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CONSIDER NO EVIL

Two Faith Traditions and the Problem of Academic Freedom
in Religious Higher Education

BRANDON G. WITHROW & MENACHEM WECKER

Even casual acquaintances of the Bible know that the Truth shall set you free, but in the pursuit of that Truth in higher education—particularly in Christian or Jewish seminaries—there are often many casualties suffered along the way. What happens when faculty and students at religious academies butt heads with senior staff or dare to question dogmas or sacred cows that the institution cherishes? *Consider No Evil* examines seminaries affiliated with two faith traditions—Christian and Jewish—and explores the challenges, as well as prospective solutions, confronting those religious academies when they grapple with staying true to their traditions, as they interpret them, while providing an arena that incubates honest and serious scholarship.

“When students ask me about truth, I always send them to the religion department. In the future I will point them to *Consider No Evil*, a work that has contrived successfully to carry water on both shoulders. This is an important book, well written, thoughtfully providing an insider’s view of historically private institutions. I recommend it for students of higher education in both secular and religious institutions.”

—STEPHEN JOEL TRACHTENBERG

University Professor and Emeritus President, The George Washington University

“*Consider No Evil* is a gift to scholars, clergy, and students alike. It provides historical, social, and personal context to clarify the thorny issues surrounding academic freedom at religious institutions of higher learning. With great nuance and insight, Withrow and Wecker promote transparency and forthrightness as a means of avoiding tension between scholars and their institutions.”

—JOSHUA STANTON

Assistant Rabbi, Temple B’nai Jeshurun, New Jersey

“In *Consider No Evil*, Withrow and Wecker act as spiritual guides in the complex, fraught, and persistently influential world of religious education. Using their own orthodox religious training as a springboard, the authors start a much-needed conversation on the tension inherent in the religious goal of transmission of tradition and the educational goal of the unobstructed search for truth. *Consider No Evil* should be required reading for all who study, teach, or preach within the hallowed halls of seminaries, yeshivas, and divinity schools.”

—PAUL BRANDEIS RAUSHENBUSH

Senior Religion Editor, *The Huffington Post*



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To my father, Greg:

You taught me to think for myself,
but I've never felt that meant to think alone.
Thanks for the spirited discussions over breakfast at "the cafe."

—BGW

To my grandfather:

Although we didn't always agree on every religious topic,
you were an inspiration to me always.
I miss you every day.

—MW

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PART ONE

Our Stories

1

No Good Education Goes Unpunished

Brandon G. Withrow

The boy tosses in his bed and calls out to his father. At nine years old, he knows there are no ghosts. He does not need a glass of water. He's not sick. So what's troubling him?

His mind whirls with what-ifs. What if he's not really a Christian? What if his first, second, and third time of receiving Jesus into his heart weren't real? What if hell has a special place just for unrepentant little boys?

His father, a pastor accustomed to addressing the spiritual doubts of others, walks in and places a soothing hand on his shoulder. "Do you want to pray again?" he asks.

"Yes."

And so they do.

Saying "I'm a pastor's kid" is more than a statement of identity; it's a confession. Being around other pastors' kids (PKs for short) resembles an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. We confess our unhealthy relationship to the church and the damage it has caused. Unlike AA meetings, however, many of us are still in that unhealthy relationship—though there are plenty of PKs who can tell you the exact date of their last "drink."

This chapter is an admission of perspective. I was raised, educated, and now teach in the evangelical world. These pages reflect my time in three conservative evangelical schools, their controversies as experienced

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through my student eyes, and how these institutions and their controversies shaped my educational and career direction. It's a story of theologians struggling for control and how theology has served their narratives. My understanding of religious higher education is deeply entwined with these experiences; my conclusions are inseparable from this phenomenology. For that reason, I begin with a short memoir, and a fair warning: it's not always a positive story.

In the Beginning

My father, born William Gregory, is Greg to his friends. Like his father before him, he struggled with alcohol abuse in early adulthood. When I was around three years old, he and my mother were on the verge of separation, thanks in part to his drinking. Unfortunately, there's nothing unusual about that. Countless Sunday morning services since the dawn of "the testimony" genre have started this way.

Faced with the possibility of repeating the mistakes of his alcoholic and drug-addicted father, Dad reached a crisis moment. Late one evening, probably flipping channels on a commercial break during *Barney Miller*, he encountered Billy Graham's sermon on 1 Corinthians 6:10 that "thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God." There was no escaping it; replace "drunkard" with my father's name, and Billy Graham—the evangelical pope with Apostle Paul-like authority—had just condemned him to an eternity in hell. That night, he walked the metaphorical aisle in our living room and fell to his knees before the soft-blue shekinah glory of the television.

This was more than an evening of drunken sadness, phase two of the Sisyphean cycle of drink, repent, repeat. He was determined to find a new path. (Determination is a characteristic of his that I've always tried to emulate.) So shortly after his conversion experience, he found himself active in the Free Methodist Church, a community that became his starting place for exploring his new theological world.

Free Methodists are no strangers to the effectiveness of evangelical guilt. In this circle, Dad faced reminders that his actions could affect his eternal condition. You may be saved today, but grace is only a few sins away from slipping out of one's grasp. While he was concerned about which sins could damn him, he never found an answer that satisfied and he settled firmly on the idea of a grace that never gives up on the sinner. For a

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recovering alcoholic, this threat of eternal loss is powerful, but for him the security of grace made better sense of Christ's cross. He took cheap beer off his shopping list, threw out his porn and rock music, and made things right with my mother.

