

EDITORIAL

Dr. Edward J. Young (1907–1968)¹

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Near the end of my arts course at the University of Sydney, I was given a copy of Edward J. Young's *Isaiah Fifty-Three* (1952). I knew of him and his colleagues at Westminster Theological Seminary, but this was my first exposure to his writings. The simplicity with which he wrote and the rich devotional tone of the book struck me immediately. That book was but the first of several of Young's books that I had read before I went to study at Westminster.

During master's and doctoral studies at Westminster, I had the privilege of taking several courses with Dr. Young. For some courses, such as Aramaic and Syriac, I was his only student at the time and hence had much personal contact with him. On one occasion I went and asked him for some information on a passage in Syriac, and he read the text aloud and commented that he would love to have time just to carry on such reading. I quickly realized what a remarkable man and scholar he was. A brilliant linguist, with a vast knowledge of the Scriptures, he was also a humble Christian who was able to communicate easily with those who did not possess the information that was at his command.

Young entered on his teaching career at Westminster Theological Seminary with thorough preparation, especially in the areas of linguistics and

¹ For a more detailed account, see Allan Harman, "Edward Joseph Young," in *Bible Interpreters of the 20th Century: A Selection of Evangelical Voices*, ed. Walter A. Elwell and J. D. Weaver (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 189–201. For a good introduction containing a select bibliography of Young's works, see Edward J. Young, *The God-Breathed Scripture*, foreword by Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2007).

background to the Bible. He was brought up in a Christian family in San Francisco, and at the age of fifteen made his decision to study for the Presbyterian ministry. He planned his tertiary studies with that goal in view, including specialization in Hebrew and other Semitic languages. Whether he was deliberately following the pattern set by the notable Old Testament scholars at Princeton Theological Seminary, Joseph Addison Alexander, William Henry Green, and Robert Dick Wilson, is unclear, but certainly, he understood early on the intense study needed and extensive knowledge that he would require for successful lecturing and writing.

After graduating *cum laude* from Stanford University in 1929, he traveled to Europe and the Middle East for two years before returning to California and enrolling at San Francisco Theological Seminary. Already he was committed to a high view of Scripture, and after one year, he transferred to Westminster Theological Seminary. After completing his theological course and getting married in July 1935, he returned to California to be examined for ordination by the California Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. While many of his views were out of keeping with prevailing positions in that church, he was ordained, though he transferred to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church shortly after that.

He and his wife left for Germany, where he studied on a fellowship, and in the spring of 1936, he received an invitation to return to Westminster and teach Old Testament. This invitation he accepted, and in September he began his teaching career there, continuing until his sudden death on February 14, 1968. He joined a distinguished faculty, but soon his brilliance as a teacher and an Old Testament scholar added to Westminster's reputation. After joining the faculty, he pursued postgraduate studies at Dropsie College in Philadelphia and was awarded the PhD degree in 1943.

When Young joined the faculty at Westminster, evangelicalism was at a critical stage. Many of the older seminaries had departed from their original doctrinal standards, and scholarly defense of orthodox Christianity was the need of the day. This situation resulted in the Westminster faculty being very much in demand for preaching and lecturing engagements, as well as for writing commitments. Later, the foundation of new seminaries, such as Trinity, Covenant, Fuller, Biblical, Gordon-Conwell, and Reformed, provided much additional support for the defense of the gospel. The Westminster faculty formed a cohesive group, dedicated to historic Calvinism as expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the published work of all the members displayed that. Young was no exception, and his writings demonstrated his commitment and his ability to articulate the faith once and for all delivered to the saints.

Several things stand out in regard to Young and his ministry. The first was his absolute commitment to the infallible Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. That commitment, made as a teenager, was maintained and defended right through the rest of his life. All his writings display this appreciation of the nature of biblical revelation. His faculty colleague Paul Woolley described his “tenacious loyalty to the inerrant Scriptures.” The first occasion on which he developed his views at length, apart from class discussions, was his contribution in 1946 to *The Infallible Word*, a volume that consisted of a symposium on the doctrine of Scripture by faculty members of Westminster Theological Seminary. Young commenced with viewing Jesus’s attitude to the Old Testament and how it confirmed the attitude of the Jews of his day to the Old Testament canon.²

Eleven years later Young published a full study on the doctrine of Scripture entitled *Thy Word Is Truth*. It was aimed at intelligent lay people, and he disclaimed any intention to write “a technical theological treatise.” His aim, he wrote, was to produce “a popular book, designed to acquaint the intelligent layman with the Biblical doctrine of inspiration and to convince him of its importance.”³ The significance of this book can be seen in that it has been kept in print for over sixty years. He gave special attention to neo-orthodox views, which had become popular. His position is set in contrast to alternative positions that, while using the traditional language of the Bible and the church to describe the Scriptures, failed to recognize it as God’s objective revelation given in inerrant form. Discussions by Young on the matter of the Old Testament canon confirm how consistently he held to the position that the Bible was divinely inspired, without error, and testifies to its own origin.

