

ULTIMATE OBLIGATION *

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A member of the faculty of Asbury Theological Seminary has a great opportunity but he also has a great responsibility and obligation. The magnitude of that obligation can be accurately measured only when the divine call as well as the human need is considered.

Neither the opportunity nor the obligation shall be properly appraised without a realization of the importance of philosophical and theological truth. The difference between a Christian and a non-Christian rests initially in what one believes. That difference may appear small if measured only in ethical affirmations. William James said there was little difference in men but that that difference made a tremendous change. This statement is also true of those who hold differing philosophical beliefs. A false philosophy and the true philosophy may appear to the casual observer to lie close together, but actually they stand in polar relation. Here at Asbury Theological Seminary we are committed to a definite philosophical position. Our obligation to that position is buttressed by our debt to many persons.

AREAS OF OBLIGATION

We have an obligation to the founders of this institution. This Seminary was founded at a time when the "old Liberalism," then called "Modernism," was dominant. Churches across the nation were being closed, revivals were placed under taboo as antiquated, basic doctrines were ridiculed. Christian schools, founded with the blood and tears of consecrated saints, were changed into centers of skepticism and atheism by false philosophy and false theology. It was against this background that Henry Clay Morrison and his co-workers founded this Seminary, with the express purpose of turning back into the blood stream of the Christian church a Spirit-filled,

* This article and the one following were installation addresses given at Asbury Theological Seminary, October 12, 1965.

Scripture-based ministry. Space forbids the inclusion of the details of the sacrifice required; but only an utmost willingness to sacrifice and an uttermost faith in God kept them true to the task. As we contemplate their devotion there seems to echo across the years the words of the poem,

We are the dead, short days ago
 We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
 But now we sleep.

And there follows in sobering tones,
 To you from failing hands we throw
 The torch. Be yours to hold it high.
 If ye break faith with us who die,
 We shall not sleep.

Besides the undeniable obligation we have to the founders of this institution, we also have an obligation to those who have carried on across the intervening years. The trying times of the great depression of the thirties came only a few years after the Seminary was founded. Even long established schools failed at that time. Only by prayer, sacrifice, and unyielding efforts did this school continue and grow. Across the years of World War II and the decades that have followed, prayer and perseverance have prevailed. Today Asbury is one of the leading seminaries of the nation. What a debt of gratitude we owe to those who have and who are still carrying on.

Beyond the debt of the past there is still the obligation of the present. Students are here who are sacrificing basic comforts in order to attend. Student families are here who are living without the minimal necessities. Such families trust God and carry on, inspired with the hope of some day taking their place on the battle front of God's eternal concern and man's desperation. How deplorable if any institution robs them of their faith. How tragic if they exchange a flaming heart for a full head. But how wonderful if to their flaming heart can be added the tools for more effective service. A surgeon caught in the presence of a fatal accident exclaimed in frenzied tones, "I could save him if I only had my tools." We have the obligation here to furnish those who grace our halls of learning with the tools for effective service.

Our obligation, however, reaches beyond the classroom. Out in the world's highways and byways lie a multitude in the darkness of despair. Nothing but the Gospel can bring light and hope to such hopelessness. The decline of Western prestige in our world is primarily due to the eclipse of the Gospel within the Protestant tradition. With other Evangelicals we seek to hold the line against present day apostasy and delusion and to rekindle the same fires of Holy Spirit baptism within the Church.

AFFIRMATION OF LOYALTY

I accept this position on the faculty of Asbury Theological Seminary with a firm belief that my affirmation of loyalty to this institution coincides with my dedication to God and the Gospel. An ultimate obligation rests upon me. It is ultimate horizontally because it extends to every son of Adam's race. It is ultimate vertically because it is to God who called me and entrusted me with this task.

