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In Memoriam John Theodore Mueller

MARTIN H. FRANZMANN

"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth."

2 Tim. 2:15

God uses the men with whom we live and work to write things into our lives; He works their message into the stuff of our biographies. Not all men qualify as pens of the Ready Writer; not all have hearts that indite a goodly matter. These fill our pages with the futile tracery of their flattery, the evanescent lines of amusement, the easy curves of casual camaraderie, or the acid etchings of their spite. But there are those who are good and honest pens in the Almighty Hand, and God says notable things to us through them. He uses men to underscore and incarnately rehearse His Word to us. This is a goodly gift and should not be interred with their bones. The Word they traced should be remembered and live on in grateful transmission. That is the justification for memorial services; and in the case of a man like John Theodore Mueller there is ample justification.

What did God write into our lives through him? Surely the imperative of 2 Tim. 2:15 was a live imperative in the life of this man. "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved." John

Martin H. Franzmann is chairman of the Department of Exegetical Theology of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He delivered the accompanying sermon at the memorial service for Dr. J. T. Mueller in the chapel of Concordia Seminary on May 11, 1967.

Theodore Mueller lived with a high sense of accountability. Our colleague Richard Caemmerer at the burial service spoke, movingly and as a loving eyewitness, of his sense of the value of time. There was in his disciplined regimen a directness and an intensity of living which made our more relaxed and "balanced" ways seem somehow dubious, if not futile. He "did his best," and it was an unremitting, strenuous best; but what made his best really good was the fact that it was a best presented to God. He lived and worked as ever in his great Taskmaster's eye, for His approval.

He knew, as all of us know, that a man is "approved" only under the heaven of God's forgiveness, that "approvedness" can grow only on the good earth of God's grace. But he also knew, better than most of us, that man is not created to be an earthworm, endlessly engaged in the ingurgitation of his life-element. He knew that on this good earth a man is a man, responsible, articulate, and active. He not only "had his being" under the heaven of forgiveness; he "lived" and "moved" as one for whom "God" is in the dative case, the case of "to" and "for."

This way of living liberated him from the neurotic quest for novelty, which is one of the seven deadly sins of theology (O Relevance, what sins are committed in thy

name!). It freed him from academic ambition and removed him from the scholar's scramble. There was a daily beauty in his life, but this beauty was not for pose and parade. He was too busy for that sort of thing.

He was "a *workman* who has no need to be ashamed of his work." His high sense of accountability made his life a life of hard work. He pursued his profession with a rigor that was nothing less than ascetic. But he never thought of his life as ascetic, and that saved him from the secret sin of the ascetic, "the pride that apes humility."

Thus he became a workman who "has no need to be ashamed." He prayed the Fifth Petition as all men must, even theologians, just theologians. But when the Great Inquirer came down the garden path in the cool of the evening and asked, "Theologian, where art thou?" He did not find John Theodore Mueller decked out in fig leaves of obfuscatory verbiage, nor hiding in thickets of fruitless conjecture and sterile hypothesis. His was not a theology that orbits around the theologian's sickly ego.

His theology orbited around the Savior whom he loved and the Word at which he trembled. His high sense of accountability and his hard work issued in healthy teaching. He was orthodox (tell it not in Gath): he liked the word, and he liked what it denoted. He was passionately concerned about the *pure* of our Confessions' *pure docetur*—and was not ashamed to be caught with a proof text in his pocket.

He echoed Luther's feeling: "Das Wort ist nicht mein und dein." He cut a clean furrow in handling it, and he was therefore still capable of a stout 16th-century-type *dammamus* (not the modern sneeze-

type, half smothered by the white handkerchief of our fearful amenities).

A life like his evokes a cluster of four-letter words, not the four-letter words that are wafted, stinking, across the footlights in current dramas which, for all this messing around with human misery, never succeed in being tragic — but four-letter words that are beginning to sound old-fashioned: good, pure, kind (he was 22 years my senior, yet none of my colleagues treated me with more exquisite collegial courtesy), meek, sane (he was capable of an impish humor and could make wry estimates of his own importance), love, work, fear, teach. But above all, there was one word that marked the man: faith, faith both in its beggary and in its courage.

Men like that, lives like his, do not happen; they are God's productions. He could write 2 Tim. 2:15 into our lives because the grace was given him to hear and heed imperatives like 2 Tim. 2:2, "Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus," and 2 Tim. 2:8, "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David."

Men like that are often hurt in the world—and in the church. The remembrance of them is often fraught with some pain. But he is with his Lord now, and past all hurt. Let us thank God for all that He gave to our beloved brother and let us thank Him for what He has written into our lives through John Theodore Mueller. Pliny tells the story of a young man who, at the death of an old and wise and virtuous friend, remarked: "I fear that I shall live more carelessly hereafter." As we look back on the life of our brother, we may, each of us, be moved to say: "I trust that I shall live more carefully hereafter."

St. Louis, Mo.