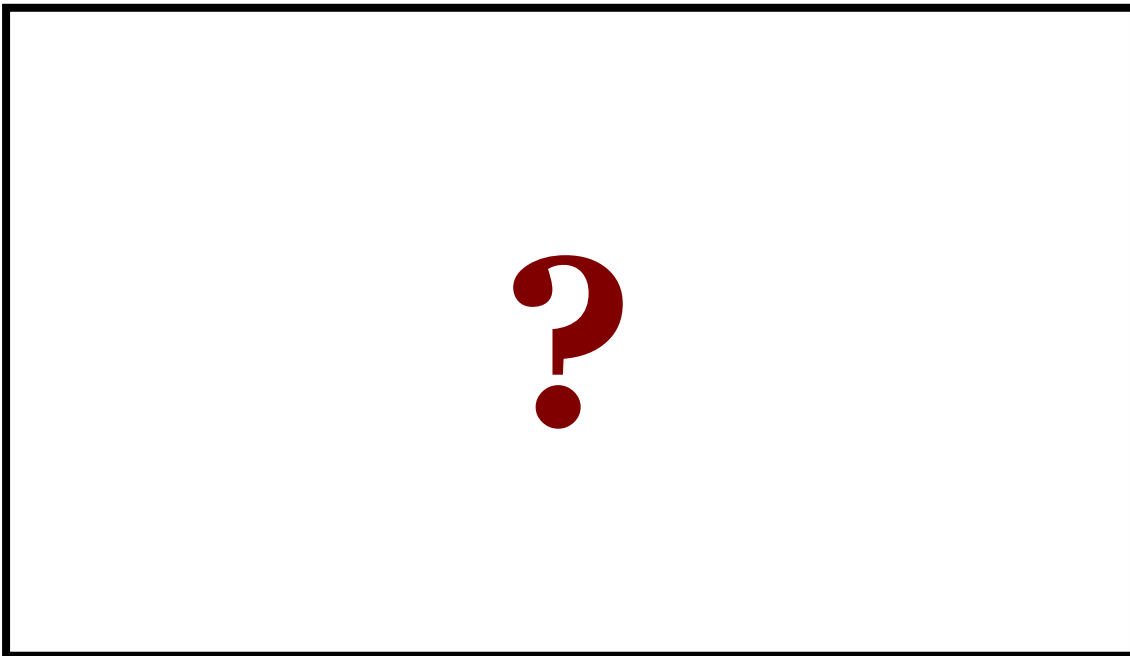


(1)

An Analysis of Executive Vice-President Gaston's Vision Statement for Erskine Theological Seminary

The Reverend H. Neely Gaston has been the Executive Vice-President of Erskine Theological Seminary since 2003. An extensive search of the Erskine websites reveals that the following is Mr. Gaston's vision statement for ETS:



There simply isn't a vision statement to be found. Why has the Erskine Board been derelict in not demanding a vision statement? Why has the ARPC been derelict in not demanding a vision statement? Why has Mr. Gaston been unwilling to write one? What are Mr. Gaston's stated goals for ETS? How does one evaluate Mr. Gaston's success or failure as a seminary head without stated goals, directions, and plans? Is the seminary of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church run as an orderly educational enterprise or as an adhococracy, with ideas being thrown out on a whim, helter-skelter?

The only way to assess the vision of Mr. Gaston for ETS is to examine his policies since 2003.

- **April 1, 2003 (An Interesting Date)**. Mr. Gaston was appointed Vice-President of ETS. Because there were questions regarding his academic and administrative qualifications, a two-headed arrangement was devised: Mr. Gaston was appointed the Executive Vice-President of the seminary and given administrative and development tasks, and Dr. R. J. Gore was made Academic Dean and, as the title indicates, Dr. Gore was expected to manage academic affairs. One wonders as to the feasibility of this two-headed arrangement; however, the arrangement dissolved almost immediately when Dr. Gore, a reserve chaplain in the Army, was called to active duty and deployed to Iraq for a year.
- **2004 (The Institute for Reformed Worship)**. The securing of the services of Dr. Hughes Oliphant Old and the opening of the Institute for Reformed Worship are outstanding accomplishments. Mr. Gaston is to be commended. Dr. Old is an internationally known scholar in the Reformed community. This Institute for Reformed Worship that is centered on Dr. Old's written legacy in preaching and worship is quite a coup for a small seminary. The D.Min. program that is the focus of the Institute for Reformed Worship is greatly respected. The moving of the program to the Columbia site gives the Institute for Reformed Worship greater visibility.
- **2004 (New York City Extension)**. There was an abortive attempt to open an ETS extension site in New York City. It seems that this attempt was launched without proper authorization from the New York state authorities. Fortunately, no legal actions were taken and ETS was not sued.
- **2004 (AME Withdraws Approval)**. The African Methodist Episcopal Church severed its longstanding relationship with ETS. This resulted because of conflict between Mr. Gaston and Bishop P. W. Williams II. According to Mr. Gaston, the Bishop called him terms that identify him as a racist. Wow!
- **2005 (Columbia Extension)**. The opening of the Columbia, S.C., site is significant and Mr. Gaston is to be congratulated. The generosity of the First Presbyterian Church, Columbia,

S.C., is much appreciated. In the opinion of the Editor of *ARPTalk*, this site gives the hope of a future to ETS.