Another trait of Methodism is that it doesn't take long before one is pulled into ministry. He began teaching Sunday school classes and soon entertained the idea of a seminary education. One day, after he told my mother he was considering ordination, the denomination's magazine appeared in his mailbox. The words "So you want to be a pastor, but don't know where to begin" ran across the cover, which he took as a possible prompting from God. Within little time, he began working towards ordination, taking a few college classes locally, and making it through the first stages. He didn't have an undergraduate degree, but the Association of Theological Schools allows for a small percentage of students to enter a program based on life experience.

He never finished the process of ordination. Serious theological change sent him down a different path, one that would have a significant effect on me and my educational choices.

The Family Business

My father and several family members who attended the same church eventually left the Free Methodists to form an independent church with congregational governance and a Baptist doctrine of grace. They called it The Assembly of Christians. My father, a mentor of his, and an aunt and uncle were involved in leadership. Dad received his first license to marry at the age of twenty-six, and the first wedding he officiated was his sister's.

My life as a pastor's kid was set in stone.

The family church was conservative, dualistic, and often contradictory, with one foot in mainstream evangelicalism's pop culture and the other firmly planted in stricter fundamentalist doctrine. Alcohol and secular music were taboo, but the church loved its Christian hippie music. (The 1970s birthed an industry of Christian alternatives to mainstream music, complete with Christian versions of popular songs, the advent of praise music, and Christian superstars—big fish in a relatively small pond.) Compared to many fundamentalist Baptist preachers, my father's long Sonny Bono hair and wash-worn blue jeans made him stand out in the pulpit. But as progressive as the church's look may have been, its theology was generally conservative.

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I've never been able to paint my father and "The Assembly," as they still call themselves, with a broad brush. There were moments when their independent mindset and their disconnect from the historical tradition defied strict categories. "One man's conservative is another man's liberal" is an aphorism of my father's that continues to prove itself.

In those early years, to those outside of our conservative world, he was no doubt a fundamentalist preacher, but for those on the inside, he was far from being a real conservative. In fact, among the parents at my Baptist grade school, Dad was considered a liberal. Who but a liberal would have "long" hair (reaching the collar of his shirt)? Who but a liberal would prefer contemporary Christian music to the hymns of the faith? Who but a liberal would take his kids to see *Indiana Jones* in the theater? (Many of our Baptist friends refused to buy the local newspaper because it advertised movies.) Being a "liberal," my father was rarely welcome at PTA meetings.

But there were areas of life and belief where we were clearly closer to fundamentalism. We were young-earth creationists, rejecting evolution as "only a theory," which we defined as "a guess." The Assembly, then and now, maintained the view that it is not biblical for women to be in pastoral ministry, hold the office of deacon, or serve as ushers. In the early years, our apocalyptic imagination was held captive by the dispensational view of the end of the world, most familiar today as the theology of the *Left Behind* novels. It was common for me to join the adults in regular weekly Bible studies, during which we scanned the newspaper for signs of the coming antichrist and compared what we found with the predictions of book of Revelation.

In addition to this progressive-fundamentalist duality, our lonely congregation had times of stability and times of great tumult. In the earliest years, The Assembly met in several odd locations, including the office of a chiropractic center, the basement of our house, the back room of a laundromat, an old school, and then above a Tupperware office. We eventually made it to our own building, where the congregation grew to around 150 members.

And it was a family church, by which I mean it was eventually filled with and run by my father's sisters, their husbands, and friends. Church equaled family, and vice versa. This was often beneficial for my brother and me, since both The Assembly and our immediate family moved around the Toledo area with some regularity. At the time, Toledo was not small enough to be quaint, but not large enough to have much beyond movie theaters

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and bowling. The church and its connection to my extended family offered stability.

It also baptized me into the gladiatorial world of Christians eating Christians. We attracted families that were looking for a place to worship and find community, but we also had a knack for collecting those who'd left a wake of trouble at previous churches. Plenty of self-proclaimed prophets showed up at our doors peddling their apocalyptic schisms. There were groups who thought Christ would return in 1988 and 1994 and every year between and after. They brought with them a persecution complex that was generally self-fulfilling. And in each case, the church leaders felt the need to protect the congregation, while the prophets felt their authoritative messages from God were being ignored.

But the two largest catastrophes came not from outsiders but from within—disputes over authority that involved members of my extended family. The first occurred when I was a child, in 1982. My most vivid memory was sitting in the family van while my parents and my father's siblings argued loudly in the front yard of the building the church rented. I remember a close friend of my father's jumping into the van to distract my brother and me and keep us from getting upset. The dispute lasted for a while, leading to my father seeking advice from a seasoned minister and the congregation voting to install more of my uncles as leaders, with one as the music minister. When the dust settled, my father's mentor and an aunt and uncle were gone. It would be years before that first rift healed.

