

AFTER WHITSITT, WHAT?

AN OPEN LETTER

—TO—

THE TRUSTEES OF THE SOUTHERN
BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY.

—BY—

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AFTER WHITSITT, WHAT?

Dr. Whitsitt is on trial before Southern Baptists on two charges; these stand apart and have no connection with one another.

I.

(1.) The first count is this: Dr. Whitsitt, a Professor in the Baptist Seminary, published editorially in an independent paper articles written from an undenominational and independent standpoint. It seems to be agreed that this was a grave mistake.

It is to be noted, however, that Dr. Whitsitt himself first called attention to the authorship of these articles, and that, too, after the outcry against his historical views had already begun. They were published nineteen years ago. It was at most a mistake of judgment. Not his motive, but his method is called in question. His character is untouched. He has admitted that this was a mistake, is sorry that he did it, and has asked the forgiveness of his brethren. It would seem that as Christian

men we ought frankly to accept his apology and forgive him. If we refuse to do this, do we not lay ourselves open to a more serious charge?

You will never be able to convince the world that simply the form of the articles in the Independent drove Dr. Whitsitt out of the Seminary. People will refuse to believe such a pretext. They will see in the matter a reason less creditable to Southern Baptists, a reason indeed which will be a stigma on us, especially since the Board of Trustees at Wilmington accepted fully his statement, and exonerated him, which action was reaffirmed at Norfolk.

We shall sit in the box of that Athenian jury. The world does not recall the three counts technically upon which Socrates was condemned. It knows only the real cause that forced the weeping jailer to hand the cup of hemlock to that "first martyr of intellectual liberty." The pretext of Anytus has not shielded the jury from the scorn of the ages. They condemned Socrates because he *thought*, not because of some pretext or other put forward by his accusers. Dr. Whitsitt made a mistake; with Christian men his acknowledgment and apology ought to close finally this count.

(2.) The second charge is this: Contrary to the general opinion of Southern Baptists, Dr. Whitsitt, after investigation, asserted that English Anabaptists restored believers' immersion in 1641, and thereby became Baptists.

This is a question on which only a specialist can speak, for the settlement of it depends upon the ability to examine and sift a large mass of documents and facts from which most of us are shut out by time as well as taste. A convention of religious people would not venture to pronounce upon a question in surgery or medicine, because it does not fall within the province of that body to study these intricate scientific problems. Such a convention is in no wise more competent to vote on a debated point in history.

Many specialists in history agree with Dr. Whitsitt, though some of these have reached their conclusions by wholly independent lines of research. Rauschenbusch in Germany and Whitsitt in America, by the study of different documents, reach the same opinion on this point in history.

In making these investigations, Dr. Whitsitt was doing what he was appointed to do. Southern Baptists set him aside to study church history. They said to him: "We have confidence

in your ability and training; we wish to give you the leisure and opportunity to look closely into these facts for whose examination we have no time, and then we wish you to tell us plainly of your results." His election to the Chair of History meant that, if it meant anything. Should it be granted that Dr. Whitsitt's conclusion is erroneous, we are only the more spurred on to further investigation. There is no place for cavilling with Dr. Whitsitt. Our sole concern is to keep on probing until we know the facts in our history. Men may succeed one another in the Chair of Church History, but the Chair means, or at least ought to mean, that investigation must go on and on until the full truth is known. We can dismiss Dr. Whitsitt, but shall we abolish the Chair? Why continue the Chair if we stereotype definitively our history? If we, grown weary, stop by the wayside, will not others follow up the path? In short, can we muzzle truth as easily as we can suppress Dr. Whitsitt?

Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill, who held diverse views in philosophy, were once engaged in a heated controversy as to certain theories of Spencer. While the discussion was running through the press, Mr. Spencer, forced by lack of funds, announced that he

would have to discontinue the publication of his promised books on science and philosophy. Mr. Mill wrote him at once, saying that while he could not agree with him in some things, he realized that Spencer's investigations on the whole made for the advance of truth, and so he himself would be glad to bear the expense of the remaining volumes. The world will not soon forget the disinterested love for truth which is revealed by that offer, prompted by generosity in money, and, a rarer thing, in mind. And yet Mill was reared by a cranky old father in the bitterest hostility to Christianity.

II.

We have thus far spoken only of the common opinion as to Dr. Whitsitt; but at this crisis, it matters not so much what we in general think of him and his cause, as what the particular gentlemen who make up the Board of Trustees of the Seminary conclude. They are to give the final decision. That decision, should it interest any one to forecast it, will probably depend on which one of two views they take as to their office.

