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In Memoriam



Dr. William Stewart
1941–2003

ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν κέκρυπται σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ ἐν τῷ θεῷ . . . ὅταν ὁ Χριστὸς φανερωθῇ, ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν, τότε καὶ ὑμεῖς σὺν αὐτῷ φανερωθήσεσθε ἐν δόξῃ.
Colossians 3:3–4

Dr. William (Bill) Wayne Stewart, son of Roy and Gladys Stewart, was born June 8, 1941, in Austin, Texas, where he died on December 4, 2003. Bill graduated from the University of Texas, Texas Tech University, and the University of Southern California.

Bill had a lifetime interest in education, serving as a director at the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. He was especially interested in Christian education, serving on the Board of Brentwood Christian School and as an adjunct faculty member of Austin Graduate School of Theology.

Bill is survived by his wife Becky, his son Landon and daughter-in-law, Lana, two grandsons, Christian and Casey, and his sister, Jan Colley. Bill's first wife, Daphren, died in 1986.

From 1973 Bill was a member of Brentwood Oaks Church of Christ where he taught classes and for several years faithfully composed prayers for the order of worship. He was a man of deep personal faith who was sensitive to all those around him. He viewed all life as God's gift and sought to live in a manner showing gratitude for those who have gone before and concern for those who follow.

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Seminaries, “Spirituality,” and “Spiritual Formation”
*A Quick Fix for the Disciplined Life of Faith?**

J. J. M. Roberts

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In the twenty-five years I taught at Princeton Seminary one of the recurring complaints of the student body was that the seminary did too little to promote “spiritual formation.” Nor was this complaint unique to Princeton. If one may judge from ATS recommendations, it is a complaint common to many, if not most, seminaries. In recent years this complaint has grown in such volume that seminaries all over the country are attempting in one way or another to fix the problem. I assume something similar is happening in Church of Christ schools, since the desire for “spirituality” and “spiritual formation” seems to be a cultural-wide phenomenon, but since I have not taught in any of our schools for many years, I will restrict my comments to the schools I know, which are mainly Presbyterian. The fact that I criticize a phenomenon I know first hand in Presbyterian schools should not be misconstrued as a self-congratulatory criticism of others, however. My

*This paper was originally a speech presented on November 25, 2002, at the Restoration Quarterly Breakfast in Toronto, Canada, during the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature.

criticism is directed at a cultural phenomenon that I think is affecting theological education in almost all Christian communities, including our own. In fact, if I may judge from what I see going on in the worship services of our communion, we probably have a far greater problem than the Presbyterians. Most Presbyterian ministers still know what a Presbyterian order of worship looks like. I am not so sure the same can be said for the ministers graduating from our colleges and seminaries. In addition to the general cultural drift toward a homogenized and undifferentiated Evangelicalism, many of our graduates appear to be encouraging that drift, whether out of ignorance, or even more troubling, out of a surprisingly blatant hostility toward the central concerns of our own theological tradition.

Nonetheless, many of the fixes to the need for “spirituality” and “spiritual formation” that I have seen in Presbyterian and other Reformed circles have been incoherent, and in some cases even flaky. In my opinion, the recent and very popular promotion of walking the labyrinth as an ancient and profound Christian spiritual exercise qualifies as flaky. It is neither a very ancient Christian practice, nor was it ever very important, even at Chartres, until the recent fad. At Princeton, some faculty and administrators encouraged Seminary students to deepen their spirituality by attending spiritual retreats run by a Benedictine monastery. Together with a number of my Presbyterian colleagues on the faculty, I regarded that advice as at least bordering on the incoherent. Can a “spirituality” nurtured in and designed for the cloister really sustain a Presbyterian minister in an active pastoral ministry? That raises the issue of whether the devotional practices being encouraged by these fixes really strengthen the theological identity of the participant or actually serves to undercut it. One might mention here the new interest of Presbyterians in programs to train spiritual advisors. The model for such spiritual specialists is that of the Roman Catholic priest as father confessor in a one-on-one private confessional, and that seems to me

to undercut the emphasis in the Reformed tradition on the priesthood of all believers and the role of the whole community in issues of confession and church discipline.

