



The Yankees and Westminster:
Personal Reflections on the Meaning of Tradition¹

by

Peter Enns

Introduction

I have been a Yankee fan since 1970. My parents were German immigrants who settled in northern New Jersey, so my first exposure to the game was purely accidental. I was flipping channels the previous year, at the age of 8, and stumbled upon a game on WPIX channel 11, the Yankee station. It was Mickey Mantle Appreciation Day, occasioned by his retirement. I didn't know who he was, but I was hooked. Had I stopped flipping channels at WOR channel 9, I might have grown up a Met fan, but I'd rather not think about that.

I have been a Yankee fan longer than I have been a part of the Westminster tradition, longer than I have been Reformed—indeed, longer than I

¹ This essay has not and likely will not appear in any official publication. It was written purely as a discussion piece among the WTS faculty and board as a counterpoint to a document produced by a colleague. This essay was written in 2000 and only slightly edited in 2007. Hence, Yankee fans in particular will see how dated some of the information is, particularly with respect to one element: the Yankees' move to a new stadium in 2009. I still have not accepted that fully. More importantly, I warmly dedicate these thoughts to my former teacher, and now former colleague, but always baseball compatriot, Dr. William Barker. A lifelong Cardinal fan, his mature understanding of the proper role of tradition is one I resonate with. He also embodies a helpful reminder that it is good to take pleasure in the simple things in life, like baseball.

have been a Christian. Over the past thirty years, to paraphrase the famous line from the movie "Field of Dreams," Yankee baseball has been my "one constant."

The Yankees came into existence in 1912. The franchise was first known as the Highlanders (1903-11), and, as I am quick to remind my Maryland in-laws, began in Baltimore (1902) and only moved to New York in 1903. In the 20th century, the Yankees won more games and more championships than any other major league baseball team. The World Series was played 95 times in the 20th century. As I write this (summer 2000), the Yankees have played in 36 of them (38%) and won 25 times (26% of the total and 69% of those in which they played). In fact, if I may rub it in, they have *won* more post-season *titles* than a good number of other teams have *played* post-season *games*.

The word that is quickly associated with the Yankees is *tradition*. They have it—a lot of it. It is a proud tradition, a long tradition. The names of some Yankee players transcend their sport and have become a part of Americana: Ruth, Gehrig, DiMaggio, Mantle. Few if any sports towns can have their playing venue simply referred to as "The Stadium" and expect to be understood, even by outsiders. Of course, there are other teams that also boast a rich tradition. The Dodgers and Giants have it (although some would argue that their move to the west coast in the late 1950's brought that tradition to an end). The Red Sox, Cardinals, and Pirates, to name just three, are also rich in a long baseball tradition of their own, but the majority of teams cannot say the same. There is no aura that surrounds the Blue Jays, Expos, Mariners, or Padres.

Like it or not, there is something special about the Yankees, although not everyone accepts this as warmly as I. My exile in Philadelphia is a constant, living reminder of this. (Although at this juncture I am also reminded that, as of 1990, Philadelphia baseball teams—first the Athletics then the Phillies—had the worst winning percentage in the 20th century, .464. The Phillies themselves were 1,439 games under .500 through 1997. As political commentator and lifelong Cubs fan George Will puts it, “They’re having a bad century.”)² My point here, however, is not to discuss the Yankee tradition for its own sake, and at the outset I would ask forgiveness of those who might not take kindly to my rather obvious New York bias. (I grew up virtually thinking that the well-known cartoonish map “New Yorker’s View of the World” was drawn to scale.). Rather, my devotion to the Yankees has afforded me a context within which to consider the role of tradition in general, what it is and is not, what it can be and cannot be.

Westminster, likewise, is an institution that has a rich, vibrant theological tradition, one that we are right to want to maintain and perpetuate. Although I would not go so far as to say that WTS is the guiding light of the Christian world, or even of the Reformed world, it is an institution that has had a broad, international, influence that began in the Depression and continues still. But, unlike a baseball team, whose tradition can be quantified by such things as statistics (among other things, see below), the WTS tradition is not so easily delineated, for it concerns the world of thought, of ideas, of positions, of

² These statistics, as well as the quote, are from George Will, *Men at Work: The Craft of Baseball*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991. I might add, with all due respect to my friends who are guilty of no other wrong doing than having been born in the Philadelphia area, that the Phillies, during the 2007 season, gained the distinction of being the first team ever to reach 10,000 losses.

ideologies, even world views. There are, in fact, diametrically opposite ways of interpreting the WTS tradition in a way that would not be likely with respect to the Yankees. For some, Westminster means to defend against things perceived to be liberal or contrary to WTS original charter. For others, the focus is on continued development and refinement. Or, to put it another way, the issue can be summarized as the recurring tension between "always Reformed and always reforming." But this raises a number of important and ever-present questions.

