization of man. Jesus Christ as the Lord of thought set forth that basic truth.

Jesus Christ said something else which is of supreme importance for thought. *Truth*, he said, *is revealed to the humble*, to "children." Ultimate truth about the universe is not revealed to the proud who think they know, or to people who have power pretensions of their own, but to those who are humble and childlike in character. Because Jesus was committed to that proposition he used a pictorial way of teaching. He spoke things. His presentations were not in general concepts but such as appealed to man's percepts and his love of the dramatic. In contrast to the Scribes who were the legalists and conceptualists of the epoch, Jesus saw to the heart of the hierarchical simplicities. He spoke in parables, in pictures. That is why he was so fascinatingly interesting to the common people. In every instance he used the essential image to communicate truth.

It is entirely in keeping with Jesus'

dramatic and pictorial method of communicating truth about God and man, that he himself as the Lord of thought should become the center of the most dramatic and profoundest simplicity in all thought. The story of Jesus' own life, "the old, old story of Jesus and his love," whereby "the Eternal did a temporal act, the Infinite became a finite fact," the proclamation that God became man for man's salvation—all that is so simple that a child can understand it and be transformed by it. It is also so profound that the wise and prudent and sophisticated of this age and of every age can miss its meaning and regard it all as foolishness.

Jesus' method of communicating truth about the great hierarchical simplicities is thoroughly germane to our cultural problem today. In every sphere of culture a premium is being put upon sophistication, whether in the realm of art, or literature, or science, or philosophy. The scribes of our time, the people who are of most repute in the learned societies, have cultivated to such an extent an esoteric kind of communication that they can be no longer understood by people of equal calibre and profundity whose research is carried on in some other sphere of knowledge. We have witnessed too a subtle glorification of the artist or poet whose work defies all understanding, including his own.

Take an example of what I mean. A group of very distinguished thinkers have been meeting annually for ten years in the Faculty Room of Columbia University under the general designation, "The Conference on Science, Philosophy, and Religion." From year to year the Conference has published exceedingly valuable and interesting volumes of monographs and discussions. This year the members of the

Conference engaged in a unique act of self-examination. They had come to realize that not only were they failing to influence culture, but they were failing to understand one another. They agreed that a basic problem of contemporary culture is to find some way "to teach scholars how difficult it is to make sense." A *New York Times* correspondent thus interpreted the mood that prevailed in this academic confessional:

"The distinguished academicians who were being asked to appraise their four-day labor submitted that scholars don't know how to write clearly; that they are reluctant to do so if they can; and that special jargon in a specialized field of inquiry is a badge of authority jealously guarded by its practitioners."

This is clearly the end of the cultural road in our time. We have reached at last the great abyss and the Kierkegaardian "seventy thousand fathoms deep." We have come to a moment when it has become impossible for our literateurs and our savants to say to other intelligent men what exactly it is that they mean. If proof is needed that contemporary culture in the highest university circles is verging on bankruptcy and that the concern for university education which has recently been expressed by such men as Sir Richard Livingstone, late Vice Chancellor of Oxford, and Sir Walter Moberly, Britain's greatest educator, are justified, here it is. The contemporary university is not really influencing thought and life in the way that thought and life need to be affected in a revolutionary age. Thought and life are being influenced today by dynamic forces quite alien to our academic tradition.

What I am getting to is this: When such representative systems as French

Existentialism and Marxian Communism deny the reality of a divine hierarchical structure in the universe, and when our universities cultivate cultural sectionalism and are incapable of stating ultimate simplicities, believers in Jesus Christ have the greatest opportunity in Christian history. Now is the time for the Church of Jesus Christ to proclaim the essential structure of things in the light and under the guidance of the Supreme Lord of thought.

III.

But I hasten on to the other and final point. *Jesus Christ is the Lord of life.* As the Lord of life Jesus Christ is the crucified Lord who conquered death. It is no sentimental or chance symbol which depicts him in the Apocalypse with the marks of his suffering—a Lamb as it has been "slain before the foundation of the world." Why must the Lord of Life be the *crucified* Lord?

He who set out to do God's will in an absolute way met with crucifixion. He ran athwart the lust for power in religion and politics, in culture and civilization. He met head on the vested interests of human nature in individuals and in groups. He refused to back down and to accept the ultimate validity of historical forces. He would not accommodate himself to the dominant trends in human nature and in the history of his time. This he refused to do out of loyalty to God; and so they crucified him.