Then when I was fifteen, a second debate over doctrine and church authority embroiled the remaining family members. It began with a cousin who ran into trouble with the law, leaving the leadership of an uncle (who was also a minister in our church) in question. This time my paternal grandmother left with the rest of my aunts and uncles. It was a devastating moment in the history of The Assembly, and I watched my father break down in tears. He tendered his resignation, only to have it refused by the remaining (non-family) leadership. The last of the family disappeared out the doors, never to return. There were no awkward Thanksgivings or Christmases after that, because the connection was severed completely.

It might seem unbelievable that a grandmother would cut off her grandsons because of a disagreement, but at the time my grandmother felt her bread and butter were with the departing family members, and so went her allegiance. She also really knew how to hold a grudge. This was a woman who'd once had a bad experience at a shoe store, and after it went

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out of business and was replaced by a series of other businesses, she refused to buy anything from any store that occupied the same building.

The summer after she left the church, I frequently rode my bike to her place, hoping to keep that relationship fresh, but I was always greeted at her door by “the grudge.” Years passed without birthday cards, Christmas cards, or even an acknowledgment of my existence if we happened to run into her somewhere. Even on her deathbed, as my father sat next to her in quiet conversation, she refused to make her peace with him.

Countless family dinners were disrupted by congregants calling for my father. He gave hours of counsel to people with troubled relationships, spent long days in the hospital with the sick and grieving, shared financial resources with others in need even though we didn’t have much—only to discover that one day they, too, would leave the church over a theological disagreement. Whenever I hear the advice not to go into business with family, I immediately think of those early years in my father’s church. Twenty-five years later, no divisions of this magnitude have occurred again in his congregation, though plenty of friends have come and gone, and there are still moments when a member of the congregation is formally disciplined for adultery or causing division. Nevertheless, my first impressions of Christianity were formed in these rough, early years.

Yes, I have great memories too—regular church picnics, friendly pranks, talent shows that showcased the bizarre humor of our congregation, close friends who graciously put up with my overly pious teenage opinions, food and comfort regularly offered by good people.

But looking back over my experiences in theological higher education, and all the disputes over church authority and theology, it’s not surprising that those experiences resemble the most formative ones of my upbringing.

A New Identity

The biggest theological change for The Assembly came shortly after the second family split. Our Baptist roots had been firmly planted in a tradition that emphasized free will, an unchallenged remnant of the Free Methodist tradition. But in the years following the second split, that ideology was displaced by a Calvinist perspective, nudging us into more of a Reformed Baptist tradition.

There were many reasons for this transition, one of which might have been a desire to understand how God could allow—or was it ordain?—such

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painful interpersonal conflicts, and I welcomed this perspective with all the fervor of a young man searching for answers to life's hardest questions. Looking back, I realize that, to me, one of the most significant outcomes of this theological shift was the people it brought into our circle.

I'm no longer a Calvinist but I'm happy that I inhabit the place in the multiverse where this change occurred. Because at nearly the same time that The Assembly embraced Reformed doctrines, a new family arrived looking for a church that shared their Calvinist convictions. The oldest daughter was sixteen, homeschooled with her four siblings, and raised on an apple orchard where her father had painted "Jesus Saves" in giant letters across the roof of his barn. I was nineteen, schooled by the state, and had never had more than an eighth of an acre for a backyard. When we met, I was dating the music minister's daughter, but apparently it had been predetermined that I'd break up with her and fall in love with Mindy, the orchard girl, because within a few years we were married and enrolled at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago.

You'd think that as a pastor's kid—after a childhood of rising early for Sunday services and filling the rest of every week with Wednesday night services, Bible studies, youth group meetings, potlucks, and service projects—an early retirement from the church experience would be a reasonable desire. Many children of ministers want nothing to do with the church community or theology by the time they reach college.

But not me. I went on to earn a bachelor of arts in theology. And the theological disputes of my early years would prove to be like high school preparatory programs for my higher educational experiences.

Schooled in Chicago

Mindy and I, both theology majors at Moody, were deeply apprehensive about our new world. Higher education was not a family tradition. Neither my family nor Mindy's had set aside funds for it. In fact, my grandparents on both sides of the family had fourth-grade educations at best, and my dad worked as a precision grinder while pastoring before becoming a full-time minister later in life.

Chicago was (at first) a large cement monster. We spent four years downtown, and then another two a little further north. Exposed to a new abundance of other cultures and church traditions, we began to read and think more broadly and eventually to establish theological perspectives distinct from our communities of origin.

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In what was a radical shift for us then (though looking back it was probably imperceptible to outsiders), we moved from being Reformed Baptist Calvinists to Presbyterian Calvinists. Among other things, this meant that to our Baptist parents, who looked forward to grandchildren, we would be committing the sin of baptizing infants. We now followed the Westminster Confession of Faith—a second Bible for Presbyterians—and no longer embraced what we felt was the science fiction of dispensationalism.

We also underwent a significant change of view on the role of women within the church. Despite the fact that Moody was a mostly patriarchal institution (Exhibit A: as a male theology major, I took a preaching class called “Homilectics” while Mindy, as a female theology major, took a preaching class called “Sermon Preparation for Women”), Mindy found professors there who helped her rethink her place in the world. She joined a literary discussion group led by a feminist English professor who mentored her honors students. The group was entirely female; some male students, undoubtedly echoing the sentiments of their professorial mentors, spread the rumor that the group’s members were lesbians. (Apparently, in a conservative Christian school only lesbians are smart.)

