IN MEMORIAM

Professor JAMES D. G. DUNN, FBA, DD
(1939-2020)

NICHOLAS TAYLOR*

“Jimmy” Dunn, Lightfoot Professor of Divinity, Emeritus, in the University of Durham, was one of the most significant New Testament scholars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. His influence extends far beyond students he taught and whose research he supervised. Students and clergy around the world have read his books, translated into several languages. There are institutions in many countries, long marginalised in international scholarship and denuded of resources, which he dedicated himself to seeing included, and respected, in the global academic community.

James Douglas Grant Dunn was born to Scottish parents in Solihull, Warwickshire, just weeks after the outbreak of the Second World War. The following year, his father died, and his mother returned with her four sons to Rutherglen, near Glasgow. One of the main Clydeside industrial centres, Rutherglen was heavily bombed during 1940 and 1941. James won a scholarship to Hutcheson’s Grammar School, then located in the Gorbals area of Glasgow, from which he matriculated into the University of Glasgow. His first degree (M.A.) was in Economics, a discipline of which he retained a thorough and shrewd grasp in his later professional life. After graduating, Dunn entered Trinity College, the Divinity Faculty of Glasgow University, to complete his B.D. The legendary populariser of critical scholarship in broadcasting as well as in print, William Barclay, was at the time Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism.

On graduation, Dunn was licensed as a Probationer Minister in the Church of Scotland. From Glasgow, he and his wife Meta moved to Cambridge, where he became a member of Clare College. There he completed his Ph.D. in the Faculty of Divinity, supervised by C. F. D. (Charlie) Moule, the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity who contributed much to bringing evangelical scholarship into the mainstream of British academia.

* Rev. Nicholas Taylor was a Ph.D. student under Professor James Dunn in Durham; his thesis was published as *Paul, Antioch and Jerusalem* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992). His most recent book, *Paul on Baptism* (London: SCM, 2016), is dedicated to Professor Dunn. Nicholas Taylor, Rector, St Aidan’s, Clarkston, & Convenor of the Liturgy Committee, Scottish Episcopal Church, 8 Golf Road, Clarkston, East Renfrewshire, UK, nhaylor@dunelm.org.uk.

Among his contemporaries working under Moule were Graham Stanton, himself later to become the Lightfoot Professor, and David Catchpole, later Professor of Theology at Exeter. Richard Longenecker, later Professor at Wycliffe College, Toronto, and doyen of North American evangelical New Testament scholars, was at the time a post-doctoral research fellow.

Dunn's Ph.D. thesis became the basis for his first book, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM, 1970). This established his reputation as a scholar, as was to prove a most timely resource for the Church as the charismatic movement swept through many Christian communities, and inspired the formation of many others, during the 1970's. Though never himself identified as a "charismatic", Dunn defended the authenticity of the religious experience which inspired the movement, and its continuity with the heritage of ancient Christianity.

On graduation from Cambridge, Dr Dunn returned to Scotland as Chaplain to overseas students in Edinburgh University, until his appointment as Lecturer in Theology in the University of Nottingham. There he wrote *Jesus and the Spirit* (London: SCM, 1975), which consolidated his reputation and earned him the Cambridge B.D., despite its apparently lowly title a rare distinction in scholarship. *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1977), conceived as an undergraduate textbook, laid the groundwork for his subsequent reconstruction of Christian origins. *Christology in the Making* (London: SCM, 1980) was perhaps the most controversial of all Dunn's books, challenging as it did traditional assumptions about the doctrine of the Incarnation, and especially the pre-existence of Christ. Although controversial, Dunn never wavered in his belief that incarnational theology is rooted in the New Testament, and important for Christian theology today, even if not attested in the witness of all early Christian movements.

In 1982, Dr Dunn, by then Reader in Theology at Nottingham, was appointed Professor of Divinity in the University of Durham, in succession to C. K. Barrett. The same year he coined the phrase "The New Perspective on Paul" in the title of a Manson Memorial lecture to the University of Manchester. The apostle Paul became increasingly central to his scholarly endeavours, as Dunn engaged in debate with E. P. Sanders, Heikki Räisänen, Hans Hübner, Peter Stuhlmacher, Martin Hengel, and others on Paul, and on quite fundamentally reconceptualising images of second temple Judaism which had been perpetuated in much of Christian scholarship and popular belief. Collaboration between scholars in the Universities of Durham and Tübingen flourished during this period, with several symposia with published proceedings and exchanges of students under the Erasmus scheme

– when Britain was still part of the European Union. Dunn’s commentaries on *Romans* (Waco: Word, 1988) and a collection of essays in *Jesus, Paul and the Law* (London: SPCK, 1990) reflect much of his work during this period, which saw the award of a Cambridge University D.D. and the merger of his Chair with that named after J. B. Lightfoot, noted nineteenth century biblical and patristic scholar and Bishop of Durham.

