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Theological Education is Due for a Reckoning

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Blog Series: Social Justice and Civic Engagement

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In 1850, Harriet Beecher Stowe began writing a story about slavery. Stowe's father, Lyman Beecher, was a pastor of Presbyterian and Congregational congregations in New York and Connecticut before moving with his family to Cincinnati, Ohio, to serve as president of Lane Seminary, a Presbyterian institution, in 1832. As a young adult, Stowe attended a series of debates on abolition, colonization, and slavery at the seminary. These debates in 1834 stirred the fires of abolitionism among many of the students, which agitated the board of trustees, and Stowe's father sought a compromise between the students seeking to be bolder and more strategic in their activism and the trustees urging the school to focus on theological subjects and training future clergy for pastoral leadership.

Ultimately, fifty-one students decided to withdraw from the seminary. They published a statement protesting the institutional leadership of both the trustees and Beecher. The students detested institutional attempts to censor their activism on campus and accused the school's leaders of cowardice and betraying the call of Jesus Christ: "Are our theological seminaries to be awed into silence upon the great questions of human duty? Are they to be bribed over to the interests of an unholy public sentiment, by promises of patronage or threats of its withdrawal?" Stowe's literary career began to flourish around the same time as she began publishing many essays in various periodicals, but she returned to the topics discussed at Lane for her most famous and influential work, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was first published in serial form in an abolitionist newspaper in 1851, and then in book form the

following year.

I presently teach at a different Presbyterian seminary in Decatur, Georgia. Though hundreds of miles and almost two centuries separate Columbia Seminary in 2023 from Lane Seminary in 1834, I believe the searing questions from the students departing Lane are hauntingly relevant at Columbia and other seminaries. Many of the conversations among faculty and administrators at Columbia are about the future of theological education. We talk about the promises and perils of online education, the joys and challenges of teaching multi-vocational students, and the pros and cons of reducing credit hours in certain degree programs. These are rich and necessary dialogues, but I also know that we are not addressing all of the “great questions of human duty.” I can’t help but feel that the busyness of strategic planning, with its accompanying committee meetings, listening sessions, bar graphs, and pie charts, has awed us into silence on Columbia’s historic sins and reparative justice.

On June 15, 2020, the board of trustees and president’s council of Columbia issued a statement that entailed a “commitment to repair the breach.” Columbia’s leadership confessed that the seminary “came into being in the context of and participated in the subjugation and oppression of Black people.” This is an important acknowledgement of Columbia’s sinful past. But confession also requires addressing the totality of wrongdoing that lies at the foundational roots of the seminary.

In 1834, six years after its founding and three years after its first classes, Columbia received \$3,603.25 in its endowment from the sale of eighteen enslaved African Americans. Charles C. Jones, a white member of Columbia’s board who joined the faculty one year later, inherited four enslaved persons, a young woman named Cora and her three children, from Andrew Maybank, a white plantation owner in Liberty County, Georgia. In his will, Maybank also instructed Jones to sell fourteen of his other enslaved persons, with the proceeds directed to Columbia Seminary. Jones sold Cora and her three children in a private sale for \$1,000. He also arranged for the other fourteen enslaved persons to be sold in a public auction for \$2,603.25.

This is but one of numerous instances in which money derived from the sale of enslaved persons flowed into Columbia’s endowment. In 1845, a journal published by the Associate Reformed Synod of the West excoriated Columbia for benefiting from a public auction of enslaved persons. The journal found it tragic to see human beings—“the following negro slaves, to wit: Charles, Peggy, Antonett, Davy, September, Maria, Jenny, and Isaac”—listed as property akin to animals, lands, and other capital in a local Savannah newspaper. But it was especially infuriated to behold a Presbyterian seminary in the listing as the recipient of the funds derived from the sale. The journal criticized the lack of shame or remorse from the seminary as “scandalous.”

Columbia’s commitment to racial repair includes new scholarships that cover the entire cost of tuition and fees for every admitted African American student. As I have shared in an earlier reflection, I am exceedingly grateful to teach at a seminary that has the financial resources to

support the students in my classroom. But there is one glaring omission in Columbia's efforts to repair the breach: The absence of reparations to Cora's descendants and the descendants of other enslaved persons who were sold to enrich the seminary's endowment. In 2019, Virginia Theological Seminary designated 1.7 million dollars as a reparations endowment fund to identify and pay the descendants of Black persons who labored on its campus during slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow segregation. Three years later, the seminary reported that this fund increased to 2.2 million dollars and nearly 200 descendants had received payments.

Virginia Seminary's work toward reparative justice is simultaneously a model and an indictment of theological education. Surely it is not the only theological school that must atone for its historic sins of slavery and racial oppression. Both Columbia and Virginia are among the wealthiest theological institutions in the nation. In 2022, one magazine published a list with the ten schools holding the largest endowments: Princeton Seminary (\$1.45 billion), Harvard Divinity School (\$845 million), Yale Divinity School (\$597 billion), Candler School of Theology (\$352 million), Duke Divinity School (\$291 million), Columbia Seminary (\$284 million), Vanderbilt Divinity School (\$277 million), Pittsburgh Seminary (\$262 million), Perkins School of Theology (\$248 million), and Virginia Seminary (\$215 million).

One question I sometimes encounter revolves around how institutions can make amends for injustices that happened so long ago. I often respond with an observation and a question. I recognize that many years have passed, and we have certainly witnessed some progress in the pursuit of racial justice. I then ask when a specific institution made things right and repaired relations with the families and descendants of the people it directly harmed. In the case of Columbia, the answer is not yet. There is much excitement about Columbia's future with a desire to boldly step into the future of theological education with renewed purpose and new vision. But before revival there must be a reckoning.

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