

Kenneth E. Henry\*

## Symbols of Heritage and Hope

Joshua 4:1-7

I Peter 2:4-10

### Introduction

I am most grateful for the opportunity to share in this Convocation during the fortieth year of the existence of Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC). My colleague, Dr. Mark Ellingsen,<sup>1</sup> and I count it a rare privilege to update the history of the seminary while many of the pioneers are yet among us in the metropolitan Atlanta area. Let us identify persons who were members of the first ITC faculty and administration and are in the area:

Mrs. Selma Richardson, wife of the first President  
Dr. Charles B. Copher, Professor of Old Testament and  
Academic Dean

Dr. G. Murray Branch, Associate Professor of Old  
Testament

Dr. Josephus Coan, Associate Professor of Religious  
Education and Mission

Dr. Carrie George, Instructor, Department of Chris-  
tian Education

Dr. Melvin Watson, Assistant Professor of Theology

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Many others who joined the faculty during the early period have retired but relate to the ITC community in various capacities. There were ninety-seven students and twenty-two members of the Board of Trustees when the school began in 1958.<sup>2</sup>

### Exploring the Theme

What, then, is our task today? ITC is a community of faith and learning. We bear the responsibility to clarify our heritage as a foundation for future hope. In other words, we must interpret our heritage of what God has done in our midst to see clearly where God is leading us in the present and future. This is the very heart and soul of ITC, and I invite you to explore the theme, "Symbols of Heritage and Hope."

In pursuing this theme, particular persons, ideas, and events emerge that characterize or symbolize life within the community. We sense immediately, however, that we are concerned with more than the Association of Theological Schools, reports of an economically viable operation, increasing enrollment, notable curriculum and faculty, and uplifting and inspiring worship. We are reaffirming our human response to God's initiative in God's continuing work of creation.

Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that we turn to scripture for guidelines. The Deuteronomic historian in Joshua 4:1-7 gives an intriguing account of the children of Israel crossing the Jordan River into the promised land. While the record here is more unified and schematized even with etiological elements than the story of conquest in the Book of

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<sup>2</sup>Harry V. Richardson, *Walk Together Children* (Atlanta: ITC Press, 1981), 69.



Judges, the writer leaves no doubt that continued national well-being depends primarily on utter obedience to the commands of God. The waters of the Jordan are held back, and the Israelites cross on dry land.

The Lord engages Joshua symbolically to record the historic event. Obviously, no one videotaped the scene with great numbers and high drama; and the account of what really happened surely would be confused, distorted, and misunderstood before the 6:00 evening news, or sharing around the camp fire. The Lord instructed Joshua to send twelve men back to the river bed to bring twelve stones to the place of lodging for the night. There they were to build an altar, a memorial to God for the miracle God had wrought that day. They were to tell the children and future generations the true meaning of these stones, symbols of their heritage and hope.

We focus on the context of the ITC story. The words of Susanne K. Langer of fifty years ago seem hauntingly relevant: "We have lost our life symbols and our actions no longer have ritual value: this is the most disastrous hindrance to the free functioning of the human mind."<sup>3</sup> Does it not seem that we rush madly from one experience to the next, never stopping long enough to understand anything?

The symbols to which we call attention are more than arbitrary signs. They participate in, and are inextricably involved with the reality to which they point.<sup>4</sup> The symbols are

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<sup>3</sup>Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*, 3d ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957, c1942), intro. (1st ed.).

<sup>4</sup>Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford Press, 1964), 54-56. Many other writers use the terms, "symbols" and "signs" with a wide range of meanings, especially the African-American religious experience. Variations include: coded messages of the Spirituals; Nat Turner's dream images; the raised, clenched fist salute of Black Power; and the many expressions of soul. This writer's primary concern is the

born within the context of the community of interpretation, and the symbols die if the community neglects the history. Therefore, the choice not to tell the story is the choice to die.

Yet, another way to explore the significance of reflecting our experience was given by W. E. B. DuBois, "Herein lies the tragedy of the age; not that men are poor—all men know something of poverty; not that men are wicked—who is good? Not that men are ignorant—what is truth? Nay, but that men know little of men."<sup>5</sup> We are about the task of recalling, identifying, celebrating our history, God's work in our midst.

### Symbols Explored

The symbols of our heritage must be explored like the stones of ancient Israel; they could be misinterpreted as symbols of division, competing interests and strife. Stones were used as boundary markers and readily suggested the point at which property and interest of one person, family, or tribe ended and another began. Moving the boundary markers was a serious offense that could trigger feuds, loss of inheritance and war (Proverbs 23:10-11, Deuteronomy 19:14). Joshua did not want stones misunderstood in that way.

