



# THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN

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## Inconvenient Truths

(Amos 5:18–24 and Colossians 3:1–11)

James F. Kay

*James F. Kay, Dean and Vice President of Academic Affairs, Joe R. Engle Professor of Homiletics and Liturgics, delivered this message in Miller Chapel at the Opening Convocation for the 205<sup>th</sup> academic year, September 8, 2016.*

**P**resident Barnes, Faculty and Administrative Colleagues, and Fellow Students: Welcome to the 205<sup>th</sup> Academic Year of Princeton Theological Seminary. Despite rumors to the contrary, I want to assure you that I have not been *here* all of those years.

What a joy to be back in Miller Chapel. This is the oldest house of worship in continuous use in the old borough of Princeton. What a joy to look out and to see it filled with new life and overflowing with anticipation.

Many of you have come to the Seminary to explore. Perhaps you're asking if God is leading you to a new purpose for your life, for a new mission, a new vocation. So, if you are exploring, Welcome!

Some of you are on a faith journey searching to discover if or how Jesus Christ is relevant to your life, or whether the Christian message is even true, or at least true enough for your full commitment. If you are seeker, Welcome!

Some of you have grown up in the church, and some of you have scarcely any experience of denominational Christianity. Welcome!

Some of you are coming because your lives have already been touched in some way by what the Apostle Paul calls, "the sufferings of this present time" (Rom 8:18)—things like abandonment, abuse, addiction, assault, discrimination, domestic violence, unemployment, or even warfare. Please know that you are not as alone as you may think. So, welcome!

And perhaps at least a few of you, like my colleague John Gilmore, were raised in places like Normal, Illinois, and grew up on Normal Avenue. If that is also your story, Welcome! Welcome to the "new normal!"

### INCONVENIENT TRUTHS

Tonight, I want to talk about "Inconvenient Truths." It's a way of saying that the apostolic tradition in which we stand and by which we are being saved always reaches us in both redemptive and destructive ways. It comes to us through very fallen, very sinful human witnesses, imperfect vessels to be sure, just like us. And just like us, our mothers and fathers in the faith, including some of the most faithful and heroic in the Bible, and indeed even the Scriptures themselves, were and are embedded in pervasive power dynamics, economic and political systems, in all kinds assumptions and climates of opinion that may well fall short of the

will and way of Jesus Christ. But it is only through such witnesses—fallible to be sure—that we have come to hear of Jesus Christ and to discover the power of his cross and resurrection. And the Good News of the Gospel is that God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved—might be changed, healed, and transformed.

# I

In my homiletics seminar, we have a unit on Martin Luther. He both is a grace-filled and very earthy preacher of the gospel. Like Saint Augustine a thousand years before him, Luther, too, is a conversational preacher and usually in very ordinary settings. In one of his sermons from 1539 on the Gospel of John, he reaches out to tormented folks who live constantly in fear of God's judgment. To comfort them, he preaches on the text that "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world" (John 3:17), placing the following paraphrase of this text into mouth of Christ himself: "Now the Lord Christ says here: 'We will put an end to such thoughts; God does not want us to entertain them any longer.' . . . The judgment is past. The Father and I condemn no one. God is not angry; for I am the Pledge and the certain Token, yes, the Gift and the Present to show you that God is not angry with us."<sup>1</sup> Luther's sermon brims with sixteenth-century pastoral care to tormented consciences despairing of hope.

And yet, just four years later, in 1543, this same messenger of hope penned one of the most monstrous and vehement anti-Jewish attacks ever written, entitled, "On the Jews and Their Lies." In this treatise he freely offers this advice, "First, that their synagogues be burned down, and that all who are able toss in sulphur and pitch; it would be good if someone could also throw in some hellfire. . . . Second, that all their books—their prayer books, their Talmudic writings, also the entire Bible—be taken from them, not leaving them one leaf, and that these be preserved for those who may be converted. . . . Third, that they be forbidden on pain of death to praise God, to give thanks, to pray, and to teach publicly among us and in our country. . . . Fourth, that they be forbidden to utter the name of God within our hearing. . . ." <sup>2</sup> And so it goes, this anti-Jewish rant, page after page, until our stunned shock gives way to a kind of numbness. How can a man who proclaimed so powerfully the life-giving Word of God be inciting murder if not genocide?

