Church: Contemporary Issues

Erskine Seminary: What Went Wrong?
By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

The religious media have recently reported that Erskine Theological Seminary has been enrolling Jewish, Muslim, Mormon, and Seventh-Day Adventist clerics in its Doctor of Ministry program.

No "Fight" Left

Erskine Theological Seminary in South Carolina is the official denominational seminary of the purportedly conservative Associate Reformed Presbyterian Synod, more generally known as the ARP Church. Established in 1837, Erskine Seminary has conservative roots. It is named for the brothers Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine, 18th-century Scottish dissenters who broke with the established Church of Scotland, and preached against the dual dangers of legalism (attempting to earn salvation through law-keeping) and antinomianism (the notion that true saving faith will not necessarily lead to Spirit-wrought sanctified living). The Erskine brothers helped found a Scottish synod that is a historical antecedent of the present-day North American ARP Church.

It is reported that Ralph Erskine once said this, echoing Paul's words in Ephesians chapter six: "Faith, without trouble or fighting, is a suspicious faith; for true faith is a fighting, wrestling faith." But the seminary that bears his name long ago lost the will to fight for the "faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

Non-Christian Clerics Taking a Doctorate in Christian Ministry?

In recent weeks the religious press has carried reports that supposedly "reveal" the fact that Erskine Seminary has enrolled Jewish, Muslim, Mormon, and Seventh-Day Adventist clerics in its Doctor of Ministry program. These reports stemmed mainly from an article
posted on the Internet by Dr. Charles Wilson, a retired ARP pastor and former member of the Erskine board of trustees.¹

However, for those who have been watching the situation at Erskine, this is not "news". The Erskine website posted online press releases as far back as January 2005 touting the fact that Erskine, under a contract with the United States Army, was enrolling military chaplains of any religion in what is supposed to be a doctoral program to train Christian ministers.² In his article, Wilson characterized it as Erskine's "selling its educational services to the highest bidder."

**A Long History of Doctrinal Deviancy**

This is by no means the first problem at purportedly conservative Erskine Seminary. The seminary faculty has long included professors with degrees from mainline liberal theological institutions such as Princeton, Yale, Cambridge, Pittsburgh Seminary, and Southern Methodist University, as well as neo-liberal schools such as Calvin Seminary, Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia), and Covenant Theological Seminary.

Dallas Willard, a guru of the Emergent Church Movement, is Erskine's Visiting Professor of Spiritual Formation (a term from the postmodern lexicon that, in today's religious academia, can mean anything from reading the Bible to practicing Eastern meditation, or worse). Willard denies the omniscience of God, and in a September 2006 Christianity Today article he stated that he is not certain how people are saved.³

Faculty members have long touted the neo-orthodox theology of Karl Barth and the postmodern, truth-is-what-you-make-it philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer. They have also openly denied the inerrancy of the Bible. Erskine long ago removed from its faculty qualification statement the requirement that its professors hold to the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture.⁴

On top of all of this, the ARP Synod for decades maintained cordial relations with the apostate Presbyterian Church in the USA, and many of its faculty members have been
associated with that denomination. Only in 2009 did the ARP Synod finally break its relationship with the PCUSA because "the theological aberrations of the PCUSA continue to worsen."5 (Where have they been for the past eighty years?)

How Did It Happen?

How did a once-conservative, orthodox seminary come to such a state of shipwreck? The answer is that the men who were supposed to be the watchmen on the walls to protect the institution against doctrinal deviancy failed to do their job. Dr. Wilson describes the mindset at Erskine, based on his own experience as a member of the board of trustees:

At the orientation meeting for new members, the Board Chairman and the President informed the new members that their task on the Board was the "Big Picture." The Chairman and President discouraged us from "micro-managing and meddling in day-to-day affairs." A condescending message was sent: the Administration and the Executive Committee of the Board know best and individual Board members should back off. Over the years, Board after Board has bought into that foolish nonsense, and the hands-off policy continues.6

Wilson admits that he himself once bought into this way of thinking, but has at last seen the error of his ways and is sounding the alarm:

The first commandment in the ARPC: "Be nice!" The second commandment in the ARPC: "Never speak ill about Erskine — even if what is said is true." Thus the "culture of niceness" trumps institutional and personal integrity. And worse, it does profound damage to the cause of Jesus Christ. Can we reasonably expect God to bless such a mess?...

Like the crowd in the old story of "The Emperor's New Clothes" we have been hesitant to speak out about the obvious. We have believed high-sounding platitudes
and pietistic nonsense that have served as fig leaves for naked administrative unfaithfulness....

Erskine is a toxic mixture of secular humanism and Christianity. On the Day of Judgment, will God quiz us on our willingness to live with this syncretism? Often at Erskine the lines between belief and unbelief are unclear. How many students have had their faith undermined by this syncretism?

Given the liberal grip on Erskine, and the record of similar cases in the history of Christian academia, restoration of Erskine to its long-ago-lost orthodox position is highly unlikely. The Biblical imperative (2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1) is separation, not compromise.

**A Warning for God's People**

In two recent articles, we have discussed the Bible's warnings about lack of doctrinal watchfulness in Christian education (Is Anyone Watching on the Walls of Christian Academia?), and the evil delight of Satan to undermine the foundations of sound doctrine (When is Satan At His Most Dangerous?). We won't repeat all that we said there, except for these brief excerpts:

Christian parents, exercise great discernment in choosing the place for your children's higher education. Make sure the faculty and administrators are watchmen on the walls who will guard them against error and apostasy, not allies of the evil one who will encourage them to welcome the enemies of Christ and His Word with open arms.

The most effective defense against Satan's "inside jobs" is to cling tenaciously to the Word of God, and to utterly reject any teaching and any teacher who is not completely in accord with the doctrines of the faith that are given to us in the Word.
First, we must recognize that doctrinal deviancy starts because of liberalizing influences in Bible colleges and seminaries. Therefore, trustees, administrators, and faculty members must be watchmen on the walls, careful in their recruiting of leaders and instructors, watchful for the first sign of divergence from the truth in the classroom.

In other words, we must have a zero-tolerance policy regarding doctrinal deviancy and those who propagate it.

I encourage you to review those articles in light of the example of Erskine Theological Seminary.

References:


7. Wilson, "Love That Has Had Enough of Gradualism."

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