This situation was followed by a walkout protest sparked by an invitation to Anne Graham Lotz to speak at Moody’s yearly student conference. Several male students were appalled that a woman would be allowed to speak publicly. Though required to attend, they sat in the front row of the auditorium and made a show of marching out when she stepped into the pulpit. The following year, the school’s leadership invited only men to speak. In protest over the administration’s tacit support of misogyny, Mindy and I wrote a letter to the school’s president. When he did not reply, we published it as an open letter in the campus newspaper—and only then received a personal reply. We became known as activists for gender equality.

During our time at Moody, feminism was not the only divisive force among faculty and students. The real controversy was about which type of dispensationalist you were. Half of the faculty members were Classic Dispensationalists, while the others were Progressive Dispensationalists. Classics understood the promises of the Old Testament to be offered to Israel alone and the fulfillment of the Davidic throne in the Messiah to be realized only in the future millennial reign of Christ after the second coming. The Christian church is a gap in the plan of God, they argue, a parenthetical moment between the promises to Israel and their ultimate fulfillment. Classic Dispensationalism was deeply ingrained in Moody’s history.

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But in the early 1990s, Progressive Dispensationalists were looking to reimagine dispensationalism by emphasizing the progressive nature of the promises of God. Rather than postpone the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises of a Davidic reign to the millennial kingdom, they concluded that the promises of God were fulfilled progressively, meaning partially now (already) and partially in the future (not yet). They wanted to transform Moody's tradition to welcome the progressives.

Obviously, all hell broke loose.

Faculty began fretting over this new travesty of theology, secretly posting negative comments and articles to their colleague's corkboards outside of their offices, trash-talking each others' books in classes, and decrying what they believed was a horrendous theological lie. The devil was in the details of Progressive Dispensationalism. (Both sides believed in a literal devil.)

As students always do, they began taking sides. Some went as far as posting protest signs in the windows of their dorms and writing op-ed pieces in the student paper. "Why have us read the books of other views if you don't want us to ever consider those views?" asked one student. Another student lampooned the divided professors in his student paper cartoon "Calvin and Hodge"—i.e., John Calvin and Charles Hodge—an obvious parody of *Calvin and Hobbes*.

The feverish dispute wasn't just an argument between faculty colleagues; it had serious ramifications for students. Every student had to sign a doctrinal statement demonstrating his or her "orthodoxy" in order to graduate. My final semester, as I walked through the halls of the Sweeting Center reading the statement that fit easily on a three-by-five card, I was intercepted by the professor who was leading the charge to require a more thorough statement in order to limit the graduation of progressives.

"You know what that means," he told me, pounding his fingers into the statement hard enough to leave indentations. His eyes never blinked. "You know what that means and if you can't sign it, you can't graduate."

But I walked away, sure of one thing. If I had failed to learn and change from my time in this institution, I thought, then what was the purpose of being here? Being able to sign the statement in the way that I understood it would mean that my education enabled me to be my own person, not a carbon copy of one man. So I signed it and graduated.

As deeply provincial as that debate was, it was merely a reminder of what I was already well versed in from my time as a pastor's kid: many Christians are adept at eating each other alive. The real crime there was

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the failure of some professors to be educators instead of theological hall monitors.

Watching the dispute among faculty and experiencing the pressure over perceived orthodoxy led me to a new appreciation for theological diversity. This is not to say that I became a freethinker, in the traditional sense, but I discovered a desire to be among those who were less afraid of other opinions.

And as ironic as it may sound, that conclusion meant I'd be taking up with evangelicals for my next degree.

The Evangelicals

A Moody professor introduced me to the broader evangelical world and suggested I consider Trinity Evangelical Divinity School at Trinity International University (Deerfield, Illinois), where I earned a master of arts in the history of Christian thought. Compared to Moody, Trinity had plenty of diversity within its faculty and was therefore a breath of fresh air. While the divinity school's tradition was the Evangelical Free Church, many traditions are represented. Faculty do have to sign a doctrinal statement, but not students.

My first experience with theological controversy at Trinity was the result of a movement known as Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT). Unlike the conflict at Moody, however, the fighting was not between "colleagues" of the same department; this fight covered a swath of the larger evangelical world.

ECT was an attempt between ecumenically minded evangelical leaders like my advisor in the church history department, Dr. John Woodbridge, to open up discussions between evangelicals and Catholics on the idea of Christian unity. For nearly two years, during my weekly advisee meetings with Woodbridge, we were immersed in discussion about whether Catholics and evangelicals could and should find a place for peaceful conversation to resolve their differences for the sake of joint missions and in opposition to secularism.

Unlike Catholic Christians, evangelicals have no hierarchal authority to help moderate and support these types of discussions. When evangelical leaders attempt to engage in a dialogue of this magnitude, they often find themselves embroiled in debates with each other. Those evangelicals who opposed the conversation appeared to see themselves as defending the

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Protestant Reformation and therefore the gospel. Any attempt for evangelicals to work with Catholics, as they saw it, compromised doctrines of grace and justification by faith.

