



Welcome to Beeson

by Jonathan Aitken

QUIRKY PHILANTHROPY AND REFORM THEOLOGY seem unlikely bedfellows, but between them they have created one of the newest and most interesting schools of divinity in the United States. Welcome to Beeson, an increasingly admired evangelical but ecumenical seminary on the campus of Samford University near Birmingham, Alabama. Financially endowed beyond the dreams of most other comparable religious teaching establishments, Beeson celebrates its 21st anniversary this year. It owes its rising reputation to two remarkable founding fathers.

The crusty and mildly eccentric benefactor behind the school was Ralph Waldo Beeson (1900–1990), a former sales agent for the Liberty National Life Insurance Company (now Torchmark). He bet his life savings on Liberty shares during the stock exchange crash of 1929, eventually selling them at the top of the market in the 1980s. This made him a fortune of well over \$100 million. He spent little of it on himself, living so frugally that his reluctance to buy new trousers became a local legend.

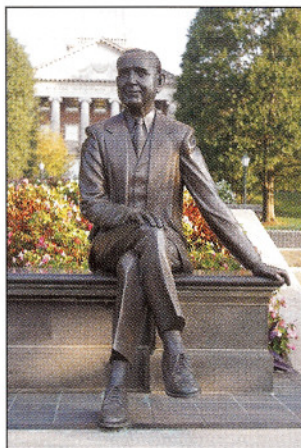
Beeson lived in a modest home on Shades Mountain overlooking the Samford campus. He donated several new buildings to the university, saying that he liked to look out from his bedroom and keep an eye on his philanthropic investments. By far the most generous of these was his endowment of a new divinity school with a gift worth more than \$70 million, believed to be the largest ever from a single

donor in the history of theological education. In 1988 he attached conditions to his founder's bequest that have subsequently shaped the school's scholarship and spirituality.

Beeson was brought up as a Methodist—his father's name was John Wesley Beeson—he married a Baptist, and they became Presbyterians, but he resisted the narrow exclusivism of these traditions. He insisted that his school should be interdenominational and nonsectarian while at the same time staying faithful to Scripture, to historic Christian doctrine, and to the heritage of the Reformation. The result is that Beeson today describes itself as “confessional, covenantal, evangelical, ecumenical and reformational,” a combination that exists in no other seminary on an American university campus.

Ralph Waldo Beeson requested two other conditions that have proved distinctive for his school. First, that it should stay small, and second, that it should be easily affordable. Under the terms of his will, the student body is limited to a total of 180. Students pay maximum annual fees of \$5,500, although

two-thirds of them make average payments of \$1,700 and one-third pay nothing at all. By comparison, most other divinity students in peer institutions (i.e., Wheaton; Fuller; Dallas Theological Seminary; Gordon-Conwell) have to pay much higher fees—usually at the \$15,000–\$20,000 level. Because Beeson is neither driven by enrollment numbers nor constrained by the usual funding pressures, it can



afford to aim for excellence in both the selection of its students and the appointment of its faculty.

The other founding father whose name has become almost as synonymous with the school as the major benefactor's is its original and only dean, Dr. Timothy George. In the early days he was exhorted by calls from Mr. Beeson in his aerie on Shades Mountain, "Now, Timothy, I want you to keep things orthodox down there....I want you to train pastors who can preach."

Virtually all the young men and women who graduate from Beeson with its flagship MDiv (Master of Divinity) degree go on to become pastors who preach in a wide variety of churches and ministries around the world. They are well grounded in Scripture, as a third of the curriculum is focused on Greek, Hebrew, and biblical studies. The leading lights of the faculty include Lyle Dorsett, who according to his dean "teaches evangelism in a way that brings together the mind of C. S. Lewis and the passion of Richard Baxter," and Robert Smith Jr., a renowned preaching lecturer and author of several books on pulpit oratory, including the best-selling *Doctrine That Dances: Bringing Doctrinal Preaching and Teaching to Life*.

I met these and other eminent faculty members, as well as many students, when I recently lectured at Beeson. Modesty compels me to admit that my favorable view of the school may have been influenced by the fact that I was there to receive its annual award in Christian biography for my *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Crossway, 2007). The institution seems to have quite a niche in Anglophilia, since recent campus speakers from my home country have included Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Cherie Blair, and John Pollock—a far better British biographer than your columnist. But after making allowances for the possibility that the prize (and the accompanying check!) may have provided me with a rose-colored perspective on Beeson, there is at least one more reason why the school is riding so high. It is the scholarship and leadership of its dean, Dr. Timothy George.

I FIRST MET TIMOTHY GEORGE five years ago when I was writing another Christian biography, *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed* (Doubleday, 2005). T. F. George and J. I. Packer were the principal Reformed theologians in the galaxy of professors and pastors assembled by Colson to lead a long-running symposium known as Evangelicals and Catholics

Together (ECT). The quality of these scholars was so outstanding (the principal Catholics were the late and much lamented Cardinal Avery Dulles and Richard John Neuhaus) that their published deliberations broke new ecumenical ground. However, ECT's gentle murmurings about unity were reported on the front page of the *New York Times* under the ominous headline "How the Evangelicals and Catholics Joined Forces." This cost Colson's prison ministry over \$1 million in withdrawn donations. Hard-line

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Reformationists such as R. C. Sproul even claimed that Rome's denial of the Lutheran doctrine of *sola fide* (justification by faith alone) meant that "the Roman Catholic church is neither a Christian body nor a Christian church." To his credit, Timothy George stood firm through these bigoted vaporings, and 20 years later ECT continues to make a fine contribution to the cause of interdenominational understanding.

The episode is important because it shows that behind the wealth and warm welcome of Beeson lies a dean with a touch of ecumenical steel. He is a distinguished author in his own right, with notable works such as *Theology of the Reformers* and *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?* (answer: no). But first and foremost Timothy George is a wide-eyed educator of excellence, a successful preparer of pastors, and an internationalist obeyer of Christ's great commission "Go and make disciples of all nations." No wonder Beeson's impact as a divinity school is being felt around the world as well as setting a fast and faithful pace in the groves of theological academe. ☼

Jonathan Aitken, The American Spectator's *High Spirits* columnist, is most recently author of *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Crossway Books). His biographies include *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed* (Doubleday) and *Nixon: A Life*, now available in a new paperback edition (Regnery).