In the formulation of ITC four denominations brought together their *denominational stones*: theological views, distinctive doctrines and structures, various resources of money and influence, established institutions and strong leaders. These could have been sources of never-ending strife and division. But the miracle of ITC is coming together, cooperat-  
essential reciprocal relationship between the symbol and the community of interpretation.

<sup>5</sup>W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomas, 1973), 226-227.



ing and sharing various gifts and traditions. During the many interviews with ITC trustees, faculty, students and alumni, whenever we asked what was most unique about the ITC experience, the answer most often given was the cooperation of our several denominations.

The guiding genius and chief architect of the endeavor was Dr. Harry V. Richardson, President of Gammon Theological Seminary. He had been called from Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, to Gammon when the school faced enrollment difficulty, faculty development and efforts to maintain a campus facility too large for the seminary program after Clark College moved to the Atlanta University area. The supporting denomination, the Methodist Episcopal Church, which also supported the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, was urging the school to relocate and explore plans of cooperation with Atlanta University and other seminaries.

Gammon was accredited by the American Association of Theological Schools; and Dr. Richardson initiated measures to strengthen the institution, maintain accreditation and broaden the base of support. Always standing beside him was Mrs. Selma Richardson, who initiated programs to enhance the life of spouses and families.

Dr. Benjamin E. Mays was president of Morehouse College, the location of the Morehouse School of Religion. At this juncture, the college could not adequately fund and staff this school of religion at the level required for seminary accreditation. The major funds were directed towards accrediting the undergraduate college. A gifted administrator and leader of national stature, Dr. Mays rallied Baptists in support of the new ecumenical venture. The Rev. M. L. King, Sr. joined this initial effort.

The third institution to become involved was Morris

Brown College, founded by the AME Church. Dr. John H. Lewis was the president. Once again, the religion department of a college struggled to meet the demand for adequately trained clergy. The leadership realized a joint effort presented more hope of success. Morris Brown students were being directed to Gammon for seminary-level work at this time.

In similar fashion, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church had sought to prepare clergy leadership at Lane College in Tennessee. Bishop B. Julian Smith was president of the Board of Christian Education for the church and quickly persuaded the church's leadership to join the united effort through the relocation of Phillips School of Theology.

These wise and resourceful leaders were convinced that together their institutions could achieve what no one of them alone could maintain. Their commitment to quality theological education caused them to transcend the division of denominations. Working together in an interdenominational effort, ITC became the symbol of their heritage and basis of their hope.

To chart this new course, they called together some of the best minds in theological education to assist them:

- ◆ Dr. Ernest Cadman Colwell, Vice President and Dean of faculty, Emory University
- ◆ Dr. Walter N. Roberts, President of the AATS
- ◆ Dr. Henry Pitt Van Dusen, President of Union Theological Seminary
- ◆ Dr. Merrill J. Holmes, President of Illinois Wesleyan University



- ◆ Dr. Frederick D. Patterson, President of the United Negro College Fund<sup>6</sup>

A clear assessment of the need and available resources enabled the bold new structure to emerge. Their work was done so carefully that initial funding in the amount of three million dollars was received from the Sealantic Fund and the General Education Board.

Students caught the spirit of preparing for a ministry setting where the faculty and student body were interracial, international, and interdenominational from the beginning. Many other ecumenical organizations have taken note of the ITC model. We must tell successive generations the story that in this place exists one of the most successful ecumenical ventures in theological education.

### Symbols Clarified

We must clarify the symbols of our heritage to ensure that the original vision is sustained and that the purpose and direction remain clear. At the time and place of the conquest of Canaan, the sites of villages were abandoned occasionally for various reasons. Acts of nature or invading armies sometimes caused widespread destruction and disease, or famine might cause residents to migrate to healthier and more productive regions. Therefore, when one encountered piles of stones, one might infer that once a thriving people dwelt here. Great dreams and purposes that energized a people are now lost and forgotten. Life and fulfillment are sought somewhere else.

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<sup>6</sup>Richardson, *Walk Together Children*, 33-35.

If we do not tell the story and retain the vision, our existence could become a story of despair, frustrated fellowship; chasing after the latest fad or rearranging the theological, sociological, philosophical, historical revisionist language, a great deal of sound and fury—signifying nothing. Just as Israel could not forget her role and destiny in a land amidst changing circumstances and challenges, so has ITC stayed the course. Let us identify areas where the original plan has been finely tuned in the midst of change.

