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Steinhoff: My Calling

(Editor's Note: A veteran of the Vietnam War, Dr. Steinhoff [1945-2021] was a stalwart in the Liberty University History Department from 1977 to 2011, teaching a broad range of classes, making an especial mark as Medievalist. "Steiny," as he was affectionately known, also served as the sponsor of the LU Phi Alpha Theta chapter for over two decades, regularly hosting student events in his home.)

My Calling to a Redemptive Mission¹

Dr. Mark Steinhoff

Summer 2021

"Who am I, O Lord God . . . That you have brought me this far?" (2 Samuel 7:18) I'm filled with wonder that He called me and that I'm still playing this far into double overtime! History, like reading Hebrew (which is read "backwards"), makes clearer sense in retrospect. A funny thing happened to this pilgrim (a Yankee) on his way to Dixie: wrestling as a Christian at Columbia and then as "a recovering graduate student" in the Army.

First things first, my heartfelt "Gratias Columbia College" for being a truly nourishing mother (alma mater) who gave me the Camelot moment of my life. I still think in medieval terms, like questing for the Holy Grail of Philippians 3:10. And I believe that Jehovah Jirah moved the Dean of Admissions, Henry Coleman,² to grant me, a fatherless boy, a Pulitzer scholarship. I fully expected Columbia to be a trial by fire for my faith, and sure enough during freshman orientation Chaplain John M. Krum, a wolf in sheep's clothing, exhorted us to abandon our old faith. Politically, I didn't fit in either, as I realized when radical mobs began assaulting Marine recruiters on campus. Good folks on the faculty and in the administration, true friends of grace and patriotism, were rooting for me. But, regrettably, I was agape for grades and attempting to do life alone -- like Rodin's solitary *Thinker* in front of Fayerwether Hall.³ Though Columbia offered me a graduate fellowship, I decided to "go medieval" but at Johns Hopkins instead.

¹I dedicate this account to Donna D. Donald, my *successor* in Liberty's redemptive mission of teaching minds, stirring hearts and molding character. I consider her a "founding mother" and actually my *predecessor* since she was a student at Lynchburg Christian Academy at the time of the "prayer meeting in the snow" in 1977.

²Radicals taking Dean Coleman hostage began the revolt in 1968. Later they shot and almost killed him in Hamilton Hall.

³Donna Donald informs me that Rodin portrays Dante pondering before the Gates of Hell.

The Selective Service deferred my induction until I could take my doctoral orals in September 1969. The doctoral exam committee felt that I did not belong at Hopkins. I felt like the kid who got all F's and a D in history. Asked what he thought was his problem, he replied "guess I spent much time on history." Like many yuppies on the make, I had idolized my craft, punted away opportunities to witness, lead in church, and even skipped some family gatherings. Mark Rudd, the leading radical in the 1968 rebellion, said that his "real" bar mitzvah was admission to Columbia College, mine was going to Vietnam. God leads His dear children along, using times of trouble to transform them.

I believe that I was led here by the Holy Spirit. My partner in "praying in" the contract was the singles group at Calvary Baptist Church (where Steven Olford pastored). I began to understand more as a result of my interview in March of 1977. Meeting me at the Greyhound bus terminal on Fifth Street were Boyd and Norma Jean Rist, a couple who integrated learning and living better than anyone I have ever known.⁴ Having tried and failed to do life alone, I found my own "sacred fortress" in Thomas Road Baptist Church.⁵ Chuck Colson was the guest speaker that Sunday and proved to be a bellwether of so much to come. For the first time I felt, "now this is where I belong"—a widespread sentiment soon to be captured by Robbie Hiner's "I want that mountain." That was the mood music of the founding generation.

