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Princeton Theological Seminary Inaugural Address
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To the Dedicated Trustees, Distinguished Faculty, Devoted Staff, and Spiritually Driven Students of Princeton Theological Seminary, I stand before you today overflowing with gratitude and humbled by this appointment.

There is indeed a credo that courses through our campus and learning community. Everyone fans the flame of Christian formation--from the frontlines of faculty scholarship to the often-hidden hands of our facilities, grounds, and food service crews. As we bask in this beautiful pageantry of pomp and circumstance, may I never forget the sacred, humble obligation to this office. "Hands that serve are Holier than lips that preach and pray."

In this installation ritual, I recognize and honor this institution's great Principals and Presidents dating back to 1812. I particularly want to acknowledge my presidential predecessors: the 6th President of Princeton Theological Seminary, The Very Reverend Professor Sir Iain Richard Torrance, and President Emeritus, Reverend Dr. M. Craig Barnes. Their dedicated efforts in this office etched a template of which I have already found great inspiration and profound insights.

With open arms, we embrace the academic delegates and ecclesiastical ambassadors gathered with us. A special salute to our Princeton University neighbors—represented resplendently by President Christopher Eisengruber and many others who serve this extraordinary University. The 4th President of Princeton Seminary, Dr. James I. McCord, declared on the day of his inauguration in 1960 that the best theological education is carried out in partnership with a University, lest the Seminary become, "little more than a hothouse where piety becomes a substitute for honest intellectual endeavor." ¹

May we continue cultivating this precious partnership for the good of both institutions and, most importantly, toward the enrichment of this magical town of Princeton that we are blessed to call home.

Finally, with a heart overflowing with appreciation, I salute my sacred circle of family and friends who have traveled here to celebrate this occasion. Many years ago, Cecily and I left Atlanta with my parents and a U-Haul in tow. The extra load was filled with so much more than

second-hand furniture. It contained the collective wisdom and encouragement of Christian communities from Jeffersonville, Indiana; Houston; Atlanta; and Raleigh, North Carolina. My mother and late father deposited us as newlyweds onto this campus. And Princeton Seminary has indeed been for us, what it has been for so many, a learning community for life—a place where the dividing lines between friendship and family evaporate. A place where, for the first seven years of our marriage, we grew up and matured together.

Today, as I look upon the face of Cecily and our children Zora Neale, Elijah Mays, and Baldwin Cline, I find myself singing with both Gladys Knight and James Cleveland, "If anyone should ever write my life story... You'll be there between each line of pain and glory. Because you're the best things that's ever happened to me."

Prayer, Purpose, and Expanding the Table of Possibility (Luke 14:15-24)

Narratives of decline have long shaped the landscape of American religious life. From the Puritans and their political jeremiads to nineteenth-century sages sounding the siren on our capitalist conceits, tales of societal slippage are a central feature of American lore. Nevertheless, we ought to be wary of the bedrocks of declension stories. Built on blurred memories and burnished myths, narratives of decline nod less to a nuanced past and oftentimes more to the present privilege of the narrators.

Consider the narrative of mainline church decline. For decades, this storyline has constituted its own veritable liturgy of loss and lament—a mournful pastoral monologue from a select class of pulpits. But what is this handwringing really about? The very idea of "mainline Protestantism" merits scrutiny. Some have defined mainline Protestants as the Seven Sisters of American Protestantism, which include denominations like the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Episcopal Church.² Why is it mainline? This definition has never been based on numerical strength. More conservative Protestant denominations like the Southern Baptists have always been more populous.

Therefore, others define "mainline" according to shared theological views. They associate mainline with the progressive side of the modernist/fundamentalist debate stretching back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries.³ Yet this is historically inaccurate, anachronistic, and racially exclusive.

The term mainline Protestantism did not enter our popular vocabulary until 1960.⁴ This is when a *New York Times* journalist used the term "mainline" to describe the denominations of "wealthy laymen" who objected to hearing social, economic, and political pronouncements from the pulpit.⁵ That this journalist, however, attached the term mainline to describe a wealthy and powerful contingent within the church would not have surprised readers at the time. The term mainline was already associated with the suburbs of Philadelphia, where railroad executives commuted to Philadelphia along "the mainline" from wealthy neighborhoods. The Philadelphia Inquirer's weekly column, "The Mainliner," even reported on Philadelphia's socialites each Sunday.⁶

