

INAUGURAL ADDRESS

—DELIVERED BEFORE—

THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

—OF THE—

S. W. P. UNIVERSITY,

IN JUNE, 1885,

—BY THE—

REV. JOSEPH R. WILSON, D. D.,

And Published by Request of the Board, at its Meeting
in June, 1886.

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CLARKSVILLE, TENN.:
W. P. TITUS, BOOK AND JOB PRINTER.
1886.

CORRESPONDENCE.

CLARKSVILLE, TENNESSEE, June 16, 1886.

Rev. Dr. Joseph R. Wilson—DEAR BROTHER—Under instructions from the Board of Directors of the Southwestern Presbyterian University, a copy of the address delivered by you when inaugurated (in June, 1885) as Professor of Theology in this Institution, is hereby requested for publication. The regretted delay in preferring this request has been quite unavoidable.

Very truly yours,

JOHN N. WADDEL,
Ch'n of Executive Committee.

CLARKSVILLE, TENNESSEE, June 17, 1886.

Rev. Dr. John N. Waddel—DEAR BROTHER—I consent to the publication of my Inaugural Address, even at this late day, in the hope that its contents may not be unacceptable, as setting forth, in brief outline, the conservative character of that Theology which I am here to teach.

Sincerely yours,

JOSEPH R. WILSON.

Inaugural Address.

Gentlemen of the Board of Directors—

The University which is under your care has attracted the pleased attention of the friends of progressive education throughout the country; and its growing importance is a source of satisfaction to many who have no interest in its prosperity other than that which, in large minds, springs from a gratified public spirit. From a number of our States students have already been attracted to its several schools, and the magnet which has drawn these is destined to be felt throughout a constantly widening circle of influence. It needs not to be said that much of the success which has thus far been achieved, is due to the able Faculty of your selection, at whose head appears the name of one who has the entire confidence of all those to whom it has been given to know how to reverence wisdom, or respect dignity, or recognize eminency. I, therefore, cannot but be conscious of a glow of pardonable pride in view of an official connection with this rising Institution and these superior men.

Yet it has been with the recoil of an unaffected timidity that I have accepted the Professorship upon whose active duties I am soon to enter; even the timidity which, true to the derivation of the word, implies the presence of a certain *fear*. The shrinking of my apprehensions is, however, not occasioned by the fact that the business of professorial instruction is in itself one to which I have hitherto been unaccustomed. On the contrary, my past life has been greatly enriched by the pleasures of class-room

teaching: and I have had abundant opportunity to discover that as no service, when discharged thoroughly, is harder, so when not dispatched perfunctorily, there is none more fascinating. The trepidation to which I confess is, in a large degree, due to quite another consideration; to this: that it is expected of me to fulfill a task which no predecessor has undertaken—to prosecute a journey for which there is no trodden path, and in which my steps are to be those of a pioneer. The work assigned me is a work hitherto wholly untried. Instructors in theology there are many: beginners in this department of knowledge there have been to whom no foregoing preceptor has declared the way, nor is this the only University in connection with which a movement has progressed similar to that on whose threshold we are now standing. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the Church with which you and I are connected—nor any portion of it—has heretofore inaugurated what is now incipient at this place. It is a novelty in the history of Presbyterianism. In advancing this statement, I am not unmindful of those renowned Scotch universities wherein chairs of theology have long been occupied by men of brilliancy and of power—of a theology, too, which is, in all essential respects, distinctively like that of our own. These institutions are, however, of Cæsar's headship rather than of Christ's. Nothing that matches *them*, therefore, would be tolerated in this land of unfettered Christian freedom: nothing that makes the Church a pensioner of the State. The theological "Seminary" we have had in its stead—a species of organization which, until after the Disruption in Scotland, was peculiar to America—and instituted by our Presbyterian fathers at a time when there was no alternative choice: if there was to be a perpetuation of an educated ministry, this wholly novel device seemed indispensable. And some are bold to predict that the hour will, one day, strike when the conventual Seminary-plan must be abandoned for something wider and freer, for a plan which shall place students of divinity in contact, at more points than now, with the world around them; as, it might easily be shown, ought to be the case. Certain it is, however, that by the arrangement *here* making—for putting a course of theology in concurrent connection with the usual schools of a University series—you will be the first in the history of our Church to prepare a practical answer to the question whether there shall be a signal

