

The petition to save Westminster Seminary

Written by Tim Black

Thursday, 24 January 2008 10:45 - Last Updated Thursday, 07 August 2008 15:55

A friend from Westminster writes,

You may or may not already be aware of what has been going on at WTS, particularly to do with the departure of Steve Taylor and the mounting backlash towards Pete Enns' *Incarnation and Inspiration*

, but there is an online petition at

www.saveourseminary.com

for all WTS students, alumni, staff, friends, etc. to consider.

In the hope of convincing her and others of my friends and former roommates who have signed the petition, I had to respond to encourage them to reconsider the wisdom of doing so.

I won't promote the petition you forwarded to me, because its opposition to the following:

- Vision Forum – indicates an opposition to conservative politics, because of liberal political/social commitments
- The criticism of Pete Enns' book – indicates an acceptance of the postmodern interpretation of our situation as the *sitz-im-leben* from which we must interpret scripture
- Lane Tipton's article – indicates an opposition to former WTS professor E. J. Young's theological methodology of believing the Bible
- The lack of sufficient redress – indicates a publicly critical attitude & method of achieving reconciliation. It is best to discuss faculty disagreements over whether a faculty member is keeping the vows he took upon becoming a faculty member on a need-to-know basis (Matt. 18), while maintaining open discussion and debate of the academic issues of the day.

The above aspects of the petition are not things I would like to promote. Rather, coming from a conservative Reformed background, and an undergrad education at a highly ranked Reformed liberal arts college, I was dissatisfied with Westminster's weakness on each of the first three points above. I appreciate Westminster's interest in carefully studying and evaluating ideas that are new and potentially of value. However, to me, the petition's four points above indicate a lack of deep commitment to the mature biblical Christianity found in the Reformed tradition, which I have found to provide far better truth and methods than do the motivations that appear to be in evidence in the petition--a liberal social agenda, postmodern hermeneutics, and a complaining or combative alarmism on the part of the disenfranchised. These things will not

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save our seminary. I'd rather see my friends and the seminary be saved from this petition.

Which view is truly disenfranchised at Westminster--the progressive or conservative? Some alumni from 50 years ago claim it is the conservative Reformed tradition. I think the best answer is "neither" or "both." Sometimes it has been difficult to put my finger on how my experience of conservative Reformed Christianity in Philadelphia differed from my years growing up in a CRC in Eastern Washington State, and studying in the South at Covenant amidst the OPC and PCA. The above list brings some clarity to my thought regarding what is uniquely parochial about what the Reformed surrounding Westminster consider cosmopolitan. In my opinion, a deeper or broader grasp of the Reformed tradition and its community might help some of my friends (and former roommates!) who signed the petition to better understand my opposition to the petition. Perhaps you do interpret the world and scripture from within a postmodern worldview. I don't. I don't trust my own interpretation unless it flows by the power of God from the Holy Spirit speaking in scripture, and unless it is faithful to every word of scripture, and not just the parts I prefer. It is exegesis of this sort that gave Calvin and the Reformed tradition its distinctively and fully Biblical doctrine--even its continually developing expression of orthodox Biblical Theology--and it is exegesis of this sort which is excellently summarized in the confession from which our seminary derives its name. To sign this petition--wittingly or not--is unfairly to impugn the biblical faithfulness of the tradition of the Westminster Confession, and of Westminster Seminary itself. I decided to write this to you in case it might help you develop your thoughts, or change your mind, regarding the petition. While my saying "please learn more of the Reformed tradition before criticizing it" won't help you know that the petition is wrong, and could easily come across as self-righteous, please consider whether the petition is promoting the whole, and the best, of that tradition, or consider withholding judgment on the petition.

I agree with the petition's specific critiques of the Vision Forum. I expect President Lillback does as well, except for (what I vaguely recall as) his friendliness toward the idea that America had Christian origins. However, many in the Reformed community appreciate other aspects of the Vision Forum's work (e.g., promoting godliness and Christian family life), and it's a good thing for the seminary president to speak to various groups without always publicly distancing the seminary from those groups where they disagree. "Everything is permissible," but "not everything is beneficial." On that point the petition's recommendation that the seminary distance itself from the Vision Forum conflicts with the petition's statement of the seminary's goal of promoting the whole Reformed tradition, and serving both those inside and outside the Reformed community. If the petition wants us to study Pete Enns' book, why again does it not want us to study the materials produced by the Vision Forum? Likewise, why not allow discussion and critique of both, in the right forum? Like Paul, the Reformers didn't burn books, they read them, then wrote a response, so that "by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God." (2 Cor. 4:2)