In other words, the category of the Protestant mainline emerged more as a cultural and class signifier than a summary of shared theological commitments. This may explain why the concept has never been hospitable to heterogeneity. Denominations like African Methodist Episcopal, despite their ecumenism, never make the cut. Nor are historically black Christian institutions of learning such as Morehouse and Spelman Colleges ever considered "mainline." The most common survey mechanisms by institutions such as Pew bracket out "black Protestants," and established the categories of "Asian American Evangelicals," and "Evangelical Protestant Hispanics," despite these groups having diverse theological and political commitments that are more consistent with what has been associated with a presumed "mainline."⁷ Similar is true of Christian immigrants coming from non-Christian nations. They are often photoshopped out of the mainline Protestant frame altogether, even when part of one of the Seven Sister denominations. So, what some call mainline decline, sociologists like R. Stephen Warner famously referred to as the de-Europeanization of Christianity.⁸

In sum, the presumed Protestant "high moment" of the 1950s—a historical reverie reinforced by Cold War conformity—is over but owed not an elegy. If this so-called decline denotes the dilution of an antiquated cultural aristocracy, then let us not lament. Such a conceptual shift should not summon our sorrow but stir our spirits. It does not mark an ending but heralds a hopeful, heartening beginning.

We must learn from our Christian siblings across the globe and those here domestically--Christians who have always answered the call from the social margins. This frees us to imagine a future where Christian communities need not be fettered to fetishized social hierarchies. Think of Christian moral architects like abolitionist Elijah Parish Lovejoy, liberation theologians Prathia Hall, Rubem Alves, and the grand traditions of Christian response that they represent. These particular Princeton Seminary alums leavened the faith with alternative visions unencumbered by an essentialized past. Nor should we forget the "showers of stoles" who were suppressed but refused to remain silent over sexual expression. Such courage from the margins has helped the global church revisit and revise our guest lists.

In Luke's Gospel (14:15-24), we meet one such fellow traveler—a banquet host with an increasingly empty table. At some point an invitation to this man's table was a coveted trophy. This appears to be no longer the case. Thus, the critical question this host had to ask himself is not simply whether he should invite others to dine. But he had to ask a more fundamental question: "What's on the menu?" What would make people desire to dine at this table?

The Protestant church in America of all stripes, must grapple with this question. What are we serving? Are we actually providing a theological meal that answers society's hunger?

Crass politicians, wannabe CEOs, and aspiring pop stars in the pulpit have driven millions of people out of our congregations in recent decades. Yet it seems that there is more to the story. Could it be that people desire a theological menu that is an alternative to, not merely a reflection of our nation's most pervasive civic faith? People want an alternative to rigid hierarchies born of an all-encompassing social meritocracy.

By social meritocracy, I am referring to a system of social management that categorizes and classifies people according to their presumed skills and abilities.⁹ It's a noble ideal insofar as it champions democratic possibility—the belief that anyone can rise to the highest social, educational, or professional levels by their intelligence, discipline, and imagination rather than birthright or heredity.

As much as the language of meritocracy inspires, however, it also obscures. It obscures the fortuitous circumstances of birth. It obscures the direct correlation between household income and the mechanisms that measure merit. The requisite private schools, tutors, coaches, and admission consultants do not come cheap. And it obscures the legacy benefit of the hallowed halls of power, as our institutions have the uncanny ability, like the mythical figure Narcissus, to fall in love with their own image.

Most relevant for us gathered here today, the myth of meritocracy obscures the emotional, physical, and psychological toll of its effects on even those of us deemed "successful." Consider ruinous 80–100-hour work weeks, overscheduled and overburdened youth, and the inordinate pressure for us to measure up. With such emphasis on individual merit, no wonder [civic participation at every educational level has declined over the past twenty-five years](#). A growing amount of research reveals that the more individuals believe in their own merit, the more prone we are to be selfish, less self-critical, and even discriminatory. We don't have time to consider what we owe one another or wrestle with more significant existential questions of life. As affiliation has decreased, diseases of despair such as loneliness, anxiety, depression, and addictions have increased across all socioeconomic categories.

We live in a world where people yearn for faith, hope, love, meaning, and purpose. Yet the evidence shows that they are not inclined to dine from a table of Protestant *noblesse oblige*--a table that does not look, feel, or taste very different from the meritocratic menu offered by the larger society. Thus, the question that we, members of the Protestant Church writ large in America, must constantly ask is whether we are serving a meal that is distinct. Recall lessons from the great 20th-century theologian and one-time darling of the political establishment Reinhold Niebuhr—a man who learned the price of cozying up too close to power the hard way. A few years before his death, he warned us that whenever our Christian witness clings too close to any cultural or political establishment, we risk becoming ["high priests in the cult of complacency and self-sufficiency."](#)

The Gospel invites all to a banquet where seats are shared, not seized, where achievement kneels before altruism, and where the bountiful blessings of life are not trophies to be hoarded but treasures to be distributed. Our host in this parable projects an alternative vision of a society where the conceptual dividing lines between the first and the last, the margins and the center, the establishment and the excluded, are erased and eradicated. This banquet host leverages his resources to make the banquet more open and equitable; our host seizes this moment to swing open the doors of access and opportunity.