One might simply ask *What precisely is the WTS tradition?* What does Westminster "stand for?" What does it mean to "be" Westminster? Or, as I have heard it put lately, what is "Westminsterness," i.e., what are those qualities without which we would cease to be what we are? These are very important questions, and they lead to a second set of questions:

What does it mean to perpetuate this tradition? To what extent should successive generations "hold to" the tradition or "stray" from it? In fact, to get more to the heart of the matter, what exactly does it mean to "hold to" or "stray from" this or any other tradition? Does it mean that successive generations of faculty and administrators are required to reproduce or repeat the great voices of our past in order to perpetuate the tradition?³ How much mobility is there already within our theological tradition? How much of a mandate do we have not merely to reproduce the past but move *beyond* it? Have we strayed from the past when we voice disagreements with the past, and is such "straying" healthy for a tradition?

Without any hint of frivolity, the purpose of this brief essay is to address some of these questions by juxtaposing Yankee tradition with Westminster tradition. I would like to offer some personal reflections on the Yankee tradition and draw an analogy for discussions of what it means—and does not mean—to be a part of the Westminster tradition. The general direction of these reflections can be summarized in the following overlapping statements:

Tradition and change are not mutually exclusive.

Tradition is not a static entity but a developing one.

Tradition that does not adapt dies.

Tradition that is too rigidly defined becomes dead, or worse, oppressive traditionalism.

Change is necessary to perpetuate tradition.

At the outset, I would like to attempt to obviate a possible misunderstanding or two. First, this parallel should not be over read. If read too rigidly, the analogy does not follow through completely. I am well aware of this. Nevertheless, the point of any argument by analogy is not to imply that the two entities are in any way of equal value, and “what holds for one must hold for the other.” Rather, the point is to bring some fresh perspective, and hopefully clarity, to the issue of the WTS tradition by introducing a concept that is less familiar and does not seem to intersect with the world of theological traditions. I ask the

³ Westminster Seminary’s faculty manual, for example, is very clear in its support of creative scholarship that seeks to shed new light on God’s Word. I will consider posting a paper I have written that interacts

readers, therefore, to understand that the point I am making here is more impressionistic than technical, and holds regardless of the problems that beset any argument by analogy.

To anticipate a more important objection, I am aware that the analogy seems to break down at one central point, the issue of doctrine. The truths of the gospel are most certainly revealed to humanity by God in Christ, through the Spirit, and in particular in the working of the Spirit through the Word. The Yankees, however, are neither a divinely ordained institution, nor a component in redemptive history. Moreover, there is no doctrinal component to being a Yankee fan; it is not a matter of accepting revealed truth. In what follows, therefore, I am not suggesting for one moment that the gospel can actually be compared to baseball. Nor am I suggesting that the gospel changes over time. It does not. The central tenants of the Christian faith do not come into view here.

The matter under consideration, however, is not the gospel itself, or revealed truth, or biblical doctrine, but *tradition*. Again, I do not intend to be frivolous in comparing Yankee tradition with Westminster tradition, as if the two are equally important. But we must remember that no human theological tradition, no matter how persuasive or passionately held, should be *equated* with the gospel. Any human theological tradition has a “work in progress” component. If anything, it is frivolous with respect to the Gospel when any human theological tradition is considered beyond critique. It is the gospel that is eternal and timeless, not traditions. Traditions, as I define them, are particular, enculturated, in-time attempts to apply and articulate the gospel. And how any tradition seeks

to articulate the eternal truths of the Gospel, revealed in God's Word through the Spirit, must be a matter of continued reflection in the church. In other words, if I may make the point directly, biblical doctrine matters. It is central to who we are as thinking Christians. But what is being considered here is how these doctrines are articulated, i.e., *tradition*. It is in this spirit that I offer the following analogy.