- **2006 (Gore Removed). Dr. Gore was removed as Academic Dean at Mr. Gaston's request. As far as anyone knows (but openness is not a hallmark at Erskine) there was no inquiry into this matter by the Seminary Committee or the Board. One wonders what Mr. Gaston was thinking. At this time the financial stability of ETS rests on the D. Min. Army Chaplaincy program that Dr. Gore has been able to arrange for ETS. Dr. Gore's rank as a full colonel, his military connections, his participation in the War College, and his war experience did not hurt ETS in the renewal process with the Army. Mr. Gaston may have met the Generals, but Dr. Gore calls them "Sir" and probably has been deployed to a war zone with them.**
- **2006 (UMC Withdraws Approval). The University Senate of the United Methodist Church declined to renew the longstanding status of Erskine Seminary as an approved seminary for United Methodist ministerial candidates. What happened? Why was Dr. Michael Bush hired at that time instead of a minority faculty member to replace UM professor, Dr. Luonne Rouse? Did Mr. Gaston not realize that an audit was coming, that the UM University Senate was deadly serious about minority representation, and why did he put ETS in a place of jeopardy? At one time ETS had 150 Methodist students. This does not portend well for a secure financial future under the present arrangements at ETS.**
- **2006 (Professor's Academic Freedom Restricted). In an Old Testament class on the Pentateuch that was taught by Dr. Doug Culver, there was a discussion regarding the ordination of women to the ministry. Two female students asked why Dr. Culver was opposed to women's ordination. They wanted to know why Dr. Culver would not affirm their desire to be ministers. Dr. Culver granted them the right to think as they wanted but he affirmed the position of the ARPC of which he was a minister in good standing. The two women complained to Mr. Gaston. Mr. Gaston confronted Dr. Culver in a hostile manner, accusing him of not supporting the mission of ETS, and then in a faculty meeting threatened all faculty members with dismissal if they failed to support the mission of ETS. Apparently, Mr. Gaston had forgotten that academic freedom in the classroom applies to both professor and student.**

Apparently, Mr. Gaston thinks that any ARP professor who is an ordained minister in the ARPC and who affirms the position of the ARPC on ordination issues is in conflict with the seminary of the ARPC. Apparently, Mr. Gaston was unable to go to Dr. Culver and deal with this issue quietly (one might even say according to Matthew 18). Apparently, Mr. Gaston did not know how to seek advice on this issue from those who have had to deal with it in the past. Dr. Culver was shaken by this experience and spoke of it to various members of the Second Presbytery. The Editor of *ARPTalk* is one of the people to whom Dr. Culver talked.

- **2007 (Staff Issues). The longtime Registrar and Financial Aid Director filed a lengthy set of charges against Mr. Gaston for abusive behavior and resigned. There was no Board investigation.**
- **2007 (Intimidation). Because of a conflict between a Erskine College Vice-President and a student, representatives from the Minister and His Work Committee of Second Presbytery met with President Randy Ruble and expressed concerns about a “culture of intimidation” at Erskine. In this meeting the behavior of Mr. Gaston was one of the matters discussed.**
- **2008 (The Re-emergence of Neo-orthodoxy at ETS). Because of the meeting of the Calvin Colloquium at ETS, a member of First Presbytery, Rev. Ed Fleagle, Pastor of our congregation in Jacksonville, N.C., became disturbed at what he saw as a PC(USA) and Neo-orthodox takeover of “our seminary.” He was especially disturbed that the provisions of the John H. Leith Chair state that a PC(USA) minister who represented the theological positions of John H. Leith had to fill the Chair. Mr. Fleagle presented his finding to the Session of his congregation and a memorial was framed and sent to First Presbytery asserting that Leith “affirmed, believed, wrote, and taught Neo-Orthodoxy as an acceptable position.” Amazingly, the new Academic Dean of ETS, Dr. Robby Bell, presented a paper that relied on selective quotations from Leith and from Wikipedia. Incredibly, he contended that John H. Leith was not Neo-Orthodox/Barthian in his theological views. Dr. Bell must be the only academic in the world who holds that view. Even Dr. Leith acknowledged his considerable debt to Karl Barth and affirmed that his views were in the tradition of Neo-**

orthodoxy and Karl Barth. (For a copy of Dr. Bell's paper see the attachment: "ARPTalk(7)—Attachments, [1].")

