



**EARL PALMER, 44, is a pastor who knows something about seminaries. In addition to pastoring the First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, California, he is a member of the Board of Trustees at Princeton Seminary.**

**Earl graduated from Princeton in 1956. He accepted a call to University Presbyterian Church in Seattle following graduation. After eight years in Seattle, Earl migrated to the Union Church of Manila (Philippines). In 1970, he became the Senior Pastor at Berkeley.**

**With the objective of interviewing a person who understood the local church and the seminary community, the Door Keepers journeyed to Northern California in mid-February where they trapped Earl in his office.**

**DOOR:** What are seminaries for?

**PALMER:** I think a seminary is a professional school which has a commitment to train young men and women who want to serve in the church. It seems to me that the seminary must have a double commitment. As a professional school it must have an orientation toward or a commitment to the parish which is the most essential place of service for the Christian pastor. Then a seminary needs a second commitment to the study of the Gospel, the Christian faith, its sources, its origins with Biblical studies, theological studies, historical studies.

**DOOR:** Who do you encourage to go to seminary?

**PALMER:** You said encourage. That's interesting. I try to be careful on that score. I feel that individuals should want very much to be in the pastorate because they're being motivated by the Holy Spirit, rather than being encouraged into the ministry as a profession. It's this mystery of the call. But when young people say that they really feel that this is where they want to be trained, then I encourage them to go to seminary. I am not one to encourage a person to go to seminary to get their faith squared away or to find out what they believe. Although there are people who do get their faith squared away. But the fundamental mandate of the seminary is not that. A medical school doesn't give you a concern for people. You have that or you don't have it. A medical school gives you tools. Likewise, a seminary gives tools. Your concern for the Gospel, your love of Christ, your desire to serve--that you have because of your walk with Christ. But when a person says that he or she really wants to serve in the church, then I naturally encourage that man or woman to go to seminary.

**DOOR:** Does the seminary have a spiritual responsibility or role to its students?

**PALMER:** I believe the seminary as a community of believers has the same obligation as the church does--to stir up the gifts that are in the body. As a community of brothers and sisters in Christ, that's the seminary's obligation. But the teaching of theology and Biblical studies, which are the tools, can be learned from someone you don't agree with theologically. I don't want to see a model of the seminary so designed that only a person who is very spiritual can teach you tools. Very often a person you're battling with theologically, or who is not encouraging you spiritually may do a very fine job of giving you tools. Theological skills and tools. But within the seminary community, a body of believers, there should be a stimulus to your own spiritual growth. The great seminaries have it.

**DOOR:** Aren't professors really in a position of infallibility to a certain extent? We know of some seminaries where the personal lives of the professors are a disaster. Shouldn't the theology and the life be consistent, or does it matter?

**PALMER:** First let's take on the infallibility question. The idea of the great, towering professor that you study with is the model in European theological education. You go and study under one professor. "I went to study with Pannenberg," or "I studied with Barth." The professor develops a tremendous following and students come primarily to study with him. I don't think that's the American model as much. It is true in every seminary there are professors who have a greater following because of their personal greatness in their field. But I've also observed that professors develop a following because of their personal piety. And I think this is an encouraging new mark. For instance, at Princeton Seminary Colin Story is probably the most beloved professor on campus. Students consistently each year list him as the professor they want to write references for them. Now Colin Story is a very godly man. He's also a fine scholar. And I think it's a great tribute to the fact that on campus this professor is exerting a kind of leadership that the students respect.

Now let's take the second half of your question. What about professors

whose style of life is inconsistent with the Gospel they're teaching? Of course, that's also true in the church. The Christian church has within its life believers who are disobedient to the very Gospel they trust. But I think that a seminary, as a community of faith, should have spiritual discipline and concern for piety just as it should have concern for academic excellence. I don't have easy answers as to how it's done. I don't have easy answers as to how it's done in a session or congregation of a church.

