

Grant Shockley³¹

ORDER, CHANGE AND THE FUTURE: NAMING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

It is by intention and design that the order of service for this inauguration is both churchly and academic. Apart from my own proclivity in the matter, however, there is much to commend it, historically. Higher education in America grew out of the desire of early evangelical Christianity to educate a “literate and godly clergy” and to rear all youth in schools and colleges where “knowledge and vital piety” would be united in such a way that faith and wisdom would be nourished as an inevitable occurrence.

In the early life of the American Republic and on into the late 19th century, college presidents (male of course), were members of the clergy to “insure” the continuing relationship of moral and literary learning.

But there is a much deeper reason for uniting church and school in the liturgy of this inaugural service. It is hoped that this will make a statement to all that the Interdenominational Theological Center, a nexus for the theological education of Black ministers of seven denominations, can serve no greater purpose than to be joined to their churches in witnessing and training women and men to serve creatively and redemptively in the midst of the tumults of our day.

Introduction

My conviction that a sermon-address for an occasion such as this should be firmly rooted in scripture has led me to select a passage from the Old Testament lesson which you have just heard

³¹ This is the inaugural address of President Grant S. Shockley delivered on October 6, 1976 in Sisters Chapel, Spelman College as the third president of the Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia.

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(Exodus 3:13-18). It is the familiar passage that contains the story of the burning bush revealing God to Moses as he tended Jethro's flocks on the slopes of Mount Horeb:

Then Moses said to God, "if I come to the people of Israel and say to them, the God of your father has sent me to you, and they ask me, 'what is his name?'" What shall I say to them? God said to Moses, "I am Who I am," And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, I am has sent me to you."

Or, to use a more scintillating translation, "God said to Moses, say to the people, "I will be who I will be."

In theological education, as in everyday life, where once we thought of the new only in relation to the old, we must now learn to think of the new in relation to the future. For what is truly new must be "something that never was." The text which you have just heard means just that! It speaks of a changeless God of order and ultimate authorship who is always acting in changing ways to realize God's nature and purpose in the ongoing history of the people. And we come to know God best as we divinely become inventors of a future that is assured because GOD IS: God is who God was, God is who God is and God is who God will be.

But what is the larger context of this cryptic passage, unique in its attempt to reveal a new name for God and a new mission for God's people? How does this relate to theological education, generally, and to the Interdenominational Theological Center, particularly? Let us review the passage for some further understanding.

Moses was keeping the flocks of Jethro in the land of Midian. God appeared to him in the form of an angel and spoke to him from a burning bush that was not consumed. God called Moses from the burning bush and Moses responded by moving toward the bush until God's voice commanded him to take off his shoes before treading on holy ground. God then reminded Moses that he was the God of his fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. This caused Moses to hide his face in holy

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fear and awe. It is then that God tells Moses of his concern for the affliction of the Hebrews in Egypt and promises that they would be delivered. God then makes it clear that Moses has been selected for this mission of deliverance and Moses makes it equally clear that he is not the person for the job!

After being reassured by God that he would be with him in this mission of liberation, the prelude to an even larger objective, Moses consents, reluctantly, on the condition that God would give him a name that would convince the Israelites of his authenticity. The name that God tells Moses to tell the people is a new name by which God is to be known — for God is about to do a new thing.

There are three things in this passage that are worth considering as we seek to endow theological education here at the Interdenominational Theological Center with substance and “soul” as well as with integrity and vision: (1) the God of Moses is a living God; (2) the God of Moses is an acting God; (3) the God of Moses is a God for the Future.

A LIVING GOD

The God of Moses is a living God. The burning bush that was not consumed is a divine symbol of God’s living presence — omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. Surely the hymnist had this concept of God in mind when he wrote:

“Immortal, invisible God only wise
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes.
Most blessed, most glorious the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious Thy great name we praise.”