Fighting Back

For me as an intellectual, here was an answer to the academic chaos typified in my mind by the Columbia debacle of 1968. That fabled "House of Intellect," like Humpty Dumpty, had a terrible fall. What makes a great university? The character of the faculty and students counts most. At its bicentennial in 1954, Columbia could rightfully boast many publishing luminaries such as Mark Van Doren, Lionel Trilling, Jacques Barzun, Richard Hofstadter, and Moses Hadas, who loved teaching undergraduates especially. In saving "the big guns" for the young "undecideds," Columbia College stood almost alone; that was definitely not the norm for faculty. A good teacher is a living textbook, teaching by example. "Acts of virtue are certainly read more

⁴ The Rists were among the first pioneers, joining Lynchburg Baptist College in 1973, and experiencing "the starving times" akin to Jamestown during the winter 1609-10. Boyd Rist reminds me of Governor Dale: "Let England know our willingness, for that our work is good. We hope to found a nation where hither none hath stood."

⁵ Reminiscent of how Otto G. von Simson (in *Sacred Fortress: Byzantine Art and Statecraft at Ravenna*) had celebrated the city on which I had just completed my doctoral dissertation.

fruitfully in men themselves than in books, just as deeds speak more effectively than words” (Herbert of Bosham). While teaching, I often found myself looking over my shoulder, as if my mentors Norman Cantor and Orest Ranum *ipse* were there, and asking “Am I getting it right?” Teaching itself is something of a mystery; charisma plays a role. Pastor Falwell remarked once that parishioners came not to listen to his sermons so much as to watch him burn. Indeed, a holy man is a “Christ-carrying man”; every saint should be an exemplar, imitating Christ.⁶ Jerry aspired to make Christ the Head of this new house of learning. At Liberty, we bonded not over “the core curriculum” as at Columbia, nor over a beer as at Yahoo State, but over the Bible.

Unlike most previously hired faculty, I was not interviewed personally by Dr. Falwell because his mother was dying of a massive cerebral hemorrhage she suffered a few weeks earlier. But over the years I was delighted to experience how much the Founder resembled Abbot Suger, patron of Gothic art and architecture. Suger recruited trustworthy artists for his atelier and then stepped back and allowed them freedom to innovate. No doubt about it, that was “the Liberty Way” back then. During the Bicentennial, the name *Liberty* Baptist College was adopted. “We must never forget that liberty was born in the heart of God and that freedom is the most basic value of all.”⁷ I can honestly respond to secular colleagues’ inquiries that I enjoyed full “academic freedom.”⁸

Just starting out, Liberty wisely concentrated on being a teaching institution. Charges of “the scandal of the Evangelical mind,” to say nothing of the “oxymoron of Baptist scholars” are overblown. Similar allegations were made against the cathedral schools of the 10th and 11th centuries which produced few great philosophical or literary works. But the vitality of learning in these schools was immortalized by the metaphor of John of Salisbury, who compared himself to a puny dwarf perched on the shoulder of giants -- like his teacher in the cathedral school of Chartres, Bernard, who taught by dialogue and questioning. Come to think of it, Socrates himself

⁶ Peter Brown quoted in C. Stephen Jaeger, *Envy of Angels: Cathedral Schools and Social Ideals in Medieval Europe, 950-1200* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 78.

⁷ Jerry Falwell, *Falwell: An Autobiography* (Lynchburg: Liberty House Publishers, 1997), 380.

⁸ “I believe in a pluralistic, democratic society Our library at Liberty University has or will have every book by every author that any great university might have to support its academic offerings. We have a matchbook we distribute to make our point. ‘Moral Majority Book Burning Matches,’ . . . ‘See official booklist inside.’ . . . You will find a blank list and the words ‘That’s right, there aren’t any!’” Falwell, *Autobiography*, 396-7.

would be fired at a “publish or perish” university because he never wrote anything and distrusted the written word.⁹ Instead of making a mad dash to the Big Table, professors at Christian colleges might want to take a cue from Columbia’s Andrew Chiappe, an ideal undergraduate mentor, whose “several courses on Shakespeare were fruits of deep scholarship and performances of high originality,” even though he never got to publish anything after his dissertation.¹⁰ Just as the Bible is quoted not only by theologians but also by evangelists (usually with greater effect), so history is not the monopoly (thank God!) of professional historians.

