

Reflections on a Life
Remembering the Life of William A. Struck,
March 17, 1920 – March 6, 2014

I Corinthians 13: 12

Richard A. Rhem
Grand Haven, Michigan
March 2014

Transcription of the handwritten sermon

It is with fondness that I think of Bill Struck. When I learned of his death and the request that I give some reflections on his life, I immediately thought of what brought us together, resulting in a deep friendship. It centered around the theological journal, *Perspectives*, published by the Reformed Church in America, aimed at its leadership in order to stimulate theological conversation on issues before the church. For most of the nearly twenty years that I served as one of the Board of Editors, I was the only pastor. College and seminary professors and RCA executives made up the Board.

What I did not realize going in was that the professors and executives were limited in what they could put in print. Great discussions took place at our stimulating bi-annual Board meetings in New York's Greenwich Village but, when it was decided who should write on the issue at hand, I got the assignment. When, as could be expected, I wrote addressing the issue, Letters To the Editor came in response and the majority were negative, calling in question my positions.

My wife, Nancy, protective of her husband, asked, "Why do you always have to write on themes that create controversy?" My answer was simple: "I'm the only editor that has a 'safe' position." Blessed as I was with a congregation like Christ Community, I could wonder, question and think out loud about issues, questions, theological problems that the church was facing.

It was one thing to do it in my safe community that gave me permission to think wonder and question. It was quite another when, by writing in *Perspectives*, I reached the broader church. I got a lot of negative Letters to the Editor. But worth it all was my meeting Bill Struck. Oh, my, what a bright and shining light he came to be for me!

Among other things I wrote over the years of my membership on the Board of Editors, there were especially three pieces that stirred the "theological pot" of the Reformed Church in America. They really form a progress in my own theological

understanding, an understanding stimulated by the criticism I received which caused me to re-visit and dig deeper. I won't go more into detail here except to say that, at each step I took, Bill Struck was there to affirm, encourage and cheer me on.

Thinking about this gathering to remember and celebrate his life, I went back to those old issues of *Perspectives* to read again – not my essays, but Bill's responses in the Letters To the Editor column.

In the first essays I wrote about the extent of God's Grace, letting it be known that it was not limited – maybe even universal. Well. "All Hell broke loose," as you can imagine. But overcoming all the negatives was a letter from Bill. Let me give you a taste of his letter, introduced by the Editor:

In the wake of Richard Rhem's and William Brownson's articles last autumn on the efficiency of Christ's atoning work, a substantial volume of comment arrived. Three letters were published in this column last month, and the discussion continues with these excerpts from other correspondents. Perspectives is pleased to be the vehicle for this continuing dialogue.

John Stapert

I think that Dr. Rhem has done us an important service by jarring our thinking. For too long our theology has been characterized by a comfortable security in tradition and an unwillingness to look honestly at the rapid changes that have occurred in the world, especially in the wake of World War II. To imagine that our religious schema is uninfluenced by experience and by the current historical setting is illusory.

...

We, especially in the Reformed tradition, are not fond of ambiguity, so much so that we generally interpret Scripture to fit the premises and structure of our system of beliefs.

...

We all crave certainty. But Scripture does not provide what we crave. Wars have been fought over scriptural uncertainties. It seems to me that our fondness for dividing the world into saved and lost is rooted more in historical parochialism and chauvinism than in the clear teaching of Scripture.

...

He has called our attention to the possibility of a shift in our state of mind, an alteration in our perspective, a change in our attitude toward the "other," that could be exciting. Instead of confronting the non-Christian with a demand for agreement, with rejection as the alternative, the relationship could be one of acceptance, leading to mutual growth.

William Struck
Kalamazoo, Michigan
Letter, 02/1989

I cite this letter, not because of what Bill says of me, but what the letter says of Bill. He was deeply traditioned – I served a Reformed Church in that New Jersey hotbed of Reformed fundamentalism from which he stemmed and know it well. That gave

him a place to stand, but not be stuck. Rather he was alive to history's movement and the evolving human situation.

And more – he was aware of “the other” and welcomed “a shift in our state of mind” that would enable us to view the human tapestry with grace and move toward inclusiveness.

In light of the strong critique I received for that initial article, I came to see how stuck we were in the Dutch Reformed Church's failing to engage our tradition with the exploding knowledge of the modern world. I wrote a piece entitled “Sleeping Through A Revolution.”

Well, that article really spoke to Bill. He was a scientist – world-class – an Enlightenment scholar. He wrote a great letter, two pages, underlining what I had tried to say. From just the opening lines you can imagine how affirmed I felt and, from such a person, confirmed in what I was attempting to say. His opening lines give you a taste.

Dear Dick,

Your lead paper, “Sleeping Through A Revolution” in the April *Perspectives* left me almost breathless. It is indeed a blockbuster – a paper that is timely, necessary, hits the nail on the head, and expresses the thought of many of the “best and the brightest,” as well as of many others in the Christian community who haven't organized their thoughts.

There are so many comments that occur to me that I hardly know where to begin. But I'll try by first acknowledging that, as a scientist, I am a product of the Enlightenment, in that I take for granted the assumptions that you delineate.

Letter: 05/20/1991

One more. Again, the serious controversy the article elicited caused me to go deeper. What was binding our Reformed community in a rigid dogmatic structure that disallowed us to engage the ongoing explosion and knowledge and the dynamic of historical development? I wrote once more, sensing that a failure to be open to the critical study of Scripture made us prisoners of our dogmatic system. An inerrant, infallible Bible blocked us from fresh insight and growth in addressing our dynamic world in process. Once again, contrary to the majority opinion of the Letters To the Editor, Bill came through with a wonderful affirmation. The opening line says it all!

