

COLIN JOHN HEMER: IN MEMORIAM

Don Carson

Colin John Hemer was born on 11 September, 1930. After education at Plymouth College, he entered Exeter College, Oxford, in 1949, having been awarded the Stapledon Scholarship in Classics. After four years of study in 'Greats', Colin discharged the responsibilities of national service by a two year stint (1953-55) in the Royal Army Pay Corps. Thereafter he had ten years' experience of teaching mostly Latin or Classics, in Grammar and Preparatory Schools, primarily in Chelmsford. Strongly encouraged by his close friend Mr Jim Stunt, Colin left teaching to enter the University of Manchester in 1965, where under the direction of Professor F.F. Bruce he completed a doctoral dissertation with the title 'A Study of the Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia with special reference to their local background'.

From 1970 to 1977, Colin engaged in research at Tyndale House, combining this with various editorial responsibilities. He served as a Temporary Lecturer in New Testament Studies at Manchester University for two years (1977-79), and at Sheffield University for another year (1982-83). Between the two appointments he was the Librarian at Tyndale House (1980-82). From 1983 until his untimely death on 14 June 1987, Colin was a Research Fellow at Tyndale House. Apart from numerous research trips abroad, primarily to Turkey, he served as a Visiting Lecturer at the Freie Theologische Akademie at Giessen, and as a Visiting Research Fellow in New Testament Studies at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia.

From 1971 on, a steady stream of technical articles flowed from his pen, numbering more than fifty. The long-promised revision of his doctoral dissertation finally appeared in 1986 in the Supplement Series of JSNT, and has been universally praised for its meticulous scholarship, profound grasp of the relevant primary sources, and the fresh light it sheds on Revelation 2-3. For the past four years, Colin was primarily engaged in research and writing toward the production of a two volume work on the historicity of Acts. Those of us who have read parts or all of this unfinished study can attest its importance. Far from being a rehash of old arguments, this manuscript provides a fresh, detailed and balanced evaluation of the primary material. Unfinished the work may be, but I am happy to say it is far enough along that it will doubtless appear in due course. Decisions as to how to bring the work to completion and publication have been left to the Tyndale House Council.

Many of us feel that Colin was entering the prime period of his scholarly productivity. He himself felt he was only six months at most from completing his work on Acts. Aside from a number of more popular projects, he was hoping to contribute much work to a volume on documents of the New Testament period, to the project aiming to

produce a completely new 'Moulton and Milligan', and to joint authorship (with Ward Gasque) of the NIGTC commentary on Acts. Not only have some of us lost a gentle friend and Christian brother, but the church has lost a front rank scholar whose competence was largely underrated because so much of his best work was still to come. Doubtless Colin can say, with Paul, 'To depart and be with Christ is far better'; but his gain is our loss, and it is a serious loss.

Those of us who knew him well cherish many memories. Colin was never too particular about dress and appearance, but he won the affection and respect of an amazingly diverse lot of people, from the most respected scholars to hotel porters, from a Turkish general to unkept youths, from successful businessmen to impoverished third world students. At the age of two, our daughter thought he was wonderful, and would pick him out of any crowd and pester him joyfully. Since then I have discovered he was the delight of many children, even though on the face of things he was awkward around them. He never talked down to them, and won the confidence of more eight-year-olds than I have time to tell you about. His slowness of speech endeared him to countless hundreds of international students who passed through Cambridge; his retentive memory for names and his massive knowledge of philological details behind a dozen languages provided points of contact, while some of us, superficially more gregarious, tried to think of something to say. The Bible studies he organized in the early seventies at Tyndale House for international students grew until they numbered sixty or seventy participants a week. Others became leaders and teachers, but he was the anchor that held it all together; and not a few of those who attended will stand in the last day and thank God for the life and witness of Colin Hemer.

We remember many of his stories, always dropped word by word, and enjoyed by no one more than by Colin himself; but we cannot remember any word of malice. We remember the way he hurried home, weekend after weekend, to his ageing and ailing mother, whose death preceded that of her son by about eighteen months; but we cannot remember any word of complaint. We remember that he did not always have much of an idea what he was going to do next, as one appointment after another came to a close; but we cannot remember any anxiety, any voiced doubt in the wisdom and goodness of God. We may wish he had written more; but we are rebuked when we remember how generously he gave his time to a very large number of younger (and sometimes quite senior) scholars who sought his counsel. We remember that he had no close family members left; he is survived by five first cousins scattered in three countries. But we cannot remember any self-pity of voiced loneliness. And some who thought they knew him would be surprised by aspects of his life he rarely discussed: his bird-watching, and the meticulous records he kept of the birds he had observed; his intimate knowledge of Devon, spawned not only by loyalty but by countless long walks, sometimes alone, sometimes with one or two friends; his ability to swim like a fish. But above all, many colleagues will remember his devotion to meticulous

scholarship, his knowledge not only of classical literature but of epigraphical materials, his profound grasp of philology, his commitment to making the primary sources control the discussion, his interest in the social history of the New Testament world and his corresponding suspicion of literary, theological and sociological theories that are divorced from the only real evidence we have.