Columbia was like Plato’s Academy -- a think tank, by and for the elite. In their scorn for its sophistry, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) tried to literally burn down Columbia’s Thinkery, as in Aristophanes’ farce, *The Clouds*. By contrast, Liberty Baptist College again resembled those monastic and cathedral schools; it was Thomas Road Baptist Church’s teaching arm, serving everyone – men and women. Liberty was co-ed since its inception in 1971; Columbia remained all male until 1982.

With Polished Shafts

“Children are a heritage of the Lord . . . As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children . . .” (Psalm 127:3-4). Defensively, LBC sought to protect the next generation from the fiery darts of Satan, and offensively to place polished shafts in the hand of God. As with the Christian schools of the tenth century, love and authority were the foundation. Students were genuinely glad to have seventy new faculty onboard in August 1977. *In loco parentis*, “you gotta love them” as if they were your very own and teach them *to love* what they ought to do. We are not ruled by what we know, but by what we love. What made the Good Samaritan stop to help was his character. Before the student rebellion, this was a typical student evaluation question at Columbia: “What subject covered in this course interested you least, and to what defect in your character do you attribute your lack of interest?” But in 1968, Columbia’s SDS infamously introduced gutter talk into the academy and public discourse. The anarchist Lower East Side street gang, “Up Against the Wall [bleep]. . .,” became a chapter of SDS. “Part of the justification

⁹On the charismatic culture of the cathedral schools where the curriculum molded scholars, not vice versa, see Jaeger, *Envy of Angels*, 4-14, 76f. Quotation of Herbert of Bosham, 11; on Bernard, 129f.

¹⁰ Jacques Barzun, *The American University: How It Runs, Where It Is Going* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 43. Some of Chiappe’s essays were published posthumously.

for using the name ... was that it kept the establishment media from mentioning us. They could never say exactly who we were. . .”¹¹ One edition of Mark Rudd’s SDS newspaper featured his “Reply to Uncle Grayson” [President Grayson Kirk] that closed with what became his signature song, “Up against the wall [bleep], this is a stick-up.” It “was chanted, the *kyrie* of the season.”¹²

Our speech should be seasoned with salt, not sewerage. When Dr. Falwell spoke at Columbia in 1980’s he followed the advice of his mentor, B. R. Lakin: “Don’t get into a spitting match with a skunk.” He was Spirit-controlled and didn’t lose his temper in debates. A civil tongue is a marvelous asset. “He hath made my mouth like a sharp sword . . .and made me a polished shaft; in his quiver hath he hid me,” (Isaiah 49:2). To date I know of no greater credential among Liberty’s polished shafts than Shannon Bream (an anchor at Fox news). In 2006, Dr. Falwell characterized Liberty’s debate team (ranked as number-one in the nation that year) as a “salt ministry.” *Newsweek* misquoted him as talking about an “assault ministry” and had to apologize.¹³ Debate Coach Bret O’Donnell tried to assist the unteachable Donald Trump (not a Liberty alumnus) during the early Republican primaries in 2016, until he was promptly “fired.” Over the years I was so proud of the many arrows in the quiver of our history department: those honor students who overcame their defensiveness to deliver papers at Phi Alpha Theta competitions and at Conference on Faith and History student sessions.

For God and Country

One final analogy. The cathedral schools were “prep schools” for future bishops and courtiers of Otto the Great. When Jerry first shared his vision for a Christian college in January of 1971, his text was 2 Timothy 2:2. Discipling *preacher boys* “. . . who shall be able to teach others also” was always a priority. In fact, Liberty’s first graduate was Vernon Brewer, who went on to found and lead World Help. During the Bicentennial in 1976, Dr. Falwell traveled to 141 cities, preaching that “Jesus is calling America, calling her back to the fold.” Accompanying him were seventy polished shafts in music ministry who presented Don Wyrzten’s musical “I Love

¹¹ Johnny Sundstrom, “Hundreds of Pairs of Wings,” in *A Time to Stir, Columbia ‘68*, ed. Paul Cronin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 374. Mark Rudd recruited one of them (Lincoln Pain from Berkeley) to pull off the first guerrilla-theater action of throwing a pie in the face of Colonel Akst (of Selective Service) during a lecture.