The opposite swing of the pendulum is where you say it makes no difference what kind of life the professor leads just so he's able to teach the tools well. That may or may not be true in medical school or a great secular university. But I do not believe that attitude can exist in a theological school that has a commitment to Jesus Christ. That is a confessional institution. In this case, you notice that I'm drawing a line between a seminary which has a confessional stance and a school of religion in a great secular university. They are two different cases. I'm presupposing that a seminary has a confessional stance. It sees itself in the Christian heritage of training pastors and teachers in the Christian faith. As a Christian community I think there should be spiritual discipline. And the piety of the professor as well as the piety of the students should be under the same guidelines as within the Christian church.

**DOOR:** In the Christian church you have a pastor who has the role of overseeing the flock. Who is that person on the seminary campus?

**PALMER:** I think it would have to be the president.

**DOOR:** That implies that the president would have to be around to shepherd the flock, like a pastor is. But most presidents are out raising money and making speeches. If that's the case, who does pastor the seminary?

**PALMER:** If the president does not pastor it, in my opinion, the president has missed a fundamental dimension of his role. Remember that a seminary is not a large institution like a university is. It's a professional school and, therefore, the president has more obligation to have a

pastoral role with faculty and with students than the president of a great university where there are thousands.

**DOOR:** Who was president when you went to Princeton?

**PALMER:** John MacKay

**DOOR:** Did he fulfill that role well?

**PALMER:** Dr. MacKay had an uncanny pastoral sensitivity to people as well as being a great scholar, a visionary, and a great preacher. He also was a missionary statesman. And he especially had this sensitivity and concern for the life, maturity, and growth of the seminarian.

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**DOOR:** Many laypeople feel separated and distant from the seminary. How should the seminary relate to the layperson in the church?

**PALMER:** I honestly believe that the seminaries that floundered after the re-revolutionary period of the sixties with the collapse of the student revolution were the ones who wanted to be independent of any basic commitment to the parish...to the ongoing life of the church. It seems to me that seminaries have done best when

they've kept in their own self-awareness of their mandate, a fundamental commitment to the church of Jesus Christ, that is, the ordinary Christian church. That means that the faculty cares about the church and is involved in the church. The training of the pastor is toward ministry in the Christian church worldwide and domestically. Those seminaries who have kept that fundamental commitment are healthier now in every way. So my answer to your question is that if a seminary is a confessional community, it's a servant community. And when it loses that servant community mandate, then I think it ends up adrift from the true source of its nurture which is, let's face it, young men and women who feel a commitment to serve. They're the life blood of the seminary because they're the ones who come to school. Unless you have draft laws that give the seminary sort of a privileged way to keep a person out of Viet Nam, the source of candidates for seminary has got to be young men and women who want to serve. And most young people who want to serve want to serve in the Christian church at home or abroad.

**DOOR:** What do you see as positive and good in seminaries today?

**PALMER:** There are so many seminaries to reflect on.

**DOOR:** Let's take seminaries in general. What do you see as strengths and positive points in the whole concept of seminaries?

**PALMER:** The goal of a learned pastorate requires a lot of skills and depth that a person cannot receive apart from a school that is committed to training a person to a learned pastorate in biblical studies, historical studies, theological studies, and practical theology. The study of Greek and Hebrew, the study of New Testament and Old Testament criticism, and theological studies require a lot of scholarly equipment. And that's what's good about a seminary. It provides the tools. It's a collection of scholars and capable people training the pastor. That's train-

ing on his learned side. But the seminary must also train his professional side-- how to communicate, how to be a skilled pastor from a technical standpoint. There's the professional school side and the scholarly side. A seminary is needed for that. That's the positive. And that's one way to test how good a seminary

is. How well is a person equipped professionally and scholarly?

**DOOR:** What's bad about seminaries?

**PALMER:** The problem of the divorce from life, I suppose. A young person who has already gone through four years of college now enters into three years or four years of seminary at a very volatile and important period of his life. And the problem of the seminary may be that this young person spends those crucial years in that community of learning and may, in a way, find himself divorced from the real issues of living. Just by virtue of the fact that he's continuing on in the academic world and so tends to become unrelated to the rest of life in a kind of academic isolation I don't have any solutions to that, though.