Dec. 23, 1992

Dear Dick,

Bravo! Bravo! Bravo! “The Book That Binds Us” in the December *Perspectives* finally says what needs to be said. Some time ago, reading a book on fundamentalism, I

think by Barr, I noted especially his recognition that fundamentalism requires more of the believer than the simple faith in Christ that is so assiduously promoted. Without it being stated, the believer is also expected to accept a certain view of the Bible, a view which indeed takes the Bible to be “a book of propositional truths, timeless and eternal, covering the full spectrum of cosmic reality, to be applied objectively to questions of faith and practice.”

Sadly, this constricted view continues to permeate even that segment of the evangelical community that cringes at being called “fundamentalist.” This includes, of course, a significant portion of the RCA, especially here in the Midwest. And we all know the kinds of problems that this view creates – from “scientific (*sic!*) creationism” to the place of women in the church, not to mention a host of other contemporary issues that could never have been anticipated by the Biblical writers.

I especially enjoyed your recalling Tillich’s category of “reactive literalism” and your explication. I have often wondered about the psychology of the literalist, and find your comments on “reactive literalism,” “lust for certitude,” and the fear of “looking into the abyss” to be extremely helpful.

As I have reviewed again these letters which meant so much to me, I realize what a rare person Bill was – deeply religious, faithful, serious and also open, desiring to grow in his understanding, bringing his Christian faith into relationship with an ongoing intellectual journey.

In his remarkable professional life he met scientists and scholars from around the world and I remember how much it meant to him for a voice from his church community to confirm his gracious openness to the other.

From my encounters with him relating to our mutual spiritual quest, I have attempted to paint a portrait of this fine man.... But there is more and you, dear family, know that well – he was a gentle man, gracious, kind, of good humor. As I thought of him, Paul’s familiar hymn of love came to mind – the description of love fits Bill well.

But the last paragraph of the chapter reminds me of Bill. Paul had a problem with the Church at Corinth. There were divisions – groups and individuals vying for the prize of having the finest spiritual gifts. Paul says – fine, all those gifts are good and helpful. But let me show you a more excellent way – the way of love.

After describing love, Paul returns to the problem of competing spiritual gifts. He reminds the people of that community that in our present historical moment we are limited. In light of the cosmic scene we are but children in our understanding and, thus, humility befits us well. Comparing our present situation rooted in history, Paul writes,

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully even as I have been fully known.

Bill understood that so vividly. The reason dogmatism and absolutism have no place in our present human situation is that we see “dimly” – only partially do we grasp the wonders of the cosmic drama in which we are enmeshed. Thus, the best way to live was with humility, honest inquiry, questioning, wondering, openness to new insight and fresh perspective.

And, of course, on this amazing human journey, there is one ultimate – the Way of Love –

Faith/trust – in the Eternal God.

Hope – the best is yet to be.

Love – the last word.

Love that binds us together in family and community as we move toward that moment when we shall know even as we are known – face to face with the Love that loves us and all eternity to explore the wonder of that Love.

Thanks be to God!

Let us pray.

O God, we would be still
and know that You are God – Source of all being,
Mysterious Mover of the ongoing cosmic drama,
creatively breathing fresh surprises
into the tapestry of our history,
graciously present to us in those moments of awareness
when we come to ourselves,
when for at least a brief time,
light dawns upon us and we are saturated with wonder –
at the sight of setting sun or starry sky,
or landscape bathed in brilliant winter sun
glistening on newly fallen snow.

Then in silence and solitude
we know what is beyond knowing –
then a serenity sweeps over our souls
and we know all is gift,
for we did not create ourselves nor our world –
not sun or moon,
not the air we breathe,
not the restless surf locked under miles of ice,
unable to caress the sandy beach.
Then we know we are part of something so much larger
than the narrow parameters

of our daily experience and limited understanding.

Before the wonder of it all,
we sense we are embraced, caught up
in something the dimensions of which we cannot begin to take in –
that Mystery that has addressed us,
eliciting from us in turn the response of address,
when from our depths we utter, “O God.”
Then, knowing beyond knowing,
we know we have been found by our Source
and in turn have found our resting place.
Source and resting place,
present to us in mysterious and gracious Presence –
it is enough.
Only gratitude then fills our being.

O God, in moments of awareness
when we are attentive, present to the awesome gift of life,
the beauty, the marvel of it all,
the potential of the human creature,
whose consciousness is the consciousness of the cosmos,
whose voice is the speech of Being,
we are lost in wonder, love and praise.

Such was the way of life of your servant,
our loved one, whose life we remember and celebrate today.
This was no ordinary person –
rather extraordinary in so many ways –
deeply rooted in Christian faith
learned in his childhood home, church and school.
Traditioned in a great theological vision,
he walked humbly before you, O God,
faithful in worship and service.

But he was more.
His brilliant mind restless, desiring to broaden
the horizon of knowledge and understanding –
not to escape from the faith,
but rather to know its wonder more deeply,
to stand in ever greater awe before you,
Eternal Mystery,
in whom we live and move and have our being.
Loving husband, father, grandfather and friend,
a gentle man of good humor and restless mind
to plumb the heights and depths of our human experience.

We remember him,
images flowing through our minds,
and we give thanks that he graced our lives.

We do not deny our loss nor the grief we feel.
Where love looms large,
loss is large as well, and painful.
We lift up our eyes to You, O Eternal One.
You uphold us with everlasting arms;
You overshadow us with a gracious Presence.
You bear us up on eagle's wings;
beneath your sheltering wings
we find refuge and peace.

Sacred Mystery of all being, of our being,
consciously aware of our lives in your light,
we worship.
We know that all will be well,
all will be well.
All manner of things will be well.

Now, while our hearts are open,
our spirits tender,
mantle us with Your gentle grace.
Hear our prayer through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.