No wonder God said to Moses, “Do not come near; take off your shoes for the ground on which you stand is holy ground. Here before God’s very eyes was being revealed the dynamic eternal reality which is set at the heart of universal existence. Isaac Watts speaks of this in the verse:

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The Lord Jehovah reigns, His throne is built
on high; The garments he assumes are light
and majesty; His glories shine with beams
so bright No mortal eye can bear the sight.
Moses hid his face lost in wonder love and praise!

Moses was not only made aware of the power and authority of God in the burning bush, but he was also made acutely aware of God's eternal presence: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' and I will be your God." Here is another meaningful insight. God's eternal presence does not mean that God is just "everlasting." It means rather God's total presence in our midst — Emanuel, God with us! It is like Meister Eckhart's "now moment" or The Buddha's "single instant awakening" or Wittgenstein's triumphant phrase, "he lives eternally who lives in the present."

There is, however, a basic distinction to be made here. God's presence in the world is more than an abstract presence — more there than here — it is a "real presence." It is more than "an ineffable experience" — it is a relationship. This is unique, perhaps, in the faith of the Hebrews. From them the existence of anything is always more than an idea. It is a bond with another person. God revealed in the Bible is never alone. "God" is he who is with someone: "But I will be with you and this shall be the sign for you that I have sent you..." Yahweh becomes the God of the Covenant "because he is the God capable of being with someone."

Fear not I am with thee
O be not dismayed
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid;
I'll strengthen thee, help thee and cause thee to stand
Upheld by my righteous omnipotent hand!

AN ACTING GOD

The God of Moses is a God who acts. In revealing the divine nature in the burning bush God was more than a living presence. God did not stop with a description of his power, his presence and his covenant. The God of Moses continued to reveal himself to us as an acting God.

The drama of the Bible is a rehearsal of those acts. It unfolds the mighty acts of God in Creation. The God of Israel is the Creator of heaven and earth; God is exalted and transcendent:

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand
And determined the heavens with a span
And comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure,
And weighed the mountains in scales
And the hills in a balance (Isa 40:12)

The God of Moses and the God of the Bible is a God of creative order. As we read:

Lift up your eyes on high
And see, who has created these?
He who brings out their host by number
And calls them all by name:
So great is his strength and mighty his power
That not one is out of its place (Is 40:26)

The drama of the Bible unfolds the story of the redemptive acts of God. By God's covenant acts of grace, God made himself known as a redeemer. Through Abraham God redeemed a nation. Through Moses God redeemed a community. Through Joshua God redeemed the Promised Land. Through David God redeemed the Messianic hope.

Just as the Bible tells the story of the redemptive acts of God, it unfolds the record of God's judgment. Through the preaching of the prophets, God weighed the sins of Israel and the sins of the nations and found them wanting. They found racketeering in the

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market places, corruption in the courts, the irresponsible exercise of power in palaces, licentious living among national leaders, wasteful luxury amid squalid poverty, sordid immortality of all kinds and narrow racial exclusivism. In the midst of these conditions and situations the prophets gave us these priceless insights: (1) Israel's failure was not due to the lack of spiritual resources, but it was due to collective moral bankruptcy; (2) Israel's sin could not be assigned to the social environment, but to personal defection; (3) Israel's national collapse was as much the result of internal as external enemies.

Finally, the drama of the Bible unfolds God's mightiest act of all — incarnation. In the words of the writer of the Gospel of John, "... the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth..." The eternal entered time in the form of a person. What was really revealed in the activity of God through the life of Christ was the true and basic meaning of freedom in relation to God not just the meaning of "personal" freedom or freedom between persons. The Word which became flesh was the Word upon which everything depends. It is creative response to God's action in life and time as they present their several circumstances. In and through Christ our Example, Redeemer and Lord — God imparts himself to us — finally acting on a cross for our redemption.

