

Honoring the Life of Theologian Dr. Gordon Fee

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I will never forget the day decades ago, when I stood in a Christian bookstore thumbing through a copy of Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart's book, "How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth" (HTRB).

When I heard that Professor Fee, 88, went to be with the Lord on Monday, I winced at the pain I knew his family and others would be experiencing. But quickly I pivoted to the recognition that all of us who loved him could rejoice that he was no longer bound by any earthly limitation—especially the Alzheimer's Disease that ravaged him these last few years.

And then I once more reveled in the pleasant memory of that day in the bookstore. As a bibliophile, I get enthused about a lot of books. But HTRB became for me and countless others (over 900,000 copies have been sold) a seminal text. A lot of long-held questions were answered, and a pathway to lifelong appreciation of the Scriptures was paved smoothly. It provided the kind of relief one might feel if given the combination to a previously impenetrable safe. Treasures intended for us were accessible!

Raised in the Pacific Northwest home of Assemblies of God pastor Donald Fee, Gordon became a pioneer of sorts in New Testament studies back in 1966—he was only the second Pentecostal to earn a PhD in biblical studies from a secular university (he wrote a dissertation on textual criticism at the University of Southern California). The Church of God's James Beaty was first with a PhD in 1963 from Vanderbilt University.

Fee's education did not ensconce him in some academic ivory

tower nor cool the fire of the Spirit, it rather made him useful in a venue such as the red-hot Greater Pittsburgh Charismatic Conference that drew thousands annually during the height of the Charismatic Movement in the 1970s.

Over lunch one day in 2015, Gordon shared that it was teaching at one of those annual conferences that was the catalyst for HTRB. His four talks that year were about how to interpret the Scriptures—in particular, emphasizing the importance of respecting the various genres utilized in Scripture, but also teaching how to read contextually (Fee insisted, for instance, that New Testament letters need to be read in their entirety, not passages read randomly, and that if at all possible, they be read without the misleading chapter and verse divisions imposed in the 13th century).

“Afterwards, there was a large group that came up to talk with me,” Fee said. “There must’ve been 30 people. They wanted to know more—and they were saying, ‘Why haven’t we been taught this in our churches?’”

On the flight home from Pittsburgh, he planned how the material could be presented in a book. Being a New Testament scholar, he enlisted the help of Stuart for the Old Testament chapters.

Perusing HTRB excited me because I could see the pair were sensibly answering questions in a way that would equip readers to more fully appreciate the Scriptures. I had no idea of their denominational backgrounds.

When I found out sometime later that Fee was Pentecostal, fuel was thrown on an already blazing fire. Somehow, I stumbled on an advertisement for a video recording of Fee speaking at the Full Gospel Business Men’s 1993 World Convention. The day the videotape arrived, my wife Darlene came home to see me staring at the TV with tears streaming down my face. “Is everything alright,” she asked. “Never better, actually,” I said

haltingly, wiping tears. "You can be smart and be a Pentecostal."

Of course, there have always been smart Pentecostals, but that was shorthand for my relief that one could be passionate about the Lord yet seriously committed to wrestling honestly with the complexities of the Scripture. Gordon Fee was the embodiment of that.

He did not suppress his Pentecostal experience to be accepted as a bona fide New Testament scholar, rather, he made Pentecostalism acceptable in the academy, making it possible for the cadre of Pentecostal scholars that came after him to have 'a seat at the table.'

Fee accomplished those things by writing a highly regarded academic commentary on 1 Corinthians, which has those controversial chapters 12 and 14 and their charismatic gifts. Fee did not cower from criticism he knew would be launched by cessationists nor did he slant his exegesis to curry favor with Pentecostals. He interpreted the texts faithfully as he found them. The result was a fine piece of scholarship that confirmed from the Word much that the evangelical world had already viewed in the practices of Pentecostals and charismatics.

Craig Keener, a prolific author and himself a noted New Testament scholar, told me today, "Gordon kind of took me under his wing and looked out for me. Also, by his being the giant in Pentecostal scholarship, the scholar respected outside Pentecostalism, he did so much for the movement and for the generation of scholars I'm a part of."

Fee's skill in Greek earned him a spot on the Committee for Biblical Translation, which is responsible for the New International Version. Chair of the committee, Douglas Moo, told Regent College that "readers of [the NIV], the widest read of all modern English Bibles, will encounter his

translation suggestions on almost every page.” He went on to write a manual on exegesis for students of the NT; two important monographs on Pauline theology, “God’s Empowering Presence,” and “Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study”; and more highly regarded academic commentaries on the New Testament; as well as, editing a major commentary series. Discontented with learning from afar, in 2010 Darlene and I moved to Vancouver so that I could attend Regent College, hopeful of taking an occasional course with him even though he was no longer teaching full-time.

I did not know that Alzheimer’s would prevent that from happening. My Regent experience was deeply enriching nonetheless, and our mutual friend, Regent College professor Sven Soderlund, facilitated the opportunity to spend an extended lunch with Gordon in 2015.

I’ll confess that I was slightly nervous leading up to the lunch. My respect for Gordon was great, but on tapes that I heard and saw he could at times seem austere. Would my attempts at conversation, my questions, seem pedestrian? Would they annoy him? A breezy lunch with someone like the late Corrie ten Boom I could easily imagine, but would it be like that with Gordon Fee?

My apprehensions were quickly dissolved. I was able to make him laugh, and we bantered easily about basketball (a Fee passion!), and current trends in evangelicalism. He, of course, had my full attention when he talked about the work he was doing on Colossians (work that, sadly, he was not able to complete), and certainly when he momentarily referred to the effects of Alzheimer’s.

Most heartening, though, was his evident love for his late wife Maudine (she died the year before). And like the good marriages I am aware of, there was humor.

Maudine, Gordon and Eugene Peterson (The Message) all attended

Seattle Pacific University as undergraduates and were members of a campus gospel mission for which Peterson was the main preacher. When Eugene left, Gordon took over that responsibility.

He laughed as he recalled that his frequent trips to the mission's office—where there were opportunities to be near Maudine—prompted a faculty member to ask, “What’s that Fee guy doing in here so much!” When she responded that they needed to plan meetings, the faculty member opined that it couldn’t be possible that *that much* planning needed to be done!

Another humorous anecdote involved the Peterson family cabin in Montana that Eugene made available to the Fees for their honeymoon. When Gordon failed to open the fireplace’s flue the ensuing smoke left so much soot on the ceiling that the newlyweds had to spend two days cleaning. “But that’s the stuff life is made of!” he said, laughing.

Thankfully, I did not encounter an austere man at lunch, one preoccupied with ivory tower pursuits. Rather, I enjoyed the company of a joyful brother in Christ—one who was used to equip hundreds of thousands of believers. {eoa}

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