So, too, as Jesus himself made clear, the Christian who sets out to be loyal to God will know the dread meaning of crucifixion in some form or other. "In this world," he said to his disciples, "ye shall have tribulation." When man sets out to serve God in truth the end is crucifixion. It is not for us as Chris-

tians to accommodate Jesus Christ and Christianity to our time. The real task is to make our time relevant to God and his purposes. That is the issue. We should not judge the ultimate truth of Christianity or of loyalty to Jesus Christ the crucified by the reception it receives, whether in the Church or in the state, in culture or in civilization. There may, of course, be acclaim. Jesus Christ was applauded at one time or another in his life. What we need is piercing discrimination. Let us beware of shackling Christianity to movements, however popular and plausible, or of making Christ crucified the mere source of inspiration for worthy human causes.

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ, however, was more than the assault of the forces of evil in human nature and in human history. It expresses the sacred truth that when God sets out to save man a Cross is inevitable. The Cross is the gift of God, the proof that he loved us and in Jesus Christ gave himself for us. God was in Christ crucified reconciling the world unto himself. Deity in all its fullness was in the Crucified Jesus making manifest the self-giving and forgiving love of God. Jesus in his death wrestled with and overcame all the cosmic forces that stood in the way of man's salvation. Rising again from the dead, the Crucified conquered death and made the great Enemy a spiritual mother. For Greek as for Jew death had meant frustration. Jesus Christ saved death for spiritual ends. In her dread womb new life was engendered and a new law of spiritual advance revealed. To be crucified with Christ, to share the fellowship of his suffering, to be obedient to the love of God whatever the cost, has the certainty that a "third day" shall dawn. For the Lord of life is the crucified conqueror of death.

But Jesus Christ is also the risen Lord of the Church. The Church is the divine community. Jesus founded the Church on the great confession: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." There is no Church that is not founded upon the affirmation of Christ's deity and sovereign lordship, whereby humanity and history receive their true fulfillment.

Where is the Church? "Where Christ is, there is the Church." So said the ancient dictum. Where allegiance to Christ is affirmed, where life is committed to him, where the sacraments are administered, where the Word is preached, where individuals and congregations manifest the marks of the Spirit of Christ, there is Christ himself in the midst of his Church. It is simply not true, however, that "Where the Church is, there is Christ." One becomes increasingly impatient with the pretensions of those who presume to manipulate Jesus Christ for their own ends and with all those who presume that the Church is a structure which has nothing to do with the spiritual life of its members. No church is a true Church where Jesus Christ is not adored as Saviour and followed as King.

New men and women in Christ for whom Jesus Christ is Lord in their personal lives and corporate relations is the greatest need of the Church. To "learn" Jesus Christ is the supreme lesson, and Christlikeness the supreme goal, of Christian living.

But Christianity is also a corporate affair. It means the love of the brethren; it means, besides, a common devotion to the cause of Christ. The Church is a worshipping community but it is also a witnessing community. The Church must be the Church of the

Living Lord, both within the sanctuary and beyond the sanctuary. When I think of the Church of Jesus Christ I think of a group of brotherly enthusiasts. You can get a kind of brotherliness which makes simple sociability an end in itself. "The more we get together the happier we'll be." That is not Christian brotherhood. Christian brotherhood is the joy of those who love to be together in the hours of rest when the sun goes down. But next morning with the dawn, they will take to the highway; they will cross the ridge; they will move towards the great frontiers of life. The Christian comrades will remember that the Risen One is on the march with them and will be with them "until every tongue shall confess that he is Lord." For he who is at the "right hand of the Father" is also the companion and guide of the pilgrim way.

The Church of the living Lord is a

road fellowship. For us in Princeton Seminary the Church must be our campus community as we live and act together. It is for us here and now, within our thirty acres, to make the Church a living community of our Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot really be members of Christ's Body, the Church, if we are not members of one another. If we fail to constitute a real Christian community on this campus, we deny the Lord. Let us therefore in the terms of the great and timeless and ever basic creed re-echo the affirmation: *Jesus Christ is Lord*. Let us show by our loving obedience, that he is Lord of all. Let us say, each one, "Thou, O Living Christ, art my Lord and my God." If we do that, the apostolic era will come back again but not merely as an atmosphere; it will be recreated as a reality, through the grace of Jesus Christ the Lord.

SEMINARY BOOK LISTS

As a service to students in the preparation of essays and as a guide to independent reading, three seminary bibliographies have been prepared which will be of interest to alumni: *A Bibliography of Bible Study* (1948) and *A Bibliography of Systematic Theology* (1949) have been published by the Seminary Library and may be had by addressing a request to the Library. The price of the Biblical Bibliography is eighty-five cents and of the System-

atic Theology Bibliography sixty-five cents. *A Bibliography of Practical Theology* (1949) has been edited by Dr. Blackwood and the members of the Practical Department and may be secured for fifty cents from the Theological Book Agency of the Seminary. The bibliographies are printed in attractive pamphlet form and should be of great value to alumni who want to keep up with the best books in these various fields.