

Correspondence between Mark Wright and Erskine Theological Seminary

For you who are not aware of the issues regarding the correspondence between the Reverend Mark Wright, the Pastor of the Unity Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church of Second Presbytery, and Erskine Theological Seminary, let me update you on the particulars. During the spring semester of 2008 Mr. Wright was a student in the Th.M. course, ST 808, *Seminar in Theological Hermeneutics*. The purpose of the course was to analyze the theological and philosophical theories of interpretation from the Reformation to the present. The principal figures considered in 13 class sessions were John Calvin, Martin Luther, Baruch Spinoza, Hermann Samuel Reimarus, Friedrich Schleiermacher, David Friedrich Strauss, Ferdinand Christian Baur, Ernst Troeltsch, Martin Kähler, Johann Christian Konrad Von Hofmann, Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, J. Gresham Machen, Adolf Schlatter, Karl Barth, Adolf Jülicher, Adolf von Harnack and Rudolf Bultmann. The last class session was an open class for free discussion. Interestingly, of the 12 scheduled class sessions, four of them were dedicated by the professor for discussion on the influence of Karl Barth. Having one third of the classes dedicated to Barth seems a bit unbalanced, and raises questions about the professor's agenda.

All this is not to question the value of this sort of academic course. We are ministers in the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition and are called to be exegetes of the Bible, theology and our culture. We need to be aware of historic and contemporary trends in biblical and theological scholarship so that we can properly assess their value and implications for the life and health of the church. According to Titus 1:9 we are called to encourage the faithful and refute the gainsayers and both of these take some knowledge of what the theologians, scholars, and philosophers write and teach.

Widely read, Mr. Wright is a veteran Pastor in good standing in his Presbytery. His assessment of ST 808 is favorable in that he was introduced to authors he had not read and re-acquainted with those he had read. What surprised and perplexed him was the professor's zealous advocacy of Karl Barth's hermeneutical methodology regarding what constitutes the Word of God and the authority of the Word of God, particularly his contention that Barth's methodology is the corrective to evangelicalism's excessive emphasis on or worship of the Bible.

As has been noted, Mr. Wright is a veteran Pastor in good standing in the ARPC. He is widely read. He is also aware that the theology of Karl Barth has been viewed as heterodox in the ARPC, the mainstream of the conservative Presbyterian and Reformed community and the greater evangelical community.

We in the ARPC present ourselves as conservative and evangelical; in our literature as Bible-believing, historically Reformed and confessionally Presbyterian according to the Westminster standards. Mr. Wright was troubled that on the faculty of our seminary was one who boldly, unashamedly and passionately advocated the hermeneutical methodology of Karl Barth as the corrective for orthodox bibliology.

Let me make very clear Mr. Wright's concern. He does not object to being introduced to the writings and arguments of liberal, neo-orthodox and other heterodox scholars. He appreciates that aspect of the course. He does, however, object to the presence of a professor of Systematic Theology in the Seminary of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church who passionately seeks to convince his students of the correctness of his heterodoxy and the failure of their denomination's orthodoxy.

Mr. Wright's response was to write a letter to the Executive Vice-President of Erskine Theological Seminary. With Mr. Wright's permission, a copy of that letter is reproduced below.

Rev. H. Neely Gaston
Vice President
Erskine Theological Seminary
Due West, SC

May 23, 2008

Rev. Gaston,

I want to express my gratitude for the opportunity I've had over the past year to participate in the Th.M. program at Erskine Seminary. The classes have helped sharpen me for my ministry as an ARP pastor. Thank you for your leadership and guidance related to this program.

This past semester (Spring 2008) I was enrolled in *Theological Hermeneutics* (ST808) under Dr. Richard Burnett. This course was a survey, according to the syllabus, of "major theological and philosophical theories of interpretation from

the Reformation to the present.” Dr. Burnett is a very engaging professor in the classroom. He has a warm personality and his enthusiasm is admirable. Dr. Burnett knows his material well and does an excellent job of critiquing liberalism.

