The Theological Library: In Touch with the Witnesses
Text: Hebrews 11:32-12:2 *

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I suppose it would be unseemly in this august body for me to simply lean over and earnestly share the secret codeword of my profession: SHHHHHH. That being done, I could quite simply sit down. That and other stereotypes abound with regard to libraries and librarians. “Why did a nice guy like you leave the ministry?” my family asked when I became a theological librarian at Union in Richmond. On this day of dedication and celebration, I wish to share with you my philosophy—no, better my theology—of librarianship and the role of the library in theological education. Far from having left the ministry, I conceive of my work and that of my staff as a ministry as well as an aid in multiple future ministries. In a nutshell, the text we shared is thematic for me: we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses—past and present—speaking, dialoguing, sharing with those who would be witnesses today.

First, we must clear away some of the misconceptions and stereotypes. At its best, and in my judgment, the library is not basically “thingish” but “personal”—“peopleish?” There are those who view the library as a warehouse of precious treasures, measure its stature and adequacy by counting the number of possessions in it, devote primary attention to acquiring and sorting and arranging (not to mention labeling, indexing, filing) things. In this view, we would appreciate your dollars for the book and periodical budget, your suggestions for titles to acquire, your encouragement in conservation and preservation efforts, and the like. Basically we would be happier if you would just stay out. What a lovely place to live and work if only the people would stay out, not complicate our day, not remove our treasures. Such thinking is out of focus—we lose our reason for being. It is not a ministry.

Some view the library as a monument, a symbol of learning, almost a fortress. Make it an impressive and imposing structure: Fort Erudition standing firm against the frivolous and casual. Like the grand living room, it is to set a tone, show taste, perhaps flaunt wealth—but not to be lived in, perhaps even to intimidate persons from entering—or at least being comfortable therein. Out of focus. It is not a ministry.

Many see the library as a repository of antiquarian curios, rare tomes in a rarified tomb. Those who labor there engage in the arcane arts of an ingroup or secret guild. The Holy Librarian holds all the keys to these mysteries and the traditions and doles them out reluctantly to the ignorant masses. Out of focus. It is not a ministry.

Some—a growing number in this time of tight money and inflated costs—view the library in the seminary context as an extension of, or replacement for, the campus bookstore. Books are so expensive. Why doesn’t the library supply students with basic text-

*An address delivered on the occasion of the Dedication of the Cook Center for Theological Research.
books? Why not get 20 BDB lexicons, 30 copies of Pannenberg, or better, Calvin, and the like? Or at least 10? From another quarter there comes support for this concept: let's do some use studies, find out what is in high demand, buy multiple copies of that, and weed out and reject for acquisitions purposes those volumes that will circulate only a few times—or, horror of horrors, not at all for a few years! For a research library we want and need not only the most recent materials, but older volumes, a wide variety of editions which show changes and revisions, solid reference materials which never circulate, and even "bad" literature which documents the times and a variety of opinions. Purchasing only the rapidly circulating items will give immediate results in boosting circulation percentage figures, but seriously weakens the collection. Out of focus. This is not a ministry.

What then do we affirm? We affirm that the library is crucial to the institution, as Raymond P. Morris, now retired but for years the distinguished librarian of Yale Divinity School, wrote in Theological Education in 1964:

Few things shape the quality and style of an educational program more than its library. To no small degree the library determines the faculty an institution attracts and retains, the quality of instruction it provides, the character of the student body it recruits, and the kind of product the school produces... Indeed, few indices point more accurately to the health of an educational institution than its attitude toward its library, and the sacrifices it is willing to make for it... If the institution has integrity it gives primary consideration to this matter.

Carlyle's affirmation: "The true university...is a collection of books," like the adage: "The library is the heart of the institution," may be tempered by Emerson's quip: "It is not observed that...librarians are wiser than others."

In an ATS study funded by the Carnegie Corporation in the mid-fifties we note: Schools often state in their catalogues that the library is the center of the academic life as the chapel is the center of the worship life in the community. This suggests that schools might well take more seriously the attractiveness of their libraries as places to read and study.

Now you have gone a long way here to provide a place of beauty, warmly inviting us as into a den, parlor, or pleasant study. The library here is a social center, a place for personal development, reflection, and growth—well equipped with individual study spaces. Its design clearly reflects the intention to be at the heart of the institution and supportive of the educational goals of the school and of the church. Your service orientation, structural design with study spaces, classrooms, a coming media center, and a people-oriented staff invite us to exploration, to dialogue with the witnesses of the past and the present generation.

The world in which we live and the world of librarianship is not standing still, but moves at a rapid pace—with new technologies and new opportunities. You are "with it" in microforms, a wide variety of educational media, indexes, bibliographies—computer services, and the rest. Preparation is made here for the best use of the best technology to keep us in touch with the witnesses. Preservation may best be done by microforms, or perhaps laser or other electronic technologies. In whatever form, shape or technology, those witnesses will continue to speak and you will be ready to dialog with them.