Nevertheless, most of us will come to know about this text only because its Lutheran editors and translators insisted on its publication in the English language edition of *Luther's Works*. They worried, and rightly so, about the "possible misuse of this material," since its horrifying advice had given moral and religious sanction to the architects of the Holocaust. But they courageously decided not to protect Luther's reputation by omitting this treatise from his collected works. Rather, they faced up to an inconvenient truth. They decided not to lie by covering up the truth, but, in their words, "to make available . . . for scholarly study this aspect of Luther's thought, which has played so fateful a role in the development of anti-Semitism in Western culture." They went on to say, "Such publication is in no way intended as an endorsement of the distorted views of Jewish faith and practice or the defamation of the Jewish people which this treatise contains."<sup>3</sup> The truth is that the later Luther could no longer theologically imagine a world, as he once could

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of John, Chapters 1–4*, vol. 22 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), 375.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *The Christian in Society*, vol. 47 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Franklin Sherman and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 285–86.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, "Introduction," 123.

in 1523, a world free from the defamation of Jews by Christians; a world in which in which Christians regarded Jews by “the law of Christian love,” the Great Commandment, which, after all, is a gift to Christians and a gift to the world from the Jewish tradition.<sup>4</sup>

As we in the Reformation traditions continue to struggle with this heritage of anti-Judaism on the eve of the Reformation’s 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, I am grateful that here at Princeton, Professor Ellen Charry has been helping us to face such inconvenient truths through her courses on Jews and Judaism in Christian Scripture, on Judaism in Jewish Terms, and through her travel related courses on Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Israel/Palestine. Thanks to Professor Charry and to her students, some initial faculty conversations will begin this fall so that we do not consciously or unconsciously teach contempt for Jews and Judaism. We face these inconvenient truths together not to wallow in guilt, but to walk in the power of the Gospel by the calling of the law of love.

## II

But let’s move on to another remarkable preacher, the eloquent Bishop Jacques Bossuet of France, from the court of Louis XIV. Bossuet, a loyal Roman Catholic, has long delighted English-speaking Protestant historians of preaching. But Bossuet was more than a fawning people pleaser. He was far more than simply one, who in the words of Tom Long, could “sprinkle the fancy perfume of his oratory over the fetid moral lives of various deceased royals and cause them to smell like roses at their own funerals.”<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, Bossuet, especially when a young preacher, was remarkably fearless in politely but pointedly confronting the royal court with a call for compassion and justice for the poor. In March of 1662, at the court of Louis XIV, he was the Lenten preacher. Famine gripped much of the countryside, and many Parisians were reduced to begging. But amid this national calamity, the French court stuck to its routines, anticipating Lent by celebrating three weeks of Carnival with revels unprecedented in their lavishness. So, Bossuet preached strategically before the King and his dissolute courtiers and advisors on, “The Rich Man and Lazarus.” In contrast to his rich listeners, whom Bossuet calls “an unruly rapacious band,” always demanding, “Give us more, give us more” (cf. Prov 30:15), he urges the court to hear

the faint voices of the real poor who tremble before you, who are ashamed of their misery, and who labor unceasingly. They die of starvation; yes, Messieurs, they die for want of food on your estates, at your châteaux, in the villages and fields, in the neighborhood of your mansions and at your very doors. No one goes to their aid. They only beg something out of your superfluity, some crumbs from your table, some remains of your feasts.<sup>6</sup>

Having thrown the book at the King and his court during Lent, on Good Friday he preaches the gospel of the cross—but very much in the mode of a modern liberation theologian. In the small royal chapel furnished with paintings of the crucified Christ, Bossuet implores his listeners:

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 124–25.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 183–84.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in E. E. Reynolds, *Bossuet* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1963), 45–46.

... fix your eyes upon Jesus, and allow yourselves to be touched by the sight of his divine wounds. By that, I am not demanding, Messieurs, that you attentively contemplate some excellent painting of Jesus Christ crucified. I have another painting to propose to you, a painting living and speaking, which conveys a natural expression of the dying Jesus. These are the poor, my Brothers, in whom I urge you to contemplate today the Passion of Jesus. . . Jesus suffers in the poor; he languishes, he is a half-starved wretch within a multitude of poor families. See, then, in the poor, Jesus Christ suffers; and again there we see, for the sake of our misery, Jesus Christ abandoned, Jesus Christ forsaken, Jesus Christ scorned . . . .

Since wretchedness increases, it is necessary to extend mercies; . . . Sire, it is Jesus dying who there exhorts you; he commends to you your poor people: . . . bearing the hand of help amid so much distress.<sup>7</sup>

Did Bossuet's preaching do any good? Well, it eventually led the King's mistress Mlle. La Valliere to faith in Jesus Christ and to vocation as a nun, but his urgings to the Bourbon monarch went unheeded. The Sun King had apparently had enough of Bossuet's Lenten preaching and skipped his Easter communion in 1662.

