

*A Tribute to WILLIAM J. ABRAHAM  
(1947-2021)*

Alan J. Meenan  
The Word is Out Ministry  
ameenan@thewordisout.com

What can one say to encapsulate an extraordinary life lived purposefully, intentionally and magnificently for the glory of God? Billy Abraham was such a character. One could recite the statistics of his birth, family history, marriage and descendants, the schools he attended, his many accomplishments, his academic prowess, the amazing athleticism of his brilliant mind, the twenty-five books and numerous articles he authored, all of which would fill pages of overwhelming data (cf. <https://www.ariacremation.com/obituary/23980/>). But Billy was much more than these impressive achievements.

Yes, he was born one of six boys and raised in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland. Yes, he attended Portora Royal High School, Queen's University of Belfast, Asbury Theological Seminary and Oxford University. Billy was fiercely proud to be Irish and exulted in his broad, extensive Irish country accent which he determined never to lose. Even in the hallowed corridors of Oxford University where care was indubitably given to the intonation of Oxford English, Billy retained his country bumpkin style of coarse Irishmatic idiosyncrasies. Billy was comfortable in his own skin, a man of intense intelligence who never felt the need to impress. His converse often exhibited a combination of serious theological reflection and good humoured banter. He was lovely: simply a genius at heart who knew himself and cared nothing of others' superficial definition of dignity.

He maintained that country boy look with his bushy, unkempt beard. It was so unsophisticated for a man of his stature both as an acclaimed academic and prominent churchman that I repeatedly threatened to cut it off while he slept. Undaunted, he would claim emulation of the biblical character from whom he derived his name! Billy was incredibly fun-loving and could comfortably have dressed himself in a leprechaun's outfit and claimed to be overgrown. I know he would

giggle at this tribute I am writing. His laughter was unassuming, genuine, disarming, compelling. He loved to laugh. He did it often—and accompanied by that furtive twinkle in his Irish eye, Billy Abraham was an irrepressible combatant or an engaging comrade.

It was readily acknowledged that Billy had the unique ability of taking difficult and complex ideological concepts and reducing them to simple ideas for even the most inarticulate to grasp. He certainly was expert in doing that. But few recognized that he was equally talented in his ability to take simple ideas and clothe them with symphonic language to give them heightened credibility and profundity. I always considered the latter a greater contribution to the scholarly world of which he was a part.

Billy's love for God was palpable as was his appreciation of divine revelation. His was an unquenchable search for a greater and better understanding of the God of Holy Scripture. He fully embraced Christian orthodoxy, albeit with an intensely Wesleyan flair. His Methodist roots ran deep, and as a champion of biblical conservatism Billy was unmatched in his defense of doctrinal purity and dogma. At heart, Billy was an unabashed lover of Jesus Christ. One day soon after our initial arrival on the campus of Asbury Seminary in Kentucky, we walked past a group of fellow students speaking of Jesus with affectionate reverence—a far cry from the public profanity we often heard associated with the name in our native homeland. Billy just smiled and said, “Lovely, isn’t it?”

Global Methodism was Billy's dream: a new entity living out the purity of the gospel in his adopted and native homelands and extending around the world. It was this to which he was engaging energy as he surreptitiously slipped away, unheralded, from us. I have likened it to the evening converse Enoch enjoyed with God. On one delicious occasion I imagine God inviting his servant to come home with Him rather than returning to his earthly abode—and together they walked to glory. Perhaps something akin to that was what William J. Abraham experienced on 7 October, 2021. I will miss my accomplished friend, as will many, for his unexpected departure is an immense loss to the Church. But his legacy will live on not only in his wife Muriel, his son Shaun, and daughter Siobhan, all of whom he unstintingly loved, not only in the students whom he taught, and not only in the friendships which attest to changes in their lives, but also for generations to come in his writings, including the one which he wished to be his greatest

contribution to humankind, the four volume work on divine action, published by Oxford University Press.

I know Billy was a renowned scholar, a master professor, a gracious family man, a gifted and engaging speaker, a diligent student himself, a tender-hearted gentleman and yet a person of indefatigable conviction, undoubtedly the world's finest expert on epistemology. I affirm all those accolades—an exceptional man who did change the world in many ways and affected the lives of countless students and colleagues—mine included for, above all, he was my dearest friend.



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