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SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

STATEMENT BY DEAN WILLIAM B. LAWRENCE ON THE LIFE AND MINISTRY OF REV. DR. WILLIAM K. McELVANEY

Early in the morning, on the first day of the week, when it was just beginning no longer to be dark in Dallas, Bill McElvaney left his colleagues and friends and moved into the community of the saints. We will miss him. And we will all be diminished by his absence from us, now that he has died.

An ordained United Methodist minister in the North Texas Annual Conference, an emeritus professor from the faculty of Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University, and a former President of Saint Paul School of Theology, Bill was actually an exceptional person in the sense that he was simply true to the doctrines and disciplines of his church. While plenty of preachers lament the lack of justice in the world, Bill devoted himself to working for justice. While plenty of professors teach about the love of Christ as a matter of personal devotion and public witness, Bill committed himself to living that word as an essential aspect of believing that word—not just engaging in intellectual chats about it.

Bill received a share of recognitions for his efforts. He was celebrated as one of the Distinguished Alumni Award recipients of Southern Methodist University. And he was also celebrated separately as one of the Distinguished Alumni Award recipients at Perkins School of Theology.

Bill also received a share of criticism for his efforts. He received criticism when he actively opposed the efforts of Southern Methodist University to become the home of a Presidential Library when he believed that the President whom it would honor had been the author of policies that dishonored the doctrines of the church, the disciplines of faith, and the principles of American democracy.

But, while he was grateful for any accolades that came his way and while he was respectful of the rejections that came his way, neither of those things had any impact on his ego or his courage. He would express gratitude for praise and note that others were far more worthy to receive it. He would express respect for his critics and note that they were entitled to their views, though he hoped they would also respect his concerns for victims of suffering and injustice.

Bill was the best kind of fundamentalist—not the kind that read the Bible literally but the kind who take the Bible seriously. He actually believed that followers of Jesus were to be held accountable for the Christ's message about feeding the hungry. He really believed that the Beatitudes in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount were serious promises made to the peacemakers and to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Bill was the best kind of Methodist—not the kind that like messages for helping us to feel good about ourselves but the kind that embrace the Wesleyan approach in a church. He knew that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, had insisted that there is no such thing as holiness of life unless it is both personal holiness and social holiness. So he knew that there was something incomplete and deficient about a Methodist who would pray on Sunday for those who needed healing and then on Monday oppose public funding of health care for those who needed healing.

Bill was a man of integrity in the classic meaning of that term. He was a whole person. He believed deeply and understood fully that a Christian had to develop a wholly integrated system of beliefs and practices. When he disagreed with someone strongly, as he did with me about whether the Bush Library should come to SMU, he expressed his views vigorously. But when the matter was resolved, when the processes of the church and the university had reached a conclusion that the Bush Library would come to the campus, Bill harbored no grudges. He never engaged in recriminations. He would never withhold his affection from a colleague or neighbor, even one with whom he disagreed intensely. He helped lead a demonstration on the day the Library was dedicated. But the next day he greeted me with a smile, an embrace, and a word of encouragement.

He also never let his own ego get in the way. In the midst of the big debate over the Bush Library, Stephen Colbert took notice of the allegedly aging hippie who opposed having the Presidential Center on campus. Colbert put a remarkably unflattering photo of Bill McElvaney on the screen and made unpleasantly sarcastic remarks about him. Bill's sense of justice was profound, but he did not lack a sense of humor. Some of us with thin skins might have demanded a correction, if not an apology, from the television celebrity. Bill understood the beauty of great fun and enjoyed it with the rest of us.

One did not have to agree with Bill McElvaney to be his friend or to experience his grace. Someone could oppose him in a debate on Saturday and feel his embrace in the church service on Sunday. And, to this day, students at Perkins School of Theology are receiving scholarship assistance for their studies and are being awarded special prizes for sermons on social justice because he believed it was important to be generous to others.

Bill McElvaney was a man of faith, a man of courage, a man of principle, and a man of integrity. He followed Jesus in his boundless love for people. When church rules imposed limits or boundaries on the extent of love, he preferred to transgress the laws of the church than to violate the word of the Lord. He was a martyr in the classic sense of that term—a witness, who was quite prepared to endure the consequences for his action, but who would never recoil from acting in the way that faith demands.

His friends and his adversaries alike could both learn from him that it is a Biblical mandate to love our enemies. His friends and adversaries alike should ponder what we all might do, not only to pray for the suffering people of the world but also to create systems of justice for the suffering of the world. That is what Bill gave his life to pursuing. In his death, we could all benefit from honoring and replicating his faithful integrity.

William B. Lawrence
August 24, 2014



Perkins School of Theology Dean William B. Lawrence (l) with Rev. William K. McElvaney, at the Perkins Distinguished Alumnus Award banquet (February 4, 2013)