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Remembering Ted Runyon | Candler School of Theology

By Kendall Soulen

6-8 minutes

Happy is the school that can celebrate the memory of someone who served it for nearly sixty years with integrity, creativity, and faithfulness. Thanks to Ted Runyon, Candler School of Theology is such a happy school.

Ted first came to Candler in 1958 as assistant professor of systematic theology and taught here for forty years until his retirement in 1998, at which point he continued his association with Candler and the wider Emory community as emeritus professor and stalwart member of Glenn Memorial United Methodist Church. During his four decades of teaching, Ted touched the lives of over four thousand students, giving them a living model of what it means to be a responsible Christian, pastor, theologian, and citizen of the world in the Wesleyan tradition.

He was a member of the storied faculty cohort that included Bill Mallard, Ted Weber, Hendrikus Boers, and Manfred Hoffmann. Known as “the young Turks” by their older colleagues, Ted and his academic peers were instrumental in Candler’s early involvement in the Civil Rights movement, as well as other hot-button issues of a turbulent era, including liberation theology, the global struggle for human rights, and the “death of God” controversy. Still without tenure in the early 1960s, and so not privy to the meetings of full professors, the young Turks met together informally to read each other’s work and for mutual support and encouragement. Ted and his peers laid a foundation of collegiality that would endure for decades and bless Candler with an academic culture that was, and to this day remains, the envy of many more fractious schools. As the young Turks rose in rank and influence, they were instrumental in the call of Dr. James Laney to be Dean of the School of Theology, an event that would prove to be a turning point in the life of Candler, and, in time, of Emory University.



Ted Runyon was born in Wisconsin and educated at Lawrence College (B.A., 1952) and Drew University (B.D., 1955), where he studied with the fabled and tragically short-lived Methodist theologian Carl Michalson. After serving as a Methodist minister in New York and New Jersey from 1952-1955, Ted won a Fulbright scholarship to study at the University of Göttingen, where he earned the degree of Doctor of Theology. Ted's early years in Germany were transformative for him and set a course for his subsequent career. He studied with some of Germany's most celebrated theologians, and returned to the U.S. deeply convinced of the value of cross-cultural study and engagement. Ted established and cultivated an exchange program between Candler School of Theology and the University of Göttingen that continues to this day, thanks in part to the personal generosity of Ted and Cindy, who created several gift annuities that fund Emory's scholarship for visiting students from Göttingen. Ted himself returned to Göttingen for post-graduate study in 1964-1965, and also studied at the Universities of Tübingen and Constance in 1971-1972. Later his commitment to cross-cultural engagement led him to teach still farther abroad, at Africa University in Zimbabwe and at Methodist Theological Seminary in Seoul, South Korea.

Ted's conception of doing theology was inseparable from a life of service. When he arrived at Emory in 1958, the doctoral program in religion at Emory was just beginning. When he retired in 1998, it ranked fifth in country, thanks in no small measure to Ted's steady engagement over many years. Ted served as Chairman of the Department of Theological Studies in the Graduate School's Division of Religion from 1962 to 1970, and as Acting Associate Dean of Candler from 1974-1975. He was the first recipient of the Campus Outstanding Faculty Award (1967), and also received the Emory Williams Award for Distinguished Teaching at the Graduate and Professional Level (1973).

Ted's scholarly interests ranged widely but consistently turned to questions of "where the rubber meets the road," i.e., to the places where theological conviction intersects with responsibility to church and world. The titles of the many papers and addresses he gave over the years include "Training in the Art of Loving," "Armistice Day 1969," "The Church in the World," "Church Renewal: What Can We Learn from the Second Vatican Council?," "Hal Lindsey and Biblical Interpretation," "How Can We Do Theology in the South Today?," "Theological Education and Liberation Theology: An Invitation to Respond," "What I Learned in Africa or, Why Take a Sabbatical to

Teach Overseas?,” and “The World as the Original Sacrament.” In his widely-read book *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today*, Ted establishes the framework of Wesleyan thought in five chapters and concludes with a reflection on the continued vitality and relevance of a Wesleyan vision for today. A *Festschrift* in Ted's honor, edited by his student Randy Maddox, contains essays by fourteen friends and former students, and begins with a foreword by Jürgen Moltmann entitled “Homage to a Friend.”

A former student recollects of Ted, “Had it not been for him, my interest in theology might well have vanished in the tumultuous '60s of cynicism, ‘death of God,’ and nihilism. His lectures were clear, earnest, poignant, and always quietly uplifting.” Besides the learning I derived from vigorous conversation on topics such as the relative merits of the theologies of Karl Barth and Friedrich Gogarten and the early Karl Marx, my own personal debt to Ted Runyon includes a year of study in Göttingen, thanks to the exchange program he directed. Perhaps what I will always remember most fondly about Ted, however, is his remarkably open countenance and his shining, happy eyes. After graduating with an MDiv in 1986, I returned to Candler this past fall to take the position of professor of systematic theology. I am so grateful that Ted and I had an opportunity to be together again, in a classroom, talking about things like the doctrine of the Trinity and Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations, with folks like Jim Laney, Jim Waits, Ted Weber, and Gerald Lord. Ted was in a wheelchair, Cindy by his side. But Ted's open and eager countenance, transfigured by a wide and happy smile, was just the same. Thanks be to God for the life and ministry of Ted Runyon.

[Read the Atlanta Journal-Constitution obituary for Ted Runyon here.](#)

A memorial service will be held on Monday, May 22 at 7:00 p.m. in the sanctuary of Glenn Memorial United Methodist Church, 1660 North Decatur Road, Atlanta, GA 30307.