Tribute to Dr. Williams

As a pastor in the Midwest, I was mentored from afar by Dr. Williams through his writings for ten years. My theology was clarified and my sermons deepened by studying his works. They stood apart from all my other reference books because they uniquely joined a strong Reformed theology with a charismatic emphasis. I treasured them.

Latter in 1994 while on an academic sabbatical, I came to Regent University with one purpose: to study under Dr. Williams in person. I recall the first day I met him. I was awed. It was like I was meeting the Michael Jordan of Charismatic/Pentecostal theology! A year later I had the privilege to serve under him as his graduate assistant. I consider that honor to be one of the highlights of my life.

I have come to know Dr. Williams as a man that faithfully models the Spirit-filled life he passionately writes about. In our day, when public words and private actions are seldom consistent, Dr. Williams remains a man of his word. He is a gentle giant of a man. It could be argued that he is a scholar but to me he is really much more than that. He is a spiritual father showing all that come after him what a man of God should be like. He unpretentiously loves God with his mind but also his heart.

Many times I have seen Dr. Williams confronted by self-assured students who have wanted to challenge his theological viewpoints. Instead of reacting out of insecurity and picking apart the student’s argument, as would have been so easy to do, he always responded with patience and interest. This was theology incarnate. Each time I witnessed this, I said to myself, “I have seen what I one day hope to become.” There are still heroes today. Dr. Williams is mine.

It is an honor to contribute a short letter of tribute to a friend, a theological mentor, and a spiritual father in Christ.

Dan Backens

April 2000
Dear Dr. Williams,

I want to take this opportunity to thank you for the godly influence you have had on my life. When I first came to the School of Divinity at Regent University in 1994, I was fresh off of active duty with the Marine Corps. I knew I had a calling to serve the Lord in ministry, but I was lacking spiritual foundations. I wanted to pursue the Master of Divinity degree because spiritually I felt like I was an inch deep and a mile wide. In other words, I only knew what I had been taught from a pulpit, and didn’t possess the spiritual depth I felt I needed if I was going to survive on the mission field. Little did I know that God had provided for me a Professor of Theology who had served with the Marines as a Navy Chaplain during the battle for Okinawa during World War Two!

I was blessed to sit at your feet my first three semesters at Regent. You gave me the theological foundation I needed. But I learned much more than systematic theology from you. I saw how you encouraged your students to expand their thinking, and engage in serious discussions. You allowed students to present dissenting views. You prayed for your students, and brought the Holy Spirit into the classroom in a real and tangible way. You shared your Easter Sunday conversion experience (“He is risen, indeed!”), and somehow our own conversion experiences became more real to us.

I remember when you broke your arm playing tennis. Jo lobbed the ball over you, and when you tripped and fell your arm broke. You told the class later that while you were still laying on the court she quoted from your Renewal Theology, Volume I, saying, “Suffering is due, in part, to the kind of world God made.” Or, as you wrote about the law of gravity, “Any action that disregards this law will invariably result in pain” (page 127). I’m sorry that you had to endure the suffering, but I will always remember your teaching on that subject (and in fact translated the essence of it into Indonesian two weeks ago while counseling an Indonesian Christian).

I witnessed your influence on two graduate assistants, Mark Dietrich and Dan Backens. Both became friends of mine, and I saw your zeal for truth and love for students reflected in their interactions with your classes. Your influence on their lives and the lives of all your graduate assistants will continue to influence the Kingdom of God for eternity.

I was also the recipient of a more tangible blessing from you, the J. Rodman Williams Missions Scholarship. For two years I was blessed financially by your personal commitment to provide financial aid to students in the School of Divinity. That scholarship helped me to finish my education debt-free, so I could freely respond to the call to the mission field when the time came.

In May 1998, at the School of Divinity Commissioning Service, you and Dr. Synan prophesied that I would preach the Gospel to thousands of people. At the time, I didn’t
believe you. After all, I wasn’t an evangelist, and didn’t see any chance of preaching to large crowds. I want you to know, however, that on December 12, 1999, in Jakarta, Indonesia, I preached the Gospel to over one thousand employees of the Indonesian State Oil Company, Pertamina. You really did hear from the Lord, and my faith is a lot bigger now.

