

ARPTalk (Extra5)

May 24, 2009

* * * * *

EXTRA!

EXTRA!

EXTRA!

**DR. RICHARD BURNETT
PUBLICLY ACKNOWLEDGES
THAT HE DOES NOT CONCUR
WITH INERRANCY!**

At the end of an acerbic diatribe filled with unsubstantiated accusations against the Editor of *ARPTalk* and others, Dr. Richard Burnett, Professor of Systematic Theology, Erskine Theological Seminary, has publicly acknowledged that he DOES NOT CONCUR with the theological position of the ARP Church on the authority of the Bible and desires to instruct the ministers of the ARP Church on their defective understanding of the inerrancy of the Bible. This article is posted on the ETS blog-site, "Erskine Action" (<http://seminary.erskine.edu/blog>). For the reader's convenience, the article is reprinted below.

[A Letter from Dr. Richard E. Burnett](#)

By Neely Gaston. Published May 22nd, 2009 at 10:29 am in [About Erskine Seminary](#), [Faculty News](#). There are [no comments](#).

Last fall, the Board of Trustees asked me to lead the Seminary in sharing information more vigorously with our constituents. We are doing this in several ways. For example, our alumni, along with leaders of Associate Reformed Presbyterian congregations, have begun receiving information about our faculty that goes beyond the usual academic facts. Two letters from students describing their experiences at the Seminary became available on the Seminary's blog, "Erskine Action" recently. Today, I am passing along to you this letter from Dr. Richard E. Burnett, in which he responds, especially for congregational leaders in the ARP Church, to issues and questions that some have publicly raised about his teaching and beliefs. His words are strong, but they need to be heard:

May 22, 2009

Dear Brothers in Christ,

It is said: "there are no second chances to make a first impression." Yet for those of you who have only heard about me but have not yet met me I hope this is not true and that one day we'll have an opportunity to sit down as brothers in Christ and talk together face-to-face.

My name is Richard Burnett and I have taught Systematic Theology here at Erskine Theological Seminary for the last seven years. I regret that this is my first direct communication with most of you and I deeply regret its circumstance. But many charges have been made against my colleagues and me publicly in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church throughout the last year-and-a-half, and I am now compelled to address them.

The accusations made against me have to do with my theological views, and particularly my view of Holy Scripture. I have not responded to them publicly because I have had no forum to do so. I had hoped that cooperating fully with investigative committees, talking openly with anyone who wished to discuss my views, and exercising patience with institutional processes would eventually dispel any questions as to my orthodoxy. I had hoped that prudent minds would prevail and that the falsehood of the repeated caricatures and deliberate misrepresentations of my views would eventually come to light. This has happened to some extent and I am grateful for it. Unfortunately, however, serious accusations continue to be made. But now, more grievous, the integrity and judgment of those who have sought to defend me, including my colleagues on the faculty, administrators, and members of the Board of Trustees have been publicly impugned. Finally, this past weekend, the final straw, one of my students was maligned in print.

I cannot begin to address now all the charges that have accrued over the last year-and-one half, but in order to begin to address at least some of them I must make clear what has already been said about me and by me for the record and on the record. You may access these documents by clicking on those underlined or by [visiting my website](#).

The Reverend Mark Wright, having completed my course on “Theological Hermeneutics,” wrote [a letter on May 23, 2008](#) to the Seminary administration and to several dozen ARP ministers in which he made a formal complaint against me claiming that my views were “deeply troubling” to him. I responded to the Reverend Wright’s charges in [a letter written on May 30, 2008](#). Following school policy as stated in our Catalogue, a Grievance Committee was appointed to look into the Reverend Wright’s accusations and, having done so, it made the following [investigative report](#) and concluded that “no further action on this matter” was necessary. Though I have since sought to speak with Mark Wright about these matters, he has repeatedly refused yet continues to repeat his charges publicly.

