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## THE REV. JAMES BENJAMIN GREEN

*(Remarks made by Rev. James McDowell Richards at the funeral service of Dr. Green conducted in the Decatur Presbyterian Church, Decatur, Georgia on the afternoon of September 9, 1967)*

It is not our custom today to pronounce eulogies upon the dead. This in itself is both right and proper. A funeral is not a time for sentiment and for empty words in praise of one who has departed; it is not an occasion on which to exalt a person, but rather to magnify our Maker.

There are times, however, when it is a good thing for us to pause at the close of some great life and to ask ourselves the secret of its meaning. At such a time we seek to emphasize the lessons which have been taught in that life and to pay tribute to the God of Grace and of Glory, who is willing to use a life dedicated to Him, and who yet speaks to us through his servants.

Such a day has come in our experience. The Second Book of Samuel records the fact that when David was mourning the death of his captain, Abner, he spoke to his servants and said, "Know ye not that there is a prince and a great man fallen this day in Israel?" So is it with us today, for the one whose earthly career is ended was indeed a prince and a great man in the life of our Church. It is entirely fitting that we should pause to ask ourselves what God has been doing and saying through this life, and what God is saying to us at this hour.

It has been remarked by Dr. Davison Philips that in some sense the end of Dr. Green's life marks the close of an era, and this is true. Here is a life which spanned a large part of two centuries and covered a period of 96 full years. Dr. Green was born in Lexington, Alabama on May 10, 1871, and was 29 years of age before the end of the nineteenth century. Incidentally, it might be remarked that he was born in a log cabin, that he had few initial advantages in the way of worldly possessions or position, and that he had to overcome real difficulties in preparing himself for service. In this respect his life was an exemplification of the American dream. It is likely that not many more of those who rise to places of distinction in this country will be born in log cabins, although doubtless many will continue to come into the world in humble circumstances.

The last 67 years of this man's life were spent in the Twentieth Century, and the close of his pilgrimage found men launching their satellites into space, probing their way toward the moon and the planets, and threatening themselves with destruction through the hydrogen bomb. Dr. Green was a real part of both centuries. It has recently been remarked by one who knew him well that he was also very much at home in the First Century.

Insofar as Columbia Theological Seminary is concerned, Dr. Green's death assuredly marks the end of an era. He was the last of the distinguished and faithful men who taught in the old Columbia Seminary located in Columbia, South Carolina, and who then came to teach on the new campus and in the more adequate buildings provided in Decatur. He is also one of the last of that little group of professors who carried forward the work of the Institution during the depression years of the early Thirties, laboring under discouraging circumstances, at tremendous personal sacrifice and at a salary so small that I prefer not to mention it in public today.

In 1936, when salaries were still at almost their lowest level, when the student body was very small, and when the prospect of the future was highly uncertain, a renewed invitation came from Union Theological Seminary in Virginia for Columbia Seminary to merge with that Institution in Richmond. The way before this school was so uncertain that it seemed necessary to give careful consideration to the invitation. Indeed, the Board of Directors felt that it would have to accept the offer of a merger unless a considerable sum of money for those days could be raised by the Presbyterians of Atlanta — an undertaking which fortunately was successfully completed a few months later. At the time the question of merger was under consideration, and even though such a move would have brought many personal advantages to Dr. Green, he was unshakeable in the conviction that Columbia Seminary should remain where it is. He said that too much prayer had been offered for guidance before the decision was reached to move from Columbia to Decatur for God to have let his servants make a mistake, and that he was sure God did not mean for the decision to be altered in 1936. We believe the events of these later years have proven how right he was in that conviction.

It is not our intention to speak in detail concerning the life of Dr. Green. Much might be said about his personal and his family life, for he was a Christian gentleman in the fullest sense of the word, and a devoted husband and father. He was also the faithful and much loved pastor of congregations, and an expository preacher of such faithfulness and power that he had few peers and perhaps no superiors in that respect during our time.

It is of Dr. Green's work as a professor that I would speak particularly, however, for here his greatest service was rendered. In 1921, he was called from the pastorate of the First Presbyterian Church of Greenwood, S. C. to become Professor of Systematic Theology at the Old Columbia. Because he remained vigorous in mind and body until a comparatively few months before his death, and because the retirement policy of the Seminary had not been so strictly defined at that time as it is now, he continued his service in the classroom until 1951, when he was 80 years of age. He was a teacher of great ability. Although his principal work was in the field of Systematic Theology, Dr. Green also taught Homiletics, Ethics and the English Bible. He found particular delight in setting forth the Word of God and, as we were reminded earlier, he had an especial fondness for the Psalms which enabled him to interpret them superbly for his hearers. Probably few of the courses taught by Dr. Green were more greatly appreciated than those in which he led his students in a study of the Psalms during his later years in the classroom.

This man had been entrusted by God with a clear and logical mind, and he used his talents faithfully and well in the task to which he was assigned. He had an unusual ability to analyze, to synthesize, to condense, and to present the content of his subject with clarity and with force. He was a master of alliteration, making use of this device so constantly and effectively that it became both a source for delight and the occasion for much affectionate humor on the part of his students. His teaching was characterized by remarkable clarity of outline and was often enriched by the use of memorable and epigrammatic phrases.

