

*A Good Steward: William J. “Billy” Abraham (1947-2021)—
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When Jessica asked me to preach for this service, she stressed that I only had 10 minutes. That means I have to cut straight to the chase. There will be no time for the blarney that Billy Abraham so dearly loved. That’s okay. There will be other times to share stories with one another. And to laugh.

William James Abraham was a lot of things. A Methodist minister. A Professor. A Philosopher. An evangelist. A missionary. A theologian. An author. A husband. A father. A friend. Above all, he was a good steward. I’ve never met anyone who stewarded his life and divine calling more faithfully than Billy Abraham. He was a tireless servant of God and the church.

Born in 1947 in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland, Billy’s dad died in a farming accident when he was a young child. In the wake of this tragedy, the local Irish Methodist church looked after Billy’s family. Billy never forgot it. He never forgot his Methodist roots. For Billy Abraham, Methodism was a gift to be stewarded—something he received at a very young age and cherished all the days of his life.

In early adolescence, Billy attended the Portora Royal school in Enniskillen, a prep school known throughout Ireland in part because the Irish playwright and novelist Oscar Wilde was among its notable alumni. Billy made the most of his opportunity, eventually earning a place at the Queen’s University of Belfast, where he would read and be nourished spiritually by John Wesley’s sermons. Billy would later insist that every good Methodist should spend time reading Wesley’s sermons—not so much for their theology, as for their spiritually formative power.

Following undergraduate study, Billy came here, to Wilmore, KY, where he earned an MDiv and a scholarship for a doctorate at Oxford University. Ever inquisitive, Billy stewarded the gift of his intellect and the opportunity to learn from teachers on both sides of the Atlantic. He often said that he was blessed with two great teachers—Basil Mitchell at Oxford and Bob Traina here at Asbury. From Professor Traina, he received the gift of inductive Bible study—a gift he would steward for decades as a regular Sunday School teacher at Highland Park United Methodist Church in Dallas, TX.

Billy Abraham made the most of his education, publishing several books toward the tail end of his time at Oxford and the beginning of his teaching career at Seattle Pacific University. One of these early books—*Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism*—was recently republished by Oxford University Press in the Oxford Classics in Religion series. He would go to write many more books during his time as professor of evangelism, Wesleyan studies, and systematic theology at Southern Methodist University.

Billy also made the most of every teaching opportunity. He didn't teach subjects or academic disciplines as much as he taught students. He poured himself into his Ph.D. students, many of whom are now leaving their own marks in theology, philosophy, ethics, Wesleyan studies, and more. What many people don't know is that Billy spent much of his spare time teaching students around the world and helping to get Bible colleges and seminaries off the ground in places like Romania, Costa Rica, Russia, and Singapore, to name just a few.

While Billy stewarded his gifts and skills, as well as his time and opportunities, his greatest legacy of stewardship is the way that he stewarded the faith once delivered to the saints. For Billy Abraham, the faith of the church was a gift of the Holy Spirit. And what a marvelous gift it was. He regarded himself as the recipient of sacred treasures which he both guarded and handed over to as many people as he good. To receive the faith of the church from Billy Abraham was joyous and life-changing. In his hands, the faith of the church was dynamic and expansive. It was living faith. It began with Holy Scripture; but it didn't end there. Billy was convinced that the Holy Spirit had given the church a whole boat load of gifts, including the sacraments, doctrine, the ancient creeds, offices of oversight, preaching, liturgy, iconography, teachers and saints. Each of these gifts had a role to play. Each was a means of grace through which the Holy Spirit brought

people to faith in Jesus Christ, healed them of all manner of spiritual illness and disease, and sanctified them entirely. Billy introduced countless people to the spiritual treasures of the ecumenical church—treasures found in Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Magisterial Protestantism, Methodism, and Pentecostalism. Over the last two years, he went so far as to finish his teaching career with the Baptists! If he would have only lived a little longer, there would’ve been icons and incense in Baptist churches all over Texas! Billy believed in his bones that the Holy Spirit was at work through the varied means of grace available in all the churches of the world. He loved going to churches with elaborate rituals and liturgies—he called it getting high up the candle. But he was equally at home in low-church settings—or what he liked to call “happy clappy churches.”

A number of years ago, Billy made waves when he gave a plenary address at the Wesleyan Theological Society. The address was called the End of Wesleyan Theology. It was a classic Billy Abraham address—full of bold claims and delightful ambiguity. Many people were angry afterwards. They heard the phrase “the end of Wesleyan theology” as a declaration that Wesleyan theology was dead and that we should all just pack up and go home. And there was a sense in which Billy was saying just that, at least where some approaches to Wesleyan theology are concerned. But he was also working on a much bigger canvas—the canvas that is the fullness of the church’s canonical heritage. On that canvas, the phrase “the end of Wesleyan theology” was equally about the telos or purpose of Wesleyan theology. Billy’s boldest move that evening was to declare that we had misunderstood John Wesley as a gift of the Holy Spirit to the church. Wesley, Billy insisted, did not belong to the canon of great theologians alongside St. Augustine and St. Athanasius; he belonged to the canon of saints. It was a move I was sympathetic with then, and I remain so, now. More than arguing about the ins and outs of Wesley’s theology, Billy wanted us to emulate Wesley’s life. He wanted us to be inspired by Wesley’s deep and tireless devotion to Christ—just as he had been as a young college student in Belfast.

I know the concept of saints makes some of us nervous. Hopefully, we can all agree that, if the saints are to have any role among us, then it should be to inspire greater devotion to our Lord Jesus Christ. John Wesley did that for Billy Abraham. And Billy did that for those of us who knew and loved him well. Billy was and is inspiring.

Sometimes, we speak, even if only playfully, of patron saints. St. Jude is the Patron Saint of Lost Causes. I don't have the authority to assign patronage to the dead. But if I did, I would declare William J. Abraham the patron saint of stewardship, so that he might inspire us all to be more faithful stewards of our talents, our skills, our minds, our callings, our time and opportunities, and above all, of the faith once delivered to the saints.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.



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