God not only acts redemptively in persons who are obedient to his will, but God acts through persons to redeem the history in which persons are enmeshed. In other words, God acts in the affairs of history through persons to change history. Let it not be forgotten that the voice of God did not come out of a "bush" except in a literal sense. The voice came out of a crisis in the life of God's people.

Then the Lord said, "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry... I know their suffering, and I have come down to deliver them.

There are two observations that should be made here. The Gospel that we preach, teach and practice in theological education consists of more than an elaboration and refinement of an inert

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corpus of truth. The Gospel is characterized in every aspect by concreteness and contemporaneity. There is simply no way it can be read or interpreted with integrity without confronting the concrete concerns of persons in their “situations-in-life” and commanding us to change those situations and enable persons to re-orient their lives through Christ. This seems to be the basic point in the “furious passage” in Luke 4:18, a clarion call to radical social change based on radical personal transformation:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

The activity of God occurs, if it occurs at all, in the midst of the trials and tribulations of the poor, the oppressed, the prisoners and the outcasts. It is here that God through the ministry of God’s servants, lay and professional, is seeking to redeem his people and change whatever systems that would keep them in bondage or negate their intended fullness of life in Christ. The theologian Freidrich Gogarten is correct when he says that “The Word of God and the word addressed to the world must never be separated. They must be held together in the event of revelation.” God called Moses to obedience in order that his purpose might prevail in the present, the here and now of time. God will be who God will be — Now! God is the Lord of history and God will always be acting as the Lord of history; must act in relation to God’s nature as Lord. Furthermore, God’s action speaks to the kind of response expected of God’s people. They are to be taught to act as those responding, momentarily, to the Lord of all history and every vicissitude.

There is another matter that calls for our attention in the burning bush passage. The faith that was revealed to Moses in the burning bush incident not only placed the “acts of God” firmly and squarely within history. That same faith generated and motivated a chain of events that moved God’s purpose toward its even larger goal. Recall these words in the text:

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When you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain. (Exodus 3:12)

The reference to serving God upon “this mountain” is significant. It is really superfluous except for one important thing. It seems clear from this passage that from the very beginning, God never intended the liberation of the Israelites from their Egyptian bondage to be the sum and all of his relationship to them or of them to God. Liberation from Egypt was a prelude. It was a precondition to the larger purpose of making all of Israel God’s people and through them all people everywhere followers of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob! In other words, liberation was a purposeful and necessary means to the kind of real freedom that God’s people must have to choose God’s mission in the world and be about that mission. Liberation in this fuller context is from “slavery” to “freedom” for “mission.”

What, then, are some implications of this for the Interdenominational Theological Center, a predominantly Black theological seminary? Several thoughts come to mind. First, an “*apologia pro vita sua*.”

Black people, because of centuries of oppression and racism have a basic need and a human right to affirm and enhance their existence in a hostile American society. We have a right to assess and appropriate the history, heritage and cults of any faith that will enable us to deal effectively with “the ultimate and violent issues” of life and death that face us in one form or another, daily.

Let us also say, proudly, that the Black Church has “acted” to meet these needs. Its entire history and present manifestation has been and is a tremendous witness to its attempt to articulate the religious experience from a Black perspective. Just recently, in the emergence of the “Black Theology” movement (contributed to substantially by members of our own faculty), this trend has climaxed in what has already proven to be one of the few original contributions to American theological thought. But what is “Black theology”?

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Black theology is a theology of Black liberation. It seeks to plumb the Black condition in the light of God's revelation of God as revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Freedom is the gospel. Jesus is the liberator.

Third, the Black Church, all Black denominations and Black constituencies in white denominations, have "acted" by bringing into being this Theological Center to raise up ministers, women and men, who are uniquely qualified by experience and training, to deal constructively with the Black condition from the perspective of the Gospel.

