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# THE DISMISSAL OF A YOUNG RELIGION PROFESSOR IN 1938 SET IN MOTION A SERIES

By John C. Shelley

he most significant contribution to academic freedom at Furman occurred on "All Saints Day" almost 63 years ago.

On November 1, 1940, the board of trustees officially adopted the brand new 1940 Statement on Academic Freedom and Tenure. Created jointly by the Association of American Colleges (an organization of presidents and deans) and the American Association of University Professors, the statement emphasized a professor's right to teach and conduct research without threat or coercion.

Furman President John Plyler, who had been in office less than two years, may well have preferred a policy less radical and far-reaching. But he also seemed to realize that he was in no position to offer opposition.

Furman's reputation as a liberal arts college that respected academic freedom had been sullied by

### OF EVENTS THAT

a series of events in the late 1930s that focused upon Herbert Gezork, a young religion professor from Germany. Gezork served on the religion faculty in 1937-38 and had been reappointed by President Bennette E. Geer for 1938-39, but an array of charges brought by a small coterie of students, some local pastors and a Furman trustee led to his dismissal in July 1938. The incident would have momentous consequences for Furman. In 1937, however, Gezork was a recent immigrant to the United States from Nazi Germany. Earlier in the decade he had been the highly regarded associate pastor of the First Baptist Church of Berlin and General Secretary of the German Baptist Youth Movement.

CHANGED THE CHARACTER OF FURMAN.

Hitler's ascent to power in 1933 brought Gezork and his German Baptist Youth Movement into direct conflict with Nazism, especially the Hitler Youth organization. At the Baptist World Alliance meeting in Berlin in 1934, Gezork delivered an address sharply critical of Hitler and his regime. The Nazis responded by dissolving the German Baptist Youth Movement and forbidding Gezork to continue as a Christian pastor.

By 1936 the Nazis had become even more brazen in crushing political dissent, and Gezork, fearing for his life, made plans for voluntary exile. He booked passage on an American ship and applied for a passport under the guise of a lecture tour in the United States. As he walked up the gangplank, he was stopped by two members of the Gestapo who were checking the names of passengers against a list of persons to be arrested should they attempt to leave the country. Fortunately for Gezork, his name was not yet on the list.

Landing in New York with less than \$4 in his pocket, Gezork cobbled together odd jobs and speaking engagements in and around the city, including service as part-time interim pastor of the German Baptist Church. The meager income supported subsistence living and enrollment in courses at Columbia University. His financial situation became desperate in May 1937 when he was joined by his fiancée, Ellen Markus. But soon, with their debts mounting, an offer from Furman would appear to the newly married couple as a true godsend.

In 1937, a vacancy arose in the religion department at Furman when professor Frank Pool was granted a twoyear leave of absence to complete his doctorate at Duke University. Gezork, who held a doctorate from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, applied, and with the support of strong recommendations from distinguished Baptist scholars and seminarians who praised his scholarship and character, he was offered a two-year contract as assistant professor of religion with an annual salary of \$2,100.

Bennette E. Geer assumed the presidency of Furman in 1933 after President William J. McGlothlin and his wife were killed in an automobile accident. McGlothlin left an outstanding faculty — much of which he had built — whose progressive ideas were creating strains with South Carolina Baptists.

In 1932, for example, a group of ministerial students committed to biblical inerrancy enlisted the help of the local Baptist Association to bring charges of "liberalism, evolutionism, and atheism"



Bennette E. Geer



Edwin McNeill Poteat



John L. Plyler

The board of trustees' treatment of Gezork may have been a factor in President Bennette E. Geer's decision to resign in 1938; like Gezork, Edwin McNeill Poteat was also attacked for his religious teachings; President John L. Plyler encouraged the board to adopt the 1940 Statement on Academic Freedom and Tenure. Previous page: The main entrance to the old campus. against five Furman professors, each from a different department (religion, Classics, English, philosophy and modern languages). The board of trustees investigated the charges and reaffirmed Furman's commitment to historic Christian faith, but absolved the five professors on the grounds that the charges were vague.

Geer faced a similar situation in 1936 when a group of influential Baptists attacked the religious teachings of Professor Edwin McNeill Poteat. Theologically liberal, Poteat was a past president of Furman (1903-16) and had returned in 1934, at Geer's invitation, as professor of religion. Geer and the board stood firm against the outcry and issued Poteat a letter of confidence. Poteat's death within a year momentarily quelled the opposition, but after the incident every new faculty hire would be carefully monitored by both sides.

