Introduction
ELTON M. EENIGENBURG
A Twentieth Century Renaissance Man

"Unique" is an overworked word, but it is no exaggeration to say that Elton Eenigenburg has made a unique contribution to Western Theological Seminary and the Reformed Church in America. It is not only his rare combination of pastoral, administrative, and scholarly gifts; no one else in the history of Western Seminary has served as dean for four presidents (if one includes the interim presidency of Lester Kuyper in 1971-73) as well as serving as acting president for one year himself (1962-63). During the years he was academic dean (1961-1977) Western Seminary experienced some special stresses, so it could be said that he was the glue that held things together during some difficult times. First, however, it will be helpful to look at the background of our renaissance man.

I. The Makings of a Scholar

Elton Eenigenburg was born and raised in Chicago, went to high school there, and then attended Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey (thanks to a special scholarship fund there for Reformed Church students). All of this is significant because practically no other professor in the history of Western Seminary has had this kind of cosmopolitan background. With the exception of those who have come to the seminary from non-RCA backgrounds, almost all of its professors have hailed from Western Michigan or farms or small towns in midwestern states, principally Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin. (Simon Blocker would be one of the exceptions). They then usually attended Central or Hope College before entering seminary. Thus Elton Eenigenburg brought to Western Seminary an unusual sophistication and urbanity which was further enhanced by his serving large churches in both metropolitan New Jersey (Bethel, Passaic) and Chicago (First, Englewood).

In addition, he did his graduate work at some of the leading graduate schools in our country: Princeton and Union Theological Seminaries, and Columbia University. He received his Ph.D. in 1949 from the last named, having studied under such luminaries as John H. Randall (at Columbia), Reinhold Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on the subject, "The Experience of Divine Anger in Greek Tragedy."

Consequently, when he was invited to join the faculty of Western Seminary in 1952, he brought experience, training, and gifts which surpassed that of most of the faculty prior to that time. It was fortunate he was so able and well equipped for his task, for in the years to come he would be asked to do a great variety of things, most of which the Board of Trustees at that time could not have envisioned.

II. The Scholar-Administrator

Elton Eenigenburg's fields were Christian ethics and philosophy of religion. When he first came to Western in the spring of 1952, however, he was asked to teach church history because William Goulooze, the church history professor up to that time was ill with cancer.
and had to withdraw after the first semester. I was in those first classes he taught and recall how impressed we were, not realizing that he had originally been hired by the Board to succeed Professor Simon Blocker in the field of pastoral theology!

For a decade he taught church history—everything from Christian Origins to American Church History—and he did this very well. It was not until a chair of Christian Ethics and Philosophy of Religion was established in 1962 that he was finally able to teach in the areas in which he had specialized. The prior year, however, he had acceded to the request of the Executive Committee of Western's Board to become the academic dean. This position he held until 1977 when he returned to teaching full-time.

What is remarkable is that during this period when ostensibly half his time was to be given to administration, half to teaching, he was not only a very able dean but he also taught all the required and elective ethics courses as well as courses in psychology of religion, theological German, and systematic theology (anthropology). During this period he also continued to produce scholarly reviews and articles, one of which was reproduced in two books ("How New is the New Morality?" in The Situation Ethics Debate [1968] and in Moral Choices [1977]), as well as one of the chapters, "God the Son," in Guilt, Grace, and Gratitude (1963) and a significant history of the RCA in one of the Covenant Life Curriculum volumes (1965). His magnum opus, however, is still forthcoming, viz., Biblical Foundations and a Method for Doing Christian Ethics.

These accomplishments alone would qualify him for being labeled a "renaissance man," a quality increasingly rare in an age of specialists. What is especially impressive in all this is the fact that he never did anything—at least not as far as his peers or students could discern—in a careless or slipshod fashion. As professor, scholar, and dean he always did his jobs with care and competency.

III. The Larger Picture

Yet this is not the whole story. I referred earlier to the "special stresses" the seminary experienced during his deanship. First there was the brief tenure of Harold Englund as president (only two years), after which Elton Eenigenburg himself was asked to serve as acting president until a successor could be found. During Herman Ridder's presidency (1963-71) the Bilevel Multisite Program, a unique cooperative program with New Brunswick Seminary, caused some dislocations and placed special strains on the faculty. It was Elton Eenigenburg's responsibility to implement the program, assist and encourage professors who didn't fully appreciate it, and pacify students both within the program and the regular M.Div. students, as well as area pastors who had misgivings about the whole venture.

Then, for a period of four years, when one president governed both seminaries (Herman Ridder from 1969 to 1971 and interim president Lester Kuyper from 1971 to 1973), he inherited the unenviable task of being virtually the chief executive officer when the president was away at New Brunswick Seminary for months at a time even though he didn't have the authority of a president. On a more personal level I also want to pay tribute to the invaluable assistance he gave me when I became president of the seminary in 1973. I arrived on the scene only one month before I was to take office and had no administrative experience. The transition, however, was an easy one, largely because of his wise counsel, aid, and support.
All of these accomplishments, both academic and administrative, do not exhaust his distinctive contributions to the school and church. One must turn to the essays in this festschrift by Marion de Velder and Arie Brouwer to get the full picture. For Elton Eenigenburg was for many years the parliamentarian for General Synod—a difficult and thankless task—and was also the chief architect of the Book of Church Order of the RCA. At the same time, on the home front he was constantly in demand in local churches as a teacher for Bible studies and special classes for family night and church school programs.

One more thing needs to be noted as we honor this gifted teacher, dean, colleague, and friend. That is his ability to grow and adapt. When Elton Eenigenburg came to Western Seminary thirty-three years ago there was one degree program (the present M.Div.) and a very traditional, fixed curriculum. While he was dean, three more degree programs were added (the M.R.E., M.Th., and D.Min.) and the curriculum underwent countless changes, some of them fairly radical. In all of this change and development his was a cautious voice but not a recalcitrant one. He might warn and demur at times, but he was always open to new approaches and new ideas.

Accordingly, though now on the verge of retirement, he teaches three of our more avant garde courses: Medical Ethics, Feminist Theology, and Liberation Theology. Moreover, in the Doctor of Ministry degree program, which requires a very different approach to pedagogy, he is one of our most successful teachers. As a result, we have asked him to continue as a leader in the D.Min. program after he retires.

This ability to remain sharp and keep abreast of the latest scholarship is due largely to his natural intellectual gifts and disciplined life. In part, however, it is due to his faithful exercising, so that both body and mind are exceptionally well tuned at the ripe age of seventy. Those of us who are also his colleagues on the volleyball floor each Friday noon can attest to his fitness, agility, and shrewdness on the volleyball court as well as in the classroom!

Finally, a word of appreciation must also be expressed to his faithful wife, Edith. She has not only been a loyal and helpful supporter in times difficult and pleasant; in her own right she has also been a great supporter of the seminary. She has been a great help in many ventures such as the WTS Women's Auxiliary and has also entertained countless students throughout the years. Above all, she has been a faithful supporter of and participant in the seminary women's Adelphia Society. Generations of seminary wives will remember her with affection and gratitude for that support and for her loyalty.

So we thank God for both of you and for what you have meant to Western Seminary, the church, and to your many friends over the years. We pray that the years to come will be healthy, happy ones where your dedication and gifts can continue to be used for the glory of God.

I. John Hesselink