¹² Roger Kahn, *The Battle for Morningside Heights: Why Students Rebel* (San Francisco: William Morrow, 1970), 24.

¹³ Ann Coulter, *Godless: The Church of Liberalism* (New York: Crown Forum, 2006), 15.

America.” Francis Schaeffer, author of *A Christian Manifesto*, coached the Chancellor to break with the traditional fundamentalist avoidance of politics.¹⁴ “It is my conviction that whatever is required to make a good Christian also makes a good citizen. . . . Sometimes, Christians must be willing to work together with persons with whom we have major theological differences in order to secure serious societal problems, and even to save the culture.” Founding the Moral Majority in 1979, “I promised five years of my life to political leaders.”¹⁵ Analogous to Otto’s “philosopher’s academy,” which recruited students to his imperial court,¹⁶ was Liberty’s Washington Internship Program, which drew heavily from the History and Political Science Department, then chaired by Dr. Jerry Combee. I know of two history interns who served in the Oval Office itself. Lynn Boyer was a White House intern under President Reagan. She later worked for Jesse Helms when he chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. When the Oval Office became safe once again for interns, Jaoni Matzker served there for George W. Bush.

Tearfully but inexorably, we come to the *semper fidelis* who rushed toward the danger. The self-styled “Politically Incorrect University” has hosted Army and Air Force ROTC since 2001 and 2002 respectively. It seems to me that God wrapped up Liberty’s answer to Islamic terrorism in the person of Jesse Strong. “Jesse’s Arrow” cost him everything but – like Jonathan’s arrow of old – delivered a powerful message about doing great things for God. Jesse was a history major, and a member of Phi Alpha Theta, our history honor society. Having just graduated from boot camp and wearing his Marine uniform, Jesse led our department’s participants in the President’s Parade, a few days after 9/11. Sergeant Strong graduated in 2003 and went on to seminary, until his unit was activated to serve in Iraq. His mother writes that “As a result of his visible faith and walk with the Lord, Jesse’s fellow Marines made him honorary chaplain of their platoon, and he often led them in prayer (including before the mission that

¹⁴Ruth McClellan, writer and editor, *An Incredible Journey: Thomas Road Baptist Church and 50 years of Miracles* (Lynchburg, Liberty University: 2006), 138, 180, 198.

¹⁵He ended up presiding over Moral Majority for eight years. Falwell, *Falwell: An Autobiography*, 368, 379, 406-7.

¹⁶Jaeger, *Envy of Angels*, 36. Remember that Alexander Hamilton of “King’s College” (renamed “Columbia” in 1754) was very action-oriented, indeed “woke”. The equivalent of Christian community service at Columbia was their citizenship program. To my shame I did not participate, but Mark Rudd did, admirably tutoring an underprivileged child in Harlem.

night),” January 26, 2005, when Jesse, along with three other Marines, was killed in an ambush.¹⁷

Keep the Light On

It is not mere emotionalism, nor ignorance, that has triggered my astonishment at what I have witnessed on Liberty Mountain. In the face of skeptics’ frantic attempts to “de-wonder” a unique and miraculous event, we need to remember it. If the Lord should tarry, I would challenge the next generation to “do the greater works.” If history is any guide, it seems we have done the easy part. Mark Noll singles out several *known fundamentalists* for “the syndrome of the reinvented wheel. Popular authority figures like Bill Bright, Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson all assume that no previously existing educational enterprise is capable to meeting the demands of the hour. Despite the absence of formal educational credentials, each man presumes to establish a Christian university.”¹⁸ And George Marsden has written a magisterial treatment of *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief*, which documents secularization at the nation’s most prestigious universities.¹⁹ To supplement Marsden’s study of the Ivies and other bastions of learning (which did not include Columbia, by the way), James Tunstead Burtchaell’s *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches* chronicles the same sad story in case studies of seventeen prominent institutions of learning in the Congregational, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Catholic, and Evangelical traditions. Hundreds of lesser-known colleges are listed in each chapter; for example, fifty institutions affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention are named. However, I would caution my successors not to take a defeatist attitude, as D. G. Hart did by reacting, “Burtchaell’s bold and bracing book should be read by all Christians, whether in the academy or not, tempted to think that education will

¹⁷ Jessestrong.com., “about Jesse” link. Jesse’s father, Rev. Nathan Strong, has written two tributes, one entitled *Designed for Success: A Fresh Look at the Bible and the Staying Power of the Church*.