And yet, only two decades later, Bossuet, this eloquent preacher of the social gospel standing up to the King and his court, was now paying homage to Louis XIV as a pious new Constantine for his persecution of the Huguenots. The result was to give moral and religious sanction to what could only be regarded today as "crimes against humanity." One million Protestants, about 15 percent of the French population, were stripped of their long-held rights of assembly, of worship and property. Their church buildings were systematically leveled to the ground. The 1680s knew also the kidnapping of Protestant girls who were taken from their families and placed in convents for re-education as forced conversions became government policy. Such compulsory conversions created a cynical laity within the Roman church. Although illegal, the massive emigration of Calvinists out of the country decimated the ranks of France's hardworking, law-abiding, and economically dynamic middle class. As Father David Tracy of the University of Chicago once said to me, "If Louis XIV had not revoked the edict of Nantes, the first men on the moon would have spoken French!" In hindsight, the French monarchy destroyed the very communities and values by which a civil society can flourish. As with Martin Luther, so with Bossuet we have to temper our temptation to hero worship with an inconvenient truth: Bossuet could not theologically imagine a country in which Catholics and Protestants could live together as fellow Christians, let alone as fellow citizens.

Perhaps some of this program of an absolute monarch sounds familiar: Thousands of people forced to flee the country and limiting the civil rights of religious minorities in the name of national identity and national security. That is why I am grateful to Dr. Nancy Duff for assisting and collaborating with the students from her Bonhoeffer class in sponsoring a conference here at the Seminary on September 29 on "Civil Courage: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and American Politics Today." What a gathering it will be with Robin Lovin of the Center of Theological Inquiry,

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Bossuet, "Sermon sur la Passion de Notre-Seigneur," in *Bossuet, Sermons: Le Carême du Louvre, 1662*, ed. Constance Cagnat-Deboeuf (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 270–71; my translation.

Victoria Barnett of the Holocaust Museum, Angela Hancock from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and our own James Deming chairing a panel discussion.

### III

But turning from the analogues afforded by the *ancien regime*, what of us here in Princeton, New Jersey? What of us in this venerable bastion of Reformed piety and learning? Precisely because Princeton Seminary will soon be 205 years old, because the Seminary grew up with the young American Republic, the Seminary also grew up in a culture and a church, within a nation and a federal constitution that were inextricably entangled and complicit with the enslavement of African Americans. This is the contradiction that lies at the heart of the American experience and the American experiment.

Within this contradiction there were seemingly moments of truth telling. In 1818, the Presbyterian General Assembly was asked to rule on whether a church member selling a slave, who happened to be a fellow believer, should be brought to discipline if the slave did not wish to be sold. The question was referred to a committee chaired by Ashbel Green, president of the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University, and President of the Seminary's Board of Directors. In his magisterial bicentennial history of the Seminary, *Princeton Seminary in American Religion and Culture*, Professor James Moorhead records the stirring introduction to this report:

We consider the voluntary enslaving of one part of the human race by another, as a gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of human nature; as utterly inconsistent with the law of God, which requires us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and as totally irreconcilable with the spirit and principles of the gospel of Christ, which enjoin "all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." Slavery creates a paradox in the moral system; it exhibits rational, accountable, and immortal beings in such circumstances as scarcely to leave them the power of moral action. It exhibits them as dependent on the will of others, whether they shall receive religious instruction; whether they shall know and worship the true God; whether they shall enjoy the ordinances of the gospel; whether they shall perform the duties and cherish the endearments of husbands and wives, parents and children, neighbors and friends; whether they shall preserve their chastity and purity, or regard the dictates of justice and humanity.

