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Erwin Buck:
Professor, Pastor, Linguist, Exegete, Churchman,
Friend

Clifford Reinhardt

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I first met Erwin Buck in a congregational setting. It was the spring of 1975, and I was the leader of a small musical ensemble representing Camrose Lutheran College (now the University of Alberta — Augustana Campus). We visited St. Peter Lutheran Church in Medicine Hat, Alberta, as musical guests on the occasion of the congregation's 65th Anniversary. Buck had served that congregation pastorally from 1969 to 1973, and had returned together with his wife, Gertrude, for the celebration. I don't remember much of that occasion except for what occurred after the formalities. Buck took me aside, expressed his gratitude for our music, and then kindly advised me not to apologize for who I am and what I do. Apparently I had presented myself and our group in a deferential or perhaps even self-deprecatory manner. His intention was not to tear down but to build up. Thus began Buck's role in my pastoral formation, four years before I enrolled in seminary.

Professor and Pastor

Our formal teacher-student relationship began in September of 1979. I was a typical first-year student — eager but anxious — while he was a seasoned professor of theology, teacher of languages, and pastor of the church. Our class was one of the larger ones at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, comprising about twenty women and men from a variety of backgrounds.

My first course with him was New Testament Introduction, whose primary text was Kümmel's *New Testament Introduction*.¹ Class discussions were often animated as we wrestled with the various theories of the provenance of the literature of the New Testament and, necessarily, personal faith. Buck was resolute as far as the syllabus of the course was concerned, but at the same time he acknowledged the struggle that the course occasioned, and permitted

(and even encouraged) discussion that arose from our engagement with both the sacred text and the science of introduction. For our class, the name “Kümmel” became something of a by-word; it was the hurdle we all had to face. And for some, so also the name “Buck.”

Like other professors at LTS, at heart Buck was also a pastor, which meant, among other things, that he was vitally concerned for the wellbeing of his students. He acknowledged that seminary training could be challenging; more than once I heard him say, “Hang on to what you have” — that is, *do not jettison your faith*. At the same time, however, he was an unapologetic proponent of “bombshell theology” (an expression perhaps coined by a detractor). In a chapel sermon he explained its consonance with Cross-and-Resurrection and its necessity for the sake of faith and ministry. Even so, as a practitioner of such classroom tactics, he exercised extraordinary kindness and patience, which of itself inspired us who were already undergoing the theological and spiritual “re-formation” to which Buck and his professorial colleagues devoted themselves.

Moreover, he trusted God to produce the “new creature.” It became apparent to me early on in my seminary training that it was his goal to turn out neither clones of himself nor even adherents of his own convictions, but rather to exercise an educational ministry which would prompt us seminarians to reconsider for ourselves the nature of faith and life. Thus he urged us to at least consider the questions posed by translators, interpreters, and theologians of the New Testament. He himself was thoroughly acquainted with the various issues raised by the scholars of the New Testament, and he insisted that we students likewise become informed.

His pastoral influence was by no means limited to the more arcane matters of seminary academics. During my years at seminary, our church’s re-consideration of Baptism, Confirmation, and Communion came to a head. This was especially poignant for my wife, Lorraine, and me, since our two children were born about that time.

The ministry of our parish pastor, the late Rev. William Roesler, was very significant for the decisions that we made for our children, which included Holy Communion for our second child, Peter, on the day of his baptism (at the age of about 6 weeks), and initiation of Holy Communion for our elder child, Karla, on that same day, at the age of about 2-1/2 years. We will always be grateful to “Pastor Bill” for his insightful theology, warm counsel, and inspiring example.

But here “Pastor Erwin” likewise made an impact upon me. One time, in one of his courses, the theology and ministry of Holy Baptism commanded our attention for the better part of the class session. Someone raised the matter of policy governing admissibility to Baptism, prompting Buck to comment to this effect: “Why would we ever say *no* to a request for Baptism? The truth of God’s saving grace is at stake. We simply cannot say *no*!”