Princeton Theological Seminary stands as a beacon, burnishing both the tradition of theological wisdom and the translucence of timely transitions. We are torchbearers of a faith that finds its roots in ancient texts yet flourishes in the contemporary context—not merely as guardians of a

privileged past but as gardeners of a more nourishing future. We can fertilize moral imaginations to harvest alternative social visions grounded in the teachings of a Jewish peasant.

The urgency of our mission is to make the theological table more accessible and our menu more inviting. It is not enough to open the doors; we must go into the highways and byways, extending God's invitation to those historically marginalized and overlooked. The Seminary must be an enduring resource to our alums and others throughout the globe--thoughtful, sober servants who are tending to the wounds of victims of terror and persecution, providing water to those who thirst, and building bridges of peace where others erect boundaries and borders of oppression. We must enhance our menu of offerings to expand and enrich our table.

To be sure, expanding the table will alter us. Yet the diversification of questions, concerns, and spiritual quests that people will invariably bring to our learning community is not a challenge to be feared. It is a treasure to be embraced. The diversification of offerings, whether hybrid degrees, certificates, or stackable credentials, is not an obstacle to be avoided. It is a gift to be extended.

It was J. Ross Stevenson, the second president of Princeton Seminary, who declared in his 1916 inaugural message that "There must be the knowledge of a time-spirit, which is ever-changing and projecting new occasions to teach new duties." The design of the Seminary did not, "fix rigid molds for the manufacture of an unvarying type of minister." We must "endeavor to serve each present age."¹⁰

This is my prayer today. That we remain steadfast in our institutional purpose and mission--to prepare Christian servants for ministries marked by faith, integrity, competence, compassion, and joy will remain the same. Yet, who we teach and how we teach must remain an open question. And this creates the conditions for who we can become. An expanded table of possibility insofar as our influence reverberates not just within the halls of academia and tall steeple congregations, but in the hearts and homes of all who hunger for meaning and thirst for justice.

So, as we move forward to this next influential era for Princeton Seminary, let us be brave enough to look beyond the presumed glories of a privileged past. Let us be bold enough to set our sights on a more inclusive and accessible future. And may we remain both self-critical in our prayers and confident in our purpose, that we can allow the love of Christ to expand the realm of our possibility and the contours of our beloved learning community.

This is my prayer. This is Princeton Seminary's purpose. This is our possibility.

¹ James I. McCord, "The Idea of a Reformed Seminary," 53, no. 3 (1960).

² Jason Lantzer, *Mainline Christianity: The Past and Future of America's Majority Faith* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012).

³ Peter J. Thuesen, "The Logic of Mainline Churchliness: Historical Background since the Reformation," in *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline*

Protestantism, ed. Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002).

⁴ Historian Elisha Coffman notes that the earliest use in a popular publication that we have identified is in 1960 in the *New York Times*. Prior to this, James Hudnut-Beumler has identified one use of the term "mainline" to describe American Protestants. It is in a 1949 article in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* entitled, "Whither Christian Pacificism?" But both findings underscore the point that attributing the term "mainline" to any Protestant denomination before midcentury is anachronistic. Elisha J. Coffman, *The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); James David Hudnut-Beumler, *The future of mainline Protestantism in America*, *The future of religion in America*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

⁵ John Wicklein, "Extremists Try to Curb Clergy: Moves to Ban Social Issues Causing Protestant Rift," *The New York Times* 1960, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1960/03/28/105188131.pdf?pdf_redirect=true&ip=0.

⁶ E. Digby Baltzell, *Philadelphia Gentlemen: The Making of a National Upper Class* (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2017), 201.

⁷ For examples, please see The Public Religion Research Institute Survey on American Religion from 2020, the Pew Research Center on American Religion Poll of 2021, and The Public Religion Research Institute Mainline Protestant Clergy Survey 2023. For research on the similarities of voting patterns among Asian American, African American and Latinx Protestants and the so-called "mainlines," see David C. Chao, "Evangelical or Mainline? Doctrinal Similarities and Difference in Asian American Christianity: Sketching a Social-Practical Theory of Christian doctrine," *Theology Today* 80, no. 1 (2023).

⁸ R. Stephen Warner, "The De-Europeanization of Christianity," in *A Church of Our Own: Disestablishment and Diversity in American Religion*, ed. R. Stephen Warner (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

⁹ Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy trap : how America's foundational myth feeds inequality, dismantles the middle class, and devours the elite* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019). Michael J. Sandel, *The tyranny of merit : what's become of the common good?*, First edition. ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

¹⁰ J. Ross Stevenson, "Theological Education in Light of Present Day Demands," *The Princeton Theological Review* 14, no. 1 (1916).