Recognizing that the Grievance Committee’s work would not satisfy some and given the growing concerns of others about the Presbyterian Church USA (many of which I share) and my membership in it, and that of my colleague, Dr. Michael Bush, Vice President Neely Gaston invited Dr. Bush and I to meet with the Seminary Committee of the Board of Trustees. We agreed to do so and met for several hours on two different occasions and answered their questions. Here is the question and answer portion of the [minutes of the Aug. 22, 2008 meeting](#). I shared a document in this meeting that I had submitted prior to being put on a “short list” for a position at Wheaton College in 1997 in order to demonstrate the continuity of my position. However, one Board Member “inadvertently” leaked [this document](#) to the Reverend Charles Wilson, *who altered it, claimed that I had recently drafted it in order to satisfy my critics, and then asserted that this was evidence that I had changed my position.*

In a subsequent meeting on Oct. 15, 2008 the Seminary Committee drafted a list of questions and asked that Dr. Bush and I respond to them in writing. [This was my response to their thirteen questions](#). Finally, the Seminary Committee met with the entire Board of Trustees and made the following [report on Oct. 16, 2008](#). It concluded: “The Committee was in unanimous agreement that both men are in full accord with the terms under which they were called and affirms their continued ministry at the seminary.”

I have not changed my views regarding Holy Scripture since being recruited by Dr. John Carson and appearing before the Board of Trustees in the spring of 2002, contrary to what has been alleged. But there are some ARP pastors – not surprisingly – who are still unhappy with me. Rumors, innuendo, and gossip persist to this day. Granted, there are real threats to the theological health and well-being

of Erskine and the ARP and I have additional documents that will shed light on them that I will make available in due time.

Nevertheless, please know that I am still grateful to have been called to teach at Erskine. I admire its rich heritage and, despite all the accusations of its recent detractors, I remain hopeful about its future. To be sure: there are serious challenges ahead. But please know that those making false statements, wild accusations, and damaging mischaracterizations are not helping the cause of those of us who earnestly desire that the *entire* Erskine community sincerely embrace serious theological commitments and exhibit a genuine Reformed and evangelical witness in this world.

I do not wish to infringe upon anyone's freedom of speech or conscience, but I hope you will consider the accusations being made against my colleagues and me in light of what we ourselves have *actually said*, but also in light of the conduct and character of those who are making these charges. I hope you know how destructive the lies and slander propagated by the blog, "ARP Talk" are, especially to college students to whom it is now being distributed. Of course, not every claim in "ARP Talk" is false. But how difficult it is for young people (such as my own son, a freshman) to affirm even its legitimate claims (much less defend them among unbelieving or half-believing peers) amid all the lies and in light of the conduct, character, and reputation of their author, the Reverend Charles Wilson, an ARP minister who, having been investigated by a special commission for pastoral misconduct in 2002, retired at age 55 on "medical disability." Once again, members of his own court have filed official complaints against him. Action on these complaints, filed several months ago, is still pending, I am told. But the Reverend Wilson's accusations continue unabated.

In the meantime, however, I hope you know how disturbing these endless charges and character assassinations have been to our seminary community, and not least of all to our ARP students. Several have come to me and expressed grave concerns about the ARP and their future in it in light of all that has happened (and not happened) recently. I have reminded them that every denomination has its problems and that it sometimes takes time for such things to work out. And while it is true that the deeper problem is usually not so much that lawless men rise up but that good men remain silent, I have encouraged them to listen to the older, wiser, perhaps quieter voices (at the moment) in their presbyteries, to modest men of honor and integrity who have a record of faithful service, who bear the marks of pastoral ministry, who have weathered other ecclesial controversies, and who know well enough not believe everything they hear. Such was the caliber of ARP ministers who were friends of my father, the late Reverend Robert E. Burnett, pastor of Williams Memorial Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC, where I grew up.

I am confident there are still many such men in the ARP today, but they have not been told or have been told only bits and pieces of what is really going on here at Erskine. I can only say that in regard to the charges made against me, the reason this information has not been widely disseminated, contrary to those who have charged repeatedly that there is “a lack of transparency and openness by the Erskine Administration and Board of Trustees,” is because the latter are men of character who have sought to do things “decently and in order” and to protect both the accused and the accusers. As I see it, the accusers have been protected long enough. For the sake of the Ninth Commandment, particularly as interpreted by the *Larger Catechism*, for sake of Christ’s Kingdom, and for the sake of the accusers themselves, they should be held accountable for their words.

As anyone can see who takes the time to read what I have actually stated, I fully affirm without reservation or qualification that the Bible IS the Word of God. I have taken vows to submit to its authority in all things and my views regarding it are firmly grounded in the Reformed tradition. It is not *despite* what the Westminster Standards teach but *because* of it that I do not concur with the new statement made by the Synod last summer. The 2008 statement completely ignores what the drafters of the 1979 statement sought scrupulously to avoid. If history is any indicator, I think the new statement will do more to undermine the Bible’s authority than to safeguard it since it seeks to establish the authority of a Bible we do not have (original manuscripts) by an authority we do not need (based on human value judgments) at the expense of the *one* authority we cannot do without (God alone through the internal testimony of His Holy Spirit). I cannot begin to elaborate all my concerns here and I admit there may be things that perhaps I have not understood, as has been claimed, but I will be available in Bonclarken the week of Synod and, for what it’s worth, I would be happy to discuss these matters privately or why not in a formal, public debate? In any case, I look forward to seeing you there [Editor’s emphasis].

