

Foreword

NOT CONTENT SIMPLY TO teach about Kierkegaard in his famous class at Yale Divinity School, Paul Holmer became Kierkegaard, embodying SK's sly, disarming manner of indirect discourse. I wish you could have been in the presence of Holmer's droll, caustic humor as well as his sweeping theological assertions, which he delivered with a chuckle and a twinkle in his eye. That semester in the presence of two towering, playful, difficult, Christian intellects—Holmer and Kierkegaard—my life was changed, my theological trajectory was forever altered, and I embraced the Christian faith in a fresh and vital way. In my four decades of ministry in academia and the church, Paul Holmer's witness remains unique and superlative. Holmer's infectious intellectual love of God was a gift he gave to so many. In the turbulent sixties, when much of the church was attempting to force a marriage between the Faith Once Delivered to the Saints and What's Happening Now, Holmer was an invigorating reminder that the Christian faith has its own logic, its peculiar truth, its strange and wonder-filled words that must be honored before we give any credence to the world's counterfeit gods. What a great gift now to have the Holmer whom we loved (and sometimes feared) preserved and shared through the publication of this three-volume series.

In reading Holmer, I think you will find the designation "sermons and addresses" to be too mild for what Holmer says—more truthful to call many of these pieces "attacks." They are assaults in the manner of his mentor Kierkegaard's brilliant, acerbic, and assertive *Attack Upon "Christendom."* Holmer's massive intellect and deep knowledge of Christian philosophy will be obvious to you, though Holmer apparently had no need to parade his erudition before us. He could show off intellectually if he wanted. That he does not preen and display his learning demonstrates his earnest desire to be a true preacher of the gospel. In offhandedly pronouncing an aphorism like, "We cannot know ourselves, not because . . . the self . . . is . . . miss-

ing, but because we ourselves . . . keep the self in confusion,” Holmer knows his Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard, and Kant without having to mention any of them.

What a joy again to read Holmer’s “On Being Steadfast,” an essay that found me just when I needed it—barely two years into the thicket of parish ministry, beset by the multiple demands of congregational life—my teacher Holmer reminding us who worked in the church that the God who is over the church is ever so much more interesting and important than the myriad demands within the church. And, in the tug and pull of another tough little Southern parish, I survived to fight another day after reading Holmer’s “The Minister, a Reconsideration.”

Holmer not only challenges the hegemony of the modern worldview but also attempts to restore the church’s intellectual nerve. An undercurrent of defiance runs through most of his sermons and addresses. It is vintage, pure Holmer to criticize us for being “exceedingly anxious to assimilate modern knowledge” (in “The Transforming Power of Otherworldliness”). Holmer’s unveiled, sneering contempt for our modern penchant for eagerly gobbling up *The Latest Thing* is invigorating. His “On Believing in Heaven” is not only a powerful testimony to Christian truth, but also a deceptively simple challenge to the intellectual principalities and powers that would hold us moderns captive.

Theology is lifelong training in being more attentive to God and less mindful of ourselves. Amid a blur of spiritualities of this and that, where few are all that “religious” but just about everyone is goofily “spiritual,” Holmer’s “Spirituality and Self-Deception” and “On Speaking the Truth in Love” are eerily prophetic. The church doesn’t need clear, well-formed thought and rigorous theology if the church’s preaching is only “general advice and a kind of tacky mishmash of current psychology, everyday observation, and moralistic policy recommendations.” Holmer’s contempt for the world is never as severe as his judgments upon the church. Only Holmer would have given Yale’s dwindling, urbane Battell Chapel Palm Sunday congregation his long sermonic exposition of Christian mercy. After that sermon, I’m sure that Holmer was not invited to preach in the chapel ever again.

Holmer’s peculiarly Lutheran pietism has a wonderful insolence about it. “About Liturgy and Its Logic” defies the then-current “contemporary liturgy” craze and argues that the best things about

Christian worship are its formality and its age. Ruthless in his condemnation of theology adjusted to the constraints of the present moment, Holmer contrasts theology that merely makes “Christianity into something institutional and the clergy into their erstwhile functionaries” with that in which we have to do “with a very mysterious God, whose ways are past finding out.” Ouch.

My own thought and ministry is forever indebted to the work of Paul Holmer. Now, in this sagacious collection of sermons, addresses, and prayers, a new generation of theologians will join his former students in owing Holmer.

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