However, as the semester unfolded it became apparent that for Dr. Burnett the “answer” to liberalism and higher criticism was not to be found in the theology of the Protestant orthodoxy, the Westminster Confession of Faith or in Princeton theologians such as B. B. Warfield and Gresham Machen. Instead, Dr. Burnett argued that the theology of Karl Barth is the answer to liberalism and the corrective to evangelicalism. I was caught off guard by such an aggressive promotion of Barth and his views. Certainly Barth needs to be studied and I am glad to have become more familiar with his theology. I understand that there is a movement about in our day that interprets Karl Barth in a more favorable light than in the past. Still, the vast majority of conservative reformed scholars who have examined Barth’s theology have found it flawed and would take issue with many of Dr. Burnett’s assertions.

Erskine Seminary has the weighty responsibility of overseeing the training of many of the young men who will fill the pulpits of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. Though I personally like Dr. Burnett and consider him a true brother in Christ, nevertheless I find it deeply troubling that one of our seminary professors would teach our students that to properly understand the doctrine of Scripture they should look to the theology of an individual who denied its inerrancy. It is indeed a serious matter 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.

By His Grace,
Rev. Mark Wright

The response to Mr. Wright’s concern was a letter from the office of the Executive Vice-President informing him that his letter was viewed as a grievance against a professor and that a grievance committee would be formed to adjudicate the matter. Mr. Wright objected to this and stated clearly that his complaint was NOT a “grievance” involving the professor personally or the professor’s professional decorum; rather, his complaint questioned the policy of his denomination’s seminary that hired, encouraged, and recently granted tenure to a professor whose views were so divergent from the denominational standards.

The grievance committee was formed and on June 30, 2008 its report was sent to Mr. Wright. With Mr. Wright’s permission, a copy of the report he was sent is copied below.

June 30, 2008

Rev. Neely Gaston
Executive Vice President of Erskine Seminary

We, the members of the Erskine Seminary Faculty Grievance Committee, appreciate the opportunity to serve in this capacity, but we also acknowledge that this particular grievance has been an awkward one to address.

There are several points we would like to make about this grievance:

First, we want to state publicly that we do not believe the student, Rev. Mark Wright, has followed the outlined grievance procedures properly. We do not believe it was appropriate for him to make his concerns about the professor, Dr. Richard Burnett, known to the wider public of Second Presbytery and the General Synod of the ARP Church before giving Erskine Seminary a chance to follow internal procedures. It is likely that Rev. Wright's reason for not following these procedures was that he did not consider this to be a personal grievance against a professor, but rather he thought it was a matter that should be addressed at the level of institutional faculty policy. Nevertheless, the issue was handed to us as a grievance, and we do not believe it is possible to separate the personal grievance issue completely from the institutional issue. Therefore, we are addressing this as a student's grievance against a professor. (Indeed, we as a committee are not authorized to address it in any other way.)

Second, we have examined the numerous communications from Rev. Wright and Dr. Burnett. Judging by the course syllabus for ST 808 and by Dr. Burnett's lengthy letter, it seems that much of the discussion of Barth in the course came at the initiative of the student. Therefore, we find no basis for the student's complaint that the professor "unashamedly uses his position in the classroom to promote the theology of one whose views are so at variance with the confessional standards of our denomination and its seminary." Furthermore, we believe that Dr. Burnett has responded well to the student's concerns in his lengthy letter. Because we are satisfied with that response, we do not feel the need to hold oral interviews with Dr. Burnett or Rev. Wright.

Third, while we as a committee are authorized to address this only as a grievance by a student against a professor, we also believe it is worth noting that at heart, this is a much larger issue of ARP denominational identity, and consequently the identity of Erskine Theological Seminary. Rev. Wright's complaint seems above all to stem from his belief that Dr. Burnett is a Barthian and that Barthians should not be allowed to teach at Erskine Seminary. This is related to the issue of whether Erskine Seminary sees itself as a servant of the whole Church (which would require *some* diversity on the faculty as well as among the students), or whether the institution exists to serve only the conservative branches of the

Presbyterian family (mainly the PCA and ARP Churches). Given that Erskine Seminary's *stated* mission is to serve the broader Church from the Reformed tradition (see the "Who We Are" statement in the *Catalog*), any attempt to narrow that mission needs to come from the Board of Trustees and needs to be clearly articulated.