This teaching was marked always by sincerity and earnestness. Perhaps the conviction with which he taught was all the greater because he was not born into a Presbyterian home. He had come to mature years before he made his profession of faith in Christ, and he became a member not of the

denomination of his fathers but of the Presbyterian Church. Hence, for him Presbyterianism was not an inherited tradition but a freely chosen faith. This fact had its inevitable effect upon the witness which he bore in the classroom and in the pulpit.

Dr. Green was a man of genuine humility and often seemed surprised by the appreciation and affection accorded him. To him the man was nothing, but the message which he bore was of transcendent importance. He was a man of the Book, whose message was based upon and centered in the Word of God. We have spoken already of his ability as an expository preacher and as a teacher of the Bible.

This was a man of faith, who knew that "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." His praying was marked particularly by the spirit of praise and thanksgiving even to the end of his life. He was gifted in public prayer because he prayed much in private, and because he did not approach this exercise of worship lightly. Students who sat in his classroom do not easily forget the earnestness and the edifying nature of the prayers with which, according to the practice of the Institution, he customarily opened each period of instruction. Indeed, it is likely that on many occasions they derived far more benefit from the prayers than from the lectures which followed, able though the latter were.

As a Christian, Dr. Green was a man who knew what he believed, but whose convictions were held in charity. He was able and willing to contend for the positions which he held, but there was about him no spirit of bitterness or of ill will.

Dr. Green was an author of distinction and his two principal works, "Studies in the Holy Spirit" and "A Harmony of the Presbyterian Standards with Explanatory Notes," continue to have a wide circulation. Through them he still speaks, but his influence in the life of the church is felt still more strongly through the lives of hundreds of men who sat in his classes and received instruction from him. Because his teaching was done with sincerity, because it put iron in their blood, because they remember him as a man of deep reverence for the Word who magnified the Church, and who exalted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, these men rise up with his family and his friends today to call him blessed.

In love and in gratitude the Alumni of the Seminary years ago initiated and carried out a successful movement to endow the Chair of Systematic Theology at Columbia Seminary in his name. For the same reason, some of his former students quietly initiated steps to have him nominated as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U. S. — an office to which he was elected in 1946. Perhaps no single incident will serve better to illustrate the spirit of the man than one which occurred in this connection.

On the day when Dr. Green first learned of plans to have him nominated as Moderator, he was encountered by one who loved him, pacing up and down behind the residence which he occupied on the campus of Columbia Seminary. He was obviously agitated and was weeping. When asked the reason for his distress he replied: "I have just learned that I am to be nominated as Moderator of the General Assembly, and I am not worthy of the office." Such was the spirit of the man whom God gave to serve Columbia Seminary and our Church for so many years.

There are two words from Scripture which seem to me to be highly appropriate on this occasion, and with them I would close. The first is

found in Proverbs 4:18 — “The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.” The other is from Ephesians 3:8 and I Corinthians 15:10. It consists of statements made by the Apostle Paul which Dr. Green had appropriated for himself, and which he echoed in his life: “Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach. . . . the unsearchable riches of Christ. . . . By the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain.”

## IN RESPONSE TO RECOGNITION BY THE ALUMNI

*William Childs Robinson*

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Pastor, Mr. President, Alumni, Family and Friends —

This is far beyond my fondest expectations. I am overcome. What can one say in appreciation of your manifold kindness? In listening to the gracious words of President Richards and of Dr. Phillips, I could not help but recall the old story that comes from the time when it was customary to eulogize the departed. The widow listened as the Parson waxed eloquent over the alleged virtues of her departed husband until she could stand it no longer. Pulling her son closer, she whispered to him, “Johnny, you go open that lid and see if the man in that box is your Pa.”

Yet Dostoevski does tell us, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, that, “in the heart of every man is both Sodom and the Madonna,” and the Apostle reminds us that we have this treasure in earthen vessels. Compared with the pricelessness of the divine treasure the earthiness of the human vessel overwhelms one.

Perhaps the generous gift of this magnificent automobile is a reminder of our first Christmas as professor at Columbia. That year we had been buying furniture and several times the car ran out of gas. So when Christmas came and the students took the faculty to task, they humorously complained that Dr. Robinson ran out of money by the middle of every month and the students had to push him around to the first. If our fourteen-year-old DeSoto has looked like it needed replacement, my defense is that this year we have been buying a house into which to move as we retire from the faculty home provided for us while we teach.

In any case I can only remember the Apostle’s lovely letter of thanks in his Epistle to the Philippians. Perhaps my Philippians are Harry and Davidson Phillips, the President and all those Columbia alumni and friends for whom they spoke. “I thank God for every remembrance of you from the first day until now” and, “my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” We cannot thank you enough.

Nor can I ever sufficiently express my gratitude to my junior colleagues for their kind offices in honoring my seventieth birthday with a volume of essays by distinguished scholars. *Soli Deo Gloria*, the title they have selected, is precious to every Christian’s heart. Abraham believed giving glory to God.