Sincerely,

Richard E. Burnett, Ph.D.
Professor of Systematic Theology

Well, there it is!

Thank you, Dr. Gaston, for allowing Dr. Burnett to publish his letter which VERIFIES the concerns that have been expressed in *ARPTalk* this past year. Sadly, this letter CONFIRMS that ETS is in conflict with the ARP Church.

The Editor of *ARPTalk* has repeatedly asked two questions in multiple issues of *ARPTalk* and in email correspondence. The first question: Are there or are there not neo-Barthians teaching at ETS? The second question: Is the Administration of ETS actively seeking to lead the seminary of the ARP Church in the direction of the “conservatives” of the PC(USA) and the “Confessing Movement” in the PC(USA), and in so doing watering down the theological distinctives of ETS as the seminary of the ARP Church? Now the first question is answered clearly. Yes, there is one (at least one) neo-Barthian teaching at ETS.

Thank you, Dr. Burnett, for answering that question.

Unfortunately, the accusations in Dr. Burnett’s letter make it necessary for the Editor to respond in an attempt to set the record straight.

- 1. Dr. Burnett says, “The accusations made against me have to do with my theological views, and particularly my view of Holy Scripture.” However, the Editor has not made “accusations”—only ONE. The Editor has asked only whether Dr. Burnett is a neo-Barthian who rejects the doctrine of inerrancy. How does such a question damage his reputation? Dr. Burnett readily admits this and has taught that Barth’s view of the Bible is THE CORRECTIVE to both Evangelicalism and Liberalism’s understanding of the Bible and in his comments in his letter he acknowledges what the Editor has written.**
- 2. Dr. Burnett complains that he has been under attack for a “year-and-a-half.” Is this a reference to *ARPTalk*? The date for the first issue of *ARPTalk* is June 2008—a year-and-a-half that ain’t!**
- 3. What does Dr. Burnett mean when he writes that he has waited until now to write because he has “had no forum?” “Erskine Action” (the official ETS blog) has been online for some time. The Editor of *ARPTalk* has repeatedly invited responses and, as the Editor is doing now, would have printed Dr. Burnett’s response(s). Repeatedly, the Editor has asked for open dialogue.**
- 4. The time is 3:28 PM, 5/23/09, and the Editor has just completed a phone conversation with Rev. Mark Wright. Dr. Burnett above alleges the following: “Though I have since sought to speak with Mark Wright about these matters, he has repeatedly refused yet continues to repeat his charges**

- publicly.” Rev. Wright, however, says that the only communication that he has had from Dr. Burnett since he took Dr. Burnett’s class is a Christmas Card. Someone is not telling the truth!
5. Dr. Burnett seems to believe that the “Investigative Report” is an exoneration. The “Investigative Report” that Dr. Burnett quotes says “no further action on this matter’ was necessary,” also says that the issue had to do with the larger question of the identity of ETS and the members of the committee were in no position to deal with that as an *ad hoc* committee. Yes, it is the larger question of the theological identify of ETS that is the concern of the Editor and many others in the ARP Church.
 6. Dr. Burnett states that the Editor altered his written statement on the authority of the Bible. For the record, the copy of Dr. Burnett’s statement printed in *ARPTalk* is the one found in the Minutes of the Seminary Committee that were sent to the Editor. The Editor edited only one word, the name of the Wheaton College professor to whom Dr. Burnett had written, and that edit was noted and identified with the Editor’s initials.
 7. The Editor was on the Board when Dr. Burnett was hired. Dr. John Carson, then President, offered Dr. Burnett a contract as the Director of the Doctor of Ministry program, with some teaching responsibilities. Dr. R. J. Gore, then Vice President and Dean of the seminary, had recommended Dr. Burnett be hired as an adjunct in order to get to know him and his views better. Dr. Carson, who was offered some outside funding to hire Dr. Burnett, said he thought Dr. Burnett would help reach “conservatives” in the PC(USA), and directed that he be hired full-time.
 8. Dr. Burnett speaks of his “colleagues” being attacked. How did “colleague” become plural? Dr. Michael Bush is the only “colleague” of which *ARPTalk* has spoken.
 9. What are the “Rumors, innuendo, and gossip” and “lies” of which Dr. Burnett speaks? Specifics please!!!!!!
 10. Why does Dr. Burnett attack the Editor’s person rather than debate the issues? There were no charges brought against the Editor by Second Presbytery in 2002 when he retired on disability. Moreover, there were no charges brought against him at the 2009 Spring meeting of Second Presbytery, and there are no proposed charges of which he knows. In 2002 the Editor’s struggle with glaucoma ended with more than a dozen