This very public controversy led to a number of reactionary books and articles splashed across the pages of *Christianity Today*. Those promoting evangelical and Catholic dialogue included leading Catholic thinkers like Jesuit priest and later cardinal Avery Dulles, and former Lutheran-turned-Catholic priest and founding editor of the journal *First Things*, Richard John Neuhaus. Well-known evangelical cosigners and contributors to the movement were former Special Counsel to President Nixon, Chuck Colson; Campus Crusade's Bill Bright; Christian Broadcasting Network's Pat Robertson; historian and then Wheaton College professor Mark Noll; Calvinist icon and professor J. I. Packer; the executive editor of *Christianity Today* and academic dean of Beeson Divinity School, Timothy George; and my professor at Trinity, John Woodbridge. Those evangelicals opposed to the effort were best known in Reformed evangelical circles, and included Ligonier Ministries' R. C. Sproul; Grace Community Church pastor, John F. MacArthur; televangelist John Ankerburg; professor Michael Horton; and the now deceased D. James Kennedy and John H. Gerstner.¹

The controversy over ECT officially and publicly began in March 1994 with the joint statement of purpose "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium." Initially, this was an affirmation of a common faith for the sake of proclaiming "the good news" and contending "for the truth that politics, law, and culture must be secured by moral truth." Signers wanted to reverse the advancement of secularism, outlaw abortion, and promote religious freedom. They ran into difficulty with other evangelicals when they also affirmed together that "we are justified by grace through faith because of Christ."²

Opposition evangelicals, many of whom were members of Christians United for Reformation (CURE), believed this statement ignored real differences between the Protestant and Catholic doctrines of justification. Protestant emphasis on imputed and alien righteousness was essential to counter a Catholic view of infused righteousness, which they believed was contrary to the Pauline doctrine of grace. In an attempt to maintain evangelical unity, both sides of the dispute drafted a joint document called

1. This is a partial list. Gerstner passed away in the early stages of this discussion.

2. Colson and Neuhaus, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*, ix, xxii–xxvi. A copy of the statement may be found online: <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/01/evangelicals--catholics-together-the-christian-mission-in-the-third-millennium-2>.

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“Resolutions for Roman Catholic and Evangelical Dialogue,” which affirmed that “while both Evangelicals and Roman Catholics affirm the ecumenical Creeds, we do not see this catholic consensus as a sufficient basis for declaring that agreement exists on all the essential elements of the Gospel.”³ This attempt to reaffirm evangelical unity on the doctrine of justification was only a temporary truce.

Over the next three years, the evangelical and Catholic dialogue continued, and concerned opponents were now under the banner of The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals. They drafted “The Cambridge Declaration” (1996), which sounded an alarm that evangelicals were abandoning the doctrines of grace found in the Protestant Reformation.⁴

By December 1997, evangelicals and Catholics signed a new ecumenical statement known as “The Gift of Salvation,” making it clear that they were “speaking not for, but from and to” their “several communities.”⁵ The Alliance once again countered with “An Appeal to Fellow Evangelicals” (1998), which indicated that they were “profoundly distressed” by “The Gift of Salvation,” as it was “seriously flawed” on the Protestant teaching of the gospel.⁶ The debate went on for a few years, resulting in several books and articles and eventual splits between former allies on the issue.⁷

While some students experienced the debate as a novelty, my connection went beyond being an advisee of ECT proponent John Woodbridge. Before arriving at Trinity, my new Reformed Presbyterian affiliation put me on the side of the opposition; but via my studies at Trinity, Woodbridge introduced me to an entirely new world of thinking. Christians did not have to agree on the fine details of how justification worked (infused or imputed), so as long as they agreed on the source of salvation (Jesus’ death on the cross). While five hundred years of Reformation division between Catholics and Protestants was not meaningless, as he explained it to me, it

3. A copy of the statement may be found online: <http://www.modernreformation.org/default.php?page=printfriendly&var2=876>.

4. Alliance, “Cambridge Declaration,” 14.

5. Evangelicals and Catholics Together, “Gift of Salvation,” 35.

6. Alliance, “Appeal to Fellow Evangelicals,” 29.

7. For a partial history of ECT, see my MA thesis, “Jonathan Edwards as a Resource for Current Evangelical Discussion over the Language of Justification” (1999). One Alliance member did change sides in this discussion. John H. Armstrong of *Reformation and Revival Journal* (who also gave me one of my first publishing opportunities) took a more ecumenical position, eventually forming an organization for ecumenical work and writing his book *Your Church Is Too Small: Why Unity in Christ’s Mission Is Vital to the Future of the Church* (2010).

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was also not an excuse to avoid Christ's ultimate desire expressed in John 17:21 that Christians be "one."

Even in agreeing with this new perspective, I remained strongly connected to the Reformed world that opposed ECT. A few members of the local Orthodox Presbyterian church I attended wondered how I could keep studying with Woodbridge given his obvious heresy. I received emails from Reformed friends—and from people I didn't really know, but who found my personal website where I wrote about theology—asking me to step away from the theological ledge of ecumenism.

Back home, The Assembly held yearly conferences called Toledo Reformed Theological Conferences (TRTC). The 1990s saw a revival of the conference movement among Reformed Christians. Among those invited to speak at TRTC were those named above who stood in opposition to ECT, though they were invited to speak on other theological issues. When I attended, I was often invited by my dad to join him and the speakers for lunch; and these occasions provided windows into how they understood ECT supporters. In short, the way they understood ECT was not my experience with it.

