



NORMAN H. MARING, PH.D.
PROFESSOR OF CHURCH HISTORY
DEAN OF THE FACULTY

January 12, 1978

Dr. Thomas F. McDaniel
The Seminary

Dear Tom:

Returning to the office after our talk yesterday, I met President Weiss, who was ready to leave and did not plan to return for almost two weeks. He expects to be back on January 23. Since there will be a lapse of time before you and he can meet, I thought it desirable to put the gist of our conversation into writing to avoid possible further complications and misunderstandings. I did report briefly the essence of our meeting, but could not go into much detail. Therefore, in the interest of clarity as to what was said, I will summarize our discussion in this letter. If any of it is not in accord with your recollection, please let me know.

It is probably useless to reiterate my reluctance to introduce an unpleasant subject, especially since it has not been long since you found it possible to get over resentment incurred by a previous meeting between us. I hope that you can accept me and my role in this matter with understanding, but I realize that with the best of intentions you may find it difficult to dissociate my role as a friend from that as the dean. I should have preferred to remain aloof from this business, but since I recognize the seriousness of the problem and have still the responsibility as dean of the faculty, it seemed my duty to accede to the request of the president.

No one wants to see a satisfactory resolution of this problem more than I do. Indeed, I am sure that Dan Weiss and any other persons who have a stake in the outcome would hope that an acceptable solution of the problem can be found. We all recognize that you are a gifted scholar and teacher, a sincere Christian, and a congenial colleague. You are mistaken in thinking that there are persons who will never be satisfied until they have removed you from the Old Testament position. On the other hand, as I told you, the issue raised by your Christology is perceived as a serious one which might eventuate in a request for a resignation. In other words, whereas previous disagreements may have caused annoyance, this one touches a much more sensitive point and forces the administration to investigate the matter.

You asked why the president, himself, had not talked with you about this matter, since he had inklings of your views earlier and now has had the

opportunity to listen to the tapes of lectures at Green Lake. I replied that he did not approach you on the subject earlier, because all that he had to go on was hearsay evidence. The reports, however, were a matter of concern. When the taped lectures stated your position clearly, there was no way to avoid a frank discussion to air the matter. Although I preferred not to become involved, my reasons were personal rather than based upon principle. I agreed that direct discussion was necessary, and it seemed proper academic procedure for the dean to have the initial talk.

You stated that you thought that "they" would rather have an Old Testament Professor who was a Dispensationalist and would teach traditional views which would disturb no one. I disagreed on that point, and I am sure that such an extreme statement was not a considered judgment on your part. On the other hand, I agreed that there would undoubtedly be those who would prefer someone who dealt with touchy issues in a way which provoked less criticism. Just as you feel irked at being questioned about doctrinal views, you should recognize that others feel irked at having to deal with repeated criticisms from students or from outside the school.

The Old Testament area, however, is one in which there is bound to be a certain amount of friction in a school which is consciously conservative and which naturally attracts students who are conservatively oriented. It is not pleasant for a president, dean, or others to have to defend a professor who tends to espouse views which make students question the integrity of the school, but so long as the views expressed can be fitted into the doctrinal framework of the seminary, the administration has been willing to protect your right to teach views which you believe are correct interpretations of the Scriptures.

It seemed to come as a surprise to you that your interpretation of Christ as one who had a point of beginning before the creation of the universe, and who was the agent in creation, should cause any stir. You argue that this is clearly what the Bible teaches, and therefore there is no good ground for objection. You manifested neither awareness nor concern that your position has similarity to the Arian views of the fourth century and the early nineteenth-century Unitarians in America, and that such views have been generally regarded as deviations from orthodoxy. Since you had never read Arius and had little acquaintance with the controversies which led to the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381), you did not understand how you could be considered an Arian. In your opinion, the trouble with many theologians and even with New Testament scholars (e.g., Cullman, The Christology of the New Testament) is that they do not know enough about the Old Testament. If they understood the Wisdom Literature, especially Proverbs 8:22 and the Wisdom of Solomon in this case, they would be better able to interpret John's statements about the Logos and Pauline phrases, such as "the first born of creation."

Although I know that our age of specialization leads to a narrowing of focus, it seemed incredible to me that you could be unaware of the Arian controversy and its outcome. The central point of dispute was over the Son's co-eternity with the Father and the Son's full divinity and equality with the Father. Among the favorite passages of the Arians were Proverbs 8:22, Colossians 1:15, and Hebrews 3:2, and they equated the personified Wisdom of Proverbs with the Logos in the Prologue of John's Gospel. The debate was extended over decades, and Old and New Testament were combed for evidence. Conflicting interpretations of identical passages complicated the issue, but the result was clear: Any view which denied the eternal existence (or that affirmed that the Logos had a beginning) was a contradiction to the full Biblical picture of a Triune God. For centuries that position has

been accepted by Protestants, Catholic, and Orthodox ever since.

