

Stanley K. Fowler: A Theologian in Service of the Church

**Funeral Tribute
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David G. Barker

I am deeply honoured to stand before you and give a tribute to our friend and colleague, Dr. Stanley K. Fowler. Along with many others, I had the privilege of working alongside Stan as a fellow faculty member at Heritage College and Seminary for almost thirty years. I thank the Fowler family for allowing me to speak on behalf of Stan's academic and ministry colleagues, and reflect on his service for Christ as a professor, scholar, and churchman.

Two stories and some reflections

Story 1: My first encounter with Stan, back in the mid 80s, was a debate between Stan and me on Dispensationalism, held in front of a group of pastors at North Broadway Baptist Church in Tillsburg. I had never met Stan, and I had no idea what I was in for. I should have known that as a graduate of Dallas Seminary, and not holding to Dispensationalism, and that he had long since "left Left Behind behind," he would know far more about this subject than I did, even as a Dispensationalist at that time. We sat together on a piano bench of all things, side by side—a premonition of things to come. To say the least, I never had a chance in that debate. He argued circles around me.

The beauty of it all was that I hardly knew I had been completely outdebated. In his superior ability to speak to the issue there was no antagonism in his cogent arguments or in his incisive questions. And we became friends.

Story 2: The next event was in 1988 when we were together at a Canadian Evangelical Theological Society meeting in Kingston. At the time I was the Acting President of London Baptist Bible College and London Baptist Seminary as he was for Central Baptist Seminary in Toronto. He asked me, "Do you ever see the day when our schools could get together and form one Baptist school in Southern Ontario?" I said, "It will never happen in our lifetime." He said, "I think it will, and I think it must."

Within five years of that conversation, Heritage Baptist College and Heritage Theological Seminary came into being, led by him and the CBS board, along with Marvin Brubacher and the London board. It was Stan's vision, sense of camaraderie, and passion for what might be when it came to theological education that brought the two schools and the supporting churches together and formed what we have today. It so reflected how he loved the idea of moving church relationships from independence to inter-dependence.

Reflections

I am sure that my colleagues would agree with me that Dr. Stanley K. Fowler was one of the most outstanding theologians of our time. Many of us really wanted him to write a theology textbook, since we knew it would be superior to anything we have today. Stan was competent in the biblical languages, exegesis, and hermeneutics. He was well versed in Historical

Theology, Biblical Theology, and of course, Systematic Theology. His knowledge and understanding of the sacred Scriptures was wide and deep. He was well able to speak to difficult theological and philosophical issues, social and cultural issues, moral and ethical issues, apologetic issues, and world-view and political issues. He was regularly called upon by the Fellowship and other denominational groups, along with local churches, to help them work through the difficult realities that faced them. I am convinced that if we all adopted his approach of "Principled Pluralism" our society, church, and world would be a better place.

His course, Church and Ministry, as a churchman, pastor, and scholar, was one of the best courses we ever offered at Heritage Seminary. He served as our Dean, and led us through accreditation self-studies, curriculum reviews, and was a voice of reason and thoughtfulness at the highest levels of administration at Central and Heritage. He was the first professor at Heritage to be named Professor Emeritus at Heritage College and Seminary, and the first to receive a Festschrift, a collection of essays written by his colleagues and academic peers.

In honour of Stan, Heritage Seminary Press has published two volumes of his writings: The Collected Writings of Stanley K. Fowler: A Theologian in Service of the Church. In these writings, both popular and scholarly, we find that the wide-ranging topics he addresses are dealt with competence, integrity, and wisdom. His book, More than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism, is necessary reading for all of us.

Stan was a master of being able to see a thorny issue from almost any direction possible, argue the arguments for each, and softly land on his personal position. He never landed with a thud or hammer. He was known for his, what we call, "epistemological humility." He often talked about not knowing the final answer to troubling questions "this side of the parousia." Yes, he held his views firmly, but often didn't tell his students right away what they were (much to their frustration), and when he did affirm his position, it was always with deference to those who differed from him. Although he would inevitably affirm his view with the line, "Well, it is perfectly obvious to the most casual of observers."

Final word

Stan, in all his academic skill and scholarly ability, always maintained a deep faith in Christ. In one of my visits with Stan after his stroke, in light of the inability to speak, the frustrating therapies, the ongoing battle with cancer, and all that made life not so good, I asked him, "How do you do this? How do you keep your faith?" He looked at me, then he looked at the ceiling, and then he simply pointed to the sky and nodded.

In one of his sermons he said:

We accept the reality of an uncertain future, we wait for God to fulfil his purposes, we believe God can do what his humanly impossible and we obey God, whatever apparent results are going to be, and we trust God to deal with the long term events.¹

He had no idea how prophetic that would be. His faith in a sovereign, wise, caring, loving, and gracious God never wavered.

¹ Excerpt taken from volume 1 of The Collected Writings of Stanley K. Fowler. The original sermon was given at Crestwicke Baptist Church, Guelph, Ontario, July 2021.

Dr. Stanley K. Fowler, esteemed colleague and friend to so many of us. Teacher, author, sage, pastor, and lover of God. Truly, a theologian in service of the church.