departure from the customary policy. And, whilst it furnishes occasion for gratulation, that the independent enterprise of these Southwestern Synods has thus entered upon a path which is lined upon no guiding chart,—yet, just at this point it is, that my disquietings find their awakening and their foreboding—lest, in such hands as mine, an experiment upon whose success so much may depend should become perplexed and marred, and the sceptical watchers shall have it to say: "Aha! it was not worth the trial." But, happily, there is always to be had the help that descends from the mightiest of all, on whose sustaining arm the humblest of His servants, who does what he can to help himself, may confidently rely. I am sure, too, of encouragement from my brethren, to many of whom I am indebted for such assurances of sympathy and support as might almost serve to embolden cowardice itself. And yet, whatsoever one's uphodings when undergoing such a trust, he must needs be appalled, not alone by reason of the novelty of his position and the peculiar responsibility it involves, but also because of the labor that is required for the mastery of a science which, in addition to its own inherent ambiguities, is constantly pressed with new questions that demand the utmost resources of the very widest scholarship.

There is, however, not a little comfort derivable from the fact that the truths I am to handle are not still awaiting the initiative of an original exploration; for, the patient industry and practiced learning of the past have not merely brought these truths forth into large and distinct view, but, to an extent almost exhaustive, have ascertained their interdependent relations and exhibited many of their finest harmonies. So that, with respect to nearly all of them, there is now needed, not so much the painstaking discoverer, or the inventive systematizer, as the trustful follower and the thoughtful imitator. What, therefore, the occupant of this chair shall lack in brilliancy of adventure among the clouds that may seem to hang upon the horizon of his extensive subject, ought to find its compensation in his conservative hold upon the secure ground of established certainty, where there is room enough, and to spare, for the largest building which intellectual fervor—like that of Thomas Chalmers—ever erected; or speculative fancy—like that of Edward Irving—ever adorned.

But what is this fixed theology, whose basis is at once so broad and so trustworthy? It had been my purpose to select a few of

its most vital points, and discuss these somewhat in extenso. But it is better, I think, to indicate in more general description the character of the theology to which it shall be my aim to adhere—regarding it in its *entirety*, as being less formal and more satisfactory not only, but also because time is thus saved and tedium avoided.

It might, indeed, be sufficient simply to state that the theology to which I am referring is strictly *biblical* in every portion of its structure, and as to the very atmosphere which breathes through it all. Inasmuch, however, as it is a fact that, with scarcely an exception, the many differing theological systems which claim to be evangelical (and even some which can make no such claim) do likewise profess to find their own vindication in what this same Holy Book authorizes, it is necessary to be more explicit.

That theology, then, which I regard as possessing most largely and most distinctly, the seal of a divine warrant, is known to every student of creed-history as the *Pauline*; and whose characteristic features are quite unmistakable, if, for nothing else, by reason of the very peltings it has received from the numerous foes with which, in every age, it has had to contend. Or, let us style it the theology of the *Reformation*,—as more completely illustrated by brave Zwingli than by bold Luther; as lifted into finer prominence by Knox the hardy than by Cranmer the hesitating; and the cardinal principles of which the agency of undaunted Wickliffe was, long before their day, chosen to revive amid the ashes of an apparently expiring Christianity—whilst now and again such martyrs as the erudite Huss and the eloquent Latimer had it translated for them into those horses of flame, the fire of whose nostrils lights the world to this day.