The second feature of his work as a lecturer and writer was his ability to communicate with his hearers and readers. I do not think this was just a natural ability, but something that Young developed over the years. There was a claim, which seems to be true, that he used to practice rephrasing Dr. Cornelius Van Til’s more difficult prose to see if he could reduce it to a much simpler presentation. Van Til heard about this and commented, “Young feels that I can’t write something that is popular enough.” While Van Til doubted whether Young was familiar enough with modern philosophy to write a primer in apologetics, Young was well noted for the way he

² Edward J. Young, “The Authority of the Old Testament,” in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary*, rev. ed. (1946; repr., Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), 53–87.

³ Edward J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth* (1957; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1963), 7.

could present difficult material in a way that could be easily understood. In this respect, he was rather like Bishop J. C. Ryle (1816–1900) of England, who though a brilliant scholar (obtaining a first-class degree in classics from the University of Oxford), deliberately set out to simplify his English style in order to communicate his message better. At times, Young was considered lacking in substance in his writings because of the simplicity of his style. Nothing could be further from the truth. His vast knowledge on many subjects lay behind his presentations, and his former students can testify to the wealth of detail that came when they asked him questions.

His skills as a writer are especially evident in his popular works. As early as 1934, while he was still a theological student, Eerdmans published his *Study Your Bible: A Self Study Course for Bible Believing Christians*. Later, in 1948, the Christian Education Committee of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church published his work *Old Testament Prophecy: A Course Designed for Individual Home Study*. These books demonstrate his concern for Christians regarding important biblical concepts, and his ability to relate to the average believer in his presentation and language. The same is true of his other popular exegetical works such as *Genesis 3: A Devotional and Expository Study* (1966), *In the Beginning: Genesis Chapters 1 to 3 and the Authority of Scripture* (1976), and *The Way Everlasting: A Study in Psalm 139* (1965). He understood his audiences and wrote in such a way that made the truth plain and also in a way that evoked devotion and praise of God and his Word.

The third characteristic of Young that demands attention was his skill as a linguist. This was not just a general interest with him, but one directed in the main to biblical research and writing. What was in one sense a hobby was in another an ability that he utilized in relation to holy Scripture. From the time of his conversion, he knew that his gifts were to be employed in Christian service, and so he planned his courses of study accordingly. This was true not just at Stanford University, San Francisco Theological Seminary, and Westminster Theological Seminary, but also for the time he spent in Europe and the Middle East. He acquired there the modern languages he needed, and also the ancient ones, especially Semitic languages that were significant for Old Testament study. He wrote introductory textbooks on biblical Hebrew and Arabic, and at Westminster he taught these languages, along with Aramaic and Syriac. Arabic remained a real interest for him, and just three years before his death he published a review of a new reader on modern literary Arabic in the *Westminster Theological Journal*. His immense knowledge of ancient languages in particular is visible in his commentary on Isaiah, as the footnotes display knowledge of over twenty languages. Languages did intrigue him, and he was constantly looking at

new ones, sometimes with the aim of using a specific one on an overseas visit to lecture on the Old Testament.

A fourth characteristic was his ability as an exegete. It is unknown how early in his career he was introduced to the great exegetical tradition from Princeton Theological Seminary, with Old Testament scholars of the caliber and ability of Charles Hodge, Alexander, Green, and Wilson, and New Testament ones like Hodge, Alexander, and J. Gresham Machen. Then, too, at Westminster, he had been a student under Oswald Thompson Allis and Machen, and also of Allan McRae. Young soon replicated the skills his teachers had shown him in his work, with a concentration on a historico-grammatical approach, coupled with attention to biblical theology. It is true that not a great deal of Young's writing deals directly with biblical theology, but there is no doubt that his understanding of it followed strongly in the tradition of Geerhardus Vos. This emphasis was made plain in his lectures delivered for London Bible College on the occasion of the opening of its new premises in 1958 (published as *The Study of Old Testament Theology Today*). He commenced by dealing with the relationship between Old Testament theology and history before speaking of the nature, content, and influence of Old Testament theology. The following year, commenting on a review of this book, he asked a very significant question: "Who has done more to bring Old Testament Theology to its rights than Geerhardus Vos?" An additional influence that strengthened his integrative approach to the Old Testament was that of Dr. Benne Holwerda, who for a few short years (1946–1952) was a professor at the theological seminary in Kampen, the Netherlands.