- **2008 (Letter of Complaint)**. In May Rev. Mark Wright, the Pastor of our Unity congregation in Second Presbytery, wrote a letter of complaint and concern to Mr. Gaston stating that, in a Th.M. course, "Theological Hermeneutics," in which he was enrolled, Professor Richard Burnett presented the teachings of Karl Barth as both "the answer to liberalism and the corrective to evangelicalism." He also stated that the class was characterized by "an aggressive promotion of Barth and his views." Mr. Wright expressed concern "that the seminary has hired a professor who is a Barthian and unashamedly uses his position in the classroom to promote the theology of one whose views are so at variance with the confessional standards held by our denomination and its seminary." Mr. Gaston chose to deal with this affair as a personal grievance and set up an *ad hoc* committee to deal with it. Mr. Gaston did this in spite of the fact that Mr. Wright objected that his letter was not a personal "grievance" against Dr. Burnett but "a complaint about the direction of the Seminary." Subsequently, the Grievance Committee in its finding noted "that at heart, this is a much larger issue of ARP denominational identity, and consequently the identity of Erskine Theological Seminary."
- **2008 (Secret Tenure)**. In an unprecedented manner that was quiet and without any public acknowledgment, Dr. Richard Burnett was granted tenure. Tenure is no small matter for an academic and the community that grants it. Why did Mr. Gaston choose to act in this stealthy manner? Was he not farseeing enough to recognize that a firestorm would break out? Did he even care what the members of the ARPC thought?
- **2008 (Faculty Division)**. During a spirited April faculty meeting in which the authority of the Bible was discussed, both Dr. Richard Bush and Dr. Michael Bush expressed doubts regarding the inerrancy of the Bible. However, in public pronouncements that followed Mr. Gaston gave the impression that the entire ETS faculty affirmed the inerrancy of the Bible. He even did this before the Erskine Committee at the meeting of the General Synod. When confronted that this was not the case, he was left red-faced.

- **2008 (Presbytery Advocate).** With all sorts of questions regarding the theological soundness of ETS reverberating around the ARPC, shockingly, Mr. Gaston engaged in a floor debate in Second Presbytery's Fall Meeting that involved a member of Second Presbytery, Dr. Tom Richie, whose theological convictions and ecclesiastical practices have been called into question. In the aggressive manner in which Mr. Gaston debated, one would have thought that he was Mr. Richie's advocate. What was Mr. Gaston thinking?
- **General (Loss of ARP Students).** The year before Mr. Gaston became the Executive Vice-President of ETS there were more than 50 ARP students attending ETS. At that time there seemed to be an ARP Renaissance at ETS. Today ARPs are hard to find at ETS. To find the seminary of the ARPC one has to drive to Reformed Theological Seminary-Charlotte. If memory has not failed, last year three ARP M.Div. students graduated from ETS. Of the monies that are allocated to Erskine from General Synod, ETS gets approximately \$300,000. If the author is still able to do his math, this means the General Synod spent \$100,000 last year per ARP M.Div. graduate from ETS. Is this the wisest stewardship of our shrinking resources? We could have sent those students to any seminary in the world and put them up like kings!
- **General (Hiring Policy).** There are complaints as to how Mr. Gaston handles the hiring and allocation of faculty. For example, it appears that a number of important positions have been filled without formal searches. There are strict guidelines for an academic community. Are these violations of institutional protocols and the procedures and expectations of accrediting agencies? If the answers to these questions appear in the positive when ATS and/or the Southern Association do an audit, the experience will be most painful.
- **General (Summer Absence).** One wonders as to the wisdom of Mr. Gaston spending his summers at Bonclarken involved in camp ministries. What he does is commendable, but is it a wise use of his time? What of the perception? These last few years have been times of a declining student body and a loss of revenue for ETS. Would it not be prudent for Mr. Gaston to be found in his office at Due West during the summer months, seeking to attract students and finding financial support? If the reason he is working at the summer camps is to

supplement his income, then the Board needs to increase his salary so that he is free to do the work of being the head of a seminary.

The task now is to analyze the above events and conjure from the parts a vision statement. What will it look like?

- 1. The leadership style has reflected more of an adhocracy rather than strategic design. The Columbia site and the Institute for Reformed Worship have been successful. Other attempts have been abortive and, in some cases, nearly disastrous.**
- 2. The ARP Renaissance that had begun under Mr. Gaston's predecessor has withered and died. For good or ill, Mr. Gaston is faced not with the trust and goodwill but the suspicion and doubt of many in the General Synod.**
- 3. The Burnett and Bush controversy is not going to fade into obscurity any time soon. The issues involving these two men go far beyond their views on the Bible. At the heart of the discussion is how the ARPC is defining herself and the willingness of ETS to follow the lead of the church. Many in the General Synod are asking why is it that the General Synod is giving \$300,000 per year to the ministry of ETS and ETS is looking to other constituencies that have not given ETS any financial backing in the past or present. Indeed, the ARPC desires to be proud of ETS and to support ETS financially in a greater way, but it seems that the leadership of ETS does not want the affection or the largesse of the ARPC.**
- 4. If the goal of Mr. Gaston has been to draw ETS closer to the ARPC, he has not succeeded. If the goal of Mr. Gaston has been to build strong community among the ETS faculty, he has not succeeded. If the goal of Mr. Gaston has been to increase the number of M.Div. students at ETS, he has not succeeded. If the goal of Mr. Gaston has been to increase the number of ETS's constituencies, the losses of the AMEC and the UMC seem to indicate that he has not succeeded.**
- 5. As Lot pitched his tents toward Sodom on the plain of Jordan, is Mr. Gaston seeking to pitch the tents of ETS toward Sodom on the plain of the PC(USA)?**