I became passionate about the subject, actively keeping documents and links to articles on my website, with the hope of combating misinformation. (It would not be the last time I did this for a cause.) As I worked in Trinity's alumni department, I helped organize a public lecture for Woodbridge to clarify the work of ECT. I wrote my MA thesis on the subject, published two related journal articles, and carefully worked the discussion into my introduction to a new edition of van Mastrich's *Treatise on Regeneration*.⁸

My childhood church introduced me to controversy on the congregational level, and Moody showed me how to apply it to a theology department. Trinity was my first real exposure to broad theological dispute across campuses, publishing houses, and theological traditions. But the real blood-thirsty division occurred at the last of my theological schools, Westminster Theological Seminary.

8. I wrote the introduction to and edited an edition of Dutch theologian Peter van Mastricht's *Treatise on Regeneration* (2002).

The Truly Reformed

Despite the ECT debate, I remained interested in the Presbyterian tradition. I arrived in Philadelphia shortly before September 11, 2001, to start a PhD in the history of Christianity. The program was historical and theological, and I hoped it would help resolve whether I was really Presbyterian. As it turned out, I was not.

Westminster was founded as the result of a dispute at Princeton Seminary in the early days of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. The first few decades of the twentieth century left evangelicals with a fear that liberalism was taking over the educational world. Between 1910 and 1915, former president of Moody Bible Institute, R. A. Torrey, and the Baptist minister and evangelist A. C. Dixon put their opposition to liberalism in print by editing several volumes of *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*. Each chapter defended their definition of Christian orthodoxy against their liberal enemies and included affirmations of the inerrancy of the Bible, the historicity of the miracles of the Bible, and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. A symbol of the era was the media circus known as the Scopes Monkey Trial (1925), popularized by the movie *Inherit the Wind* (1960), in which John Scopes was accused of violating the law by teaching evolution in the public schools. The fundamentalist saw evolution as a liberal rejection of the inerrant authority of the Bible.

In New Jersey, Princeton Seminary was experiencing its own fears of encroaching liberalism. As conservative professors saw it, liberals were replacing the “Old Princeton” of Charles Hodge and Benjamin Warfield. Professor and Presbyterian minister J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937) wanted to return Princeton to its conservative roots, and his famous book *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923) was his call to rally. In the 1920s, Machen became a major evangelical leader. Moody Bible Institute invited Machen to speak at conferences and James M. Gray (academic dean at Moody) had suggested that Machen might replace him.⁹ Machen’s effort to keep Princeton Seminary conservative failed when the school reorganized in 1929, officially creating more room for his feared liberal opponents.

At this defeat, Machen and three other Princeton faculty members (Robert Dick Wilson, Oswald T. Allis, and Cornelius Van Til) decided to form Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia (1929). Machen was also concerned that his denomination, The Presbyterian Church

9. Harris, *Fundamentalism*, 20; Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*, 41.

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(USA), had given way to the liberal Social Gospel of Baptists like Walter Rauschenbusch and Harry Emerson Fosdick, and so he, along with others, founded the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions (1933), an act that brought him up for disciplinary charges by his denomination.¹⁰ Charles Woodbridge (father of John Woodbridge) represented him before the denomination, but they both found themselves disciplined and stripped of ordination. This led Machen to push for the formation of The Presbyterian Church in America, which eventually became the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

For decades, Westminster had a reputation for controversy. When I graduated from Trinity and hoped to learn more about Presbyterianism, Westminster was one of the names I had heard, though I did not fully understand its culture. I was also under the impression that it had been slowly becoming more open to the broader evangelical world. In a private letter, conservative Presbyterian theologian John Gerstner warned me against attending Westminster since they had recently invited ECT signer Chuck Colson to speak in chapel. Given my new perspective on this subject, however, I did not see this as a bad thing. And as it happened, Westminster would soon turn back to its conservative roots.

By 2005 a full-blown controversy had broken out over a book by Peter Enns, a tenured faculty member in biblical studies, resulting in a major rift in the faculty and a dispute that spilled over into the broader evangelical and Presbyterian world. It was a dispute that clearly struck at the history of Westminster and pushed almost every creative theologian out, setting the school back on a path toward fundamentalism.

Enns's notorious book, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (2005), addresses the concerns evangelicals often have on issues of higher criticism. When the Bible is subjected to the same scrutiny that is given to any ancient text, it is evident that its stories and texts reflect and borrow from the cultures of the day. The Mosaic law code, for example, is clearly connected to, or at least shares a very close historical trajectory with, the centuries-older Code of Hammurabi (eighteenth century BCE), a Babylonian legal code. The wording of the two law codes is very close. One might imagine the problem this poses for evangelicals, who stress the unique, inerrant, and divine origin of the Bible. If the Mosaic law is said to be by divine inspiration, yet it clearly borrows from a pre-existing legal culture, then one might argue that Scripture is not

10. Sweeney, *American Evangelical Story*, 101.

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truly God's words. These conclusions had been central to the concerns of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy earlier in the century, leading to the formation of Westminster.