In view of this situation, does it not seem naive to think that you can contradict such a generally accepted view without being challenged? Even if it were possible to prove that your interpretation is correct, it would seem the part of wisdom to propose a novel idea on so critical an issue with more caution and tentativeness. ~~Write~~ Your interpretation could turn out to be correct, but it is an interpretation! There are other competent scholars who have interpreted the same passages in a different way and have reached conclusions different from yours. Why not acknowledge with some sympathetic understanding that this is an exceedingly complex problem, and that there are other ways to interpret the materials? Why not take pains to show why you think that there is no discrepancy between your interpretation and a fully Trinitarian interpretation of the God of the Bible? The insistence upon making a clear distinction between the Logos (Son, Wisdom) and Jahweh, and that the Son had a point of beginning (begotten, created) before there was "time," is certainly opening yourself up to identity with what has been generally accepted as unorthodox Christology. Therefore, I was surprised to hear such clear, unqualified statements as were made on the taped lecture. There may be ways of harmonizing your position with an orthodox, Trinitarian position, but the question cannot simply be dismissed by saying that that is what the Bible teaches!

When we get to the nub of the present problem, however, it is not a question whether your interpretation is correct or not. The question which has to be faced is: Does your interpretation of Christ as one who had a beginning, and who is to be clearly differentiated from the Jahweh, fit the interpretation affirmed in our Doctrinal Basis, viz. belief in "one God eternally existing in three persons--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit"? Is your interpretation compatible with the clause in the doctrinal statement? There appears to be a conflict between what you affirm and what has for centuries been considered orthodoxy. It is not immediately self-evident that one can have a beginning and at the same time be eternally existing. Since that is the case, you should not feel surprised that questions are being addressed to you, but the burden of proof lies upon one who makes such an assertion.

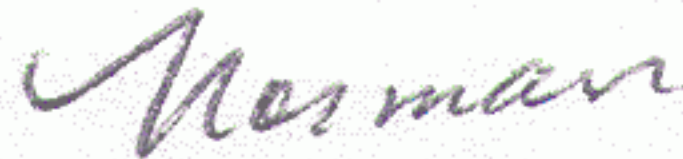
You have said that you do not see any contradiction between your views and the Doctrinal Basis which we all subscribe. It is possible that you can make a plain and reasonable case for harmonizing the apparent conflict. I am sure that you have signed the statement in full honesty, not doubting the consistency of your views with those of the seminary's official position. It may be, however, that your confidence stems in part from unfamiliarity with historical theology and even a tendency to disdain any theological systems which uses inferences and language not purely or specifically asserted in a biblical text. However, even biblical theology such as yours involves presuppositions, inferences and interpretations; and in order to protect the intent of the Biblical witness it is sometimes necessary to formulate creedal affirmations or confessional statements. Even Baptists, historically, set great store by confessions of faith, although modern Baptists know so little history that they often deny this to be the case.

Tom, I have stated the case as frankly and plainly as I can. We publish in the Doctrinal Basis a statement of Eastern's official doctrine, and president, dean, directors, and faculty have a stake in maintaining the integrity of the institution. I shall be glad to have you produce a convincing statement which demonstrates the compatibility of your views

in this matter with those of the respective clause in the Doctrinal Basis. I am sure that all of your colleagues, including the president, would share the same hope (if they were ^{all} cognizant of what is going on). You need not furnish me with any kind of statement, but you should have a statement prepared for Dan Weiss when he returns, showing how you harmonize what appear to be discrepant views.

If there are inaccuracies in the account which I have prepared for the record, please let me know. It is not intended to be a point-by-point transcript of our conversation, but a summary of the essential points covered. If I hear of no objections within the next few days, I shall assume that you see nothing to which you object and will give a copy to the president.

Cordially,



Norman H. Maring
Dean of the Faculty

P.S. This typing is not up to the standards we expect from our secretaries, but I have done the typing because I did not want its contents to be the possession of any one of them. Insofar as possible, I shall try to keep this matter from becoming a matter of general knowledge, although I know from experience that it is extremely difficult to keep anything confidential after three or four persons know it. Since writing the original draft, Cubby has said that he talked with you and that the two of you will continue the talk later. I have also let Dr. Veninga read the letter, since he is the one to whom I am immediately accountable.

I hope that you will not spend time in trying to find out who is to blame for raising these issues. Attention has been raised by a series of more or less fortuitous happenings, but ultimately it simply goes back to ideas expressed by you in classes and at Green Lake and to the natural reactions and comments which they have evoked. Focus attention on the key question, which I have underlined in the letter. The resolution of that is what is important. Try to look at the matter in perspective, i.e., from the standpoint of one informed at all about historical theology who hears statements such as were made without qualification in the Green Lake lecture. Then, see how or whether a clear harmonization can be made.