His death has brought numerous letters of tribute. Former colleagues at Manchester and Sheffield have testified to his geniality in their respective departments, to the active interest he showed in students, and the healthy skepticism with which he treated scholarly fads. On the last point, one of them wrote; 'As raconteur extraordinary and advanced practitioner of the hermeneutic of suspicion (especially on the eminent names of Biblical scholarship), Colin had no peer'. Friends and colleagues at Macquarie University have written amongst the most moving of tributes, some too personal to be included here; but it would not be inappropriate to say that Professor Edwin Judge credits him with setting in train the 'Moulton and Milligan' project and with helping to ensure that it would be undertaken in the antipodes, while Dr Greg Horsley, whose work on the New Documents series is so invaluable, ascribes his own move in this direction to the influence of Colin Hener. In a letter written to Colin just before he died, one senior scholar gratefully acknowledged, with respect to Colin's work on Acts, 'If at times the critics get on top of me and tempt me to doubt, I know to whom to turn for reassurance!' In a letter read to Colin twenty-four hours before he died, Professor F.F. Bruce wrote in terms many of us would want to reiterate: 'I have learned much from you, and from your life as well as your scholarship'. A long-standing friend who repeatedly travelled to Greece and Turkey with Colin provided a number of vignettes: he writes 'of the first Sunday in Greece when we were led to an assembly of Brethren in an upper room in Thessalonica when Colin astounded the good folk by reading and speaking to them in...Greek in simple response (or so it seemed) to the 'Pisidian Antioch' invitation, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people say on"...But it is almost impossible to describe in words his reception in Turkey by the local people, great or small. He was certainly the most shabbily dressed person I ever travelled with, probably with the remains of some breakfast on his shirt; but he was immediately at one with them as the perfect Gentleman he was. Naturally the fact that he made an extremely good shot at conversing in Turkish impressed them deeply - so few foreigners bother to try...I suppose my abiding memory of Colin will be his behaviour on holiday, notebook in hand, copying inscriptions! Me, I sat in the sun on the nearest warm stone. He was a model passenger in a car, even in the early days when Turkish roads were quite abominable. (Noteworthy was his) willingness to provide his driver with a brief history lesson, and then repeat it all again so patiently when it was clear that the lesson had been forgotten or misunderstood'. One Christian publisher, thanking Colin during those last days of his life for the unselfish ways he had worked behind the scene, wrote, 'Words are always inadequate, but we pray

that you will know the peace which passes understanding and the certainty of Christian hope, founded in those great facts and realities to which you have devoted your life'.

Colin's friends will want to know a little of the nature of his illness and the manner of his death. He had suffered what he took to be a nasty viral attack at the end of last year, and never entirely recovered. At the end of February of this year, he was still feeling weak, was coughing quite a bit, and unable to work at full capacity. Medical advice was to the effect that he was suffering from 'post-viral syndrome'. He returned to Devon for the Easter break, destined to be his last trip, renewing links with many friends. By then he was losing weight rather badly. He did not consult a physician here in Cambridge until 8 May; preliminary tests were all negative, and Colin was in good spirits, though extremely weak. By the middle of May, he was finding sleep rather difficult. To keep any food down other than the simplest liquid repast was almost impossible. House residents took it upon themselves to care for his simple needs as well as they could. Concerned especially about the weight loss, with Colin's permission I became involved with the physician near the end of May. On 2 June, what began as a scheduled trip to the doctor's surgery ended in hospital. The consultant ordered a systematic set of tests, culminating on Monday 8 June with a liver biopsy. Eight days after admission to hospital, on Wednesday 10 June, the results were declared: Colin had cancer in the liver, the gastro-intestinal tract, the lungs, the bone marrow, and, in the word of the doctor, 'everywhere'.

My wife and I offered to have Colin home, but the doctors would not release him. It fell to me that evening to explain the gravity of the situation to Colin, who even at this point had no suspicion that he was terminally ill. He had been told that he had a 'growth' that was inoperable; he had somehow gained the impression, wrongly, that the promised treatment would be remedial rather than palliative. Nevertheless, I have rarely witnessed a Christian adjust so quickly to the prospect of his own imminent death. Typically, he wanted to know the facts, all the facts, and whether there was any possibility of a mistaken diagnosis. Once clear on these matters, he said, rather wistfully, that he rather hoped he could fool the doctors. I stayed until he was settled in his own mind, and prayed with him. His chief reaction to the news was astonishment, not fear; and by the end of the evening he was wondering what kind of service the Lord had in store for him that he should be called away so quickly. True to his own interest in others, he said to me at the end of the evening, 'This can't have been a very easy evening for you'.

By the next day, Thursday 11 June, Colin was announcing his condition in the bluntest terms to his many visitors. We were trying to set in motion the many steps that needed to be taken to sort out an array of legal and literary matters; he was making jokes about the pleasure of doing the research and writing for the Acts project, while others would have to take on the bother of indices.

By Friday, though still without pain, every few minutes he was losing lucidity for short periods of time. With considerable mental effort, he helped me sort out remaining legal and other matters. David Coffey and I spent that night and the next day and night at the hospital, where we had the privilege of watching and helping a Christian die. I suspect we were more helped than helpers. The quiet faith that had been the hallmark of his life was no less characteristic in Colin's death. In his decreasing moments of lucidity, we discussed many things, not least matters philological. Typical of the tangential way he most commonly spoke about his faith, he gave us a Turkish word to remember, and then translated, 'We commend you to God'. Several friends arrived from Plymouth on the Saturday; in each case, Colin roused from what was by this time more or less constant stupor long enough to greet them and welcome them. By Saturday evening he was in considerable pain. Increasing doses of drugs finally enabled him, by about 3.00 am Sunday morning, to get some rest. He slipped away into the presence of the Lord three hours later, at 6.05 am, 14 June, four days after the diagnosis had been given.

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.

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