The Partings of the Ways between Judaism and Christianity (London: SCM, 1991) reconceptualised the emergence of diverse Christian groups from a diverse Jewish matrix, as a complex and contested process over many decades. Commentaries on *Galatians* (London: Black, 1993) and on *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) preceded *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), the culmination of decades’ work of lasting significance for the study of Christian origins.

In 2002–2003 Dunn served as President of *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas*, the prestigious international Society of New Testament Studies, delivering his presidential address to the Conference of the Society in Durham. The following year he retired from the University, becoming Emeritus Professor, and published the first volume of his trilogy *Christianity in the Making. Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) explored the complexities of recovering what generations of scholars had referred to as “the historical Jesus”. *Beginning from Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) reconstructed the history of the first Christian generations, perhaps giving rather more credence to the account in Acts than he, and most other critical scholars, had accorded it over the preceding decades. *Neither Jew nor Greek* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) extended the study into the second and third generations of the Church, recapitulating many of the issues he had treated over his career.

Dunn was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2006, confirming his eminence in the profession. His contribution to Christian theology, however, was by no means restricted to academic scholarship. He did a great deal, in public lectures and in books such as *The Evidence for Jesus* (London: SCM, 1985), *A New Perspective on Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), and *Did the first Christians worship Jesus?* (London: SPCK, 2010) to make the fruit of scholarship accessible to lay people. Dunn was active also in calling upon the Church and a nominally Christian society to live by Christian principles, and to apply them to the social and economic issues of the day. *The Kingdom of God and North East England* (London: SCM, 1986), an edited collection produced in the aftermath of the miners’ strike against government plans for extensive colliery closures, is an example of this. Through long involvement with the British Trust for Tantur as well as through academic contacts, he

became familiar with the situation in Palestine-Israel. Initially sympathetic to Zionism, having been sensitised by the caricatures of Judaism he had done much to demolish in scholarship, he wrestled over many years to recognise and to speak out about the ever-widening disjunction between the justice demanded by the Law and the Prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures and what he saw perpetrated against the Palestinian people with ever-increasing brutality.

These strongly held Christian principles were to be applied to scholarship itself. The relative wealth and privilege of western European and North American academic institutions, and the Eurocentric ethos with which much scholarly labour was pursued, were addressed not only in rhetoric but also in practice. During his year as President of *SNTS*, Dunn committed to bringing scholars from Africa, Latin America, and Asia into its fellowship, and generating the funds to make this possible. He was instrumental also in assisting Christian institutions in eastern Europe to recover from the privations of the Communist period, particularly through restocking their libraries.

No treatment of Jimmy Dunn would be complete without mentioning his dedication to his numerous research students. The weekly seminar on Monday afternoons was as central to his timetable as it was expected to be to theirs. Despite sometimes supervising up to 20 doctoral students simultaneously, Professor Dunn kept abreast of developments relevant to all their research, was punctilious in reviewing draft texts, generous, hospitable, and collegial without being unduly familiar, and exemplary in modelling the life and ethos of a Christian scholar. Several have continued themselves to make significant contributions to scholarship and to occupy prestigious chairs in universities, others have contributed in other ways to the furtherance of Christian education in challenging circumstances. All will continue to find in Dunn's example an inspiration, and to value the encouragement he offered – sometimes against the objective evidence – to persevere when they were struggling.

After his retirement, Jimmy and Meta moved to Chichester to be nearer their daughters, Catriona and Fiona. As well as enjoying grandparental duties, Jimmy remained active in scholarship, public education, and the life of their local church, despite a stroke, until debilitating cancer brought his life to a premature end. His death, faced courageously, was at the same time the climax of a life following Christ, and a transition to the life to which he aspired. May he rest in peace and rise in glory – and God be thanked for his legacy to us.¹

¹ Mrs Meta Dunn died on 9 April 2021. May she too rest in peace and rise in glory.