At the time, waves of emotion and insight washed over me. I regret that in the first decade of my pastoral ministry, when subjected to other influences, I took a more legalistic stance about eligibility for the Sacraments, causing disappointment and misery for people seeking a gracious word. But Buck’s words (among others) echoed in my ears, and God changed my mind and my heart. Indeed, if God in Christ says *Yes!* how can I say *No?*

Linguist and Exegete

A seminary education is not an end in itself. Among other things, its purpose is to provide the building blocks and initiate the process for continuing education. Thus Buck introduced to us the Nestle-Aland edition of the Greek New Testament and its “critical apparatus.”² Here was a new dimension and a new challenge to the pastoral calling: not only translating the text of the New Testament, but also exploring some of the variations in the manuscripts of the text and engaging in textual criticism as well! Another professor at LTS discouraged us students from such pursuits, cautioning us that it was an endeavour reserved for experts, but Buck expressed his confidence in our abilities and urged us on (and tested us on the matter, too!). He sought to equip us regardless of our career paths; parish pastors and academics alike could work with the tools he placed in our hands.

At least one of those tools he fashioned himself: the *Handbook for the Study of New Testament Greek*. The *Handbook* is not a commercial publication; rather, it’s a handwritten manuscript, photocopied and bound in an expandable two-hole-punched binder. It evolved from class notes that Buck had prepared and distributed to students of New Testament Greek, but because the materials also proved helpful to students of exegesis, he eventually made it available to them as well. It is by no means comprehensive — actually, he intended it to be used in conjunction with other published

textbooks³ and more comprehensive grammars — but it serves to this day as a tool yielding insight into the science and art of the language of the New Testament, its translation, and its interpretation.

The author of the *Handbook* is a lover of language. Buck's native tongue is German. As an immigrant child in Canada he quickly learned English, and then, as his education advanced, French, Latin, Hebrew, Syriac, and classical and demotic Greek (no doubt he learned others, too!). Remembering how my father would sometimes think and speak in German and sometimes in English, I once asked Buck in which language he thought. He was a quiet for a moment and then replied to this effect: "You know, I'm not sure that I think in any one language at all. Perhaps I think in them all ... or perhaps I employ my own language of thought."

Under Buck's tutelage, I likewise became a lover of language ... but only after a trial marked by great anxiety. I had never studied the demotic Greek of the New Testament. I had taken only one course in classical Greek, almost five years prior to enrolling at LTS. When the time came to study the first required exegetical course, the Passion Narratives, I was almost overcome by a sense of frustration and panic. My first translations were not very good, if the extent of Buck's corrective marks and comments were any indication of quality. I knew that I had to successfully complete two exegetical courses; I hoped and prayed that I could achieve that goal.

As usual, Buck was kind and encouraging, even while he continued to urge all of us to produce better work. That counted for a great deal in my seminary career, especially where the Greek text of the New Testament was concerned, and so, gradually, I did improve. Not only did I successfully complete the two required exegetical courses, I enrolled in another four over the next two academic years. In the year following my completion of seminary training when, for the sake of my wife's university education, we remained in Saskatoon one more year, Buck asked me to grade his students' translations in the two required exegetical courses. I was deeply honoured, but troubled once again by doubt. Could I rise to the challenge? True to form, Buck encouraged me, reminding me that I possessed the basic tools, the principles, and a growing "feel" for exegetical work. For the finer points of grammar he recommended several resources.⁴ Thus, the professor also became my employer.

Churchman

Buck is so much a servant of God that his exegetical scholarship is not an end in itself. His goal in teaching New Testament Greek and the critical tools for evaluating the text of the New Testament was to give the student the knowledge and the skill to translate for him- or herself. He wanted his students to engage the texts and thus gain insight into their meaning. While he is by no means an iconoclast, Buck urged his students on with words like this: “Much bad theology exists today because people have let dogmatic presuppositions take precedence over an honest wrestling with the text of the New Testament and its history.”⁵

Buck practices what he preaches, and does so for the sake of the church. On a warm summer evening in 1984, a little over a year following my completion of seminary training, family members, classmates, and friends gathered at the chapel of LTS in Saskatoon. Buck represented the Office of the President of the former Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada (ELCC), so as to ordain me as a pastor of the church. At my request, he also preached.

The text I asked him to proclaim was Mark 4:1-9, “Listen! A sower went out to sow,” one of the parables of Jesus that we had studied in his course on the parables. I had become fascinated with the parables, as did many others, and in my case Buck had as much to do with their appeal as did the parables themselves. Simply put, I was transfixed by his interpretative openness in those often enigmatic one-liners and tales. True to form, he preached with an intellectual rigour, experiential breadth, and spiritual humility that had endeared him to many.