**DOOR:** How long does it take a guy out of seminary to get back into the real world? What's the time lag?

**PALMER:** If the person during the midst of his theological training kept in touch with people at an interpersonal level, it's not going to be a problem. Now that in-

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terpersonal contact could be a small Bible study group, or support group, or prayer group in seminary. If he's married that contact could come through other couples, or with university students if there is a campus nearby. Or it could be through involvement in a local church. All this helps to speed a seminarian's ability to engage life as it really is afterward. You have a built in tension at seminary. The theological task involves being by yourself with books in an academic atmosphere. And there is a built-in tension between becoming a really first rate learned person so that you can be a thoughtful pastor and have what I would call a classical education and, on the other hand, be practical and in touch with life.

**DOOR:** How did you live with that tension? What were you like when you first came out of seminary?

**PALMER:** When I was at Princeton Seminary, I was very much involved with university students, leading small Bible study groups at Princeton University. When I graduated, I went into student ministry at University Presbyterian Church, Seattle. So I think for me there was less cultural shock because I continued to work with university students. Fortunately in Seattle, Dr. Cowie (the senior pastor) had a vision for his associates that they not be ghettoed, but that they be drawn into contact with people throughout the life of the church. In gentle, simple steps, I began to get involved at University Pres. with people of all ages through assignments Dr. Cowie gave me. I was eased into that world of the generations and I enjoyed it. Now if I had been suddenly thrust into that, I think I would have had terrific cultural shock coming out of seminary. That's why I do not believe in a young person coming out of seminary being ghettoed in a staff position where he works only with one age group. I think he should be eased in logical steps, but with real strategy in mind, into a relationship with the whole reality of the Christian church.

**DOOR:** How would you react to the seminary student who says, "This is the only three or four years I've got to do intense study, and therefore, I'm going to try to forget outside involvements. I'm going to immerse myself in study and get well prepared."?

**PALMER:** I respect a student who says that and I wish more students would say that.

Because I think a lot of students say, "I want to be out and involved with people as much as possible and do as little study as I have to do." That is a more grave mistake. But the student who wants to work very hard on the scholarly side of theological education still needs a support group. He still needs brothers and sisters in Christ that he is accountable to and who he feels are accountable to him. And his wife needs that very much if he's a married student. That's the way the Christian life is. I don't think we thrive otherwise. A Christian in the midst of theological training has got to stay a growing Christian. And that means interpersonal accountability through some sort of support, prayer, fellowship, or Bible study.

**DOOR:** Aren't seminaries luxuries of the middle and upper class?

**PALMER:** In fairness to theological schools, it should be noted that their tuition costs are less than or other professional schools. Certainly less than law schools and medical schools. And scholarship aid for most theological schools--often aid that is especially given to minority students or overseas students--is available. That doesn't, however, get away from your observation that most young men and women who go to theological schools probably do come from the middle class, upper middle class. This is not true in the Far East, though. When I was in Manila, I taught as an adjunct professor at the Union Seminary in the Philippines. And the whole six years I was there I don't believe I ever had a student who was from what we would say middle class or upper middle class. All the students were from the poor. They all virtually came from the provinces.

**DOOR:** Were the poor going to seminary so they could move up on the social scale?

**PALMER:** No, I don't want to in any way reflect on their sincerity of motivation. What it probably means in the Philippines is that the middle class Protestant Christians did not want their children to be preachers. Because the role of the preacher was held in such low esteem. They wanted their sons and daughters to be engineers and doctors. But it's a fact that poor young men were coming into seminary. In the U.S., the children of middle class families are going to seminary. But be-

cause of scholarships, I think we're seeing an increasingly wider spread here, too.

**DOOR:** Isn't the seminary really, in a sense, a "minister's factory"? How does the seminary maintain its integrity in

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terms of presenting pastors who reflect what the church ought to be rather than attempting to preserve the status quo?