6. Further analysis the author leaves to the reader.

These are some of my thoughts,

Charles W. Wilson

Charles ("Chuck") W. Wilson

[\(continue to article 2\)](#)

(2)

An Analysis of the Erskine Board Meeting

The Fall Meeting of the Erskine Board took place at Due West, SC, on October 16 and 17, with the Seminary Committee meeting the day before. Below is a summary of the meeting according to the *Erskine NetNews*.

Erskine Board of Trustees hears latest on Moffatt Dining Hall restoration

Meeting as a group for the first time since the summer fire that extensively damaged one of the social hubs of the Erskine College and Seminary campus, the Board of Trustees heard a report Friday from President Randall T. Ruble about the restoration of Moffatt Dining Hall.

Ruble told the board during its meeting in the Daniel-Moultrie Science Center auditorium that the institution has faced a few obstacles in its effort to rebuild the dining hall, which was rendered unusable following the July 10 fire.

Erskine utilized the Dixie High School cafeteria for several weeks after the fire and has been using the mezzanine of the Galloway Center to feed students, faculty and staff since the fall term began in September.

"The problem has been working through the details," Ruble said of the delay in rebuilding, but he expects the work to begin in earnest soon.

"I want to assure you we have done everything humanly possible (to resolve any issues and get the Moffatt rebuilding under way)," the president told the board.

Ruble said the construction company estimates the project will take about three months to complete.

In other business:

- The strategic plan for 2008-13 was approved by the board.

- Board Chairman Chip Smith said the institutional structure committee recommended no change in the relationship between the college and seminary and they will continue to operate as one

institution.

- The board approved a resolution thanking the Stuart family and the Edward C. Stuart Foundation for its 52 years of funding and administratively supporting the E.B. Kennedy Scholarship program.

- The board approved a revised 2008-09 budget, primarily due to enrollment and student retention issues, and received a report from Treasurer Greg Haselden about the institution's investments.

- Haselden reported that the college is updating its campus master plan in accordance with the new strategic plan and will submit that plan to the finance and facilities committee of the board at its February meeting.

- The board approved granting degrees to students approved by the faculties of the college and seminary for January 2009 graduation.

- Changes in the Donor Gift Policy on Naming Opportunities were approved by the board.

- Resolutions were approved by the board to create the Dr. Julia Ann Speares Mancino Scholarship Fund, the William C. Caveny Scholarship Fund, the Lee Ward and Eleanor Grier Logan Scholarship Fund and amending the John K. and Lisa B. McGill Endowed Scholarship Fund.

- The next meeting of the board is set for Feb. 9-10, 2009.

Well, the Board of Erskine has met and we in ARPdom are UNDER-WHELMED. Where is the promised report from the Seminary Committee regarding inerrancy, Neo-Orthodoxy, and Professor Burnett and Vice-President Dr. Bush? The Moffatt fire is little more than a small candle compared to the conflagration that rages regarding the life and direction of Erskine Theological Seminary!

Where is a statement regarding the hiring of new faculty? Is Erskine College and Seminary abiding by the most recent stipulations of the *Manual of Authorities and Duties*? Many in ARPdom do not trust the Erskine Administration. It seems that the course of wisdom is to allay that distrust with documentation and transparency. Would a policy of openness not be a wonderful way to rebuild the trust of ARPdom?

At the meeting of the 2007 General Synod the following two motions were passed.

First Motion – Minutes of the General Synod (2007), p. 102

That Synod call upon the Board of Trustees, Administration, Faculty and Staff of Erskine College and Erskine Theological Seminary wholeheartedly to fulfill the instructions of the General Synod regarding character and mission of the College and Seminary and, in particular, that they carefully and without evasion adhere to the requirement that any newly appointed administrative or teaching employee of any board shall have given satisfactory evidence of their belief in and adherence to the basic doctrines of evangelical Christianity (*Manual of Authorities and Duties 2006, pg. 9*).

First Motion – Minutes of the General Synod (2007), p. 102

That the General Synod reaffirm its commitment to the previously approved “Statement of Christian Higher Education” and encourage the committee tasked to produce a new statement, to the end that it will in no way weaken, but in fact will strengthen, the Christian commitment and clarity of the statement;

That the General Synod remind the Erskine President and Chairman of the Board of Trustees of their mandate to implement this philosophy and to maintain the Erskine identity in accordance with it, in ways that are reported to, and verifiable by, the General Synod; and

That the Synod pause to pray for the Lord’s present and future blessing on Erskine College and Theological Seminary, its Board of Trustees, and its new president.

