

## Memorial Tribute to Dwight Moody Smith, Jr. (1931–2016)

Meeting of the American Theological Society  
Princeton Theological Seminary, 2017

Dwight Moody Smith, Jr., was born in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, in 1931. I once asked him why he and his father were namesakes of the shoe-salesman turned evangelist. “In those days,” he reminded me, “Dwight L. Moody was an important man.” Our Moody was educated in the Spartanburg, South Carolina, public schools. In 1954 he was graduated from Davidson College, *summa cum laude*, with an A.B. in History. While preparing for ordained ministry in the Methodist Church, he took his B.D. from Duke University Divinity School in 1957. Like other young biblical scholars of his generation, he traveled to Yale for Ph.D. studies, not only for its stature in historical-critical scholarship, but also owing to the formidable attraction of Paul S. Minear, who was president of this Society in 1965–66. Minear, he had hoped, would direct his dissertation, but Minear was appointed an internal observer of the Second Vatican Council. In the event Moody’s thesis was directed by Paul W. Meyer, yet another of this Society’s presidents (1987–88).

Moody’s published dissertation,<sup>1</sup> a reconstruction of the sources into which Rudolf Bultmann had analyzed the Gospel of John,<sup>2</sup> set the terms for his published lifework. Smith’s earliest monograph provided anglophone scholars a *vade mecum* for understanding what Bultmann was doing while wryly questioning its *modus operandi*: that Bultmann had written a commentary on a text that Bultmann himself had created. From this platform Smith dedicated much of his career to the study of Johannine Christianity as a distinct theological tradition in the early church. I know few scholars of his era, fewer in the present, who probed so many avenues of the Gospel and Letters of John: their Jewish milieu, their presentation of the historical figure of Jesus, their relationship to the Synoptics, and their character as Christian scripture. Altogether he published ten books as well as hundreds of articles and essays, which demonstrated, in his own words, a “commit[ment] to the importance of historical understanding and historical theology as tasks laid upon us by our scholarly discipline and by the character of Christian theology.”<sup>3</sup> The quality of his work was honored by a Lily Fellowship,<sup>4</sup> a Guggenheim Fellowship,<sup>5</sup> a Doctorate in Human Letters, *honoris causa*, from Davidson College (1990), a *Festschrift* presented by scholars from around the world,<sup>6</sup> and his presidency of the Society of Biblical Literature (1999).<sup>7</sup> His scholarship was invariably precise, nuanced, judicious, and reserved. He resisted bold, dogmatic claims, because, as one colleague wrote, “[Smith] believes that something

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Composition and Order of the Fourth Gospel: Bultmann’s Literary Theory* (Yale Publications in Religion 10; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1965); rpt., Cascade Books (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1941); ET *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (London and Philadelphia: Basil Blackwell/Westminster, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> *Johannine Christianity: Essays on Its Setting, Sources, and Theology* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1984) xiii.

<sup>4</sup> Universities of Basel and Zürich, 1963–64.

<sup>5</sup> University of Cambridge, 1970–71.

<sup>6</sup> *Exploring the Gospel of John in Honor of D. Moody Smith*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> He was elected to membership in the American Theological Society in 1982.

serious is at stake, namely, the quest for truth. And his commitment to that quest is too deep for him ever to lead another away from the truth.”<sup>8</sup>

A truthful portrait requires touching on two other dimensions of Moody Smith’s life and work. In 2008 he wrote, “I have always thought of my scholarship as serving teaching. . . . Most of the things I have written—certainly the books—have had teaching in view. . . . From the beginning my goal was to teach theological students.”<sup>9</sup> After finishing his studies at Yale, Moody declined interviews with Ivy League institutions and instead taught for five years (1960-65) at the newly opened Methodist Theological School in Ohio—prompting one of his close friends, who had landed a job in the Ivy League, to chide him, “It is as if you were going to the mission field, to Nairobi.”<sup>10</sup> In 1965 he moved to Duke Divinity School “because of the library and in order to teach graduate students.”<sup>11</sup> He remained there until his retirement, thirty-seven years later, as George Washington Ivey Professor of New Testament. In 1993 Duke named him the University Scholar/Teacher of the Year. Countless undergraduate and theological students have been introduced to the New Testament through *Anatomy of the New Testament*, the textbook he created with Robert Spivey in 1969. Now in its seventh edition,<sup>12</sup> forty-eight years later *Anatomy* has never gone out of print. Moody delighted in telling others that he had taught over two thousand theological students, directed twenty-four doctoral dissertations, and served on an equal or greater number of dissertation committees. When asked, at his fiftieth college reunion, the accomplishments of which he was most proud, he mentioned his graduate students, who included deans of theological schools, a college president, a bishop of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, and a president of the National Council of Churches. He said, “Most of [my graduate students] were smarter than I am. Somehow that got out. Then I was in big trouble: ‘Which ones of us are *not* smarter than you are?’ Well, I guess they all are, but I like to be around smart people.”<sup>13</sup> I can attest that Moody’s students liked to be around him—not only for his intelligence and quick wit, but also because he cared about us, rejoiced in our accomplishments, and enjoyed our friendship. The week that he died, one of his students marveled aloud at “such a rich, unselfish life.” Another spoke for us all: “A lot of what I know about kindness I learned from him.”

A second thing must be said: Moody was a gentleman of Christian integrity. He was as much at home in the pulpit as in the lecture hall, in Sunday school as in symposium, on the tennis court as at the graveside. The scholar, the teacher, the pastor, the advocate for social justice, the father of four, the grandfather of six: all were glistening facets of a single jeweled life. One of his favorite scripture passages was from the First Epistle of John: “If any one says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also.”<sup>14</sup> This was Moody’s ultimate vocation, and his life was shaped by that gospel truth. He walked the talk until, last year, he could walk or talk no farther. For that reason we who remember him feel

---

<sup>8</sup> Robert Kysar, “The Contribution of D. Moody Smith to Johannine Scholarship,” in *Exploring the Gospel of John*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> D. Moody Smith, “Religion Graduate Students’ Luncheon,” unpublished lecture, 18 November 2008, 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Robert A. Spivey, D. Moody Smith, and C. Clifton Black, *Anatomy of the New Testament: A Guide to Its Structure and Meaning* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Smith, “Religion Graduate Students’ Luncheon,” 4.

<sup>14</sup> 1 John 4:20-21.

his absence keenly, which is but the underside of our deep gratitude to God for Moody Smith's life and legacy among us.

C. Clifton Black  
24 March 2017