

COVENANT COLLEGE AND COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

By Robert G. Rayburn

A very sympathetic expression was evident on the face of the Chancellor of the University of Missouri as he said to me, “Dr. Rayburn, I don’t want to discourage you unduly, but with such a small number of people in your denomination I don’t think it is possible that you will be able to get enough support to make Covenant College a viable, accredited educational institution here in Missouri.” He had just asked me how large our denomination was, and I had confessed that indeed we were a very small church with about 10,000 members. At that time, of course, we were the Bible Presbyterian Church. I immediately assured the Chancellor that we were not looking to our denomination as the source of our financial security, but that we believed our sovereign God had called the college into existence and we expected Him to provide for it in His own wonderful ways. He looked sympathetic, but it was evident that he certainly had no understanding of or appreciation for my confidence in God.

Covenant College had just moved to St. Louis from Pasadena, California, where it had finished its first year of classes. After being created by the Synod of the Bible Presbyterian Church (later to become the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod), it was temporarily located in Pasadena because most of our student body and faculty members were there having been part of another small independent college in that city which had been seriously disrupted by accusations of ecclesiastical compromise. The Synod had voted overwhelmingly to establish its own college and had elected a board of trustees which asked me to take the presidency of the new institution. A permanent (or so we thought) campus property had been discovered in St. Louis which seemed to be an exceedingly desirable location since our denomination was scattered over much of the U.S.A., and we wanted a central location. Funds to begin the purchase of the campus had been provided by an unexpected source, so we had moved to St. Louis. As word went out

concerning the new campus, immediately the school began to grow with students enrolling from many parts of the country. I was eager for it to gain proper recognition in what was to be its home state, and I knew that recognition by the State University in Columbia was the first step toward ultimate regional accreditation. I was not surprised at the reaction of the Chancellor, but all the more determined to lead the college to acceptance in the academic world.

During the summer of 1956, as we prepared the new campus purchased from the Roman Catholic monastic order which had put it on the market, our Synod acted again and made the decision to add the Theological Seminary as the graduate department of Covenant College. I worked hard to enlist scholars for the two faculties and soon an unusually gifted group of teachers began moving from the east to St. Louis to accept appointments as members of the faculty. They were nationally and even internationally recognized conservative biblical scholars such as Dr. J. Oliver Buswell, former president of Wheaton College who was to head our Systematic Theology department; Dr. R. Laird Harris, well known for his writings, came from Faith Theological Seminary to head our Old Testament department; Dr. Wilber Wallis, head of our New Testament department, came from Shelton College where he had been a very popular teacher; Dr. Elmer B. Smick, a Semitic scholar who had taught at Shelton and also pastored a church in Trenton, New Jersey, joined the Old Testament department. Dr. John Sanderson who had been teaching at Westminster Seminary was added to the faculty soon after school opened on the new campus, as was Dr. W. Harold Mare.

Both the college and the seminary experienced such growth that it soon became evident more space was urgently needed. Having moved the college once from California to St. Louis, there was considerable reluctance to contemplate another move, but the lovely landscaped campus with only about twenty-five acres simply did not provide enough room for two expanding schools. The college especially needed space for extensive science laboratories, a gymnasium, athletic fields, and other facilities.

The board of trustees began investigating possible locations in other places and a number of suggested properties were visited but found to be inadequate for various reasons. Then one of the trustees came to a board meeting with a picture of the well-known Lookout Mountain Hotel on top of Lookout Mountain, Georgia, near Chattanooga, Tennessee. This large hotel was for sale by the insurance company which had foreclosed on a mortgage it held on the property, and our trustee urged us to consider the purchase of it for the college. I resisted for more than a year because I was unhappy about moving again and especially moving to a community where we had not a single church of our denomination. However when months had passed and we had found no other property which seemed desirable, the trustee who had initially brought the picture of the hotel to show us asked, "Don't you think that you should at least go and look the property over?" I agreed that it was certainly a reasonable thing to do, and several of the staff made plans to travel to Georgia with me to look at the property. When we stepped into the huge hotel building located at the very top of an historic mountain and surrounded by magnificent scenery, it became evident almost immediately that it would be a most desirable location for the college.

We learned that the insurance company which held the mortgage had decided to accept sealed bids for the property, so the board of trustees decided on an amount which they felt they could offer and submitted it as a bid. In God's wonderful providence, although our bid was not the largest one received, the board of the insurance company decided to let us have it because we were an evangelical Presbyterian denomination which would fit into the Chattanooga community better than would the other proposed institutions. This confirmed for us the fact that the Lord had been guiding in the whole process of location for our growing school.

The summer was spent in preparing the large hotel for occupancy as a Christian liberal arts college. Faculty members and students who were available spent many hours at this huge task. My wife and I together with some furloughing missionaries cleaned

bathrooms and did all manner of chores to make the property ready for an influx of students and the beginning of classes. We were enthusiastic laborers because we knew that the Lord was in the whole project.

There were some who thought that both the seminary and the college should move to the Lookout Mountain campus, but it was the decision of the board that the theological seminary should stay in St. Louis where much better facilities for theological research were available and where other resources important for a graduate school were located. So the decision was made to keep the seminary on the St. Louis campus while the college moved “bag and baggage” to its new mountain-top home.

For one year I traveled between the two schools, spending part of each week at the college and the remainder at the seminary. This was made possible at that time by the fact that I could take an evening train in St. Louis, sleep all night in the Pullman, and get up in Chattanooga the next morning ready for my teaching and the administrative work of the college. However, it soon became evident that this would not be desirable as a permanent arrangement, so the board determined to separate the two schools and asked the Synod to elect separate boards of trustees who would in turn set up separate administrations. It was the decision of the board that I should stay with the seminary in St. Louis and a new president should be found for the college. Happily Dr. Marion Barnes, who had been chairman of the board of the combined school, was asked to take the presidency of the college, and after prayer and frank discussion with board members, he wholeheartedly accepted the college presidency and moved from St. Louis to Lookout Mountain.

After the separation of the two schools, significant attention was given in both institutions to the strengthening of the academic programs and the development of greater financial stability. The recognition of each of the schools as fully accredited by the regional accrediting associations was set as a firm goal. The seminary was the first to reach regional accreditation with the North Central Association after an intensive self-study. Accreditation by the Association of Theological Schools was not sought at first but later proved to be

desirable. Another self-study was undertaken and the seminary has been fully accredited by this professional association for several years.

Covenant College was in the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges and received its full accreditation from that organization in 1971.

The joining of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, with the Presbyterian Church in America was accomplished with a firm agreement that both of the educational institutions would remain permanently under the control of the General Assembly of the combined church rather than being changed to independent institutions as some suggested at the time. That there should be direct accountability to the courts of the church on the part of these two educational institutions has been a firmly held conviction of those who founded the schools, because the college and seminary are directly involved in the progress and spiritual growth of the church. A substantial majority of the teaching and ruling elders of the denomination has agreed with this position.

In both the college and the seminary a primary emphasis has been placed on the spiritual lives of the students. Recognizing that a true education involves an understanding of and commitment to a Christian world view consistent with the Bible and the Reformed Faith, the college has required that all of its professors should be able to clearly demonstrate the relationship of their academic disciplines to their Christian faith and their teaching in the classroom. While the seminary is a professional school for the training of young people for active Christian ministry as pastors, missionaries, and other Christian professions, there is a strong emphasis on academic excellence. However, the most basic ingredient which must be encouraged in the lives of seminarians is that spiritual growth which will produce dynamic ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit. The two schools have maintained their close relationship by using the same coat of arms with the motto "That in all things Christ might have preeminence."