The following year, at the 2008 meeting of the General Synod, a change to the *Manual of Authorities and Duties* was adopted that clarified the position of the ARPC on the authority of the Bible as “inerrant.” Does it not seem that wisdom and principled commitment to the ARPC’s mission should have motivated the Administration and Board of Trustees to respond to the General Synod with some indication that these actions of the General Synod have been heard “loud and clear,” and that every effort is being made to regain the trust and respect of the whole General Synod? APPARENTLY NOT! Many in ARPdom do not trust the chief administrators of Erskine. Many in ARPdom are categorically opposed to the perceived direction and theological biases of the chief administrators.

It is interesting that a tight lid has been placed on the Board's actions. At this time, not much is known. But "what happens in Due West doesn't stay in Due West." Some things are known.

- 1. According to the text of the Strategic Plan, there seems to be great concern on the part of Seminary leadership over "libelous blogs" and "gossip" in ARPdom.**

The word "libelous" is serious. That is legal tort language. We at *ARPTalk* are horrified that people are telling lies about our institutions.

We at *ARPTalk* join with the Erskine Administration and Board in being opposed to that which is "libelous." How can *ARPTalk* help in tracking down the "libelous" blogs and help in stopping the gossip? We at *ARPTalk* give and often sign our names to what we write.

We at *ARPTalk* envision *ARPTalk* as an e-magazine; however, at this time, *ARPTalk* is probably not much more than a small e-newsletter. There is a blog site that posts *ARPTalk*, but *ARPTalk* is not a blog. The blog site that hosts *ARPTalk* is used archivally, as a posting place for resource materials that would clog up e-mail servers if sent as e-mails and as a convenience for overseas readers and others who find the e-mail delivery difficult to receive or read.

- 2. It is reported that the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church is identified as "the host" denomination of Erskine College and Seminary by administrators.**

One wonders if "host" is the word that Administrators want to use with regard to the ARPC. Isn't a "host" what a parasite feeds on? Is Erskine a parasite that feeds on the ARPC? Matthew 22 has a story about a wedding host and a wedding guest who would not wear the wedding garments that were provided by the host. The offending guest was bound "hand and foot and [thrown] . . . into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." One would think that a better choice of words can be found than "host" for the ARPC!

3. **The goal of Mr. Gaston, the Executive Vice-President of ETS, is to see ETS the best Presbyterian and Reformed Seminary in the United States.**

That ain't going to happen! It's unrealistic. That's not the direction ETS is going. RTS in its many sites has 2500 students. Covenant Theological Seminary has more than 1000 students. The 1000 students and academic prowess of Westminster Philadelphia and California are beyond ETS's reach. A goal of parity with Greenville Theological Seminary, Greenville, SC, or Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Pittsburg, PA, is realistic and achievable, but only if the necessary steps in buttressing the theological foundations of ETS are decisively taken!

The main obstacle to reaching the goal that Mr. Gaston desires is the theological diversity that ETS, under Mr. Gaston's administration, holds as sacrosanct. The major conservative, evangelical, Presbyterian and Reformed seminaries of America are unashamedly "inerrant" in their view of the Bible. The unwillingness of the ETS Administration to remove Barthians from the ETS faculty is self-destructive to Mr. Gaston achieving his goals for ETS. Or is it? After all, what are Mr. Gaston's goals? Conservative, evangelical, Presbyterian and Reformed types are going to look at ETS as a curiosity of pseudo-evangelicalism that speaks with warm and fuzzy rhetoric about Jesus but in the end is nothing more than a tasteless stew of academic oddities and mediocrity. Then those conservative, evangelical, Presbyterian and Reformed types will turn to those seminaries that speak clearly about the Bible and its authority. Using the language of Native Americans regarding the actions of the white man in the old western movies, these conservative, evangelical, Presbyterian and Reformed types will say that ETS "speaks with forked-tongue." Indeed, according to letters that were published in the last issue of *ARPTalk* of ARP seminarians who have chosen to attend other seminaries, that is exactly what they are saying.

4. **Bush found "not guilty" in DUI trial in Abbeville City court.**

It seems bizarre that ETS is not tolling the news that ETS Vice-President and PC(USA) minister Dr. Michael Bush was found "not guilty" of his April DUI charge. Why is this not being done?