¹⁸ Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 16-17.

¹⁹ George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief*. There’s all the difference in the world between a thermometer (like Mark Noll or George M. Marsden) and a thermostat (like Jerry Falwell).

increase the influence of the gospel.”²⁰ “If it wasn’t for that lighthouse” was Jerry’s all-time favorite song. Don’t tear that lighthouse down -- rise up and make it great again!

This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine. Don’t let gusts of accommodation blow it out. In 2011 our department had a good laugh at the way pagan historians see us. Applying for an opening, one honest candidate reassured us that our statement of faith was no problem for him because “basically I don’t believe in anything.” More insidious are those who stealthily use cultural assimilation to gradually boil many slumbering frogs. In 1866, Frederic Henry Hodge, in his address to Harvard alumni, epitomized the subsequent disaster that historians have dubbed “cultural Protestantism.” “The secularization of the College is no violation of its motto, ‘*Christo et Ecclesiae*.’ For, as I interpret those sacred ideas, the cause of Christ and the Church is advanced by whatever liberalizes and enriches and enlarges the mind.”²¹ But what would our Muse, the Holy Spirit, say about such casuistry?

Taking our cue this time from one of Macel Falwell’s favorites, “Midnight Cry” by John Starnes, let’s consider the parable of the Ten Virgins (Matt. 25: 1-13), which was so loved by Gothic sculptors, who applied it to the church. All ten were virgins, separated from the world in awaiting the Lord’s return. And all of them had fallen asleep when the midnight cry came. “The vigilance of the most earnest is but as sleep compared with that constant and intent watchfulness which is the ideal of the Christian life.”²² The five wise virgins were ready because they “took oil [the Holy Spirit] in their vessels.” Even though they had been slumbering, they had diligently prepared. “Christian men may be taken unawares. And death may suddenly come upon them, the Lord may come suddenly; but, if they have been living in faith and prayer, they will be able, so to speak, to put themselves at once into an attitude of devotion. Such men are filled with the Spirit; the Spirit is there, to make intercession for them . . . They can rouse themselves at once

²⁰ D. G. Hart on back cover of James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

²¹ Frederic Henry Hodge in an address to Harvard alumni, 1866. Quoted by George M. Marsden, “The Soul of the American University: A Historical Overview,” in *The Secularization of the Academy* ed. G.M. Marsden & Bradley J. Longfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 9.

²² Quoted in *The Pulpit Commentary*, vol. 15 *Matthew*, eds. H.D. M. Spence & J. S. Exell (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 487.

into preparedness . . . for they have been waiting for the Consolation of Israel . . .”²³ Perhaps this medieval morality tale will help. Some knights were crossing a stream in the dead of night and were told that, if they stooped down and gathered some stones, in the morning they would be both glad and sad. Of course, what they had picked up were precious gems.

By contrast, the foolish virgins, not believing that the Lord might come quickly, made no provisions for feeding their lamps, which became useless. They neglected to “keep their souls with all diligence.” The contrasting depictions of the virtues and the vices (on Strasbourg Cathedral) got it right: “To be a son of God, what more glorious! To be a serf of Satan, what more despicable!”²⁴ So Jesus is still calling us -- to wake up to the signs of the times. He weeps over our blindness to the deadliness of sin and watering down of the gospel. He pleads with the five foolish virgins to keep vigil because His return is certain.

“The world is very evil, the times are waxing late,
Be sober and keep vigil, the Judge is at the gate.
The Judge who comes with mercy,
The Judge who comes with might,
To terminate the evil,
To diadem the right.”

²³ *Pulpit Commentary* on Matthew, 488.

²⁴ *Pulpit Commentary* on Matthew, 503.