Fourth, in keeping with the previous assertion, we as a committee do not believe that faculty members should be disciplined on the basis of an understanding of the institution's mission that is not actually articulated. Furthermore, we believe that Dr. Burnett's teaching is consistent with the parameters for adherence to the Reformed tradition laid out in the "Who We Are Statement" in the *Catalog*. We acknowledge that there are disagreements within that tradition and that Burnett's interpretation of modern Reformed theological history is at odds with that of some other faculty members and students, but we believe he is seeking to be faithful to both Scripture and the thought of the Reformers. Furthermore, we note that ST 808 is a Th.M. course, and in the Th.M. program in particular, students should interact with a variety of ideas and should develop their critical-thinking ability by responding to various ideas whether or not the professor agrees with them. (See goal seven among the goals for the Th.M. program in the *Catalog*.) If Dr. Burnett had unjustly given Rev. Wright a low grade because of their disagreements, that would have been legitimate grounds for disciplinary action against Dr. Burnett. But simply because a professor presents unusual or unpopular ideas as options, and even defends them enthusiastically, does not constitute grounds for disciplinary action against a professor.

Therefore, we as a committee believe that no further action on this matter—considered as a *grievance*—is necessary. We note in conclusion that if Rev. Wright is not satisfied with our handling of the grievance, he is entitled to appeal next to the Dean of the Seminary, then to the Executive Vice President of the Seminary, and finally to the President of the College and Seminary.

Sincerely,

Dr. Loyd Melton, chair
ETS Grievance Committee

Dr. Steve Lowe

Dr. Don Fairbairn

At this point, there is a question that needs to be answered: Why am I including this matter in *ARPTalk*?

The purposes of *ARPTalk* are two-fold: (1) To inform you of the significant issues that are before ARPdom that are overlooked or ignored; and (2) To give voice to those who feel their voice has been taken away and they have been disenfranchised. With these in mind,

Mr. Wright's concerns regarding ETS are newsworthy and significant to ARPdom.

To say the least, the above response to Mr. Wright by the Grievance Committee is fascinating for what is acknowledged! This letter and critically important subject matter that is troubling for those of us who love and desire the well-being of Erskine Theological Seminary. Let me make a number of observations regarding this letter and the manner in which a veteran Pastor in good standing, a man who was examined and installed by Second Presbytery, has been treated.

- 1) On many occasions the President of Erskine and the Executive Vice-President of the Seminary have stood before the General Synod and encouraged us to respond to them. They have pleaded that Erskine College and Seminary are ours and Erskine is the place where we ought to send our high school seniors for college and our ministerial candidates for seminary and the place deserving of our financial faithfulness. But what has happened in the past when Erskine has been criticized by one of us is a "circling of wagons." Will this policy continue? Are the appeals to General Synod that the institution is owned by the ARPC more than posturing?**
- 2) The first point of the letter reveals that the Grievance Committee did not know what to make of the Administration's handling of the matter. They recognized that Mr. Wright's complaint is not a "personal grievance." The committee has to be admired for soldiering on with the unenviable task to which it was saddled. I would have refused to hear this non-grievance.**
- 3) The second point of the committee's letter involves correspondence between Mr. Wright and the professor. I am not at liberty to disclose that information. However, I will make one observation that's obvious. I do not know whether the committee has read the professor's book on Barth, but I have read the introduction, first chapter and last chapter and a good bit in between. My conclusion: IT IS NOT A SECRET THAT THE AUTHOR IS A CHEERLEADER FOR KARL BARTH!**
- 4) The third point of the letter makes three significant points. I will separate them.**
 - First, the committee notes that a broader issue of identify is involved. That is a keen observation. In order to have the**

diversity of which they speak, are they admitting that a Barthian has been hired to teach and given license to evangelize? They also propose a false dichotomy. The RPCNA seminary and Covenant Theological Seminary are also denominational seminaries that serve larger constituencies without undermining their own denominational commitments. At Erskine it seems that there is a latitudinarianism afoot that seeks to be all things to all people and regards the ARPC as just one of many constituencies—regardless of the fact that the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church owns Erskine and contributes faithfully and sacrificially to its ministry.