(1.) If they look upon themselves only as the trustees of property, they will, of course,

consider what influence the going or staying of Dr. Whitsitt will have on the outward material success of the Seminary. Regarding their office in this way, they will be jealous of a decrease in the value of the plant, or a decrease in the number of students, or a decrease in the amount of contributions to the Students' Fund and the endowment, or damage to the general reputation of the Seminary. They may conclude that the retention of Dr. Whitsitt will alienate certain people, or even certain sections, of the South from the support of the Seminary. The roll of students may drop considerably. Hard feelings may be engendered toward the Seminary, which thing is injurious to the success of all business enterprises. At worst, a rival plant might be set up which would mar the unity and concord that have hitherto obtained in our theological education. Some men may hesitate to give money to a school that thus seems to be in a chopped sea. An essential to success, they may reason, in all business is a good name and the good will of all the people.

But is not this property peculiar? Do not unusual factors enter into this business? The following facts suggest themselves:

The bulk of the Seminary property came

from comparatively few people. These contributors in the main would like for Dr. Whitsitt to be retained. They are scandalized at the persecution now waged against him. So far as they are concerned, the removal of Dr. Whitsitt may stop their gifts, and his retention will stimulate them. If judging from a money standpoint alone, it would still be wisest, in the long run, to uphold Dr. Whitsitt.

It is worth while to note that the two States, Virginia and South Carolina, which, with the exception of Kentucky, have usually had the largest number of students in the Seminary, almost solidly favor Dr. Whitsitt.

In general the forces that make for progress side with the cause of Dr. Whitsitt. The Seminary must commit its future to these forces. They presided at its birth, they aided it in other dark days, and they may be safely trusted to protect it now. The stars in their courses fight for progress.

We must not rashly conclude that by upholding a fearless teacher we shall drive away students. We should thus greatly misread the nature of aspiring youth everywhere, and, of course, in this Southland. Young men flock irresistibly to an institution that throbs with life. They have the hardihood to go a thou-

sand miles to get an idea. Neither an adverse public nor stint in funds will keep them from the precincts of the temple of truth. When it seemed that all Europe was bent on burning a certain teacher in a little university, then it was that the youth from all lands crowded that quiet old town to hear the living words of Luther. It is ever so. Youths' scent for truth is too keen and strong to be led off the trail by any attempt to get them to chase phantom game. Dismiss Dr. Whitsitt, and the prospective student will turn to Crozer, Chicago and Rochester in search of freedom of thought and of an atmosphere more congenial to truth. The plant no more certainly turns to the light and air than the student to the truth-seeking teacher.

The increasingly large per cent. of college-bred students in our Seminary has been gratifying to all its friends. What has led to this? The teachers in our colleges have been loyal to the Seminary in directing their graduates to Louisville. How will the dismissal of Dr. Whitsitt affect their zeal in urging young men to elect our Seminary? The colleges have almost uniformly supported Dr. Whitsitt, whose cause of intellectual liberty they have identified with their own.

Have we duly weighed the fact that prac-

tically all our colleges have stood by Dr. Whitsitt? Mercer, Wake Forest, Georgetown, Bethel, Richmond, Columbian, Furman, Stetson, William Jewell, Howard, and almost all the rest are a solid phalanx for the principle of freedom in teaching, which they think assailed in the person of Dr. Whitsitt. Shall we cool the enthusiasm of these college faculties for the Seminary, or perhaps convert them into recruiting officers for other institutions? They sit at the very source of supply of students for the Seminary. The Seminary, to do the largest work for Baptists, the only work that is commensurate with the idea in its founding, must keep the enthusiastic good will of the colleges, and the colleges do have and will have freedom of research. The presumption of ultra-conservatism rests upon every theological seminary, and it is generally thought to be burden enough to clear it of this suspicion, without having to fly into the face of manifest conviction.

“Yes, but what about the yearly contributions from the State conventions?” These are important, but it seems to me that we can over-estimate the true value of the Students’ Fund to the prosperity and genuine usefulness of the Seminary. Men who are tolled to a theological school only by the

promise of free board and tuition, may perhaps be left profitably to the inviting generosity of other institutions, if other such there be. Every man who deals with young men as to education knows that they are resourceful, self-sacrificing and indomitable. Fellowship funds could doubtless supply the loss occasioned by some States' withholding their contribution. The present year one theological seminary has entered upon a new era in this regard by putting on a tuition fee of \$120. Between an institution which offers free board and one which offers free truth, the ordinary student will not hesitate long. That fact is at once a compliment to our common nature and an inspiration to every teacher.