I sincerely regret that my wife Monica and I cannot attend the reception and dinner held in your honor on April 28, 2000. We are currently serving in Indonesia, so the problems of time and distance are insurmountable. Please know that we are there in spirit (and in the Spirit), joining with countless others in expressing our gratitude to you, your family, and the Lord for the profound influence you have had in our lives.

May the Lord bless you and keep you always.

Lew Belcourt
Master of Divinity in Missiology, 1998
Regent University

Vice-President and Co-Founder
International Student Christian Fellowship, Inc.
Virginia Beach, Virginia

Managing Director, Community Programs
Indonesian Harvest Outreach
Jakarta, Indonesia
April 2000

Even if I hadn’t met many friends at Regent, including my wonderful husband, and even if I hadn’t been exposed to new people, ideas, and experiences which caused me to grow as a person, even if I hadn’t enjoyed and learned in many other classes during my two years of study . . . the privilege of studying under Dr. J. Rodman Williams was enough for me to say that choosing to attend Regent University was one of the best decisions of my life.

No other teacher in my 18 years of schooling has had as much impact on my life Dr. Williams. Dr. Williams made the study of theology exciting and alive. The knowledge and understanding I gained in his classes has been invaluable to me. And, I still refer to his textbooks over and over -- whenever I have a question about a theological issue, am teaching a class, or just need some encouragement in my faith, I seem to find what I need in Renewal Theology. Just yesterday my husband used a section from Dr. Williams' text while leading a discussion about faith at our home fellowship group.

More than just being able to communicate facts about God and theology, what made Dr. Williams' classes special is his ability to communicate his love for God. As he taught, he projected a love and adoration toward the living God that made us, his students, want to seek God and learn of Him not just for the sake of knowledge, but because of who God is. Thus, studying for Dr. Williams' classes was never reduced to simply learning facts and discussing theological ideas - it was a journey in knowing and loving our Lord.

Thank you, Dr. Williams for teaching long after you could have retired. Thank you for encouraging me personally when you were my professor and advisor. Thank you for leaving an invaluable legacy by writing your books. Thank you for driving a fun car with a personalized license plate. Thank you for loving and obeying God so that I and countless others had the wonderful opportunity to sit under your teaching and hold you up as a role model. You are loved and appreciated.

Beth Gunderson Lewis
Class of 1991
April 28, 2000

Dear Dr. Williams,

As one of your former students who serves the Lord in a different part of the world, I still don't want to miss this opportunity to express my appreciation and thankfulness to you for the investment you made into my life and ministry.

I am sure many will honor your contribution in teaching and writing for your faithfulness in formulating a theology that is at the same time biblically sound, Spirit-filled and relatable to the whole people of God. Here I can only heartily agree. I am also one of those you have inspired with a love for scriptural truth and a commitment to sound doctrine for the Church.

Looking back on my time at Regent and our times together in the classroom, I realize that it was not only the excellent content of the courses but even more so your personal example which left a lasting impression on me. I think that I learned from you even more about the HOW of doing theology than about the WHAT. What I observed in you was the desire to always speak the truth in love, to have a firm, well thought-out theological position without being contentious about it. My primary remembrance of you is as a theologian of graciousness. In all our class discussions, some of which were quite controversial, you always treated your students with respect and understanding, trusting that truth and sound reason will ultimately do their own work in us. Your example of patience and kindness, without indulging in cheap compromise, has deeply impacted my approach to doing theology.

Today I have the privilege to serve as a leader and teacher at the 'Stuttgarter Bibel-Lehrzentrum' which is the Bible school of the largest and fastest growing charismatic church in Germany. Here we are training future leaders for the Church in Germany, other parts of Europe and the mission field. As I teach and counsel our students I often remind myself that my highest goal must be to instill in them a passion for the Truth, convey principles of sound interpretation and balanced theological formulation and model to them the character of Christ as I stand for His Word. Thank you for having given me a pattern of what it means to be godly biblical theologian!