Yankees

For the Yankees, the 1995 season came to a startling halt. They were playing the Seattle Mariners in the first ever best-of-five "wild card" playoff series. The previous year was the year of the strike and, for the first time since 1904, no World Series was played. Unfortunately for the Yankees, they were in first place in August of 1994, the month the strike began, and were well positioned to win the pennant for the first time since 1981. Having been "robbed" in this way by the strike, the feeling among the fans was universal: "1995 is our year." The Yankees' destined return to greatness appeared to be confirmed when they went up two games to none against the Mariners. But then, in a demoralizing shift in momentum, they lost three straight in Seattle, culminating in a heartbreaking 9th inning double by Edgar Martinez into the left field corner, scoring Ken Griffey Jr. from 1st base with the winning, and, for the Yankees, season-ending run.

One of the Yankees' nemeses that season and in the playoffs was the hard-hitting Mariner first baseman Tino Martinez. At the end of that season, he was traded to the Yankees (likely a move by the Mariners to free up some cash

to hold on to Griffey a few more years, although has since been lost to the Reds). From the Yankees's point of view, tired of the black eyes he kept giving them, Tino was a welcomed acquisition. But he had huge shoes to fill. Not only did he walk right into the Yankee aura, but his immediate predecessor was one of the finest all-around players of his generation, and felt to be the best Yankee first baseman since Lou Gehrig: Don Mattingly, or "Donnie Baseball" as he was dubbed by the fans. It's hard to follow a guy whose nickname is the very sport he's known for.

Tino, like any player, has had his share of ups and downs. What is worth noting, however, is that in no time during Tino's subsequent and on-going five-year career with the Yankees has anyone ever argued, in good times or bad, that Tino is not "really" a Yankee because he doesn't play first base the way Mattingly did or hit as many home runs as Gehrig did. To be sure, fans are occasionally disappointed and even frustrated with Martinez, but that was also true for players of the past, even Gehrig and Mattingly. What makes Martinez a Yankee is not flawless play. And it is certainly not the degree to which he reproduces what past players did. Rather, although he is expected to *contribute* to the tradition, it is simply implicit that he will do this in his own way, in accordance with his own particular gifts and skills. Tino's individual style of play is not considered evidence that the Yankees are "straying" from the tradition. Personnel changes, which are inevitable because of death, retirements, and trades, *invariably* bring changes to the team, but these changes do not in and of themselves threaten the perpetuation of the tradition.

Another example: For the past several years, left field for the Yankees has been played by a number of people who have been platooned during the course of each season. This is in contrast to the Yankees's relative stability at most other positions. Since 1996, at least the following players—some raw rookies, some aging veterans—have shared the left field responsibility: Shane Spencer, Ricky Ledee, Chad Curtis, Darryl Strawberry, Tim Lincecum, Tim Rains. As I write this, in the past week alone we have seen Ryan Thompson, Carlos Lee, Clay Bellinger, and newly acquired veteran David Justice roaming left field.

The left field situation is certainly unsettled, but, whoever is out there on any given day is no less a Yankee because of this. No one says, "Until we get a powerhouse, every-day left fielder, Yankee tradition is not being upheld." Of course, future generations may judge that these players had a relatively minor impact on the developing Yankee aura, but that is for *future* generations to decide, not the *current* one. Only time will tell how they fit. For now, when they put on the pinstripes and step onto the field, they *are* Yankees. They *become* part of the tradition. Again, personnel changes are inevitable for any team, and for a time a team may go through a rebuilding period. But no one says, "we won't be the Yankees again until...." There is a higher reality that brings together these circumstantial strands.

One final example: Paul O'Neill. O'Neill was acquired by the Yankees from the Cincinnati Reds (another team rich in tradition) in 1993. He is one of the most, if not the most, respected members of the team. Why? Intensity. His smashing of clubhouse water coolers after a bad at-bat are well known in

baseball circles. No one condones such outbursts. In fact, the New York media have been quite hard on him at times, and it is good to see him calm down a bit in the past few years. But O’Neill has a lot of pride, in himself as a player and in being a Yankee. O’Neill seems to treat each at-bat as if it were his last. The fans appreciate his dedication.

Paul O’Neill is not Babe Ruth, the most famous of Yankees who also happened to make his living playing right field. But no one would ever say that O’Neill is not really a Yankee, does not really uphold the tradition, because he doesn’t hit as many home runs as Ruth. Moreover, no one would chide O’Neill for not playing right field the way Ruth did. Whatever comparisons might be drawn between O’Neill and Ruth, favorable or unfavorable, they do not call into question O’Neill’s status as a Yankee.