What about the books, media, the things? You have gathered an impressive and significant collection of materials. That is no simple task in light of cost and the flood of
information and the rapidly shifting parameters of our responsibility for collection development. Ed Krentz wrote:

Theological literature ranges over a much broader field of interest than its name would suggest. While the average person thinks of learned commentaries on books of the Bible, ponderous tomes on doctrine, or heavily footnoted texts on the history of the church, the theological librarian today knows that he must develop collections of surprising depth in belles lettres, philosophy, and the behavioral sciences in order to have an adequate theological library. These materials must be selected with care to support the curriculum, to give breadth to the collection (to be "liberal" and fair to all opinions), and to anticipate future research needs. With rising inflation and the information explosion, it is no longer reasonable nor possible for any library to be totally self-sufficient in collection development. Now we must stress access to materials by means of interlibrary loans, interinstitutional agreements, computer-based systems and the like. The breadth and sufficiency of the library may be measured in access, its ability to deliver information, as well as holdings.

My library at Union began as a collection of books in 1806—some six years before Union Seminary was formed around those books. We celebrate our 175th anniversary today. When our school moved from Hampden-Sydney College in rural Farmville, Va. to Richmond in 1898, there was a fireplace in the library with a curious wooden mantlepiece whereon was carved: "There is but one book." One is reminded of the old story of the Scots library which closed for about a month—someone had checked out the book. Well, fundamentally the Bible stands at the heart of our work, but there are generations of folk who have pondered that book, lived in light of its teachings, reflected on its applications, and share with us their witness. To that extent we are thingish—we do, and must, gather things. Hold fast to the tradition.

The liberal education of a strong, broadly built library must not be lost in money constraints. The library is the institutional core for research, attracting, keeping, and servicing faculty and students. A reflective and learned clergy needs its resources not for intellectual status or stuffy academic trivia games, but for a stance in the tradition, for learnings from the mothers and fathers of the faith, for the setting of fads, heresies, and various wild goose chases in context and perspective. We do and must learn from our past—a past which is difficult to recover once lost.

The ministering library must be people-centered. We speak of library science and library systems, and they are necessary and helpful. We must have rules for the good of all and the regular flow of work and materials to serve people. We can, however, be charitable in our dealing with rules...perhaps not as charitable as the lovely little library in Westminster College in Cambridge. There at the periodicals end of the room was a table with a set of rules.

**READING ROOM**

1. Books and bound periodicals may be borrowed by members of the College by filling in a slip.

2. Unbound periodicals may not be borrowed.
3. If you decide to break the rule against unbound periodicals, please fill in and sign a slip.

4. Borrowed books and periodicals are to be returned to Bay B in the Library upstairs.

Westminster College, Cambridge University

Rules are designed to further service. Service must continue to be the library's number one priority. You who come with needs and questions are not interruptions, but the library's reason for being. There are no dumb questions; if they are your questions, they are important. The staff cannot do your work for you but can help you on your way.

Perhaps we can gentle our patrons along as Sidonius who said, and this was quoted on overdue notices in a British library: "...if you liked it, you must have had enough of it by now; if you disliked it, more than enough. Whichever it may be, you have now to clear your reputation." Our rules should be applied with a human and humane touch—and for the purpose of expediting research and learning, not for the rule itself.

The library staff and the library itself can do little to promote learning and reading without full support and collegiality with the faculty. It is the faculty and their assignments, and suggestions, as well as modeling, who set the tone for a school and promote library use. We may provide attractive spaces and displays but can only push so far from within these library walls. There was a day when we could do more:

Notice

to those who entreat
the use of the collections

On the Monday after the first Sunday in Lent, before brethren come into the chapter house, the librarian shall have a carpet laid down and all the books got together upon it, except those which the year previous had been assigned for reading. These the brethren are to bring with them, when they come into the chapter house, each his book in his hand. Then the librarian shall read a statement as to the manner in which brethren have had books during the past year. As each brother hears his name pronounced, he is to give back the book which had been entrusted to him for reading; and he whose conscience accuses him of not having read through the book which he had received, is to fall on his face, confess his fault, and entreat forgiveness. The librarian shall then make a fresh distribution of books, namely a different volume to each brother for his reading.

(From the statutes drawn up by Archbishop Lanfranc for the English Benedictines, 1070 A.D.
Provided by Richard Phillips, Special Collections, Green Library.)

If the librarian doesn't prescribe books and hear confessions as to their use or non-use, at least he or she can be a working partner in the academic process. Let there be a linkage here. Let no new programs of study, new degrees, new courses, new strategies in assignments be made without careful reckoning of the costs and the means whereby there may be adequate and timely resourcing of the needs which will be stirred up for students. Librarians know a bit about reading habits, actual usage of course reserves, ways students
approach research problems: there is more beyond reserves in the stacks! Encourage sharing, conferencing, planning for effective use of this building, these resources, the many tools of access to the world of learning—the world of many witnesses. Beyond orientation tours and even courses in library use and bibliographic method, let there be a firm and regular partnership in the service of the church developing your academic programming.

This building exists for theological research—learn how to use it, and by extension you learn how to use other libraries to which you may have access. Take advantage now of the opportunity to shop about and see what tools and systems “work” for you, what witnesses help.

Finally, I remember the pattern of thankful prayer often used with small children to enliven table grace: “Thank you, God, for farmers, and truckers, and grocers, etc., who brought this food to the table.” Just so let us express our thanks for donors, architects, draftspersons, carpenters, bricklayers, electricians, authors, publishers, bookdealers, library personnel, and a host of supporting laborers who have brought this building and its holdings to fruition. Hundreds of witnesses by dedication to their craft have prepared and maintained this house, this building of the witnesses. Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. As we serve God heart, soul, mind, and strength, the witnesses still speak.

FOOTNOTES

1 *Theological Education* 1 (Autumn, 1974), p. 72.