Or, name it, if you please, the theology of protesting Germany, of covenanting Scotland, of counter-remonstrant Holland, to say nothing of Calvinistic Geneva that modern but improved Athanasian Alexandria—the theology which fed the faith and fanned the hopes and fortified the courage of a “thus-saith-the-Lord” ancestry, the intelligence, the intrepidity, the inspiring activity of whose robust piety have never been excelled—the well-tryed theology which now signalizes our unequalled Catechisms and pre-eminent Confession—and whose most conspicuous glory was, from the first, what it still is, the glory of the *cross*—the theology that has steadfastly refused to tolerate at the altar of a sin-bearing sacrifice, any Priest; or on the throne of redeeming sovereignty,

any King; or within the sanctuary of the soul itself, any Prophet—who shall shadow however dimly, or rival, however distantly, the all-sufficient Lord Jesus Christ, apart from whom, whether viewed in His voluntary humiliation or in His wonderful exaltation, no sinner can ever be saved and no believer can ever be sainted. It is that theology, therefore, the central facts of which are the creation of man, his fall in the representative first, and his recovery in the vicarious second, Adam:—and these surrounded by a circle of doctrines wherein emerges the necessity for repentance, for a new birth, for union with Christ, for the indwelling Spirit, for entire sanctification through appointed means of grace—to say nothing of that surprising eschatology which discloses the mystery of death, declares the millenium, depicts the final judgment, divides the curtain beyond which are beheld the raptures of heaven and the regrets of hell, the one the perfection of happiness because the perfection of holiness, the other the perfection of grief because the perfection of guilt. It is that theology, moreover, which is at once a proclamation of man’s personal responsibility because of his free agency, and of God’s absolute and universal rule because of His essential supremacy:—the theology which publishes, without attempting to explain, the unity of the God-head as immanent in three co-equal persons, and to view their several self-distributed places in the completed plan of redeeming love:—the whole issuing in a visible Church, whose members, entering by baptism, and composed of professing believers and their offspring, are known to belong to the invisible Church by the visible fruits of their holy living.

Such, then, (with omissions some of which are inferentially suppliable, and others which, being left out, do not affect the general portraiture) is a sketch of that grand theology which is familiar and precious to the thoughts of all those biblical experts who are neither Prelatist nor Independent, Arminian nor Socinian, Antinomian nor Legalist, Formalist nor Fatalist; Quietist nor Rationalist:—a theology which is also a philanthropy, but which is not a mere philosophy or a mere morality:—and which, at every point, rests upon that infallible Scripture from whose arbitrament there is no appeal as for whose authority there is no substitute: consequently a theology from whose well defined paths if your professor shall at any time swerve, let him be promptly

silenced, for you will not dare to absolve him, "though he were an angel from heaven."

What then? Why, this: your voice unites with mine in a plea for *conservatism*, the maintenance, unimpaired, of that great body of sacred lessons which has been given into our hands by the orthodox belief of many preceding generations as an invaluable deposit, freely to profit by but never to be profaned. Nor need we fear that thus we shall lay the grasp of arrest upon and shackle the limbs of our Church's advancement in whatsoever direction she may propose to move for the spiritual subdual of the world. That doctrinal conservation is not inconsistent with practical aggressiveness, let the entire history of Presbyterian exploit, in every field of controversy and of conquest, loudly attest. Or, if the lack of readiness as to our forward works has sometimes seemed to throw discredit upon the calm repose of our faith, the blame is not traceable to a fettered theology, only to a frozen piety. At any rate, in these later fermenting days, when the temptations are so sharp and so imperative, to indulge in sensational departures from "the faith which was once (*i. e.* once for all) delivered to the saints," the conviction cannot be impressed too strongly upon our minds, that alone by walking "in the good old paths" is there either ultimate safety or present satisfaction. Every qualified theological preceptor may, indeed, be permitted to elaborate in his own idiosyncratic way the several truths of which he shall treat, just as the competent preacher, to quiet the demands that are constantly being made for newer moulds of thought, may be allowed to enforce his pulpit themes by conformable methods of illustration. But it is one thing to alter a superannuated fashion of doctrinal *dress*—although even this requires to be done with shears of caution—and quite another to repair the texture of the cloth itself, as if this, too, were worn out. The gold of divine things may sometimes, when the dust of ages is dimming it, be freshly polished; but, in the process, there must be no portion of its precious mass rubbed away. The oldest established and truest theology may, without detriment, be occasionally submitted to the alembic of hitherto untried tests; but never when the least waste shall thereby occur. It is no foe to a fertile fancy that would only decorate it; but its wise friends will not consent to any material change in the effort to reform it.