In fact, it could be argued—and it is in fact the case—that the Yankees are *better* off today with O’Neill than they would be with a resurrected Ruth. With all his mythic greatness, it is widely recognized that Ruth would not be able to reproduce his superhuman feats in today’s world. The game has changed significantly since his day. For one thing, pitchers generally throw much harder. They also throw sliders, a pitch that either dives away from or toward the batter at the last moment. This pitch was not yet developed in Ruth’s day. Ruth used a 48-ounce bat. He wouldn’t get it around in today’s game. He’d have to adjust by using a lighter bat (the average today is 33-34 ounces). He might even have to change his whole approach to hitting. His big looping swing and huge stride into the pitch might have to be shortened. Furthermore, many would agree that

O'Neill plays a bit better right field than Ruth did. O'Neill is not fast (although he is still faster than Ruth was), but he is a very sure, aggressive fielder with an absolute rifle for an arm (although Ruth, who was also a pitcher early in his career, had a very strong arm, too). American League base runners generally do not go from 1st to 3rd on even a softly hit single to O'Neill.

The changes O'Neill brings to the Yankees compared to Ruth are inevitable because they reflect a more fundamental reality. Even though baseball remains America's most loved sports institution, and the Yankees continue their long and honored tradition, the game has experienced significant changes and the Yankees have changed right along with it. To be sure, baseball exhibits tremendous stability and constancy over the years, so much so that on a truly fundamental level the game has remained unchanged. You still throw the ball, hit the ball, catch the ball, score runs. The game is still played with nine men on each side, three outs to a side, on diamond shaped fields with varying but more or less predictable dimensions. The ball is still white with red seams. Batters still hit away or bunt. Runners still steal bases. Three strikes still means you're out. It is precisely its stability that makes baseball the institution it is. A fan today, if transported back to the 1920's, would still understand the game instantly.

On the other hand, for all its stability, the game has experienced significant changes. It is not played today exactly the same way it was in the 1920's when the Yankee dynasty was beginning to emerge. Some of these changes have been motivated by social or economic factors. Many were also deliberate changes intended to make the game better. The height of the pitching

mound has been altered more than once to balance out the perceived dominance of either hitters or pitchers (the higher the mound, the more leverage for the pitcher). Since 1971, the American League has used a designated hitter. There have been equipment changes. Outfield gloves today are virtually the size of bread baskets. First batting helmets, then helmets with earflaps, were developed. Bats have become flame treated for durability and the ends have been cupped to eliminate dead weight. Now maple rivals ash as the wood of choice for bats. The balls themselves have evolved. The seams have periodically been lowered (advantage to hitters) and raised (pitchers benefit). More recently they have become harder, wound tighter, with one result being an increase in home runs (not only a recent phenomenon but first seen in the 1920's).

The list goes on and on: free agency, farm teams, spring training, team mascots, double-knit uniforms, infield-fly rule, lowering of the strike zone, extensive use of relief pitchers, retractable dome stadiums, increasing salaries and ticket prices, interleague play, wild card teams, divisional and now wild card play within the American and National Leagues, the American League itself, night games, televised games, artificial turf, exploding score boards, mascots. None of these elements was present in the late 19th century when professional baseball was in its infancy. But they have *become* part of the baseball experience. Baseball purists may quibble, but the game is still baseball, with or without the changes.

Yankees history also evinces both stability and change. Every year at spring training, Yankee owner George Steinbrenner (who for Yankee fans

alternates as both a Moses and Pharaoh figure!) lectures the new players on what it means to be a Yankee. They are told how to comport themselves on and off the field. For example, they do not wear their hats backwards during batting practice. They are permitted only minimal facial hair (trimmed mustache). They do not look and act as they please. They have a tradition to uphold. This is the team made famous by a long list of heroes who set standards of excellence in their day. These are the players without whom there would be no Yankee tradition. These new players are now a part of this tradition and they are expected to act accordingly.

Yankee tradition exhibits rock-solid stability. Yankee Stadium is located in the Bronx, in a tough neighborhood. Not a place to get lost. But—I feel I stand on firm ground here—they will never move "The Stadium" to New Jersey. They likely won't even move it to Manhattan, as has been discussed in recent years. It just wouldn't be right. For decades players traded to the Yankees have waxed eloquent on their first impressions of walking out on the field or even seeing it for the first time. They are standing where some of the greatest players ever stood. Moving "The Stadium" would be like moving the Jerusalem Temple of Solomon's day to Ashkelon (a Philistine city). Likewise, the Yankee uniform has remained constant over the years: home white with navy blue pinstripes, interlocking "NY" on the left chest, number in the back, no player's names on the uniform; away gray with blue trim and "New York" written across the chest in block letters, again no name. The Yankees will never condone the circus atmosphere seen in many other teams who sport multiple uniform color combinations and styles. It is not a

fashion show, after all; it's baseball. The uniform may seem a bit boring in contrast to other teams, but the Yankee uniform is perhaps the most visible symbol of the stability of the tradition.