operations and procedures on his eyes. The Editor is “legally blind” with an 80% loss of visual field and extensive loss of acuity. The Editor did not deal with his loss of vision well. During that time in his life, the Editor did and said things which he regrets. The Editor is, however, aware that comments have been made by Dr. Burnett and others at the seminary in recent months in a transparent and frankly rather ugly effort to discredit the Editor. Who is the source of these comments? Is this yet another working example of the “culture of intimidation” at Erskine that was identified by the Minister and His Work Committee of Second Presbytery in 2007? What sort of message is being sent? Is it that if someone calls into question the theological direction of ETS, then those in charge will defend their position by attempting to destroy the reputation of the one who is so bold as to question?

11. **Thank you, Dr. Burnett, for making it crystal clear how you stand on inerrancy.** But Dr. Burnett leaves the misleading impression that he is a champion of the 1979 General Synod’s statement on Scripture. In fact, an attempt was made at the April 2008 ETS faculty meeting to have the ETS faculty “affirm” the 1979 General Synod. This ran aground when Drs. Burnett and Bush declared that they could not affirm inerrancy. Instead, the faculty voted to put the old General Synod language into the catalog without addressing the issue of what the faculty would or would not affirm. One other thing regarding the 1979 statement: The Editor was there in 1979. Dr. Burnett writes, “The 2008 statement completely ignores what the drafters of the 1979 statement sought scrupulously to avoid.” What kind of revisionism is this? The Editor was one of those who helped to draft that statement. The motion that was adopted was made by the late Dr. Grady Oates. The Editor was one of the people with whom Dr. Oates consulted. No matter the number of intellectual gymnastics that Dr. Burnett attempts with pen and ink, the statement of the General Synod of 1979 still stands—in print for verification and guidance. It is not what Dr. Burnett tries to make it!!!

Let’s be very clear. The Editor has been saying that there are two questions that need to be answered. ONE IS NOW ANSWERED. Dr. Burnett rejects the 2008 position of the ARP General Synod regarding the authority of the Bible, and, presumably, the position statements of our sister churches in NAPARC (which are essentially identical to that of the ARP Church). The second question awaits a clear answer. An assumption, however, can be drawn. How does a

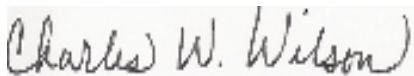
neo-Barthian view of the Bible in our seminary promote the goals, the welfare, the growth, and the unity of the ARP Church? **IT DOESN'T!** How does the Administration of ETS promote the goals, the welfare, the growth, and the unity of the ARP Church by attempting to lead our seminary toward the "conservatives" of the PC(USA) and the "Confessing Movement?" **IT DOESN'T!** The Editor wishes the "conservatives" in the PC(USA) and the "Confessing Movement" well, but they are very different from the ARP Church in ethos and theology.

This matter now rests with the General Synod, the Erskine Board, and the Seminary Committee. The Editor leaves you with these words from Francis Schaeffer that he wrote in 1984 in *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (pp. 89-90):

But a clear line must be drawn -- by those who sit on the boards of evangelical organizations and colleges and seminaries; when we recommend schools for students to attend or avoid; when we are asked to work together for the sake of the gospel with others who hold a weakened view of the Bible; when we decide who and what we will publish in our magazines and publishing houses. In organizations such as these, and especially in the colleges and seminaries, the issues are crucial. For it was the failure of evangelicals fifty years ago to practice discipline and maintain control of the denominational centers of influence -- in colleges and seminaries, in publishing, and in the organizational structures -- which allowed the liberals to take control.

. . . The practice of truth requires that a line be drawn between those who hold the historic view of Scripture and the new weaker one. . . .

These are my thoughts,



Charles W. Wilson