To sum up this point, then, I believe that ultimately as a business venture it will pay to uphold Dr. Whitsitt, though temporarily it may possibly involve a loss to the Seminary in men and money. The Board, regarding themselves solely as trustees of property, of a plant, can hardly afford to alienate either those colleges which have furnished largely the students, or those broad-minded men and women of wealth who have given largely the money, that have made the Seminary what it is to-day—an influence and power for good.

(2.) But I am persuaded that they will take their office to mean much more than trustees of property. That is too low and circumscribed a view to enter into a solution of this question. The trustees of an institution of learning are not like the trustees of other ordinary property.

A theological seminary is not bricks and mortar. They are its body, but its soul is something else. A school is the home of thought, the very lungs of truth. It is mind at work. It is not a material, but a spiritual existence. The two greatest schools have had no grounds, no buildings, no endowments—that of Socrates, which started Greek thought on its path of discovery, and that of the Teacher sent from God, who gave his lessons sitting on the mountain-side or on the sea shore. Garfield's saying is worthy of its oft repetition: "The best university on earth is a log with Mark Hopkins on one end and a student on the other." On the other hand, there can be ample grounds, splendid buildings, vast libraries, and yet no school. A school is spirit; subtle, yet vital and vitalizing. It is the inspiration that arises by the communion of mind with mind in the presence of truth. You may retain popular favor, acquire great legacies, put up imposing structures,

and if there is not therein the free play of mind, you have not a college but a galvanized corpse. This may mimic the movements of life, but no earnest student will be fooled thereby. The institution that saveth its life shall lose it, and the one that loseth its life for the truth's sake shall find it.

The Seminary is not set to teach tradition. Tradition is truth's last year's crop of leaves. A school lives and clothes itself with new evidences of life in every spring time of the world. Truth is growth, it is as fluid as life. Better no Seminary than a Seminary in which truth cannot find a home. Intellectual liberty is to the Seminary what virtue is to a woman. Despoil it of that, and you have nothing left. The South can get on without a Seminary, but the Baptists cannot thrive without entire loyalty to the truth. A noble history calls us at this juncture to stand firm for freedom.

If Dr. Whitsitt is forced out, it will be idle to assert hereafter that "reasonable freedom of research" is permitted in the Seminary. You will have gagged thought. Every time a new idea starts up in the teacher's mind, he must first challenge it to know whether it portends to him persecution or praise from those without. The

institution will be struck with intellectual barrenness. Faculty and students will be asphyxiated. The example of one will be a warning to all. How applicable are the words: "Is not the life more than meat?"

France was once distracted by conflicting religious opinions. There were enemies without; prosperity was yearned for within. "Unity we must have," said the great king. "The Huguenots differ from us in thought. They must be suppressed." England, Holland, America flourished by the arrival of thousands of skilled hands and busy brains thus exiled. In France there reigned peace, only one opinion. But it was the peace of the graveyard, which continued unbroken until the blast that called to the attack on the Bastille sounded the resurrection day of political freedom. But religiously France has never recovered from that blow.

In the last analysis, brethren, it is not Dr. Whitsitt that is on trial; it is we, we are trying ourselves. At this moment I feel more deeply because of the judgment we are about to pronounce upon our common brotherhood than because of the storm that has engulfed Dr. Whitsitt. No evil attaches to him. His character and belief are untarnished. It is only an *opinion*

of his that is called in question. But our position is more serious. We do a wrong; he only suffers it. Condemnation by the world will lie at our door. We have gone back to the principle of the papal inquisition in the days of Roger Bacon.

Dr. Whitsitt's resignation, made in perfect good faith, has cleared the atmosphere in two ways. So far as people thought that he and his personal interests were the hindrance in ending strife, he has relieved the situation by standing aside. The shafts aimed at him strike now the sacred principle which he was guarding. On the other hand, the two former deliverances of the Board on this matter might be construed by some to indicate only sufferance on its part, but his resignation submits for the decisive action of the Board the naked question: Will you, or will you not, uphold a teacher who dares to think? Neither the personality of Dr. Whitsitt nor the historical accuracy of "1641" has anything to do with the answer to that question—an answer which concerns every teacher, nay more, affects the intellectual life of all our people.

I am persuaded that the wise men who compose the Board of Trustees, and to whom the final settlement of this great question falls, will be guided in their task by this larger view of

the situation, and decide accordingly. That vote of the Trustees in May, 1899, will be the most momentous taken among us since the beginning of the Southern Baptist Convention. The cause of Dr. Whitsitt is the cause of the Seminary. The cause of the Seminary is the cause of every college. Let us not be misled; there is only one thing at stake, and that is liberty of thought. The square issue cannot be dodged. Before Dr. Whitsitt is extended the broad shield of intellectual freedom; if he is pierced through that, he is "but one sufferer in a common catastrophe."