Asbury is a confessional school; it has guidelines which give direction theologically and philosophically. Yet in no sense is our obligation merely to an established confession. Behind the present confession stands the eternal fact, and our theological position is not determined by past trends but by present truth. In a day when doctrine, in all too many places, has deteriorated to theological relatives and meaningless clichés, we proclaim a Gospel founded upon the certainty of God's eternal Word, and one which is filled with the dynamic of the Holy Spirit. In a day when coercive ecumenical uniformity is being heralded as a substitute for Holy Spirit unity, we earnestly proclaim "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints." The various theological trends of today, however, are not to be ignored or rejected without examination; they are to be evaluated. Such an opportunity is welcomed with the consciousness that God's revelation in the Scriptures remains a reliable standard of measurement.

PHILOSOPHY AND THE GOSPEL

Since my field is philosophy, perhaps some may ask how it has any intimate or current relation to the Gospel. The philosophical spectrum today reveals many colors not found in the rainbow. In fact there is no rainbow in today's major philosophies. Darkness has obscured the sun. The title of a recent work, *The Twilight of Western Thought*, mirrors all too accurately the philosophical outlook. Philosophy, as such, does not deal directly with religion, but it does deal with issues vital to religion. Anthropology, cosmology, metaphysics, epistemology, and our philosophy of history either support or refute our Gospel.

"What is man?" is a question of philosophical concern, but it is also vital to Christianity. The Psalmist made this query centuries ago, and the answer we give will either support or negate our religious beliefs. Is man only a product of biological processes? Is he merely the apex of biological evolution? Or did he come from the hand of God, endowed with a spirit which could know and fellowship with God? If he is only an animal then he is not salvable. Hence to

reduce man to animal status makes salvation an absurd consideration. Either man came from God's hand as a special creation or one has no more basis for a hope of heaven than for a hope of dog-heaven.

How did our cosmos originate? From whence did it come? Is it the result of chance, or is it the product of a Designer? Someone calculated that for our world to have happened by chance it would take enough chances that the figures themselves would reach around the world thirty-five times. Sir James Jeans has calculated that it would take 100,000,000 years for 100,000 monkeys pecking on 100,000 typewriters to happen by chance upon the plays of Shakespeare.¹ Certainly if we are to obtain any reliable information on creation it must come from someone who was present when it happened. The wisest guesses of men are only guesses. Perhaps someone may ask what difference does it make how the cosmos originated. It makes all the difference between atheism and a theism, with God at the helm in our world. If God did not create the universe He has no legitimate right to rule it. Moreover, if He did not create it He would scarcely be able to rule it. History is replete with theories of the origin of the universe, but the writer fails to find any suggestion which favorably compares with "God created the heavens and the earth."

What is ultimate reality? Science today hesitates to say whether matter or energy is ultimate. We have followed the secrets of nature far beyond anything known to former generations, but ultimate reality remains as much a secret as it was to the ancient world. As we peer into the darkness of futile efforts how refreshing to hear again, "In the beginning God . . ."

Shedding a fog of uncertainty over all areas is the philosophical failure in epistemology. From the end of the Middle Ages philosophy has devoted its major efforts to this field. Rationalism has made its claims and has been rejected. Idealism has likewise had its say and has been refused. Positivism with its empirical claims has persisted under different titles and has driven both rationalism and idealism from center stage. But having defeated its competitors it has examined the spoils and admitted, yea asserted, "There is no absolute knowledge." Skepticism in the meanwhile with a cynical smile has replied, "I told you so."

Having rejected God's Word we find ourselves without certainty in any area. This is especially disastrous in our philosophy of history. What does the future hold? Does life have any meaning? Does man make his own future or is there a Ruler who allows man

1. E. Stanley Jones, *Abundant Living* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1942), p. 5.

his day, but who ultimately determines destiny? With philosophy totally confused, and Christian theology at a stalemate, with a world looking on in fear of the "things which are coming on the earth," we can with the certainty of God's eternal Word proclaim a Gospel of ultimate victory.

Christian philosophy is the Siamese twin of Christian theology; the latter cannot exist without the former. Because of this intimate relation of philosophy to theology it merits Christian evaluation and interpretation.