But, as baseball itself has changed, so have the Yankees. They have adapted to nearly every change in the game mentioned above and the tradition has not suffered at all for it. Not all adaptation is wrong; some is beneficial. The Stadium won't move to New Jersey and the playing field won't be covered with artificial turf, but the "House that Ruth Built," the most celebrated shrine in all of sports, was completely renovated in the mid-1970's (which moved Yankee home games to the exile of Shea Stadium for two years, by whose shore Yankee fans "lay down and wept"). The famous, instantly recognizable, facade that trimmed the roof was removed (although a replica was mounted over the outfield wall as a constant reminder to players and fans of past glory). The pillars that once supported the roof, but obscured many a fan's view of the game, have been completely removed. The monuments to three past heroes (Ruth, Gehrig, Huggins) were not removed when The Stadium was renovated, but they were moved off the playing field to beyond the center field wall. More accurately, the fence was moved in, thus changing the playing dimensions. Most noticeable was bringing in the left-center field fence by over 60 feet. Many a right handed hitter's deep drives, home runs elsewhere, had been safely caught in this no-man's land, and this quirk contributed to the overall character of The Stadium, but this characteristic was changed to bring the dimensions more in keeping with other venues.

Their uniforms will never sport names or wild colors and styles, but they are no longer made of flannel as they were in the “good old days.” The Yankees switched to double-knit cotton/polyester blend in the early 70’s right along with every other team. Over time the uniform may not have changed but the way they were worn did: high pant legs and socks in the late 60’s and 70’s, equally low pant legs and socks (no stirrups) in the 90’s. The Yankee hat has remained navy blue with the white interlocking “NY” on the front, but the hat styles have changed (height of the crown, length of the brim).

Of course, all of these changes can be considered purely stylistic. More importantly, however, the Yankees have also adapted to the changes in how the game itself is played—as all successful teams, who want to remain successful, must. O’Neill, Martinez, and the other current Yankees—who they are, how they play—reflect the Yankees’s adaptation to changes in the game. They are modern players; they are not reproductions of past players. But they still contribute to the tradition. In fact, *it is precisely because they are not the heroes of the past that they are able to contribute to the tradition.* Attempting to reproduce the past in today’s baseball world would doom a team to failure. Today’s game is not played as it was in the past. Times change, so the game changes. The players must change, too.

This is not to say that the past is in any way denigrated. O’Neill does not strut around saying “You know, Ruth wasn’t that good. I play a much better right field than he did.” O’Neill would be stoned. In the Yankee world, the past is absolutely *revered* (a trip to Monument Park, located beyond the left-center field

wall, would make this solemn point). It is what makes the Yankees the Yankees. But there is also the very sober and inevitable recognition that to keep the tradition going requires much more than an idolization of the past. It requires a *deliberate commitment to ongoing adjustments*. New blood, prepared to play today's game in *today's* world, is absolutely necessary for Yankee *tradition* to continue.

The simple fact of the matter is that roster changes occur on a regular basis. Players get injured, some are traded or sold. They all eventually retire. Sadly, some pass away in their prime as in every other sphere of human existence. Replacement players must be chosen, either by draft, trade, purchase, or from the farm system. And they are chosen on the basis of how well they can contribute to the team winning *now*. Brian Cashman, currently the Yankees' general manager, when looking for players, does not say to himself, "I need to find someone who played just like Babe Ruth." He looks at the *current players available*, assesses how they might fit, and takes steps to bring them on board. These players will be expected not to play like past players but, in their own way, *contribute* to the *developing* tradition begun by those past players.

Martinez is no Gehrig? O'Neill is no Ruth? Correct. But, ironically, for Gehrig and Ruth to come back and play today, in the world in which Martinez and O'Neill play, it is *they* who would have to adjust. It is not Martinez and O'Neill who need to become more like Ruth and Gehrig. It is Ruth and Gehrig who would have to become more like Martinez and O'Neill. Adaptation to change is not "straying" from the tradition. It is what allows the tradition to continue. The

continuance of Yankee tradition, therefore, although firmly based on the legacy of the heroes of the past, is in *more* sure hands with Martinez and O'Neill than it would be with merely a resurrected Ruth or Gehrig.