Professor Moorhead then notes that the report went on to say that it was the "duty of all Christians . . . to use their honest, earnest, and unwearied endeavors to correct the errors of former times, and as speedily as possible to efface this blot on our holy religion, and to obtain the complete abolition of slavery throughout Christendom, and if possible throughout the world."<sup>8</sup>

It is at this point in the narrative that an inconvenient truth begins to emerge. Professor Moorhead has to warn his readers, "The level of antislavery commitment behind these stirring

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<sup>8</sup> James H. Moorhead, *Princeton Seminary in American Religion and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 150; citing *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from Its Organization, A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1820* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1847), 688, 692.

words should not be overestimated, for the report made clear that ‘as speedily as possible’ did not mean anytime soon.”<sup>9</sup> Portions of the report even indicated that the slave owners were victims and should not be harshly censured for being trapped in circumstances that prevented them from freeing their slaves. No wonder Gayraud Wilmore, in his book *Black and Presbyterian*, could declare, “No church was more high-sounding and profound in its theological analysis of slavery and did less about it.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the same General Assembly that unanimously approved this report, went on to sustain the removal from the ministry of the Rev. George Bourne of Virginia “for denouncing slave holders as guilty of the worst form of theft—manstealing—and for attacking fellow ministers as complicit in the slave system.”<sup>11</sup> So, the one who told truth was kicked out of the ministry.

Last Spring, history Professor Marty Sandweiss of Princeton University shared with our faculty the inconvenient truth that to live in Princeton before the Civil War was to live in a town where enslaved black people were highly visible. The first nine presidents of the college, she reported, all owned slaves, and presumably including Ashbel Green, author of the General Assembly Report of 1818. Likewise, our own founders Archibald Alexander and Samuel Miller owned slaves. Visiting Princeton in 1860, you would have found enslaved African Americans working as household servants, toiling in gardens, and laboring in fields. Mrs. Obama has spoken of living in a house built by slaves. Another house, the House of Representatives, located in the Capitol building, was also built by slave labor. While the federal government did not own slaves, it contracted them out from slave owners. We may wonder how many buildings in this community, on the university campus, and on our own campus were built or financed by the labor of slaves. Though there is not much of Miller Chapel that is original, with the exception of its portico, its primary footprint, and the pews in the gallery, could we be worshipping in yet another house, a House of God, built by the hands or on the backs of slaves? At this point, we don’t know. But we intend to find out!

So, we are grateful to President Barnes, who has invited Professor Moorhead, Dr. Yolanda Pierce, Dr. Gordon Mikoski, and Mr. Ken Henke from our Library Archives to engage in vital historical research to find answers to these and other urgent questions. Professor Moorhead’s research seminar this fall on “Princeton Seminary, Slavery and Race” will help us to uncover further inconvenient truths. This is a Christian academic responsibility. In the words of Colossians, to be “raised with Christ,” to “seek the things that are above, where Christ is,” and to “set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3:1–2), means that we live on this earth in such a way that we “do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator” (Col 3:9–10). Only by uncovering and facing inconvenient truths, as Georgetown University has recently done, can educational institutions, especially those with a Christian mission, take up the difficult and complex questions of restitution, of reparation, and of reconciliation. Such actions must be the fruit of truth, and the Spirit of truth, and not simply based on guilt or expediency.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>10</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black and Presbyterian: The Heritage and the Hope* (Philadelphia: Geneva Press, 1983), 62; cited by Moorhead, *Princeton Seminary*, 195.

<sup>11</sup> Moorhead, *Princeton Seminary*, 151.

Over the years, historical research by Professor Moorhead, Dr. Pierce, Dr. Mikoski, and Professor LaRue have uncovered and brought to our attention the large legacy of Princeton Seminary students. Some, with a boldness lacking in their professors pioneered the abolition of slavery, such as Theodore Sedgwick Wright, our first African American student and graduate of the Seminary in 1828. Like Bossuet, with both politeness and pointedness, Wright opposed his own teacher, Samuel Miller, and all the other supporters of the American Colonization Society. He opposed them, because however well-intentioned their scheme to return freed blacks to Africa, the whole idea represented a failure of theological imagination. To paraphrase Dr. Mikoski, “They could not theologically imagine a country where blacks and whites could ever live together in harmony.” And to Wright’s name we could add others: Elijah Parish Lovejoy, pastor and editor turned abolitionist; Francis James Grimke, Class of 1878, twice sold into slavery, freed after the Civil War, pastor of the 15<sup>th</sup> Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC, and a founding member of the NAACP; and, James Reeb, Class of 1953, whose murder in Selma, Alabama, hastened the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Given this record by our students, and I have only named a few, Professor Moorhead observes that “one is struck by the extent to which the choices and commitments of students themselves shaped the extracurricular part of their education and hence much of what they took away from Princeton.”<sup>12</sup> As I look out tonight on new students entering the Seminary, I am more aware than ever that what you *bring* to this place in interaction with your learned professors may well lead you, and them, the Seminary, and the country itself into a future that we cannot tonight fully imagine. So, again, Welcome!