The first major commentary that Young authored was on the book of Daniel (published by Eerdmans in 1949). In this commentary, he was not only trying to explicate the Hebrew and Aramaic text but also to do so pointing out the weaknesses in two approaches different from his own. On the one hand, he wished to highlight the inconsistencies in the liberal viewpoint, while on the other hand, he also wished to distinguish his view from that of dispensationalists, especially the claim that much of Daniel's prophetic content related to the seven years after the return of Christ. He made it plain that while writing to help pastors, he was also aiming at providing a commentary for the average educated reader. He pursued his interest in Daniel in two further works. When InterVarsity in the United Kingdom published the *New Bible Commentary* in 1953, he was the author of the section on Daniel, thus making his views on prophecy in general, and Daniel in particular, available to a much wider audience. His views on Daniel 7 received even greater attention in his Tyndale Lecture in 1958, *Daniel's*

Vision of the Son of Man. When dealing with Daniel 7:13–14, Young saw depicted there an individual figure, the Messiah, which figure Jesus took over in his teaching and rightly applied to his own ministry.

The Old Testament book to which Young gave the greatest attention was the prophecy of Isaiah, and he was able to produce a large three-volume commentary on this book before he died. On approaching this book, he had a model commentary that he admired from Alexander of Princeton. Young acknowledged that Alexander had superb gifts as a linguist and philologist, but his prime qualification for writing was “sincere and humble piety coupled with firm faith in the Bible and reverence for the Bible as the Word of God.”⁴ Young had read extremely widely (as is displayed in his book, *Studies in Isaiah* [1954]), not only writers who shared his evangelicalism, but also liberal writers, for he wished to know what claims they made about the book, and how he could point to their failure to come to grips with its text. While his presentation is a popular exegetical study, he did not shirk from introducing discussions on the Hebrew text, and including material like those from the Targums and the texts from Ugarit.

The unity of Isaiah and its ascription to Isaiah of Jerusalem was given very little space in the commentary because these issues had been dealt with elsewhere (for example, in *Who Wrote Isaiah?* [1958] and in his *Introduction to the Old Testament* [1949; repr., 1964]). Many other aspects of the book were covered in articles or other presentations, including the general approach that he took to prophecy. To that he devoted a full book (*My Servants the Prophets* [1952]), as well as his popular lectures on Old Testament prophecy delivered in Toronto in 1965. Perhaps Young’s three volumes on Isaiah have not been as influential as could have been expected simply because of their size. A shorter presentation in one volume may well have had a greater impact and made his views accessible to a broader audience.

The final aspect of Young’s life that I consider significant is his ecclesiastical work. He was ordained in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1935, but he transferred to the newly formed Orthodox Presbyterian Church the year after and maintained that commitment till his death. He was active on the local level, as well as serving on many denominational committees. In 1956, he was elected as moderator of the General Assembly. An amateur cellist and a student of hymnody, he was deeply involved in the preparation of the *Trinity Hymnal* (first published in 1961). All his scholarly endeavor took place in a life that was closely integrated with his local church fellowship and denominational affiliation. There was

⁴ Edward J. Young, *Studies in Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 10.

no separation between scholarly work on Scripture and the worshipping community of which he was a part. Proclaiming the gospel was for him “the most beautiful task on earth.”

Fifty years have now passed since Young passed away, but his legacy lives on. Many of his books remain in print, both in the United States of America and in Great Britain. His cultivated simplicity of style makes them so accessible all over the world, while his multifaceted knowledge is still nourishing the life of the church. Probably the last word in this editorial should be given to his colleague, Professor John Murray:

Edward J. Young adorned his Christian profession. So many were the virtues making up this adornment that it is difficult to single out any for special appreciation. But his humility was so conspicuous that no one could fail to mark it. For those who knew him more intimately his circumspect consistency was no less evident. Unassuming and reluctant to make his own voice heard he was always ready to speak out when the honour of Christ and the claims of truth demanded it. He burned with holy jealousy for the integrity of God’s Word and for the maintenance of the whole counsel of God.⁵

⁵ John Murray, “Edward J. Young: An Appreciation from a Former Colleague,” *The Banner of Truth* 54 (March 1968): 1–2.