Yankee tradition, therefore, is not a static entity. Again, to be sure, it is based on a long and honored past that is continually referenced and revered. But it is also a tradition that changes as the players who don the pinstripes change. Successive generations of Yankees *become a part* of the tradition, a tradition that is bigger than any individual player. The tradition is "other." But each successive generation also *contributes* to the *development* of that tradition, the result being that the Yankees of 2000 are not the Yankees of 1990 (thank goodness, a horrible year), or 1950, or 1927, or 1903.

So, what exactly *is* Yankee tradition? That is actually very hard to define. Is it winning? Perhaps, but the Yankee teams that do not win the World Series are still Yankees. Still, winning is expected. Is it the uniforms? the New York setting? the great names of the past? It is probably all these things and more. But what is more certain is what Yankee tradition is not. Yankee tradition is not dependent on current players playing as former ones. To repeat, it is actually more dependent on the ability of current players to play as, well, current players, in the world in which they live, in the game as it has developed. To do so is not abandoning tradition but adapting in order to continue it.

Westminster

Westminster tradition is not a static entity. The seminary is not the same today as it was when it was founded. It cannot be. It has changed because: (1) The first generation (and many second generation) faculty are dead or retired and have been replaced by others (most of whom have been educated at Westminster, within the tradition). (2) The culture in which the church exists today (I am speaking here only of the American context) is not the same as the culture in which Westminster was founded. Because of these two factors adaptation is inevitable and absolutely necessary for facing the challenges of the changing world.

Westminster has a tradition worth revering and referencing. Names such as Machen, Van Til, Young, Murray, Woolley are firmly etched upon the heart, soul, and mind of anyone who has been a part of the Westminster tradition. These are the names that established the tradition (in the trajectory of historic Calvinism as mediated through the “Old Princeton” tradition). Part of what helps make Westminster unique is precisely this historical reality.

What we must continually keep before us, however, is that *built into the Westminster tradition is the capacity for change and adaptation*. This capacity for change is not a recent development, but has always been a part of the Westminster tradition, a fact that can be documented fairly easily. To the names listed above, there are others that should be mentioned as well, each of whom brought changes to Westminster in their own way. Some of these names are: Stonehouse, Kline, Clowney, Dillard, Conn, and more recently Logan, Silva,

Waltke, Longman. All of these names represent developments in and adaptations to the tradition.

Stonehouse’s work on the Synoptic Gospels (*The Witness of the Synoptic Gospels to Christ*), for example, stands as a model of scholarly, patient analysis of the data, but he received criticism for applying critical techniques. In fact, it is argued by one of my NT colleagues, that Stonehouse’s work actually anticipated by several years the redaction-critical work of mainstream scholarship. The more subdued times in which Stonehouse lived, compared to unsettled atmosphere in which his predecessor in NT studies Machen worked, afforded him the opportunity to undertake a scholarly investigation into the origins of the Synoptic Gospels. He, therefore, represented a development within the tradition.

Similarly, M. Kline’s work in OT (e.g., *Kingdom Prologue*) is very different from that of Young. As is well-known, Young’s career was largely spent defending the integrity of Scripture against liberal criticism. This focus left Young with little or no time to work on more “positive” aspects of OT study. Kline’s work, regardless of what might be its weaknesses, is nevertheless a positive step forward in the articulation of the theological content of the OT rather than simply its defense.

Young’s immediate successor, R. Dillard, continued this development. He is perhaps best known for his work on the theology of Chronicles. His analysis of what Chronicles “is,” why it looks and behaves the way it does, will remain a model to future generations of OT students at Westminster for its honest look at Scripture, and its sophisticated interaction with the worlds of hermeneutics,

theology, and biblical studies. Dillard received some criticism for his views, particularly by those who perceived his work to be an abandonment of Westminster’s past (again, a focus on the defense of inerrancy). Nevertheless, for those who studied under him, Dillard remains a dominating figure who struggled mightily and brilliantly over his twenty-four years on the faculty to bring together the tradition and contemporary advances in scholarship, and in doing so brought the tradition to a newer and more accurate understanding of its Scriptures. His conclusions may have been different from how the tradition had previously articulated certain issues, but this does not disqualify his work as “straying” from the tradition. Rather, it is an example of development *within* the tradition.

Ed Clowney was the seminary’s first president. His legacy, apart from biblical theological preaching, is his efforts to bring Westminster more into conversation with American Evangelicalism. Rather than distance himself from brothers and sisters in Christ who were not a part of the Westminster/Reformed tradition specifically, he worked to tear down walls of hostility between certain elements of the Westminster community and other Christians. Sam Logan continued this presidential tradition. Both received (and continue to receive) their share of criticism for their vision from those who would wish Westminster to maintain the polemical edge it had in its early decades. But both Clowney and Logan stood for a WTS where the polemics that were predominated in its infancy should not define the seminary’s identity perpetually. Polemics are needed at times, but they need not be present at all times.

One final name to mention here is Harvie Conn. Conn’s work in missions, particularly in the ghettos of South Korea, gave him insights that have greatly enriched the intellectual and spiritual life of the tradition. Both his *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds* and his edited *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic*—neither of which has yet received the attention they deserve—struggle with the difficulties inherent in bringing the message of Scripture to a variety of cultures and contexts. The issues with which Conn dealt were not those of Westminster’s founders, but we should not expect them to be, yet Conn received some strong criticism for his views.

To faculty changes we may also add institutional changes. Some of these are: CCEF (which has itself changed over time) , the D.Min., M.A.Miss., M.A.R., Th.M., and Ph.D. degrees, the various M.Div. tracks, our partnership with two accrediting agencies (Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools and The Association of Theological Schools), the increased use of technology for delivering theological education, extension campuses and distance learning, the admittance of women to the seminary, the decision that woman may be full-time voting faculty members, the increase in the international student population (especially Africans and South Koreans), the African-American presence on campus.

Each of these institutional changes has, in my view, and that of many others, enhanced the Westminster tradition rather than diluted it. To be sure, some disagree. But, what is clear is that change *has* come to Westminster throughout its history and *will continue* to come. When we look to the future, the

question is not “how can we keep from changing?” but “what *kind* of changes will we adopt?” It is worth noting that most of the institutional changes mentioned above have been a part of Westminster for nearly thirty years, almost half of the seminary’s existence, and they are still adduced occasionally as evidence that Westminster has failed to uphold its original mission. But Westminster has *expanded* beyond (not “abandoned”) its original mission of training men to be pastors. We do more. But to meet these challenges, Westminster has had to adapt.

A respect for the past is essential, but, as is so often the case with any intellectual tradition, it is sometimes easy to cross the line from respect for the past to an uncritical adherence to the past. To give just one example, not long ago, in my M.Div. level course on Wisdom Literature, I lectured on the date of Ecclesiastes and outlined the evidence for a post-Solomonic date. After class, a well-meaning student took issue, insisting that Solomon was the author. The brunt of the argument was essentially this: “The view you are giving us is novel. Your view represents a departure from the tradition. You need to balance your own view by giving us more E. J. Young.”

Now, those familiar with Young on Ecclesiastes might be confused here, since he himself (along with William Henry Green, a 19th century Princeton Theological Seminary OT scholar) frankly acknowledges, on the basis of both internal and external evidence, that Ecclesiastes is post-Solomonic (Young dates it to the time of Malachi; see his *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 349). Nevertheless, the student’s point, despite this factual error, is clear: “I would like

to hear something more conservative, more in keeping with ‘the tradition’. We need to hear more ‘E. J. Young’.”

One lesson to be learned here is that sometimes former faculty are seen as more conservative than they actually were. I have heard Young, for example, cited to support both a literal six-day view of Genesis 1 and a literary view. Few escape the tendency to write history according to one’s own liking. Our own views are projected on the past and then turned around and used to buttress our arguments as more in keeping with the tradition.

My response to this student, however, was not to emphasize the factual error. Rather, I stressed that there are *other* names from Westminster’s past that could just as well have been called upon, other examples of “Westminsterness,” other representatives of the tradition. My response was, “It sounds to me that you have had a fair amount of ‘Young’ already. What you need is to reflect on Dillard or Longman.” Of course, to put it this way is to do a *great* disservice to Young himself, who was not only a rigorous thinker but a subtle one as well. But, to make the point, I perpetuated the student’s fallacious dichotomy and stressed the changing, adaptive quality of the tradition that he himself was claiming to represent.

Another example. An issue before the church in today’s world is postmodernism. Good or bad, right or wrong (or both), this word failry represents the world in which we live, the world in which our graduates will be ministering. Because of this, it is a topic that comes up quite deliberately in many of our classes.