5. There is a decline in the number of entering Freshmen at the College.

According to sources, the number of entering Freshmen is down at Erskine College. This is the smallest class in a number of years. Is this Freshman class smaller than last year's Freshman class? Alarming, this has taken place in spite of the introduction of three new sports programs. Questions need to be asked. What about the "discount rate," the average amount of the total price of Erskine that is discounted through financial aid? Is Erskine's discount rate now around SEVENTEEN THOUSAND DOLLARS? What about the academic quality of the new Freshmen class? Have academic standards been lowered to recruit students? Is Erskine having to pay MORE to get FEWER and LOWER QUALITY students? The author's memory is old and it has been a number of years since he served on the Erskine Board, but the retention rate then was above 60%. Is it now expected to be lower? What does all this mean for the future of Erskine College? Is the Board of Trustees asking these inconvenient questions? If not, why not?

6. The debt situation at Erskine is stable.

It was reported that the loans that were coming due have been refinanced in such a manner that they will come due incrementally in a manner that can be managed.

7. The seminary is focusing to recruit students from the PC(USA).

Why does the seminary of the ARPC have this odd obsession with securing a stream of students from the PC(USA)? Is it because the PC(USA) has contributed so much money to ETS in the last five years? Five years ago the John H. Leith Chair was established with a focus on securing students from the PC(USA). In the same five years the ARPC has funded ETS to the tune of about \$1,500,000. One wonders how much money has come in from the PC(USA) to fund the PC(USA)-oriented Leith Chair? Is it fully funded now? If so, was it funded by PC(USA) money? One also wonders how many hundreds of students have come over from the PC(USA) to attend ETS. According to records that were reported to ATS in 1995, ETS had 30 PC(USA) students and in 2005 ETS had 17 PC(USA) students. That's not going up but down, isn't it? Has ETS sold

its theological integrity and identity to the PC(USA) for nothing? In the past the legacy of the PC(USA) to the ARPC has been corrupt theology and a patronizing attitude that views the ARPC as a "simple-minded little brother." The gifts of the PC(USA) have been a curse and a plague and a blight and a famine and a fire and a worrisome itch that oozes and stinks. Is it possible that the current leadership of ETS is cozying up to the PC(USA) because it is more comfortable with the PC(USA) than the ARPC?

8. [The Seminary Committee is split over Burnett and Bush.](#)

The Seminary Committee met the day before the Board began its meetings. The Seminary Committee spent most of the day with Dr. Richard Burnett and Dr. Michael Bush, two PC(USA) faculty members, as they were explaining why they believe that the Bible is "without error in all it teaches" but that the Bible is not "inerrant." It makes for a lovely day when theological subterfuge is practiced by professional theologians! If a professional theologian can't explain what he believes about the authority of the Bible in 50 words or less, he is equivocating!

The Committee was able to agree on a report, but the Committee was not really in agreement. The members of the Committee agreed that both Dr. Burnett and Dr. Bush were employed under the terms that affirmed the Bible was "without error in all it teaches" and not the inerrancy position of the 2008 General Synod.

Dr. Burnett teaches courses in systematic theology and ethics. Dr. Bush was teaching courses in preaching but it is reported that his class evaluations were less than stellar, and so he was elevated to the administrative office of Vice-President in charge of development and recruiting in the PC(USA). Thus he can recruit the hundreds of PC(USA) students who desire to flee to ETS.

Do Dr. Burnett and Dr. Bush have no shame? Do not Dr. Burnett and Dr. Bush understand that they are PC(USA) ministers who are guests in the house of the ARPC? Are Dr. Burnett and Dr. Bush unable to see the theological direction that the ARPC is going? It seems that a non-ARP professor who teaches theology and ethics and a non-ARP professor who

taught preaching, when they see the theological direction of the ARPC and realize that they are not in accord with it, would seek employment elsewhere instead of being causes of conflict in the ARPC. Is it surprising that many in the ARPC wonder about the integrity of these men? What is the driving factor for these men? Is it self-interest or something else? Is it surprising that many in ARPdom wonder as to the wisdom and direction of the ETS Administration?

Why are the actions of the Erskine Board, especially the Seminary Committee, being kept under wraps? Does this mean that the actions will later be revealed in the Synod packet in May and what we in ARPdom will see is a *fait accompli* with the General Synod expected to give it a "rubber stamp?"

These are some of my thoughts,

Charles W. Wilson

Charles ("Chuck") W. Wilson

(continue to article 3)

(3)

A Modest Proposal for the Reformation of Erskine Theological Seminary

The title of this article indicates that Erskine Theological Seminary is in need of being saved, changed, fixed, repaired, and/or mended. It is the contention of the writer that there are fundamental fissures in the essential fabric and foundation of ETS that must be addressed for the sake of the health, and perhaps for the preservation, of both the seminary and the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church.

The Justification for ETS

In the past what are the roles that ETS has played for the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church? There are more than two, but there are two very important roles.

The first role that ETS has played is that of an educational institution for the training of ARP ministerial candidates. ETS has been the place where homegrown candidates and proselyte candidates have traveled for theological education. In the past, most ARP ministers have shared that common professional education experience.