**PALMER:** That's a very thoughtful question because when we talk about the seminary having a commitment as part of its mandate to the church, does that commitment to the church mean that seminaries should produce pastors who will please the church? I like to draw the distinction between what we want and what we need. The Christian church needs the Gospel of Jesus Christ affirmed with virility, thoughtfulness and depth that calls people to discipleship. That's not always what the Christian congregations want. But it is what they need, I believe. And that's why I am a believer in advocating a classical education in the sources of our faith. I have to be honest with you there. I would rather see a seminary err on the side of having too much of an academic

orientation into the sources of the gospel than to err on the side of being too practical in all the techniques of interpersonal work and counseling. Because it seems to me there's a greater danger on the technique side of becoming the victim of the church--the church's wants. When the emphasis is on the in-depth study of the Gospel, there's something about the Christian Gospel that triggers renewal and it is less captive to both the person learning it and the church that hears it. Very often churches will say, "We want more practical fellows. Fellows who know how to run church meetings and how to administrate the session and do counseling." But I think at it's the technique side of practical theology which is more easily brought under the control of the desires of the church. After a while you have very highly specialized people that don't know the Gospel. It's the Gospel that changes the church. It's the Gospel that produces the true prophetic renewal experience.

**DOOR:** Are seminaries doing the job in terms of giving people this concept of the Gospel?

**PALMER:** They do and they don't do the job. It's an individual thing. It's amazing what happens to young men and women when they get turned on to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They get turned on by the Gospel and it has implications in lots of different places, in lots of different schools because of the tremendous power--an inner force, an inner integrity of our Christian faith itself. I'm not sure I want to give the schools all the credit for this. Sometimes it's in spite of the schools.

**DOOR:** It seems like Lutheran seminaries crank out men and women who can run good Lutheran churches. And Southern Baptist seminaries turn out guys who can run Southern Baptist churches. Must seminaries be slaves to that sort of thing?

**PALMER:** I think you put your finger on a real tension and I don't have a lot of easy answers to it. There is this mandate to serve the church, to be a serving institution. And yet, you best serve the church by turning loose in the life of the church the implications of the lordship of Christ. That requires that the more fundamental commitment has got to be to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And secondarily to the church.

It's just like Karl Barth said in 1934 in the Barmen Declaration. They were facing the crisis of the German organizational

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conquest of the evangelical church in Germany. The big question arose: should they try to fight for the church organizationally and ecclesiastically? Barth said, "No, let's fight confessionally. It's the gospel that will save the church. Not winning an election or an ecclesiastical battle." And that's why the Barmen Declaration was primarily theological. We've got to discover who Christ is and what His lordship means. You turn that loose in the life of the church and that's what turns on people. That's what wins people to Christ and wins them to the church. But it's not always what the church thinks it wants.

What does a seminary do? It gives a young person a chance to discover through the original languages, in Bible studies, exegetical courses, and theological courses, the great sources. But those great sources don't always catch the seminary student even if the course is taught by a genius.

**DOOR:** How do you feel about the pass/fail grading system in a seminary that is striving for academic excellence?

**PALMER:** I think pass/fail is a disaster. It has encouraged a lot of people to glide and stroll through their theological training knowing that no one will flunk them. A student can take virtually what he wants. In some seminaries, he can do that for two years and then in his third year, he can go out and work in a church. The emphasis is so practical that a third of his three years in seminary he spends out in the field coming back one day a week for three hours in the morning. One day a week for seminars and rap sessions is what it really amounts to. Well, that's a very shallow diet.

We had one young man before our Presbytery committee whom we interviewed for his progress exam. He was in his last year and was about ready to be launched on the church. He had taken three courses in the fall three courses in the winter, and three courses in the spring. We were talking to him in the spring and we asked him to tell us the courses he was taking. They were all pass/fail, of course. Well, he told us, "Let's see, there was this one course on archeology I took." He had no more business taking a course on archeology than the man in the moon, but it was easy, pass/fail, you won't lose...a course for specialists in archeology. He was taking a course on films--an analysis of Fellinni's films. And then he said, "I can't remember the third course I took." We asked him about winter quarter and he couldn't remember the third one there. He honestly could not even remember the name of the course. All pass/fail courses. Nothing of any substance Biblically or theologically. To me, that's the real dilemma. Princeton and Fuller and other schools have not gone that route. They've gone the more classical route. It's just like pre-paring a person for law. There are certain things you've got to learn to get prepared for law. That's my objection to a seminary that does not require a strong classical education. Now a person can take more substantive courses and get a first rate education at a less demanding school. But you have to be very self-motivated.