Such was the atmosphere on campus when Gezork arrived, and some of his former students have attested that suspicions about his religious views simmered as early as his first term. They boiled over during Religious Emphasis Week in late February 1938.

The speaker was Gordon Poteat, a Furman alumnus and the younger son of Edwin McNeill Poteat. He was Professor of Christian Social Ethics at Crozier Seminary — and just as liberal theologically and socially as his father. Pushing the claim that Christianity is a way of life more than a body of dogma, Poteat attracted much attention and no little support from the majority of students.

During a question-and-answer session after the speech, a student asked Poteat whether he believed in hell. Poteat replied: "If there is a hell, I'm sure that Jesus will be there!" Many students were puzzled by this remark and later asked Gezork what Poteat had meant. Gezork, perhaps indicating some sympathy with Poteat, interpreted the remark to mean that Jesus will be found wherever human beings suffer.

A few students were also troubled by Gezork's off-hand comment in class that the story of Samson killing 1,000 Philistines with a single jawbone of an ass had the essential characteristics of a folk tale, possibly constructed around a core of historical truth. The offended students appealed to J. Dean Crain. a sympathetic member of the board of trustees. Crain helped compile a list of charges against Gezork that apparently included denial of the Virgin Birth, denial of scriptural infallibility, denial of an eternal hell and suspicion about revivals. Crain then arranged for the board's Committee on Social and Religious Life, on which he sat, to investigate the charges. Gezork appeared before the committee sometime prior to the meeting of the full board on May 27-28, 1938, but I have found no record of this hearing or of the committee's report.

In his semi-annual report to the board, Geer commended the conversation inspired by Religious Emphasis Week and offered an eloquent defense of academic freedom and freedom of conscience. He never mentioned Gezork by name, but he did invoke the name of "our beloved Doctor Edwin M. Poteat," reminding the trustees of the attacks on the elder Poteat two years earlier and of the board's unwavering support for the embattled teacher. Clearly, Geer's intent was to defend Gezork by linking his case to that of his predecessor.

Then, as he finished his report, Geer offered his resignation as president, "effective in the discretion of the Board." It is not clear whether Geer's resignation came as a surprise to board members, but the resignation seemed to be tied to his frustration with the board over two issues: the athletic program and the unfolding plot to dismiss Gezork. Gezork is not mentioned by name in the minutes of the May 27-28 meeting, but there is a cryptic paragraph referring to "certain matters under discussion [that] would be left to President Geer to work out in a manner satisfactory to all concerned, if possible."

n the minutes of the June 1 meeting of the board's Executive Committee, we learn more precisely what these "certain matters" were. The board, without formal action, had instructed Geer to seek Gezork's voluntary resignation and, if unsuccessful, to refer the matter to the Executive Committee. Geer

## Acknowledgments

am indebted to Alfred S. Reid's *Furman University: Toward a New Identity 1925-75* (Duke University Press, 1976), an excellent starting place for exploring Furman's history in the middle of the 20th century.

In addition to Reid, I owe much gratitude to several individuals and institutions for their assistance. Glen Clayton and his assistants, Carolyn Lancaster and Melissa May, were pleasant and able guides in the Baptist Historical Collection at Furman, where I spent long hours poring through Furman's official records from the late 1930s. Furman's Research and Professional Growth Committee funded a four-day expedition to the Gezork archives at Andover Newton Theological School. Dean Allen, a 1990 Furman graduate who is dean of the faculty at Andover Newton, and Diana Yount, special collections librarian, offered warm hospitality and generous assistance during my research. Jim Stewart has been a most capable and perceptive editor. Finally, Ellen Gezork has graciously filled in personal details that are rarely found in official records.

- John C. Shelley

#### reported that Gezork refused to resign; further, Gezork insisted that he had been misunderstood by the Committee on Social and Religious Life and requested that he be allowed to speak to the Executive Committee. Geer, who would soon be gone, excused himself from the deliberations at that point, and the Executive Committee agreed, without formal action, that Gezork should have a second hearing before the Committee on Social and Religious Life.

The second hearing took place on June 9. Only three of the seven committee members were present, thereby depriving the proceedings of the quorum necessary to change its official recommendation to the board. Among those absent was J.D. Crain, the trustee who had initiated the charges. Chairman Richard Clyde Burts, who was sympathetic to Gezork, decided to proceed without a quorum. Having the foresight to engage the services of a stenographer, Burts left a remarkable transcript of the two-hour conversation.

Gezork came with a prepared statement, apparently anticipating several areas of inquiry: the Virgin Birth, heaven and hell, John the Baptist, the infallibility of the scriptures, baptism, the blood of Jesus, and revivals. The committee, however, carefully narrowed the focus to three charges: denying the historicity of the Virgin Birth, teaching "too strong a social gospel," and denying an eternal hell (thus implying that those who die without salvation will be given another chance after death).

Pushing his command of English to its limits, Gezork's apology was direct, passionate and courageous. It revealed a young man still wrestling with many aspects of Christian doctrine, a conscientious teacher committed to giving all sides of an issue and to sharing his own struggles, and a Christian convinced that how one lives is more important than the dogmas to which one assents.

When pressed, for example, Gezork denied that he ever told his students that he did not believe in the Virgin Birth. He framed his response in terms of a student who asks whether one can be a Christian and not take the Virgin Birth literally.

"For me," Gezork said, "the question of the Virgin Birth is this — I see theologians through the centuries down to our days and even in our days on both sides — [those] who believe in it and those who question or deny it. This seems to me to prove that it is one of the questions that is [not] essential for being called a Christian... There are men in Germany today in jail for allegiance to Jesus Christ. If you asked them, 'Do you believe Jesus was born by a Virgin?' most of them would answer, 'I have never heard much about it'."

Gezork went on to admit his own struggles with the doctrine: "As I said, before, I personally rather believe in the Virgin Birth. However, I am still wrestling with it. If one digs deep into the word of God he will think constantly about these things." He then emphasized his responsibility as a teacher: "I think it advisable to give to the students both sides and help them to come to their own conclusions."

When questioned as to whether his teaching may have "decried dogma and magnified practice," Gezork said, "I put very much emphasis upon the dynamic of the Christian life. I always put emphasis on the fact that dogma alone does not mean anything, unless we try to follow Christ. It is inevitable for teachers to be misunderstood at times. ... Many students tell me my courses have meant a new and deeper attitude, and the beginning of a new spiritual life. This has made it impossible for me to resign.... If I did not believe in Jesus Christ I would be in Germany now. I left everything behind for my Christian faith and then to be stamped as a radical is an injustice. Then another reason I

cannot resign is that young Baptists in this country and Europe have looked toward me as a Baptist youth leader. These people would be bewildered if they heard I had been expelled from a Christian college for my doctrine."

The fundamental disagreement between Gezork and his opponents was twofold: Was Christianity primarily a creed or a way of life? And should the college classroom simply be a place for passing on the received tradition, or a place of critical engagement with that tradition?

or Gezork, the real miracle of the Incarnation was not how Jesus was born but how he lived, and that meant challenging students to think: "It would have been easy for me just to present to them the material of the course, to have them learn and memorize it, write their exams, and be done with it. However, I saw in the situation an earnest task and a great challenge. I tried to show them that to be a Christian means more than just to accept a creed and go to church: that Christian faith must be a dynamic power in our lives, affecting every thought, word, and deed; that Christ is living and that His spirit must permeate



John Bozard



Wesner Fallaw



William Keys

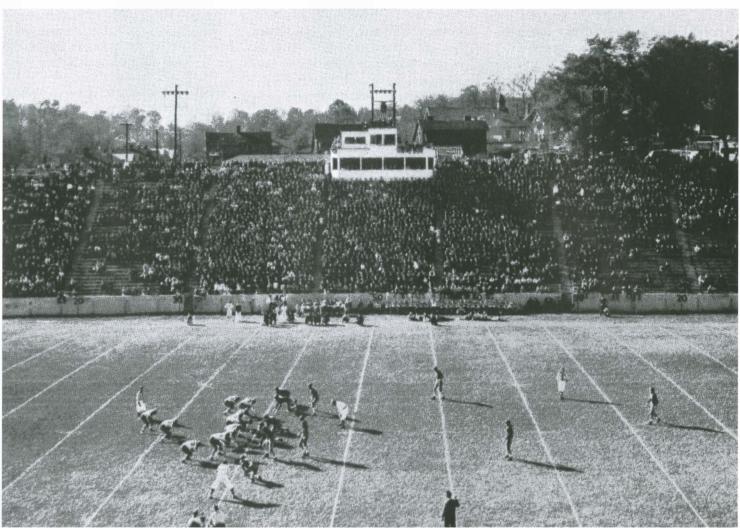
The firing of professors Bozard, Fallaw and Keys in 1939 prompted inquiries from the national office of the American Association of University Professors and questions from such organizations as Phi Beta Kappa and The Duke Endowment. Opposite: Sirrine Stadium, the symbol of big-time football, opened in 1936. Gezork believed his support of Geer's efforts to scale back the football program in 1938 may have contributed to his dismissal. and dominate more and more our individual, social, economic, political, and cultural life."

Gezork did admit to the importance of some beliefs — belief in a personal God, belief in immortality, belief that Jesus Christ came as the Son of God into this world to inaugurate the Kingdom of God. "I believe in the saving power of his life and death, his death on the cross, and I believe in his resurrection," he said. "I do not regard any one who denies these fundamentals as a Christian... It is part of our faith as Christians that we have to talk about these things."

Shortly after the conference with Gezork, R.C. Burts, chair of the Committee on Social and Religious Life, committed suicide. Crain then pressured the Executive Committee to fire Gezork at its meeting on July 14, but the group voted to take the matter to the entire board at a special called meeting on July 22. There was a flurry of activity by faculty and students in support of Gezork, but the board went on to approve a motion that "Gezork be relieved of his duties . . . immediately."

Gezork was notified of the decision by letter in Mexico City, where he was doing research. He did not challenge it, but he did plead for the board to detail "which of my doctrines have been so offensive or unbearable." Several months later he was called as interim pastor of Clarksburg Baptist Church in West Virginia, and in the fall of 1939 he resumed his academic career at Wellesley College. He would eventually move to Andover Newton Theological School, which he would serve as president with distinction from 1950-65.

had the opportunity to interview Gezork in 1982, and during our conversation he suggested two additional factors that may have contributed to his dismissal. The first had to do with cultural mores regarding relationships of blacks and whites. Gezork and his wife often employed a black gardener to work in their yard. Gezork provided transportation because the man had no car — and violated a Southern taboo by allowing the man to ride in the front seat. Gezork was told that this practice



infuriated people in the local community, including some trustees.

The second factor had to do with athletics. President Geer, long opposed to athletic scholarships, had won the support of the board to abolish them shortly after becoming president in 1933. But with the completion of Sirrine Stadium in 1936, the board had voted, over Geer's strong objections, to reinstate athletic scholarships. In early 1938, after two years of athletic deficits, Geer tried again to scale down or even drop the football program. Students and faculty signed petitions supporting Geer. Among the signers was Herbert Gezork.

But the board was of a different mind, and at a special called meeting on March 15, 1938, it approved a motion "to continue the present athletic policy" and to "maintain football on a competitive basis with other institutions we are accustomed to playing," which in those days included Clemson and South Carolina.

Two months later, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools declared Furman's athletic situation "alarming" and "distressing" and requested a full report by December 15. The board responded at its November meeting by abolishing concessions for athletics and by changing its accounting procedures — designating coaches as faculty and declaring the payment to the City of Greenville for Sirrine Stadium as a capital investment.

Gezork was told by supporters on the board that there was not a majority in favor of his dismissal and that he was the victim of an alliance between those who opposed his retention on theological grounds and those who favored a bigtime football program. Quid pro quo: "You vote to fire Gezork, we'll vote for big-time football." This is, of course, difficult to prove — trustee minutes tend to be sanitized — but it is quite plausible in view of the board's preoccupation with athletics throughout 1938.

ezork's dismissal set in motion a series of events that changed the character of Furman for both good and ill. Several members of the faculty soon organized Furman's first chapter of the American Association of University Professors to press for greater protection of academic freedom. Phi Beta Kappa, which had been leaning toward granting a charter to Furman, withdrew its interest; it would be another 35 years until the university was granted a chapter. Gordon Poteat wrote a tribute to Gezork for the student newspaper, but it was censored by the administration. Then, in March 1939, new president John Plyler dismissed three faculty members for reason of financial exigency: John Bozard in English, Wesner Fallaw in religion and William Keys in psychology. To be sure, Furman was carrying a significant debt, and the board had instructed Plyler to cut expenses. But the firings raised suspicions, as the three chosen for dismissal were Gezork's most active supporters among the faculty. And Bozard had unquestioned seniority, having been at Furman for ten years and even serving as dean for a time.

In response, the local AAUP, led by economics professor Arthur Gwynn Griffin, contacted the national office, which initiated a preliminary investigation through correspondence with Plyler. The matter ended without an official investigation, but pressure from several quarters — Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Phi Beta Kappa and The Duke Endowment — convinced Plyler of the wisdom of a written statement on academic freedom and due process.

Thus, on November 1, 1940, the trustees adopted the *1940 Statement* on Academic Freedom and Tenure. In his book Furman University: Toward a New Identity 1925-1975, Alfred S. Reid calls this decision "the most important step that Furman ever took to protect the quality of instruction and the intellectual atmosphere at Furman."

The statement establishes the principle of academic tenure, which recognizes the freedom of the teacher to teach and publish without threat or interference. It acknowledges the teacher as a citizen entitled to civil rights, including freedom of speech, and it establishes stringent criteria and due process for the dismissal of tenured faculty. Plyler, with good reason, would later refer to this as one of his greatest accomplishments.

The 1940 Statement also allows denominational schools to spell out any doctrinal limitations, and in 1941 the trustees approved such a clause as a part of every faculty contract. The clause called attention to Furman's character as "a Christian institution, founded and supported by the South Carolina Baptist Convention," and bade faculty members to lead an "exemplary Christian life" and "avoid making or approving any statements which run counter to the historic faith or the present work of Baptists, and so far as is consistent with the teacher's conscientious view and professional duties he shall advocate and advance the causes fostered by said denomination." The clause remained a part of faculty contracts until the early 1970s, when it was removed by President Gordon W. Blackwell and Dean Francis W. Bonner in anticipation of a Phi Beta Kappa chapter, which was awarded to Furman in 1973.

as Gezork a heretic? Was he too radical for Furman in the 1930s? He was certainly more liberal than the typical South Carolina Baptist, but it's not clear that his teaching was out of line for Furman religion faculty in the 1930s.

After studying Gezork's lecture notes from 1937-38, I do not believe that the content of his teaching was so different from that of his predecessors and colleagues such as Edwin McNeill Poteat and Frank Pool. In fact, he seems to have made extensive use of Pool's mimeographed handouts on biblical literature. I suspect that Gezork's prophetic passion and dialogical style in the classroom made him seem more radical. Perhaps, then, we should think of Gezork not as heretic, but as scapegoat.

In a classic study titled *The Scape-goat*, French philosopher Rene Girard describes how warring factions often divert their hostility to an outsider. With no clear resolution in sight, they turn their wrath upon a vulnerable stranger who is suddenly identified as the real cause of the discord. Joining forces to remove the scapegoat, either by death or exile, the parties find common ground that ushers in a period of relative peace.

Recall the attacks on five faculty members in 1932 and the similar protests against Edwin McNeill Poteat four years later. On both occasions the board stood firm against the attackers. When conflict flared again in 1938, Gezork was an obvious scapegoat. He was a vulnerable stranger — young, poor, a foreigner with a funny accent, theologically liberal, heedless of Southern racial taboos, unappreciative of big-time football. Moreover, like Socrates in ancient Athens, he was dangerous because many students had been captivated by his prophetic passion and his courage in opposing the Nazis.

On November 15, 1938, the South Carolina Baptist Convention took the unprecedented step of singling out Furman for commendation because of its dismissal of Gezork. In its resolution, which passed overwhelmingly, the convention praised the trustees for "purging from Furman University teachers who believe and teach doctrines contrary to the fundamentals of our faith and [for] securing teachers who believe and teach our great fundamental and essential doctrines." Gezork was the scapegoat whose sacrifice ushered in two decades of harmony between Furman and South Carolina Baptists.

Many good things happened during those 20 years, most notably the adoption of the policy guaranteeing academic freedom and the move to the new campus. But there were costs. First, the incident sullied Furman's academic reputation and impeded its advance toward academic excellence. Surely Al Reid is correct in his assessment that "not for another thirty years would Furman rise to such educational prominence."

Second, the dismissal of Gezork implicated the university in a human tragedy: refusing hospitality to a stranger. In a letter to the trustees in support of Gezork, a group of 11 pastors from across the state put it this way: "Because Dr. Gezork has faced persecution and oppression in Germany, and has come to America, a land of religious liberty and freedom of thought, in order that he might be free to serve Christ, we consider it especially unfortunate that he should meet obstacles to the free service of his saviour."

Finally, given the trajectory of Gezork's career at Wellesley and Andover Newton, it is clear that Furman lost a very talented, conscientious and exemplary teacher.

The author is chair of the religion department at Furman, where he has taught since 1980.

## An exemplary life

#### Gezork became known as courageous prophet, superior teacher

Herbert Gezork rarely talked about his dismissal from Furman. He did tell me in 1982 that he had come to view the incident as a blessing in disguise, for it had launched his remarkable career as a scholar, teacher and preacher. He also recalled with a wistful smile the overwhelming support offered him by Furman faculty and students in 1938. There was no evidence of lingering bitterness, but Gezork acknowledged the wound left by painful memories of those difficult days.

Following their brief stay in Greenville, Gezork and his wife, Ellen, moved to West Virginia, where he was called



as interim pastor of Clarksburg Baptist Church. In 1939 they moved to Massachusetts, where he became professor of social ethics at Andover Newton Theological School and lecturer at Wellesley College.

At Andover Newton, Gezork quickly distinguished himself as an admired teacher and eloquent preacher.

Gezork at Andover Newton

Not surprisingly, given his outspoken opposition to Hitler in the early 1930s, he was also in demand as a commentator and interpreter of the events unfolding in Europe.

The Gezorks became American citizens in 1943, and the family would come to consist of three sons and a daughter. After World War II Gezork learned that his parents, trapped between the German and Russian lines, had died of exhaustion and exposure and were buried in a mass grave.

In the five years immediately after the war, Gezork was pressed into service on three different missions with the U.S. military command in Germany. His most extensive service came during a 16-month stint between 1946 and 1948 as Chief of Protestant Affairs under General Lucius Clay. His responsibilities focused on the rehabilitation of religious life in Germany, which included eradicating the influence of Nazism and militarism in churches and theological schools and advising the U.S. High Commissioner in Germany on who should be brought to trial for atrocities against the Jews.

In 1950 Gezork was elected president of Andover Newton, a position he held until his retirement in 1965. Under his leadership the size of the student body and faculty grew substantially. During this period he also served as president of the American Baptist Convention (1959-60), joined a group of seven other Protestant clergy in a much publicized visit to Russia, and participated in ecumenical dialogue in both the National and World Councils of Churches. He was granted honorary degrees by a number of Baptist-related institutions, including Brown and Colgate.

He pushed tirelessly for Christian unity but was suspicious of the high-level ecumenical consultations so popular in the sixties, preferring the unity of Christians and others in the cause of justice. "I have never felt the true unity of the body of Christ," Gezork once said, "as deeply as on that memorable day in Selma, Alabama, when we marched silently from Brown's Chapel to Dallas County Court House, thousands of Whites and Negroes of many different denominations, led by a Greek Orthodox archbishop, a Baptist minister, a Methodist labor leader, and three Roman Catholic nuns."

Gezork remained active in retirement, averaging 40 speaking and preaching engagements annually and serving as a visiting professor at Brown, Harvard and Kanto Gakuin University in Japan. He and Ellen returned to Germany almost every year in retirement, enjoying especially their hikes in the Alps and the Black Forest.

Gezork died in 1984. Ellen survives and divides her time between Vero Beach, Fla., and Amherst, Mass.

Herbert Gezork is remembered by colleagues and students as an outstanding teacher and preacher. In the pulpit he was said to have few equals, and his manuscripts burn with prophetic vision and courage. He was fearful of the toll materialism took on community and personal character. He was wary of committees, organizations, institutions and especially the state, and he constantly reminded his students that ministry is always fundamentally about people, not institutions.

When Gezork retired in 1965, the faculty of Andover Newton broke with precedent and elected him to give the Commencement address. The result was one of his most memorable sermons. The final paragraph, aimed directly at young men and women about to enter various forms of Christian ministry, reveals something of Gezork's eloquence and prophetic passion:

I salute you, then, as you enter a life in which you will have more than the average person's share of joy, of satisfaction, but also of agony and pain. People will admire and flatter and praise you, but don't take all this too seriously. People will love you. Accept that love in gratitude and humility. People will despise you. Don't let that break your spirit. You will be lonely, but never forget that you are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses and stand in a noble succession of prophets and priests of the Most High. And may you, in your darkest hours, hear the voice from the ramparts of eternity: "Lo, I am with you always, even until the end of the world."

As I read these words last fall, I was moved both by their power and by a haunting question: What was Gezork thinking when he wrote them? Were his memories only of Nazi Germany and the fearful flight to freedom? Or was he also thinking of those dark days in 1938 when he was labeled a radical and driven away by Furman University?

- John C. Shelley