

A THEOLOGIAN OF GRACE

by Charles C. West



Editor's Note: Dr. Edward A. Dowey, PTS's Archibald Alexander Professor of the History of Christian Doctrine Emeritus, died on May 5, 2003, having served on the Seminary faculty since 1957.

Ed Dowey was a scholar who made unremitting demands on himself, his colleagues, his students, and his church. He was also a teacher and a friend, ceaselessly open and gracious to everyone who knew and lived and worked with him. He was both of these at once, and he bound them together with a zest for life that drove him until his very last days.

Ed was a scholar. His first and enduring contribution, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, was to change a whole generation's view of the great Reformer. Start reading the *Institutes* he said to his students and to everyone else, with Book Three: "The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ." Here is where Calvin's heart beats; he was first of all a theologian of grace, then of discipleship, and only third, of speculation and law. So it was with the whole 16th-century Reformation, from Luther onward, which Ed taught from this perspective. He gave his life as a scholar to it. A mountain of notes and an unfinished book on the Reformer Heinrich Bullinger, who composed the Second Helvetic Confession, bear witness to his dedication. But no finished volume could have completed Ed's work. It was the man and his message that inspires and guides us all, as we carry on the witness of grace and freedom in Christ against the legalists and moralists of our time.

Ed was a statesman of the church. The second great monument to his influence was of course the Presbyterian Church's Confession of 1967, whose composing committee he chaired and on which he wrote a definitive commentary. That committee, of which I was a member, wrestled for more than five years both among ourselves and with outside critics. What was our task? To define a Presbyterian theology? No, we said; it is, as with those early Reformers, to confess our faith in God at work in the world today. So we dated it "1967," though we had in mind the whole age in which we still live.

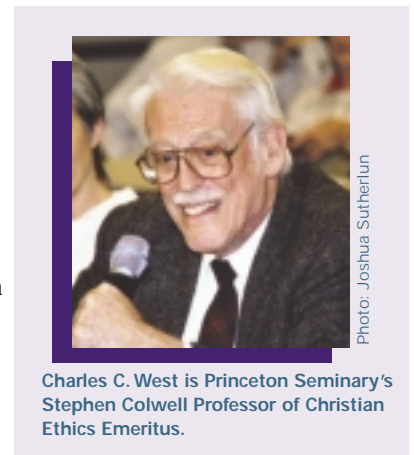
What is scripture? An authoritative human witness, we said, to God's revelation to the Hebrew people and in Christ. That raised a storm indeed! Is God's reconciliation of the world in Christ the central biblical message for our time? We are still debating it.

How specific must a confession of faith be about the personal and social message for our time—about race, about economic justice, about political justice and peace? How are prophecy and humility related in faithful witness? We fought about all these things. Ed Dowey was our critic and our moderator. Every paragraph of the Confession bears the marks of his consensus-building work, through biased and sinful human hands, but its chief witness and servant was Edward A. Dowey.

Ed was devoted to the mission and the integrity, both spiritual and academic, of Princeton Seminary. He had many friends in the University and in the community, and he would often spice our conversations with reports of what they thought of us. But on the quality of our curriculum, the qualifications of the faculty, and the integrity of our theological stance, he was adamant.

It was not always easy. He sought perfection. For years he fought for a communion table in Miller Chapel to replace the altar (which was closed, he noted, in the Roman Catholic tradition, to hold the bones of the saints). Many a time he held out against a compromise program or the choice of a new professor who was less than ideal. But on one point he was absolutely clear. The chapel was still the community's place of worship, and therefore his as well, however impure its symbolism. If the faculty voted for a new policy or proposal, it became his policy or proposal, too, even if he had not voted for it. Whenever a new faculty member was hired, even against his opposition, that newcomer became from then on, in every sense, a colleague.

Ed Dowey was a guardian of our standards, and a devoted friend and colleague to us all. His spirit still is with us, in the Seminary, and in the church. ■



Charles C. West is Princeton Seminary's Stephen Colwell Professor of Christian Ethics Emeritus.