With much love and appreciation,

Chris Breuers

M.A. '93
Germany

PS: Special greetings also to your wife Jo. Christiane, Philip and Joanna send their warm greetings too.
April 11, 2000

Dear Dr. Williams,

I wish to add my voice to the chorus of those paying special tribute to you on the 28th of this month. I consider the time spent in your systematic theology classes among the highlights of my years at Regent University. The depth of your knowledge and your enthusiasm for the subject matter impressed me most at the outset. As time went on, I realized it was your loving relationship with God that caused your teaching of theology to shine with the light of the Holy Spirit.

There are theologians who treat the things of God as something to be examined and dissected, as one might study the desiccated remains of an ancient mummy. The difference is that you have come to know the One about whom we seek knowledge. You know Him as the great I AM, the living God. You have glimpsed His beauty and majesty. You know Him as the God who reveals Himself and yet largely remains a mystery to us. You have experienced His Holy Spirit, flowing as living waters to those who seek Him with all their hearts. You know He is to be sought and feared and loved.

Thank you for setting high standards of scholarship. Thank you for balancing head knowledge with heart knowledge. Thank you for your humility and holiness.

Thank you for your encouragement when I struggled with perfectionism. Thank you for the privilege of leading a Holy Spirit class small group. I remember the joy when you joined me in laying hands on a fellow student as he received the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Last month, I completed my first pastoral assignment as senior pastor of a church in SW Ohio. On numerous occasions, I incorporated material from your textbooks into sermons, or used the readings to clarify my thinking.

One of your graduate assistants shared that you regularly pray for those in your classes. I followed that model as a pastor in praying for the flock God gave me for a season.

In the early and mid-90s, I watched as your body slowed down a bit (especially after the fall you took on the tennis court). However, your mind remained sharp and your enthusiasm for God's call on your life never waned. I believe Paul was experiencing something similar when he said, “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” (2 Cor. 4:16) I hope to follow your example as I continue to serve Jesus, looking toward the day of His return.

I expect one day you will stand before our Lord Jesus and hear those most precious words, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

Love in Christ Jesus,
Royal Cutler
Commander, U.S. Coast Guard (Ret.)
1044 Austin Drive
Chesapeake, Virginia 23320

Dr. J. Rodman Williams
Regent University School of Divinity
1000 Regent University Drive
Virginia Beach, Virginia 23464

Dear Professor Williams:

There are not many times when something happens that you can honestly say has changed the course of your life. But you have had that affect on me.

You won't remember me because I never sat in your class. Even though I was the distinguished graduate in my class, you won't remember me. I was a distance student who you changed by remote control. See, it doesn't take face to face to change someone!

Even though I never saw you, I spent hours listening to you on tape....and that's how you changed me. When you don't have the distractions of body language and other people to contend with, you can focus more intently on the words spoken. So I soaked you up in every course, and your words changed me.

Your words gave me such a deep appreciation for the mind of God and the heart of Christ....it wasn't the technical details, it was the spirit of your words that changed me. I came to know the intimate side of the Father through you, and became a better son because of it.

Thank you for your wisdom. Thank you for your commitment. Thank you for your labors to pass along every ounce of passion for the Lord that you could. It was an honor and privilege to sit under your teaching. You stimulated me to push to new levels of excellence in using my gifts in the kingdom, and that is how you changed me.

Thank you and God Bless you,

Kent P. Mack
M.A., M. Th.
1996
Dear Dr. Williams,

Dr. Williams, you have made an indelible impact on my life. You have shown me the practical and passionate side of Theology. I remember being in a class where you were talking about the attributes of God and while explaining a part of the trinity and His glory in it, you paused. The presence of the Lord filled the room and you said, "let's just pause here reflect on this aspect of the Glory of God." Some in the class started to weep quietly others went into prayer; but for me a light went on. The light was that Theology could move my heart and deepen my devotion to God.

You are a rare man, with unique background that filled a specific call from God to bring theological stability to a new move of the Spirit. When I was recently asked if I would like the new one volume "Renewal Theology" instead my bulky three set, my answer was swift. I would not trade the notes and personal quotes written in my book set which I used in your classes for any other. They are the most prized books in my library. Thank you for your devotion to Him, may it reap a harvest for years to come.