- ◆ Rigorous academic standards had to be maintained rather than simply continuing the curriculum, faculty, and students inherited from the past.
- ◆ A hard look at financial support from the constituent denominations was needed as original streams of support were slowed.
- ◆ Dramatic shifts in the social/economical/political climate were occurring as the society moved, sometimes grudgingly and sometimes quickly, towards integration and social justice. Three ITC students, AMEs, were the prime movers in the attempt to integrate the Pickrick Restaurant of Lester Maddox.<sup>7</sup> This incident created a certain notoriety for Maddox as a defender of segregation which helped his campaign for governor of Georgia. How could the seminary help students maintain a relevant

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<sup>7</sup>C. E. Wells, interview by Kenneth Henry and Mark Ellingsen, ITC, 13 June 1997, Atlanta, Georgia.



Christian witness during these times?

- ◆ Curriculum and faculty adjustments were made, particularly during the administration of Dr. Oswald Bronson to meet the rising tide of Black awareness and growing impact in quality and quantity of women in the seminary community. How was the dream to be realized, the vision refocused to serve the current age? What indeed was expected—indeed, demanded—as essential preparation of the leadership for church and society?

On a personal note, I joined the ITC family in the early 1970s, but it was in Africa that I gained a vision of the role of a theological seminary. As vice chair of the Division of Overseas Ministry Board of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), I was part of a team sent to Africa to listen to and learn from the African Churches. My church had adopted a policy that anyone who sat on a mission board should have a first-hand experience of the mission among those we hoped to serve. During the course of visiting a half-dozen countries and a variety of ministries in Africa, I was challenged and inspired by a visit to a leprosarium in former Zaire. Just the idea of a place for treating lepers evoked rather disconcerting images, to say the least, as I recalled biblical stories. But I was in for a surprise.

First of all, the facility was more like an out-patient clinic rather than a remote retreat where people go to await death. We were informed that the disease caused persons to lose sensitivity in their extremities—their hands and their feet. Therefore, they would touch things too hot or cold, too

hard or rough, too acidic or irritating and never realize it. This would result in calluses, burns, punctures, injuries and many other conditions that kept the individuals out of touch with themselves and others. A part of the treatment was washing, scraping: a cleansing process to restore sensitivity to insensitive parts.

The second surprise was the name of the place, "Kivuvu," which meant "hope." There in the heart of Africa, I rediscovered the meaning of a theological seminary. We live in a world in which we and others have lost our sensitivity to almost everything and everybody around us. Children murder children; spouses manipulate and abuse each other; and the movers and shakers of the society have no time or resources for the poor, uneducated, old, homeless, minority, the marginalized of humankind. Surely in the place where leaders of the church are educated there must be washing, scraping, cleansing from all that would keep us from being in touch with ourselves and others. The rigor of our disciplined study should cut through the superficial, stereotypical and unexamined assumptions that alienate. How else can we know and serve the one who said, "In as much as you have done unto one of the least of these you have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:45). We must regularly reclaim, refurbish, enhance the ideals that launched this bold venture, not letting them lie as deserted stones in a lonely and irrelevant place.

### **Symbols Interpreted**

We must carefully interpret the symbols of our heritage in order to learn from our history and to avoid mistakes of the past. Some lessons have been learned the hard way! In ancient Palestine, a pile of stones could be the remains of an altar where human sacrifices were made, usually the young



females, the most defenseless of the society. We quickly point to the pagans surrounding Israel, but when we read of Ahaz sacrificing his son in the fire (II Kings 16:3), Jephtha sacrificing his virgin daughter to keep a promise made to secure a military victory (Judges 11:29-40), or all Israel putting children through the fire then we realize that even a covenant people, a chosen people can make needless sacrifices at the altars of unnecessary stubbornness, deliberate ignorance, petty egoism, rampant sensuality, insatiable lust for power and a host of other apotheosized human frailties.

There have been unnecessary tensions in our growth. We must recognize them and celebrate how these potential breaking points became turning points to more constructive and creative endeavors. Consider these examples:

- ◆ Some are convinced that faculty and administration are natural enemies and must do battle eternally. It helps to see the complementary relationship in a common task.
- ◆ Some would see faculty and students as adversaries, totally missing the point that we study and grow together.
- ◆ From the larger theological community, we at times seem to have assimilated the preacher-versus-the-scholar-bias, as if the world could not receive or need scholarly preachers or scholars who understand we are all sinners saved by the grace of God.
- ◆ Traditionalists versus innovators, social activ-

ists versus personal spiritual formation devotees.