Enns recognized that evangelicals could not continue to ignore these points of higher criticism and remain academically relevant. So he proposed a better way to look at the issue, a way he dubbed the incarnational analogy. According to this thinking, as Christ is said to be fully divine and fully human but one person, so too one could see the Bible as (by way of analogy) divinely inspired while not disconnected from its human context. "To work within an incarnational paradigm means that our expectations of the Bible must be in conversation with the data," writes Enns, "otherwise we run the very real risk of trying to understand the Bible in fundamental isolation from the cultures in which it was written—which is to say, we would be working with a nonincarnate understanding of Scripture."¹¹

This was only intended to be an analogy and never a precise, one-to-one comparison. Enns hoped to show a side of the Bible that would allow for critical analysis of its sources, while remaining respectful of its authority and place in theology. This includes recognizing that myth plays a role in the Bible, especially in Genesis. For evangelicals, the idea of myth carries with it the connotation of a "lie" or "deceptive story," but from an incarnational perspective, myths are designed to speak about a greater reality from within a prescientific community. God sees no need to correct these myths, as it is more important that his ideas communicate in a language understood by his people. "This is what it means for God to speak at a certain time and place—he enters *their* world," Enns writes. "He speaks and acts in ways that make sense to *them* . . . he accommodates, condescends, meets them where they are."¹²

The theologians exploded in response. Attacks on Enns's book ran the gamut from challenging the incarnational analogy by questioning its orthodoxy on christological discussions to arguing over doctrines of inerrancy. But *Inspiration and Incarnation* was clearly an attempt by Enns to develop ideas already present in the "theological tradition, represented by . . . [his] colleagues at Westminster Theological Seminary, past and present."¹³ John Calvin's doctrine of divine accommodation, which is a strong part of that tradition, used very similar language to that of Enns.

11. Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 168.

12. *Ibid.*, 56.

13. *Ibid.*, 9.

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In a later chapter, I will go into further detail about this dispute, but for now it is sufficient to say that part of the controversy centered on who properly represented the theological standards of the seminary, that is, the Westminster Confession of Faith. Many on faculty supported Enns, but others saw themselves as being the “truly Reformed,” defenders of Westminster in the tradition of Machen. They were fighting the new liberalism.

The entire campus was caught up in the controversy. It drove conversations at the café, in the bookstore, during long conversations over scotch, and on the Internet. The same faculty that took aim at Enns also pushed out the president. It was clear that the plan was not only to address the theological position of *Inspiration and Incarnation* but also to restructure and reorganize the seminary with a fundamentalist agenda—the inverse of what had happened at Princeton Seminary earlier in the century.

A change in faculty and administration became the full agenda. Samuel T. Logan, who was also the chair of my dissertation committee, was removed from the presidency. In his place was installed Peter A. Lillback, whose presidential agenda included returning the school to a strong inerrancy, promoting his Reclaim America message (based on his Providence Forum ministry), and fighting the dangerous message of Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*.

Rather than Westminster’s traditional mission of training ministers, the focus fell on Lillback’s obsession with proving that George Washington was an orthodox Christian, eventually landing him the role of guest on then Fox News host Glenn Beck’s show. Westminster became a platform for his self-published book, *George Washington’s Sacred Fire* (2006). When students and employees expressed to the board their concerns about the direction of the school, they felt their degrees or jobs were on the line. Students published an online “Save Our Seminary” petition and took to their blogs to vocalize their fear over Westminster’s new fundamentalist direction.

As a student, I did what I knew best (and what my embedded justice meter called for): I documented on my blog the events as they occurred.¹⁴ I kept records and copies of every article published in journals, official and unofficial school records and statements on the situation, and even streamed secretly recorded audio of a meeting between the faculty and students. To their credit, the seminary never asked me to shut down my activity, though some faculty made it clear they were keeping tabs on my activities.

14. “Justice meter”: the name Mindy and I have given to the unstoppable feeling that “somebody has to do something about this!”

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As these events unfolded, I realized that I was making another intellectual and theological transition. Every day on campus presented new grist for the rumor mill. Between my connections as a student and Mindy's position directing the seminary's marketing communications office, it was impossible to avoid encountering more horror stories. The atmosphere was becoming intolerable. Then her boss was terminated unjustly and suddenly, with the swiftness of an amputation. Mindy felt she could no longer do her job promoting and speaking on behalf of the school.

By the end of 2006, my dissertation was complete; I'd be graduating in a few months and no longer needed to remain in residence. So the timing was perfect when I received an offer to be a visiting instructor at Samford University's Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama. It provided a chance to work with Timothy George, and while we knew it would provide only a semester's worth of employment, we decided it was time to reinvent our daily life and find some peace of mind.

As with any controversy, it can be hard to hear about the problems of an institution day in and day out, especially when it involves people you love and respect. Our move to Birmingham gave us a chance to refocus our priorities, and it gave us both time to write. We were in the middle of writing (together) a five-volume history of Christianity, and I was publishing a book on Katherine Parr, the last wife of Henry VIII. We needed to be away from Philadelphia and the Westminster decline to make that happen. And we needed the geographical space to rethink our theological affiliations and reconsider why we consistently found ourselves in dog-eat-dog communities.

When I first arrived at Westminster, I thought I was finally evading the trappings of the fundamentalism that had marked my early years. I didn't understand then that my shift to Presbyterianism was, in part, a confusing of fundamentalism with specifics of theology rather than a way of seeing the world. I had simply swapped one fundamentalism for another.

But that time was over. We devoted our season in Birmingham to exploring other traditions. Our exposure to Cathedral Church of the Advent, Birmingham's Episcopal center, eventually led us to affiliate with the Episcopal Church, leaving the Reformed world behind.