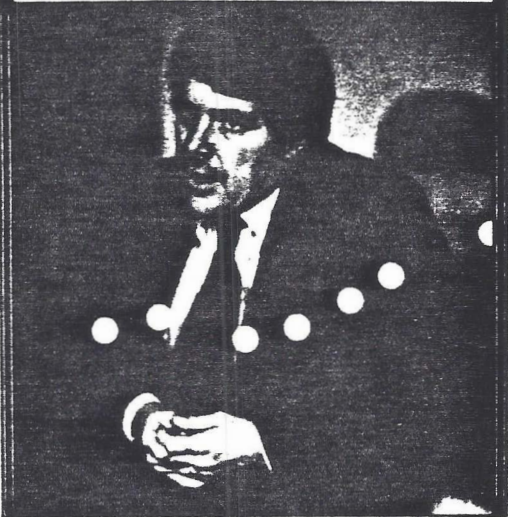
**DOOR:** If you were a seminary president

and had the chance to really shape a seminary, what would you do? You've already suggested a couple of things: you wouldn't buy the pass/fail system and you'd have some core courses. What else would you do?

**PALMER:** I want to clarify the pass/fail thing. I think pass/fail lures the student into using the pass/fail system for courses he feels borderline on and it tends to diminish his interest in the real work of the course. The professor in the course could write a commendation or a reference to go along with pass/fail. But now you see, there is open access to all references. That has, in a way, undermined the value of professors' references. And that undermined the value of the pass/fail with accompanying reference. I just feel that the grade system causes a student to work more earnestly.

I guess if I were a president, I would want the seminary to major in what I would call the source courses more than the de-

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rivative courses. There is only so much you can do with your resources. I don't think the seminary's first obligation

should be in the so called practical areas as much as in the great foundation areas of theology, Bible, and church history. Those foundation areas are, I think, more crucial in the long run although the practical areas are important. And vital. But the first emphasis should be in the foundation areas. Therefore, I would want my Biblical department my theological department, and my church history department to be as strong as possible. I would feel that areas that could be handled by others better should be definitely second and third consideration. For instance, I think universities do a better job in comparative religion. I think the seminary's first job should be mission theology or the theology of the Christian conversation or relationship to world religions. But from a Christian confessional stance. A seminary shouldn't just do the "schools of religion approach" to comparative religion. Same thing with sociology. I think the seminaries' first responsibility is to work with what is distinctly theologically significant and source oriented, rather than try to produce junior sociologists. Same thing in in the field of counseling.

I think the seminary, if it diffuses its mandate across too many fields, ends up neither fish nor fowl. So I suppose my bias would be for a seminary to try to keep its mandate and its self-awareness of what it is more in what I would call the classic model.

There are a lot of possibilities like cross-departmental approaches to practical fields. I'm impressed with what Princeton Seminary is going to do this fall in setting up an area of concern for world missions, evangelism, and renewal. They're using professors from the Biblical, theological, and church history fields to become involved in this practical concern. It isn't just an eddy out in a corner where someone is teaching about world mission, or renewal, or evangelism in the church. But the faculty members from the other disciplines are brought in to be involved in this, too. Of course, the danger of this is what's everybody's is nobody's.

I also think the seminary has a growing obligation to the continuing education of pastors, which is a other exciting new

area of theological training. Through all kinds of creative offerings, continuing education for pastors is being advanced by seminaries. That's a whole new area which I think is very vital.

**DOOR:** How do you feel about Regent's College as a seminary for the layman?

**PALMER:** Regent's really impresses me. It's a model that I like. And it's doing first rate theological work. For lay people and for pastors. Again, notice the features. It's confessional. It has a point of view that it puts out in the open. It's academically responsible. And it's right next to a great university, which keeps it honest.

**DOOR:** Martin Marty used the term "religious Cosa Nostra" to describe the atmosphere created by the seminary professor who writes for the critics and himself and feels no responsibility to those outside "the walls."

**PALMER:** I think that's the great danger

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of any academic institution. One possible cure for this situation would be a continuing education program that brought pastors back to the campus after they've

been out in the world for a while.