The originality which shall sustain it with fresh arguments is to be welcomed, but the originality which, not content with this, proceeds to clip or to mend it is to be warned off. The ark of God may be put into a "new cart," as when it was brought out of Abinadab's house; but it needs no anxious Uzzah, with the plausible hand, to prevent the appointed oxen from shaking it.

And precisely here emerges a weighty reason for imparting to our future ministry a thorough theological training—not alone that they thus may be transfused with the great principles they are to expound and impress, but that they may so be informed by these as composing an articulated *system*, at the sight of whose beauty they shall be the less incited to the bad work of tampering with it. Heresy is a malaria that may float in the purest air. Not often, however, is heresy the offspring of a sound and comprehensive scholarship. Nearly always it is the fruit of ignorance—an effect due to a limited horizon. The apostles themselves to what errors were they not prone before their minds were fully enlightened! What a difference between Peter the petulant denier, and Peter the Pentecost preacher or the epistle-writer; or between John shrinking from the shadow of the cross and John the apocalyptic seer; or between Saul the Old Testament harpy and Paul the New Testament hero! Those men who, in every age of the Church, have aspired to be teachers before they themselves had been adequately taught—it has been as a miracle when, if possessed of constructive genius or of vivid imagination, they have not become heretics almost as soon as they became heralds: the bringers in of false doctrines, to which in all sincerity perhaps, they were ready to swear, because they were not familiar with the mightier true. You will find, therefore, that it has not usually been the chair where solid learning sits a sound theology has had the most to fear. Sciolism is the mother of that presumption which refuses to "let the well-enough alone;" and it is the very arrogance of presumption that essays to reconstruct those time-honored standards of ours which, having done successful battle upon so many of the high places of contention, continue as bright and unimpaired as ever they were, are indeed all the brighter and the better because of the blows they have received and withstood.

But, it may now be asked, does conservatism in theology forbid that this great science shall, to any great extent, be *progressive*, requiring that it must always remain at a standstill just where

we find it, without the possibility of accretion or of that power of growth which belongs to all things that live? Is it already perfect, and thus susceptible of no manner or degree of improvement? Has it put forth all its branches or perfected all its buds? No thoughtful man will reply to such questionings by an unqualified affirmative answer. We are, indeed, bound to believe that the cardinal tenets of Christianity admit of no modification whatsoever, seeing that they are the manifest product of infallible wisdom. But who will venture to say that the time shall never come—that a clearer day shall never dawn—when some of these shall be better *understood* than they are at present? And with an advancing elucidation, the science whose office it is to make known, not to create, must of course advance with equal step. Thus, the measure of “progress” to which our existing theology can properly look forward, must be due to a deeper insight into inspired Scripture itself—an insight which may issue in requiring a less inadequate statement of the obscurer doctrines, whilst producing a still livelier persuasion of what is fundamental, along with a broader comprehension of the whole articulated body of sacred truth. Improved exegetical apparatus, in a word, is likely to achieve almost every desirable result: whether in showing the Bible to be nowhere inconsistent with itself; or in displaying its accord with the established facts that illustrate natural law; or in winning from its foes so much of debatable ground as may yet, on this hand or on that, remain as an object of dispute. That is, accepting the existing Scripture canon, as we demonstrably must, and as it has been accepted by evangelical Christendom from the first, *ubique, semper, ab omnibus*; and resting, as also we unhesitatingly must, upon the evidence of its divine and literal inspiration, the principal call which is made upon modern scholarship is for rendering more perspicuous, here and there, the exact meaning of the finished Scripture’s original wording. So far, therefore, as the science of theology includes the ever-extending science of *interpretation*, it is progressive, and no further than this.

We need, accordingly, nothing of such “higher criticism,” which, not content with illuminating the purport, with ascertaining the precise sense of God’s word, audaciously suggests an altogether different word, by dint of denying its theopneustic integrity and by the wild endeavor to reduce to a rank with the merely apocryphal, the Penteteuch even, to substitute for this keying

portion of the mighty arch of revelation certain dream-fictions of its own. *High criticism* this! It is not genuine criticism at all—which, when true, occupies the attitude of a witness not that of a lawgiver, of a historian not of an oracle—at any rate, is not a specious defamer of the truth it professes, however loosely, to hold, but only its honest declarer; or else its surrenderer altogether, which in these days much of what is called the best criticism actually is.

Having thus said enough for justifying my occupancy of the chair to which I have been assigned—if such justification be found in the sincere heartiness of an unreserved subscription to those standards of our Presbyterian orthodoxy which, in the future as in the past, are to be regarded as unchangeable, except in the one open direction of an enlarging knowledge of its various contents—I am now about to relieve your attention, leaving unsaid much more that might be permitted, in the way of expanding or of illustrating what has been so partially discussed.

Only, before resuming my seat, I will take the liberty of inviting your thoughts, for a few moments, to a question of importance which was purposely left unnoticed when adverting to the hopeful fact that you are beginning in this University a new era in theological education—by no longer isolating it, as has been the case with our Church heretofore, and still is elsewhere. Is it exhaustive of your design to furnish a convenience for the study of theology to those *only* who shall have the gospel ministry in their professional prospect? This I presume it must mainly be, but not, I trust, exclusively. For, let me ask, has not the time come—nay, did it not come much earlier than now—when the immense science of which I have been speaking ought not to be regarded as, in view of a complete education, essentially different from the sciences, say, of law and medicine and engineering? Ought it to be longer classed with the merely technical or the purely vocational? All persons have occasion, now and then, to heal the sick, or even to prepare a case at law, or to project a road, but who is not *always* in need of a sound theology upon a knowledge of which he is, at every turn of life, dependent—dependent at the very core and centre of his being—and by the light of which his very eternity is illumined? It would, of course, not be possible to instruct fully the multitudes in this branch of necessary learning. These must obtain what they can,

as they can, of its easier lessons from friendly neighbor or faithful preacher, or fingered Bible: and, thank God, they do, many of them by one means or another, find the right way amid a thousand obstacles. Yet, suppose there were a large and ever enlarging class of persons—merchants, farmers, physicians, politicians, lawyers—who, scattered through the land, should be so versed in the truths of a theology like ours as to be competent to indoctrinate others also, or, at the least, to guard, where occasion offered, against unsuspected error, what a new face society must by and by wear! How much stronger, too, would be our churches, with men in the pew as able perhaps as the men in the pulpit, to apprehend and to expound the messages of saving love! Nor would infidelity have so free a field, when laics, such as the late Judge Black, as well as clerics, were, leader-like, championing the cause of God—the layman being, indeed, all the mightier because of his supposed more disinterested and unpaid volunteering.

But, however all this may be, it has, in my judgment, become well-nigh indispensable: the addition to a liberal education of a theological schooling, which is the placing of a roof upon the otherwise unfinished scholarly house, if not of an essential bracing wall to hold it up and to make it habitable: Or, to change the figure, the ordinary scholarship, however complete and heavily-freighted, will, without this balancing adjunct, run always as an endangered ship, upon its beam-ends, to be wrecked, perhaps, at last.

Let the departure you are making be a great one—the greatest possible—and the voice of it go forth as an invitation to all young men to resort hither for a training the most thorough that can be obtained, if they will accept *theology* as the finish to their classics, as not *here*, at least, an *esoteric* study to be imparted to the inner few whilst denied to the outside many. But, enough.

I had a dear friend who, an honored theological professor during a decade of highly useful years, and completed just before he passed to his reward, entered upon his duties with a trembling solicitude similar to that which is a part of my experience to-day. I allude to the Rev. Dr. A. B. VanZandt: the closing words, slightly altered, of whose inaugural address, delivered at New Brunswick in 1872, I fittingly adopt as my own:

“Immediate results that shall meet the desires and gladden the heart of the Church, are more than I can promise. The issue is with God; and, without the advantage of a name or reputation

in this new field of labor, I must cast myself upon His grace, and upon the forbearance of His people. To my brethren in the ministry, and especially to those by whose influence and suffrages this responsibility has been laid upon me, I claim the right to appeal. And, by all their personal regards, by their attachment to this young institution, the prosperity of which is identified with that of the Church in whose ranks we together serve her adorable Head, I importune them, whilst I utter the earnest and utmost desire of a burdened heart in those touching and comprehensive words of an apostle: ‘brethren, pray for us.’”