- **Second, the letter reads “Given that Erskine Seminary’s *stated* mission is to serve the broader Church from the Reformed tradition (see the “Who We Are” statement in the *Catalog*), any attempt to narrow that mission needs to come from the Board of Trustees and needs to be clearly articulated.” This is true, but it avoids a question of stewardship. What is the direction of the sponsoring, financially supporting denomination? Deliberately seeking to move the seminary decisively away from the theological center of the ARPC is an unconscionable failure of wisdom and leadership. Could it be that because so many of the faculty members are not ARP’s they are ignorant of the theological direction of the ARPC? What future, consistent with the direction of the ARPC, could be envisioned that would include the hiring of another Barthian to replace Dr. Merwyn Johnson?**
- **Third, the committee’s letter speaks of “Reformed” as though there were consensus on the definition. Does Reformed mean everything that is not Roman Catholic? Merwyn Johnson, a former ETS professor, used to speak of Methodists as Reformed. Most often when the term “Reformed” is used predestination is connected with it. Barth was bitterly critical of Lorraine Boettner and his book, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, calling Boettner a “neo-Calvinist” who was an aberration. Therefore, to argue for a “Reformed tradition” that includes both Barth and Boettner stretches the boundaries of “Reformed” beyond meaningful limits (to be sure, some in the PC(USA) like to speak of the “larger Reformed tradition,” but in doing so they exclude almost nothing). And why would one want to conjoin Bathianism and orthodoxy? Barth rejected most of what we in the ARPC hold dear. Besides, everywhere Barthianism has gone the church has suffered theologically**

and died numerically—look at the churches in Switzerland, Germany, Holland, Scotland, and the PC(USA) in the USA.

- 5) The fourth point of the committee is a continuation of the third point. They do not find the teaching of the professor in question inconsistent with the purpose of the seminary. They do not find the professor's enthusiastic advocacy of Barth's teaching objectionable. At this point one must ask: Given the fact that the doctrine of Scripture is foundational to the life and health of the church, what would they find objectionable? Would they find objectionable the teachings of an Arian? Would they find objectionable the teaching of a Baptist professor who enthusiastically promoted believer's baptism and castigated infant baptism?**

- 6) One wonders as to the propriety of the makeup of the Grievance Committee. I know Dr. Melton to be an excellent teacher; however, he is a Baptist. Dr. Lowe is a Methodist whom I do not know well. Dr. Fairbairn has the reputation of being a brilliant patristic scholar; however, he is a layman in the Due West Church and a "BARP" (a Baptist who takes exception to our views on baptism but is a member of one of our congregations). No one suspects the personal integrity of these men who have been placed in an awkward setting. However, the makeup of the committee is preposterous. The last time I looked Erskine Theological Seminary was the seminary of the ARPC and touted as such by the Erskine administrators. A serious complaint regarding a professor's teaching as being at variance with the confessional standards of the ARPC has been made and no ARP teaching elder is to be found on the committee! Mr. Wright is a Pastor in good standing in his Presbytery. Are no ARP peers to be found at ETS to adjudicate the complaint of an ARP Pastor? This is absurd! What was the Administration thinking? Did they not realize they were going to be criticized for "circling the wagons" again?**

Finally, it is no secret that Erskine has been in the past and continues to be in the present at odds with the mainstream of the ARPC. In conversations with Erskine College graduates who have left Due West to attend other seminaries, ALL of them have pointed to the theological lack of identity with the ARPC as a main factor that has lead them to seek seminary education elsewhere. Incredibly, these men have walked away from what is basically a free education. What explains the fact that ETS has fewer ARP students attending today than ETS had ten years ago? Not liking the identity of the

**ARPC, it seems that ETS is a seminary looking for another identity.
In other words, ETS is a child looking for a mama other than her own
mama—any other mama will do!!!**

**These are things we often talk about under the tree, aren't they?
Many thanks are to be given to Mr. Wright for having the courage to
bring them into the open.**

These are my thoughts,

Charles W. Wilson

Chuck