One should note that in the Catholic tradition the confessor is an institutionalized part of an ecclesial structure; he speaks with the authority of the church, not as an isolated individual. But that is not so clear in the Protestant adaptation of this model. A couple of years ago the Austin American Statesman published a letter sent in response to a personal problem aired in the new Dear Abby column. The letter writer, who offered a simple solution to a messy and complicated problem, claimed to speak for God, since he was a "trained spiritual advisor." There was no ecclesial or communal structure authorizing this "spiritual advisor's" advice; it was simply the word of an individual, self-proclaimed expert. Interestingly enough, he urged the troubled person to do precisely what she wanted to do, though that very desire was causing her intense shame and guilt.

Moreover, the need to fix this "spirituality" problem has opened the door for a peculiar sort of empire building. Certain of the faculty at one seminary have developed a program in spirituality that they are trying to franchise out to other seminaries, and they are willing to use strong-arm tactics to expand their empire. When the faculty at another seminary declined to accept the program as a part of their curriculum, its promoters went to important church leaders and complained that the faculty at the uncooperative seminary were opposed to "spirituality," and under the resulting church pressure on that seminary's administration and the promise of outside funding, the beleaguered faculty reluctantly agreed to accept and participate in the program, though the faculty still refused to make the program mandatory for all students. When participating students complete the program, they are issued a certificate of spirituality at graduation, but since students are not

required to take the program, it means that only a minority of the seminary's graduates can be certified as spiritual.

Many of the seminary's faculty participate in this program they did not want simply to prevent it from being totally in the hands of outsiders, and an incident that happened to one of them illustrates what seems to me to be the underlying problem in all these fixes. This faculty member was asked to be the final speaker on the last day of a five-day conference on "spirituality" in the program. The faculty member agreed and began this final presentation by asking the participants, who had already spent four intensive days in this workshop, what they understood by "spirituality." Not one of them could give a coherent answer. The problem is that "spirituality" is one of those amorphous words that can mean anything in general and nothing in particular. This point was unintentionally highlighted a couple of years ago in an article in *The Christian Century* entitled, "Spirituality said to spur social activism" (Oct. 23–Nov 5, 2002, p. 15). The article defined religion as an "institutionalized set of beliefs and practices." Spirituality, on the other hand, it defined as "an individual and selective expression." In short, spirituality can be any smorgasbord of beliefs and practices that an individual selectively chooses to tailor a subjectively meaningful practice and worldview.

Given the difficulty of any meaningful definition of "spirituality," it is worth noting that it is not a biblical word. While Scripture speaks often of life in, by, or according to the Spirit, it never uses the abstract noun "spirituality," and it is very reticent in using the adjectival form "spiritual" in reference to people. Paul uses the term *pneumatikos* three times in 1 Corinthians (2:14; 3:1; 14:37) to refer to "spiritual" members of the Christian community at Corinth, but one wonders to what extent this may be tongue in cheek irony. He also uses it once in Gal 6:1, where such irony is less evident. But nowhere else is it used of individuals. 1 Pet 2:5 speaks of the community as a "spiritual house," but otherwise the term is used of

things—spiritual gifts, spiritual food, spiritual drink, spiritual rock, spiritual blessings, body, songs, understanding, and sacrifice. One should note that “formation” is not one of those spiritual things. The phrase “spiritual formation” is never used in Scripture, though Paul speaks of being again in labor with his converts in Galatia until Christ be formed in them (Gal 4:19), and several New Testament passages speak of disciples growing up into mature Christians who can deal with grown-up doctrine. One of the slogans of our tradition has been “to call scriptural things by scriptural names,” and I think there is some theological wisdom in this slogan. A subtle shift in language can disguise a far more profound shift in the understanding of the reality to which that language originally pointed, and this is particularly true when the new language is vague, amorphous, and indefinable.