Because postmodernism is a recent development, at least it is perceived as such, there is the expectation by some that it is necessarily “dangerous” and represents a “threat to historic Christianity.” Westminster, therefore, is expected to “hold its ground” and soundly reject it. When our faculty, however, exercises patience in exploring this cultural movement, both for its strengths and weaknesses, such patience is perceived by some as an unwillingness to defend zealously the gospel. Apart from the fact that such a sentiment falsely assumes a neutral stance outside of the culture in which we live and from which we critique culture, it also represents a view that I do not recognize to be the dominant intellectual attitude of the Westminster with which I am familiar. Without exception, my own teachers impressed upon me the need to look at any issue with humility and patience, to see the good and the bad, and to make measured judgments that would be open to continued reflection.

The criticisms of our interaction with postmodernism, as I have heard them, have had a recurring refrain: “But Van Til would say....” At this point I usually take it upon myself to remind the student or critic that not only did Van Til live in a time where postmodernism was not an issue, but since he is now dead, they no longer have the opportunity to ask him what he would say. Moreover, if he were alive, Van Til’s contribution to this issue would not necessarily be the final word, but a contribution to the on-going theological conversation.

I should make it clear that my quibble here is with Van Til directly. My concern is with those who presume to know the mind of a dead man on an issue he never addressed, and then to critique a current issue on the basis of what

they think he would have said about it. This amounts more to hiding behind the past than interacting with it. Some may rejoin that we are obliged to apply his writings to our current situation in order to discern what he might have said, but it seems to me that such hermeneutical energy should be reserved for Scripture itself.

What makes Westminster today what it is is not the reproduction of the past but the fact that we, very consciously and deliberately, own our past, interact with it, and use its insights to address the world in which we live today. And this process implies accepting some things, refining others, shelving some for the time being, and rejecting others. What I have seen at times, however, is a "canonization" of previous generations of the Westminster faculty, namely the founding generation. For some, it is implicit that today's faculty and administration should say and do the things former generations of faculty have said and done, even though the theological issues facing the church today are not always those of the past. True, we are not so different today that there is no overlap between generations. The basic issues of humanity for which Jesus came in the first place are universal and timeless, and the Westminster tradition has articulated these issues with clarity, integrity, and a persuasive power that is sorely needed in today's world. Nevertheless, to paraphrase Conn, the word may be eternal but the world is changing. It is entirely to be expected, therefore, that a resurrected Van Til or Young, perhaps resurrected today at the beginning of their careers, would likewise need to adapt to currents in culture and thought in how they themselves articulate the Gospel. There is no basis to assume that the

thinking of past colleagues on past issues would remain unchanged in today’s context.

So, what then is “Westminsterness?” This is difficult to define. Perhaps it is wisest, within the well articulated, but broad, parameters of Reformed Christianity, to allow this question to remain an open one. Defining Westminster’s essence too specifically can lead very easily to an unhealthy rigidity. What Westminster is may not be an iron clad, static entity against which successive generations should be judged. Rather, it may be precisely the *ongoing* topic of conversation that insures continued and serious reflection of the intersection of Scripture, Reformed Christianity, and the world in which we live and breath. In my view, to put it plainly, being Westminster means *an on-going, Christ-centered, Scripture-focused, theologically aware, and culturally sensitive conversation between our rich Reformed past record and our present realities.*

There is no question that a “slippery slope to liberalism” exists. I have observed it enough times in my academic career. But there are actually *two* slippery slopes with which we should be concerned. The one is to run rough-shod over our past, thus driving us so far from our roots that we become essentially disconnected with our own past. But the other just as dangerous. It is to define ourselves so rigidly and unyieldingly that no movement is possible, to canonize a particular cultural moment, to perpetuate uncritically the shape of our seminary when it was in its very infancy, and thus to slide down the other side of the mountain, down the slippery slope to *traditionalism*. Liberalism’s opposite is not healthy conservatism but an entrenched, unyielding adherence to the past. A

healthy church and seminary must continually seek to steer clear of either slippery slope.

We must never lose sight of the fact that Westminster is not a contextless phenomenon. The seminary was born in a particular cultural-theological-ecclesiastical moment. There were concrete factors in the first quarter of the 20th century that influenced the shape Westminster tradition took. The world around us has changed since then. There are new cultural-theological-ecclesiastical moments to address. We are perhaps most true to the Westminster tradition when we, as our founders did and as subsequent generations of faculty have already done, shape ourselves in conversation with the world in which we live. And this process will invariably lead to adaptations, shifts in emphasis, rethinking long-held opinions while firming up others. And we do this, not despite our tradition, but precisely because of it.