#### IV

Let me close with a true story about a Princeton Seminary student from the Class of 1905. He was a cowboy from Dripping Springs, Texas, John William Harris, who went by the name of “Will.” At 16, while out on the range surrounded by 3,000 sleeping sheep, Will had a dream. God was speaking to him between the rifts in the clouds. Like the people to whom Luther preached, Will heard a voice of judgment: “Thou shalt be punished for the iniquity thou hast done.” Somewhat startled into serious reflection, he began to read the Bible, was eventually baptized, and admitted into the Presbyterian Church. A pastor, who had been sent from Pennsylvania to convert cowboys, persuaded Will to go on for higher education and to prepare for the ministry. So, at 19, he renounced his “hope of someday of being governor of Texas and also the hope of owning a big cattle ranch.” He writes, “I surrendered unconditionally to God, then and there, once and forever. This I did. I only asked to have the conscious presence of God with me, and strength to do his will as He would reveal that will to me, day by day. I promised him I would never stop and would try to do the impossible without doubting, if he would only go with me. His promise was, ‘I am with you always.’”<sup>13</sup>

While preparing for Seminary at Park College in Missouri, Will Harris had a second vision. In this dream, he was walking down the Burlington Railroad along the Missouri River, when, in his words, “a young man touched me and said, ‘Come with me.’ I followed him as he called my

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 87–88.

<sup>13</sup> See *Riding and Roping: The Memoirs of J. Will Harris*, ed. C. Virginia Matters, Centennial Edition (San Juan: Editorial Universidad Interamericana de Puerto Rico, 2012), 3–14.



attention to the turbulent river that now splashed at our feet. It was filled a half-mile wide with white, black, brown, red children, chattering, laughing in the water up to their arm pits. . . . He said to me, ‘This a vision of the people among whom you are to live and work.’”<sup>14</sup>

Because he spoke Spanish and could ride a horse, this cowboy ended up not back in Texas as he had planned, but assigned instead by the Presbyterian Board of National Missions to Puerto Rico. Will was determined to start a school. In accordance with his vision, he imagined a school for children of all races and ethnicities, whether Protestant or Catholic, and it would be a school where the students would pay their way by working with their hands just as he had done at Park College. Will found an abandoned school house, really more of a shack, and, in 1912 the dream came true near San Germán, in the mountains of southwestern Puerto Rico. The first day two students enrolled. One went back home discouraged. One stayed. But Will called it a great success!

Will was told his dream would never work in Puerto Rico. “Racial integration-- not on the agenda.” “Co-education in a Hispanic culture, impossible!” “Gentlemen don’t work with their hands; that’s only for peasants, for laborers!” And, “Catholics and Protestants studying together! Unheard of!”

One hundred years later in 2012, around the used brick stairs which had once led up to the original one-room elementary school, some 14,000 citizens and guests gathered at San Germán to dedicate a new centenary plaza in honor of Will Harris. That primary school with one student is now the Universidad Interamericana de Puerto Rico, The Inter American University of Puerto Rico. It has nine campuses throughout the island. With about 50,000 students, it is reportedly the largest private University in the Western Hemisphere.

Later in 2012, during the Seminary’s bicentennial, I was privileged to stand in the main entrance of Hodge Hall--not far from Will’s dorm room. A large delegation was walking across the quad and beginning to pour into Hodge Hall. They were on their way to the dedication of two plaques in Will’s honor--one in Spanish and one in English. The delegation was led by a distinguished jurist, Luis A. Plaza Mariota, the Roman Catholic chair of the Board. In the throng of administrators, including President Manuel Fernós, trustees, and former students of the *Interamericana*, there were people of darker and lighter skins, both women and men, both Protestants and Catholics. And together, with some of Will’s descendants, a granddaughter and a great-granddaughter, as the plaques were unveiled, we all gave thanks for John William Harris, Princeton Theological Seminary, Class of 1905.

And tonight, we also give thanks and praise that Christ is alive, that Christ is yet with us in and above a world that still awaits the transformations of the Gospel of God. Tonight, we give special thanks for you who are new students; thanks for what you will bring to this place; and thanks for what you will take from this place. For Christ still leads students *to* Princeton and *from* Princeton: Christians of all kinds, from all places on six continents, sometimes, as unbelievable as it may sound, even a cowboy from Dripping Springs, Texas. Yes, in every generation students are led here and *from* here to do things beyond all reckoning. And, *that’s the gospel truth!* May God’s grace enable us all to live into this truth—however inconvenient.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 15.

¡*Bienvenidos!* Welcome!