The second role, the primary role that ETS has played for the ARPC, is, through shared education and social experiences of ministerial training, the defining of the theological foundation and social ethos of the ARPC. This has been the legacy of the lives and ministries of the ministers of the ARPC who have been trained at ETS.

In the past, through the educational experiences at ETS, our ministers have been introduced to one another; lifelong friendships have been established; life experiences have been shared; concern for one another has been developed; professors who were the "Fathers of the ARPC" have been heard, respected, trusted, and shared; an orthodox theology and a particular ecclesiology that were comfortable to all have been forged; and a common social and theological language has been developed. In the past ETS experiences were the grounds for defining, finding, disseminating,

and continuing the ARP identity. This did not mean that there were no non-ETS trained ministers in the ARPC. Nor does it mean that non-ETS trained ministers were unwelcome in the ARPC. But it does mean that the ETS influence was the dominant, defining, and driving force.

The above factors are no longer operative. ETS is no longer “the seminary of the ARPC.” ETS graduates are now a minority and, among the most recent ARP ministers, a small minority.

Many factors have led to this unsettling situation. Not the least is the distrust of ETS theologically. Many in the ARPC look at ETS theologically as a pale reflection of a PC(USA) seminary—just 25 years behind. Many in ARPdom wonder why ETS has a preoccupation with the PC(USA). The professors of ETS are no longer respected as “the Fathers of the ARPC.” Many of them are not even ARPs. Many in the ARPC view some of the professors at ETS as heterodox and a danger to the very life of the ARPC.

All this portends ill for the ARPC. There must be an ARP Reformation at ETS. For the sake of the life of the ARPC, this MUST happen. ETS CAN once again become the place where the majority of ARP ministers are trained. ETS CAN once more be a place where the future identity of the ARPC is forged out of the lives of our ministers. If this does not happen, the ARPC as a denominational entity may dim and wink out in the next two decades. ETS CAN and MUST be fixed now! The time for Reformation is now!

[Six Modest Proposals for Reformation](#)

The following list is not an exhaustive list. It’s the beginning of a discussion. *ARPTalk* invites readers to join in the making and defining of this agenda for change. Your responses are invited and desired. The following are six modest proposals for beginning an ETS Reformation.

- 1. [Disassociate ETS from Erskine College and re-organize ETS with its own Board.](#)**

There are many cogent reasons for separating Erskine College and ETS. Not a single one of them is going to be welcomed by the present Erskine Administration or Board. This idea is too disruptive to the Empire of Due West.

The first argument for separating the college from the seminary is the obvious differences between a college and a seminary. Erskine College deals mainly with students who are in their late teens and early twenties and are resident students. The average seminary student is 30 years old or more, has a family, a job, and commutes about an hour or more to classes.

A second argument for the separation of the college and the seminary involves oversight. The present Board makeup does not give proper oversight to the seminary. For six years this writer watched the non-oversight of the seminary by the Board. In six years the seminary activities may have been given two hour's attention by the whole Board, and at times the Seminary Committee did not even have enough members present to meet. Much time was spent on the remodeling of the snack shop and a climbing wall—seminary students were simply ecstatic over these. Much time was spent on college student activities that involved sports—once again, this was not high on the priorities of the seminary students. In the present strategic plans there is much concern over the relations between college and seminary. That divide is not going to be closed. One does not cross a dog and horse. The genetic differences are too great. The differences between college and seminary are even greater. When both are under one Board, one is going to be the "red-headed step-child." The seminary is the "red-headed step-child." And the life and identity of the ARPC that hangs on the health of the seminary cannot allow for the seminary to be a "red-headed step-child."

A third argument for the separation of the institutions involves the endowment. A commingling of funds is problematic. In time the fungible nature of money is going to lead to accusations and problems for the General Synod to sort out. Separate boards do not have this problem with the fungible nature of money between the two institutions.

Probably the major arguments against the separation of Erskine College and ETS involve the aggravation of the task and the funding of the institutions. The aggravation of the task is not a major issue. Administrators need something to do in order to justify their jobs. The funding of the institutions is another matter. So far in the studies that have been done, the Erskine people have declared the task too expensive.

Amazingly it has not occurred to the Erskine people who have conducted the studies to ask the rank-and-file of the ARPC what they think of the matter. When the writer was on the Board the idea of opening a Columbia Extension was looked on financially as “a bridge too far.” Why don’t they ask the ARPC if the financial issue of separating the college and seminary is “a bridge too far?”

2. [Move ETS from Due West, SC, to Columbia, SC.](#)

Why would any right-minded person want to attend ETS in Due West, Abbeville County, SC? Remember, the average seminarian is over 30 and has a family.

Where is the seminarian to find affordable housing? Where is the seminarian to find a part-time job? Where is the seminarian to find churches in which to preach? Where is the spouse of the seminarian to find a job? Where are the children going to attend school if Dixie High School is not an acceptable option? Where is the seminarian to find the nearest grocery store? Where are the seminarian and the family of the seminarian going to find close medical treatment? Where is the seminarian to buy medication? Where can the seminarian and the seminarian’s family find a movie theater for entertainment? Indeed, Due West is not the end of the world, but it is close!