**DOOR:** That would keep the professors honest?

**PALMER:** I think that it would. I believe that more and more lay people should be involved in continuing education. The seminaries should really be involved in relating to lay people. A lot of seminary professors are not under the pressure to communicate with ordinary people of all ages. The more the seminary could try to put that pressure on its faculty, the better.

**DOOR:** What about an emphasis on preaching in seminaries?

**PALMER:** There was a time recently, even in theological schools, when preaching was seen as almost secondary in the model of the pastorate.

**DOOR:** Almost archaic compared to modern methods of communication.

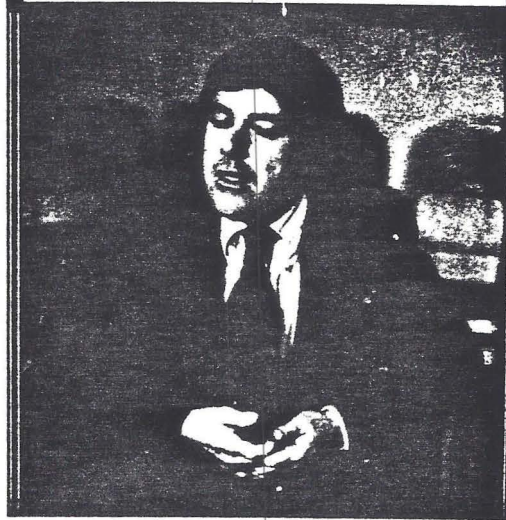
**PALMER:** Right. I don't think that has turned out to be a true reflection of what is the state of things. Right now in West Coast churches, for instance, people don't go to church for the traditional reasons they once went to church for. You don't have to go to church to be successful in the community or to make contacts. People go to church because something worthwhile is going to take place in that service. The ingredients people look for to make up that worthwhile service will differ from person to person. But I think increasingly, if the sermon is meaningful, it will be a major reason why people come to church. I think preaching is a tremendously important part historically of Christian worship. It's the time when the Word is affirmed and interpreted to the people. It has to be done thoughtfully with style and in a way that pompous or careless. But I believe that it is an essential ingredient in the weekly worship of the church. A lot of intangible things happen. Mood. Atmosphere. Psychological climate. The spiritual climate of the church is deeply influenced by what takes place in the regular diet of preaching in the church; it's more than just so called content. The medium itself begins to have a tremendous influence: if a pastor, for instance is always polemical, always on the attack, then that mood begins to prevail and the church begins to collect around that kind of mood and you have a congregation of



people always on the attack, always at war against something. If the preaching is shallow and superficial, a congregation is affected. If the preaching is affirmative and positive, that mood begins to characterize the congregation. Preaching has many subtle influences as well as the simple, affirmative communication of material. Personally, I think of preaching as trying to affirm as thoughtfully as I can what is the Christian message and to bring that message into collision with life where it is right now as an evangelist, an apologist, and as a teacher. I don't want to over-exalt what's going on in preaching. I always want to think of it as enabling a door to be opened. So that a person is then encouraged to pick up and move forward and take hold of the idea, the message. Often the door is open a crack. My own vision of evangelism and nurture in the church is that becoming a Christian involves a thousand single steps. Each step should have its own integrity. That means in a sermon I don't have to say everything there is to say; but what is said should be said with integrity and should be authentic. And it can become a part of putting together the pieces of the puzzle which all add up to helping the non-Christian become a Christian. For the Christian, it becomes a part of the ingredients, along with all these other ingredients like interrelationships, study of the Bible, reading of C.S. Lewis, or whatever else you might stir him up to read. All these then be-

come a part of the puzzle to make the whole. So in a way, we don't help a young person become a good preacher by glorifying what preaching is or diminishing it, but seeing it as a part - a very essential part--of the steps.

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## WHO'S WHO IN THE COSA NOSTRA

1. Dr. Harold "Harold the Horse" Ockenga  
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
2. Dr. David Allan "Buster" Hubbard  
Fuller Theological Seminary
3. Dr. Glenn "The Sheik" O'Neal  
Talbot Theological Seminary
4. Dr. Robert "Kid Blast" Naylor  
Southwestern Baptist Seminary
5. Dr. James "Vito" McCord  
Princeton Theological Seminary
6. Dr. Vernon "The Siege" Grounds  
Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary

