

Prof. Roy A. Harrisville, Jr – At Rest in Jesus

Dr. Roy A. Harrisville, one of my New Testament professors, died on July 25 at age 101. Though he lost his eyesight in his 90s, he continued to write and translate theological articles from German to English into his 100th year. He taught at Luther Seminary from 1958-1992. He was an excellent teacher and preacher, with a great sense of humor.

In our first semester at seminary we were required to take Introduction to the Bible, team taught by an Old and New Testament professor. I was blessed to be in a class taught by Dr. Harrisville. He began the very first class with a pop quiz testing our knowledge of the Bible. Everyone in the class failed the exam miserably. We answered less than 40% of the questions correctly. It was quite a wake-up call. Harrisville dressed us down: “You call yourselves wannabe preachers? You don’t even know the Bible and its content. How will you preach God’s Word if you don’t know what Scripture says. You’re pathetic.” From that moment on he had our full attention.

Harrisville read his lectures from a manuscript, straying from his text only to answer questions or to expand on a main point. He spoke fast and covered a lot of material. I remember just one pause in a lecture. He stopped midsentence and was silent for about 30 seconds. He was looking out the windows at the back of the room with his head gradually moving from one corner of the room to the other. When he looked back at the class he blurted out, “She’s a darn good-looking woman!” His wife, Norma, was walking on the sidewalk outside the classroom.

Dr. Harrisville was known for his work on the Pauline epistles, especially Romans. Two things stand out for me from his lectures. He emphasized the frequency with which Paul used the simple, little prepositional phrase “in Christ,” and the depth of its meaning. It is a loaded phrase. We really are, through our baptisms and by the power of the Holy Spirit, placed in Christ.

Second, he called attention to Paul’s consistent use of the passive tense and voice to emphasize what God has done for us and to us. One example is Ephesians 1:11-12:

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.

We are always on the receiving end of God’s redemptive acts. It was Roy’s way of emphasizing the grammar of the Gospel: God is the subject and we are the direct objects of his calling, electing, predestining and sanctifying.

More than 35 years later I vividly remember him ending a sermon in chapel with a tearful prayer: “Lord when you come, please let me be found as a sinner.” I don’t remember the Scripture text for the sermon. He was preaching against self-righteousness and our foolish attempts to make ourselves presentable at the last judgement. He knew full well that we are all completely dependent on God’s grace and mercy. We have nothing to offer. Jesus comes for sinners.

Dr. Harrisville foresaw that personal experience was gradually replacing Scripture as the final norm and authority for matters of faith and life in seminaries and churches. In my last course with him in my final year at the seminary, he addressed the radical students who were caught up in deconstructing the Bible, pressing a radical sexual agenda, and making personal experience

the norm and starting point for doing theology. He pleaded, “Yes, personal experience cannot be ignored, but give your tradition a chance. Start with Scripture and let it be the norm and authority.”

The radicals would have none of it. One year later when the ELCA was formed, their theology was deeply embedded in the ELCA offices in Chicago. A couple of people in the class would later serve in those offices. Roy foresaw what would happen when personal experience replaces Scripture as the norm and authority for faith and life. People will believe just about anything. They preach other gospels, not the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They make gods for themselves. They wreck churches.

Rest in peace, Dr. Harrisville, as a sinner waiting for promised salvation in Jesus.