Part of the problem in the students’ demand for “spiritual formation” is precisely that they don’t know what it is they want. It is to some extent an incoherent longing for something that is missing from their lives, though they are not really sure what it is. To the extent that this longing is a legitimate desire, I think it is a desire not just to know God, but to have their Christian identity and character so firmly shaped by that knowing that they will be able to remain faithful in their lives and ministries when God seems absent. Of course, I am cynical enough that I think some students just like to complain, or they are angry that seminary is harder and not as much fun as Young Life. Some of the complaining strikes me as no more than the desire for a quick fix. Just as students would like a foolproof method of seven easy steps for flawless exegesis, or an effortless system to learn Hebrew in just four weeks in their sleep, so many students would like the seminary to give them a totally integrated, profoundly spiritual, un-conflicted Christian identity in a painless and entertaining three years. Life doesn’t work that way.

One may even question how big a role a seminary can play in a prospective pastor’s Christian formation. In contrast to the rampant

individualism in our culture's quest for spirituality, the formation of Christian identity and character is by definition a communal activity. We are not our own, we were bought with a price, and our redemption puts us in the body of Christ, the church. It is in that community of the redeemed where we should learn what it means to be a Christian. It is the local church in its life together, in its Bible reading, preaching, teaching, singing, and praying, in its concern for the sick and the poor, and in its encouragement of family and private devotions, that is the primary shaper of Christian identity.

However much a seminary or Christian College may want to offer students a supportive Christian community, those communities cannot take the place of a local church, because seminaries and colleges are schools, not churches. Unfortunately, part of what is driving the push for spiritual formation in the seminaries is the lack of any meaningful church background for many of today's ministerial candidates. The number of students at Princeton who came out of para-church organizations such as Young Life, and who had never participated in any meaningful way in the life of a local church was appalling. What little theological identity they had was a very superficial Evangelicalism, largely ignorant of both Scripture and the actual dynamics of congregational life. But even many of those who grow up in local churches come to seminary theologically and biblically illiterate. They cannot inhabit a worldview shaped by the biblical narrative, because they don't know the narrative, and they have little understanding of the particularity of their own tradition's theology.

There is a certain sense in which seminaries are now required to do a great deal of remedial work, to make up for what the students did not learn in church. Students need to have a basic knowledge of the biblical text and a basic understanding of Christian theology before they are ready for genuine critical reflection on Scripture, Theology, Church History, or Practical Theology. Ideally, theological education should provide a student who already

has a strong Christian and theological identity a chance to reflect on and critique it in the light of other voices from the past and present, to put that identity under the scrutiny of the broader Christian world and to confront it with the serious objections of those who stand outside the Christian faith. This largely intellectual process is intended to facilitate a lifelong critical engagement with the sources of the Christian faith and its critics that will continually forge, reforge, and hopefully both strengthen and make less brittle the individual's Christian identity.

One should note here that my earlier characterization of certain practices of piety as flaky or incoherent was not intended to justify a very narrow or restrictive study of the Christian faith and its disciplines of piety. I think it is very important that all ministerial students, whatever their theological tradition, gain an understanding of the theology and practice of other Christian communities. One should study the piety of the desert fathers, the discipline of the different monastic orders, and so on. Moreover, the theological understanding of those other Christian practices may provide an important critique and correction for the theology and practice of piety in my own Christian community. My overriding point, however, is that the practice of piety promoted in a particular Christian community should reflect and strengthen the theological identity of that community and of the individual as a member of that community, that it should arise out of the community's theology. The danger today is that we simply pick and choose practices at our whim as individuals, or that as communities we adopt a practice, however foreign it is to the theology of our own tradition, because it seems neat or because it draws a crowd at some other Christian group with whom we are competing. In my opinion such faddish or market-driven choices have no theological integrity, and thus can be fairly characterized as incoherent.

Of course, more goes on in a seminary or Christian college than just academics. There is chapel, which ideally models appropriate Christian

worship, and there are all sorts of small groups, and personal interactions between students and faculty that play a role in shaping the way one thinks about and acts out the Christian faith, but at best the seminary or college community is very specialized and unrepresentative of the church at large; it is still no substitute for the local church.

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