A Columbia, SC, site for ETS will provide everything that the Due West site doesn’t provide. By moving ETS to Columbia the seminary immediately loses its “Hicksville” appearance.

3. [Clarify the mission of ETS to the ARPC and to the greater church.](#)

This is not a matter of brain surgery. Is ETS the seminary of the ARPC? Is the primary mission of ETS the ARPC? Is the task of ETS the training, care, and development of the ministers of the ARPC? If the answers to these questions are no, then why does the ARPC need ETS? Is it because the ARPC wants to throw \$300,000 per year to the wind?

***ARPTalk* is not xenophobic in advocating these measures. The secret of ETS’s future growth and prosperity is in faithfulness to the mission laid out by the ARPC. The idea of turning people**

away is not the point of these arguments. ETS should be open to all who want to come and be educated and blessed by what they receive in the classrooms of ETS. The point is that the Administration of ETS must disabuse itself of the notion that ETS has to become a theological prostitute in order to attract students. Integrity has a magnetic character that mesmerizes and attracts the greater church. Just look at the success of Covenant, RTS, and Westminster seminaries.

4. Provide directives that all ETS professors must be ordained ministers with some pastoral experience.

This proposal speaks for itself. Seminaries exist primarily for the education and care of ministerial candidates. Those who are tasked with training ministerial candidates cannot do that unless they have some experience in the ministry of a local church. Certainly there are exceptions, but a professor who does not want or feel the call to ordination for the ministry does not need to be teaching in a seminary. The calling for that individual is the academic arena of the college or the university. A ministerial education is academic, but academics are not the focus. Once again, the focus of a seminary is the local church ministry. Apart from this a seminary does not have a reason to exist.

5. Provide directives that all ETS professors must be ARPs who are members of and answerable to an ARP presbytery.

This certainly will cure many of the problems that have arisen over the years regarding ETS professors. The problems that many in ARPdom have had with ETS professors have been with those who are not ARPs. Primarily, if not exclusively, the problems have arisen with PC(USA) professors—and, to be even more specific, with Barthian professors. A professor who is not willing to become an ARP does not need to teach as a “tenured professor” in the seminary of the ARPC. The argument against this is that it is not “nice” to do and that good professors will be missed. That’s a lame argument. There are many more Ph.D.s in theology, church history, New Testament, Old Testament, and other seminary related disciplines than there are jobs.

Is it too much to expect that Doctors of Theology at our seminary should be the “Fathers” of our General Synod? The

ETS professors who are not ARPs are not seen at our Presbyteries or our General Synod. They are a mystery to ARPdom. No wonder there is distrust and discord between our seminary and our General Synod. The truth of the matter is that our seminary is not really OUR seminary!

- 6. Provide directives that all ETS professors must be examined before General Synod and are called by General Synod.**

Here is a good ARP trivia question: Who was the last ETS professor examined on the floor of General Synod and called by General Synod to be a professor at ETS?

Examined and called by General Synod! Isn't that a marvelous way to examine and call professors for ETS? This method would ensure that the ETS professors would have the confidence and respect of General Synod. What a way to promote ETS! If such a method were re-instituted perhaps the professors of ETS would once again be seen and heard in our Presbyteries and in the General Synod as "Fathers" of the Church.

Once again, who was the last ETS professor who was examined by and called to ETS by the General Synod? We don't have to go back to find the answer to this question in the 19th Century. The answer is Dr. Ray King.

The reason that we changed our procedure is because we wanted to be like the seminaries of the "big" denominations. Well, what has that gotten us?

There is a story in Aesop's fables about a frog in a stream who one day saw an ox at the stream's edge drinking. The frog admired the ox and so wanted to be like the ox.

But the frog was just a frog and he was small. But he knew that he could puff himself up and make himself larger in the mating season. So the frog reasoned that if he continued the puffing up process without breaking out and making his croaking sound he could blow himself up as large as the ox. And so he began to puff himself up. Larger. Larger. Larger. Then the frog's skin ruptured and the frog indeed croaked and was no more.

Is that the parable of the ARPC? We became like the PC(USA) in how we did our seminary. What has it gotten us? Perhaps the idea of examining and calling ETS professors by the General Synod isn't such a bad thing!

These are modest proposals. There are others ideas that are probably better than the ones delineated above. But this is at least a start. What proposals do you have? *ARPTalk* wants to know.

By the way, in order to get this done, it will take a General Synod Commission to do it. Erskine will never suggest this. The proprietary interests are too great for that to happen in the Empire of Due West. The task will be very difficult. However, if this isn't addressed, ETS is going to fade and this fading may also cause the ARPC to become like the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod—a footnote in history.

These are some of my thoughts,

Charles W. Wilson

Charles ("Chuck") W. Wilson