These have been turning points, symbols of hope, when the holistic witness of the seminary is realized. In our particular community of faith and learning, additional components helped to save us from a tunnel view of our purpose.<sup>8</sup> In 1969, the Presbyterian Seminary that was functioning as the religion department of the Johnson C. Smith University was moved from Charlotte, NC to become Johnson C. Smith Seminary of ITC. Dr. James H. Costen was the practical visionary who primarily engineered this strategic move. Serving as the first dean of the seminary, he later became the fifth president of ITC. Surely this community needed the Presbyterian sense of the church reformed, always reforming.

In 1970, the first theological seminary of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) began as the C. H. Mason Theological Seminary.<sup>9</sup> This was the culmination of pioneering efforts by Bishop J. O. Patterson, Bishop D. A. Burton and Bishop Roy Winbush, who currently serves as chair of the ITC Board of Trustees. The whole ITC community was imbued with COGIC spirit "in acquiring the learning, doesn't lose the burning."

The Absalom Jones Theological Institute was the Episcopal presence among us for a few years. This seminary reminded us of our continuity with the church universal and the continuing struggle for identity and integrity of witness. From the beginning, there have been students and faculty from

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<sup>8</sup>James H. Costen, interview by Kenneth Henry and Mark Ellingsen, ITC, 23 June 1997, Atlanta, Georgia.

<sup>9</sup>Oliver Haney, interview by Kenneth Henry and Mark Ellingsen, ITC, 15 April 1997, Atlanta, Georgia,



denominations other than the constituent ones. All of these have brought their experiences of journey in faith. We have come to know more of each other and affirm the richness and diversity of our heritage.

Many changes and developments have occurred through the successive decades of the life of ITC. It is impressive how often ITC has attracted many of the first and sometimes only Black scholars holding the Ph.D. in special areas at a particular time. New and timely programs have been introduced, and it does not yet appear what we may become.

When W. A. Visser't Hooft was first elected General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, he was asked to share what he hoped to accomplish in that role. He replied after a moment of reflection that indeed he had high expectations for the Council, but he also said, "If the Lord should will that Solomon and not David should build the temple we must be willing to say, 'Amen.'" Our experiences of the past prepare us to say, "So be it."

### **Symbols Reclaimed**

In the final analysis, reclaiming the symbols of our past as the foundations of our hope is another way of proclaiming the goodness and mercy of God in guiding and sustaining God's own.

The import of Johsua's admonition was to tell the children and successive generations of the mighty acts of God. Let them know that we are heirs to a goodly heritage, that we serve a God who never fails, and indeed fulfills all promises now and in times to come.

Rightly interpreted, the symbols help us to see beyond the immediate to the long term, from the individual to

the corporate, from only the external to renew the internal; that the passion of our praise will be matched by the compassion of our service, from this terrestrial ball we may gain a glimpse of celestial glory.

The human experience often seems to not fully realize hope until we have encountered despair and hopelessness—a Jordan we see no way of crossing. This sentiment was captured for me in the Brahms selection, “Song of Destiny,” that our college choir sang years ago. The music was rather dramatic, dissonant, irregular, atonal at points but perfectly conveyed the feel of the lyrics, “Like spray of the cataract, recklessly plunging down, down, to doubt and darkness below.”<sup>10</sup> I pictured in my mind a great waterfall with one tiny drop of water saying to another tiny drop of water, “How insignificant we are! Here one moment and evaporated the next, or plunged into nonexistence, the doubt and darkness below.” But think for a moment if that one tiny drop of water could have seen the big, complete picture, it would have realized it was but one of zillions of drops of water that together make up a scene of great beauty, awesome power, and abundant life.

I have experienced moments when I felt about like that tiny drop of water. There have been times when I have worked long hours with meager results, times when the things or persons I cherished were no longer there, times when I have studied all night and seemed to remember nothing the next day. There have been times when I felt like an insignificant, inconsequential, infinitesimal blob of protoplasm. At those times, I have been forced to step back and view the big pic-

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<sup>10</sup>Johannes Brahms, “A Song of Destiny,” op. 54, in *Famous Composers and Their Music*, vol. IV, ed. Theodore Thomas, John Knowles Paine and Karl Klausen (Boston: J. B. Millet Company, 1901), 512-513.



ture again. Then I realize anew I am a part of God's creation of great beauty, awesome power and abundant life. When I interpret the symbols correctly, I find hope. As part of God's plan, I understand the writer of I Peter 2:9-12, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are people of God, once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

ITC must continue to tell the story, to interpret the symbols of heritage and hope.