So much of his personal influence upon me pertains to his linguistic, exegetical, and literary expertise for the sake of preaching and teaching. Thus, every Sunday, when I step into the pulpit, I am reminded of and grateful for his ministry to me. But the same is true at the end of the worship service when I gaze upon my parishioners, raise my arms, and take a breath in preparation to intone the blessing; for one time, in a class not at all about liturgics, he said to this effect apropos liturgics: “When you lead worship, don’t simply rattle your words off. Mean them!”

Buck practices what he preaches. In the 1985, the church commissioned from him a study of homosexuality. He produced a document titled *Six Studies on Homosexuality* which circulated

widely in the church.⁶ As congregations took up the study, Buck traveled across the country, leading studies and forums. In faithful Lutheran fashion, the study delved into both the Biblical text and personal experience. In some circles, the *Six Studies* and its author were welcomed warmly; in others circles, they were held in suspicion; perhaps in yet other circles they were vilified. No doubt Buck paid a price for his open-minded, open-hearted piety, but that didn't deter him from completely revising the program so that it could be re-launched in 2001.

Soon God was calling Buck into yet another role. With the retirement of Dr. Faith Rohrbough from the presidency of LTS in 2004, he accepted the chief leadership role of the institution which he had served for so many years as a professor of New Testament studies. For several years he guided the institution: administering budgets; relating to the faculty and staff; welcoming and counseling students; ensuring that this journal, *Consensus*, was published; and relating to the supporters of LTS and the broader public. In the latter two of these facets I renewed my contact with this man who has influenced me in so many ways.

In the spring of 2003, Dr. Rohrbough had honoured me with the request to serve as Managing Editor of *Consensus*.⁷ When she stepped down and Buck took up the presidency, he and I renewed the relationship which we had begun decades earlier, but now on a slightly different footing. With his usual attentiveness, he listened to my reports on the status of the journal and my concerns for its future. And then, with dependable personal grace and commitment, he encouraged me in my editorial work.

When several colleagues, Rev. Marlys Moen and Rev. Kim Staus, and I launched a promotional event for LTS for Metro Vancouver, British Columbia, in November of 2004, we invited Buck to represent the seminary. His presence was significant certainly for those (like us planners) who enjoyed personal connections with him, but also for the supporters who attended the function; for he presented the ministry of seminary training with the depth and personal engagement that we had come to expect. As "the face" of the Lutheran Theological Seminary for that gathering, he was a most effective ambassador not just for the school but also for the Lutheran commitment to a theologically- and spiritually-formed ministerium, and an informed and faithful laity. It was immensely satisfying for me

to work alongside him for the sake of the seminary and the church which had nurtured me.

Friend

When Buck came to Vancouver for that promotional event, Lorraine and I welcomed him to our home. Although we had dined together in the past, the occasions had always been formal, but now he shared our board. We reminisced over times past and shared news about our families and mutual friends. Buck asked Lorraine about her musical career — she's a professional singer and a teacher of singing — which reminded me of his love of music. As he and my family members chatted, I recalled that on more than occasion I had heard him humming lines from the choral movements of Handel's *Messiah*, or from a Bach chorale, as he strode quickly between his office and a classroom. That dinner in our home was a most satisfying occasion. Buck was at the top of his game: charming, witty, gracious, and personable.

But then, Erwin Buck always gives his best for the sake of God and God's people.

Notes

- ¹ Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 17th edition, trans. Howard Clark Kee (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1975).
- ² Eberhard Nestle & Erwin Nestle, ed. Kurt Aland et al., *NOVUM TESTAMENTUM GRAECE*, 26th Edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1979).
- ³ Most notably Stephen W. Paine, *Beginning Greek: A Functional Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).
- ⁴ I chose Robert W. Funk, trans. & ed., *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature: A revision of F. Blass and A. Debrunner "Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch" incorporating supplementary notes by A. Debrunner* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1961) — a resource that serves me even today.
- ⁵ Erwin Buck, *Handbook for the Study of New Testament Greek* (Saskatoon, 1980), p. iv.
- ⁶ The revised document may be found at <<http://www.elcic.ca/Study-On-Sexuality-And-The-Church/Table-of-Contents/default.cfm>> (viewed July 15, 2008).

- ⁷ Together with the Principal-Dean of Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, Waterloo, Ontario, the President of Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, is the co-publisher of this journal.