Chris Parsons (M.A. '96)
1906 Keeter Run
Chesapeake, VA 23320
I have just recently learned the essence of an excellent compliment. It consists in helping the person see glimpses in themselves of the very thing for which they have been striving. In a world, wherein we are all so busy with our own things and schedules, seldom do we take the time to do the real work of “noticing.” It requires focus, regard and not too little exertion.

So, after quite considerable reflection, I offer you this compliment. Sir, I see a child.

How many times have I heard Jesus’ words calling me to become converted, to become a child? How many days have I bypassed wonder and mystery for seriousness and industry? How will I ever recover those days that I by-passed the penny in the parking lot for the too-full agenda that urgently beckoned me to “Keep on task! No time for squandering on spare change!” Where do we get these voices?! When did we graduate from the kingdom of childhood that God wills for us to become such important little boys and girls?

Now, that is a description of me. But in you, Sir, I see a child. How many days have you walked passed my door—I have had the advantage and privilege of being your nearest neighbor in our suite of offices for six years—raised a friendly hand and announced, “This is the day that the Lord has made!,” and in that moment, my ordinariness indeed became the work of the Lord that day? How many times have you sidestepped conventional hi/bye greetings, and rather offered open arms of brotherly affection as is befitting of saints? How many days could I wonderfully overhear you and a visiting guest, in prayer or song, warming my heart and mind to be a better Christian than I was? How many times have I stood tall in the back of chapel rooms, (Pharisee-like, hands in pockets, or with a moody face, trying to portraying “there is a man of spiritual depth”), only to squint through one eye to see you on the front rows with hands raised and face brightened with joy, simplicity and reverence?

I do not personally know many great men who have for the most part finished well. But I know you. I am better for it. I know that He will cause all His beloved ones to persevere in grace. I know it is possible to get better as we grow silver. Because Sir, I have seen a child. Thank you for walking out a childlike life faithfully before the brethren (1 Timothy 4:9-15).

Just a Next-Door Admirer.

Russell W. West, Ph.D.
Faculty-Colleague
24 April, 2000

Dr. Williams and I met at Westminster Presbyterian church in Lincoln, Nebraska in the early 70s, when he was invited there by a former student, Bill VanAuken, to speak on the experience of the Holy Spirit.

While I kept up with Dr. Williams' career through his pioneering books on the Holy Spirit, including *The Era of the Spirit* (1971), *The Pentecostal Reality* (1972), and *The Gift of the Holy Spirit Today* (1980), I never imagined that one day I would be teaching at the same divinity school as he!

Dr. Williams' public career is well-known, but often a brilliant public academic career may belie a very different personal life, as in the case of several famous theologians. This is certainly not the case with Dr. Williams. His deep Christian love, warmth, and integrity, as well as his strong commitment to the spiritual well-being of his students and colleagues has been a powerful testimony to the true measure of this great man.

Dr. Williams' innovative approach to his very popular and edifying Holy Spirit and Christian Living course has change the lives of hundreds of students. This is a rare, perhaps singular theology class where the concept of "doctrine" becomes truly biblical, in that he has set aside time to actually "train" students in the development of their spiritual giftings in special small groups.

Care for his colleagues has been demonstrated repeatedly during the time we have known each other. In times of my own personal difficulty Dr. Williams has shown great concern and offered much prayer and warmth. At the faculty level he has served as a valued mentor to most of us, as well as providing a sense of stability and balance in the many decisions facing us over the years.

Regent is truly blessed to have such an outstanding spiritual as well as theological pioneer, who gave a strong voice of biblical balance to the somewhat inarticulate charismatic movement in its formative years. Even more recently, the world has been blessed by the mature thought of Dr. Williams in his best-selling *Renewal Theology*. This work is destined to shape the lives of ultimately millions around the globe.

We all pray God's blessing on this man, his wonderful wife Jo, and on the great legacy that they leave with us.

Sincerely in Christ Jesus,

Jon Ruthven
Professor, Systematic and Practical Theology
Regent University School of Divinity