In the light of the passage cited above, however, we must do this and more. We must, in cooperation with others, seek to liberate Black and other minorities from physical, psychological, social, economic, political and cultural oppression. But when this has been done or as we seek to do this, we must also maintain a double-visioned understanding that the larger mission of liberation must find us creating, initiating and sustaining those kinds of concepts, policies and programs which, while focusing on a redemptive ministry amid the "existentialities" of the Black experience, nevertheless, will not lose sight of or concern for the future-in-the-making beloved community of a "kingdom beyond caste" or color.

As this begins to happen, the God of Moses and the Jesus of history will again be known as those who acted for God to reconcile and change, to redeem and restore. This, then, is our task in theological education at the Interdenominational Theological Center. It is to open ourselves, sufficiently, as students, teachers, administrators and trustees, to enable and support the kind of seminary that will train pastors to serve a Lord who is the same yesterday, today and forever and a God who is who he will be.

A GOD FOR THE FUTURE

In concluding this somewhat unorthodox inaugural sermon-address, still another dimension of the text must be treated. "I am who I will be" does not yield its deepest meaning until it is viewed

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from the perspective of the future. It is only in this dimension that it can be fully understood.

It will be recalled from the text (verse 13) that Moses had asked God to give him a name by which God could be described to the Israelites. Instead, God commanded Moses to be obedient to his will. This is a highly significant response. In essence, it means two important things. God's name will be revealed in God's action and in any event, God will be with us as an eternal presence. As one scholar points out, "God is saying that his presence is indeterminate, undefined, open ended... It is... something which as (its) nature is more and more known." The name of God, or the description of God's nature and being cannot be limited to form or matter, space or time dogma or doctrine. He will be who he will become as he fulfills his divine purpose, which is his nature, and keeps his holy covenant with humanity which is God's only obligation.

This is the key to the Christian faith, an implicit confidence in a God who is unfolding the richness of the total divine being for us in acts of creation, power, justice and love and whose holy presence is with us always to vouchsafe his eternal care. The radical question for the Christian is not to ask what the past was nor even when the present is — both must be dealt with as realistically, creatively and redemptively as possible. The question for the Christian is who and what, where and when is God revealed in Christ calling us to be and to do and to go. In the words of the poet,

"The world is a becoming world, a world ever surpassing itself, where the new proceeds from the old and yet at the same time is new and more.

The key to the future of the Interdenominational Theological Center, I like to think, is much like that. It is a quiet, firm confidence that students, faculty, administration, trustees, alumni and the community, working together can conceive, nurture and guide to maturity whatever future God wills for us. And in that future as in the past and present, the God who "will be who God

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will be” is not only above us but is going before us as a cloud by day and as a pillar of fire by night. (Exodus 12:21) It is knowing that God, the Living One, the “I am,” is sufficient for every situation that could ever arise. There cannot be a time or an event or a circumstance, now or ever, which can separate us from that purpose and that mission. But Paul has said it well:

For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, or depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, Our Lord. (1 Cor. 3:7)

This, I submit, is the kind of God that the ITC needs for the interpretation of her past, the maximizing of her present and the envisioning of her future. A God who is undetermined, yet stable . . . bound yet free . . . able to meet the exigencies of the present, the imponderables of the future, the novel of the moment and the emergent opportunities of history.

This is the God of the Old and New Testaments, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Martin Luther King, Rosemary Reuther, Gustavo Guitierrez. Vine Deloria, Jr. This is the God of the future of the ITC. A God who has within self what has been called “the boundless life which embraces all and transcends all.” A god who is, and who was and who is to come. God alone is the one in whom we can put our trust. Few have said it better than T. S. Eliot who in his *Choruses from the Rock* would remind us that theological education, like the church, “. . . must be forever building, and always being restored . . . and all that is ill you may repair if you walk together in humble repentance . . . and all that was good, you must fight to keep with hearts as devoted as those of your fathers who fought to gain it.”

For such a venture in theological education, God calls us to join him. God summons us all — community, alumni, trustees, administration, faculty and students to an endless pilgrimage in the task of serving the present from the perspective of an age yet to come.