Lessons Learned

At the end of my visiting post at Beeson, we returned to Ohio while I applied for permanent positions. The U.S. economy was tanking, and openings in my field rapidly dried up. I became active in the American Academy of Religion, applying my background in religious history to developing a career in religious studies. My goal was no longer theology but the academic study of religion.

I secured a position at Winebrenner Theological Seminary (Findlay, Ohio) as assistant professor of the history of Christianity and religious studies. Compared to Westminster, Winebrenner is theologically diverse. And the position provided the opportunity to teach at the University of Findlay as an adjunct in the religious studies program.¹⁵ I headed up the online education committee at Winebrenner, took part in the hiring of the new university librarian, and became director of a master of arts program. These were opportunities to start developing a professional life away from the theological world I knew and no longer respected.

The full story of my intellectual journey is beyond the scope of this chapter, but my time teaching religious studies, contributing to the religion section of *The Huffington Post*, the local hub of the Religion News Service, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* has provided a new academic perspective and a broader appreciation of interreligious dialogue.

In reflecting on these past controversies, as well as current situations experienced by colleagues in other institutions, I've discovered a number of takeaways. I'll explore these in greater detail in a later chapter of this book, but three are worth noting here.

Disputes Are Foremost about Control

Whether you're a child in a church or a student in higher education, never underestimate the need for others to have control. At Moody, Classic Dispensationalists demanded control over the theology department, while progressives sought to maintain control over their academic freedom. Evangelicals and Catholics Together opened a feud over who truly represented evangelicalism and was authorized to speak for the Protestant Reformation. Westminster had a heritage of creativity and scholarship to

15. Winebrenner is associated with the University of Findlay, sharing a campus and an ecclesiastical history.

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which Peter Enns believed he was contributing, much to the chagrin of those who wanted to control the seminary's story and keep it firmly within its fundamentalist origins.¹⁶

Divisions like these are fueled primarily by the desire to control a community or movement or to maintain control over one's rights and freedoms within a community. Whether or not the cause is just, power grabs always hurt people and wither communities.

Theology Is the Justifying Narrative for Maintaining Control

Before it was called "An Appeal to Fellow Evangelicals," The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals called their document "The Battle for the Gospel."¹⁷ The title was changed after the initial publication when ECT members took offense to the idea that they were somehow against the gospel of Jesus in wanting to work with other self-proclaimed Christians. But that original title is telling: the theological narrative was that of a battle, and in that battle one was either for or against the gospel. If there is anything evangelicals cannot abide, it's the idea of a false gospel. Theology became the justifying narrative for control of evangelicalism.

Similarly, Westminster's story was about far more than doctrine. Doctrinal differences alone would not have left employees feeling targeted or moved the board of trustees to bring in a ministry called Peacemakers to heal community rifts. The public face of the story was theological, as seminary representatives portrayed themselves as defenders of the trustworthiness and divine inspiration of the Bible. But Enns had never rejected these doctrines. Why then, after he left, did Westminster start its "Full Confidence Tour" to defend the Bible against criticism?¹⁸ It became the theological narrative for the controversy.

In all of the situations I've recounted, a theological narrative aided power and control. One side was orthodox and the other was near heresy;

16. See Peter Enns's inauguration address as Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Hermeneutics from March 2006, published as Enns, "Bible in Context." See chapter 3 for an analysis on the rhetoric of the Westminster story.

17. While a student of Woodbridge, I alerted him to my discovery that The Alliance document, "Battle for the Gospel," had gone online under that title, even though ECT members had previously requested that the title be changed, given its inflammatory nature. The title was quickly altered, but it gave away their true perspective.

18. For information about Westminster Theological Seminary's "Full Confidence Tour," see <http://www.wts.edu/alumni/events/fullconfidencetour1.html>.

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one was either on the side of God or on the side of the devil. Which side you were on depended solely on who was in control.

All Controversies Are More Complicated than We Realize

Recounting these controversies with a black-and-white simplicity would be a disservice. These stories are always far more complicated than they seem to be. While control plays a significant role in these divisions, there is no doubt in my mind that many of the individuals involved believed they were working for the greater good. After all, who wants the devil in control of a theological institution? And while theology serves the purpose of control, it would be grievous to leave the impression that all theologians in these disputes were simply, and consciously, making things up for the sake of a power grab. Most theologians would not frankly admit to using theology to manipulate others, because most of them likely believe that the theology they espouse is truly worthy of a cause such as the inerrancy of the Bible. But this is also not to say that everyone was above board; there are always the manipulators, the abusers, and the self-servers.

And looking back at my experiences growing up in the church and taking three degrees in theological higher education, I'm aware that my sympathies went to those with whom I felt the most theological kinship and who appeared to me to get the raw end of the deal. I've always rooted for the underdog. My experience may justify that position, but it cannot be said to be neutral in relationship to it.

So it is wise to acknowledge that in every situation, whether it is true injustice, cognitive dissonance, confirmation bias, or a host of other factors, the waters of truth are muddy. But if we are to continue to carry out religious education, we must understand what is driving these disputes and identify principles around which academic freedom, or whatever version of it is possible in the religious academy, may flourish.

That is the purpose of this book.