

John Deschner
1924/5–2000

Our colleague John Deschner was proud of his Texas roots. He customarily referred to himself as a third-generation Texan; this way of affirming his identity allowed him to pass over the inconvenient fact that he was actually born in Minnesota. He and his family got back to Texas as soon as they could, and in time John received his bachelor's degree from the University of Texas at Austin. He then ventured to New Haven, where, while pursuing a Bachelor of Divinity degree at Yale Divinity School, he began a life-long involvement with the ecumenical movement. Before going to Basel for doctoral work with Karl Barth, he was for several years the first executive secretary of the United Student Christian Council, and was active in the World Student Christian Federation and World University Service (International). He returned to Texas to join the faculty of Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, in 1956, from which he retired in 1991 as Lehman Professor of Christian Doctrine *emeritus*.

John Deschner was a theologian of the church. His theological activity and his contributions to theological understanding took place in three main spheres: in ecumenical discussion, in university policy-making, and in his theological teaching. His churchly commitments led him both into a deep engagement with his own Methodist and Wesleyan heritage and into an ever-widening exploration of fellowship with other Christians, and with those of other faiths. His dissertation, *Wesley's Christology*, a topic undertaken with Karl Barth's encouragement, was an important part of the mid-century recovery of John Wesley as a resource for ecumenical thinking. His own ecumenical involvement continued through leadership in the Consultation on Church Union and in various bilateral and multilateral discussions, but principally through the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches, which he served as Moderator from 1983 to 1991, and many of whose documents bear the impress of his thinking.

At home, John was deeply committed to the life and welfare of the university in which he found himself. (Having a wife in the department of modern languages and a brother in the school of music probably assisted both his understanding of and his commitment to the university beyond the school of theology.) He was an effective interpreter of the mission of the university to the university itself—to its faculty, trustees, and administrators—and to the church whose university it is; and he assisted more than once in embodying that vision in a liberal arts curriculum and in other university programs and policies.

John regularly taught adult Sunday school classes in local churches, and seminars for doctoral students. But his teaching was centered by clear choice in the two-semester Master of Divinity course in systematic theology at Perkins, in which he taught, along with one or another of his colleagues, nearly every year. He was good at it; he enjoyed it; and generations of students have testified to the importance of his contribution to their theological development and thus to their ministerial leadership.

In all three spheres, two closely related things were, I think, largely responsible for the character and quality of his achievement. Perhaps these two are really only one thing, seen from different angles. One was his gift for interpreting people to themselves: helping people to understand themselves. More than once I came away from a conversation with John with a better

understanding of myself and of my own thinking than I had going in, and I am sure this was true also for numerous students, colleagues, university faculty and officers, and church leaders around the world. The other thing was his constructive approach to the task of theological criticism. The church's theological task, as he often stated it, is "to explicate and thus to test the truth of its own service to God in our contemporary situation." When, in our teaching together, I would stress the critical task of theology, he would characteristically respond that theology should be, as he put it, "constructive in form, though critical in aim." "To explicate, and *thus* to test": the longer I live with that formulation, the more wisdom I see in it.

Both these factors—his hermeneutical charism, and his constructive approach to judgment—were rooted, I believe, in John Deschner's disposition to see things and to see people "in Christ": to see them, that is, in the context of another understanding and judgment in which truth and love are forever conjoined.

In a lecture on last things, John once referred with manifest admiration to the simple epitaph of Archbishop William Temple in Canterbury Cathedral: "Remember in Christ William Temple." That, for him, said it all. I think we could do no better than to follow the spirit of it in our own meditation in this moment, in whatever way we may find most fitting: Remember in Christ John Deschner.

Charles M. Wood
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