John O'Neill, former Professor of New Testament Language, Literature and Theology in the University of Edinburgh, and frequent contributor to *Irish Biblical Studies*, died on 30th March 2003, following a short illness.

He was born in Melbourne, and first taught at the university there – history, the subject of his undergraduate degree. His background in this discipline remained evident, and is particularly apparent in *The Bible's Authority: A Portrait Gallery of Thinkers from Lessing to Bultmann*. Then came a change of direction, his doctorate under John Robinson at the University of Cambridge, and ordination by the Presbyterian Church of Australia. He taught New Testament at Ormond Theological Hall, Melbourne, and then as Dunn Professor of New Testament at Westminster College, Cambridge, before being appointed to the chair in Edinburgh, at New College.

He was an utterly enthralling lecturer, yet his style was very simple. He began the last lecture he gave in Belfast, at Union Theological College, on the subject of "The Faith of Christ in the Letters of Paul", without any preamble or introduction, "The genitive after a noun can either be a subjective genitive or an objective genitive..." It was, as always, a brilliant lecture.

This simplicity is expressed in some advice in a letter to me before I began my own first teaching post: "Stand still, keep your hands out of your pockets, look at them, speak as loudly as you can. Tell them what you are going to say; say it; sum up." Those of us who knew him can see him in these words. And then follows something more, the characteristic courtesy, and the moral force behind it, that lay at the heart of his teaching: "As always, the Golden Rule applies: give them what you would have liked to have got from your own lectures."

There was simplicity of method too. He wrote out on separate sheets of A4 paper the Greek text of individual verses, or parts of verses, of the New Testament. He then wrote round these any relevant material or references, interleaving fresh sheets as required. These sheets were the staple of his teaching and writing. He left plenty of white space. It was an indication of his openness to new ideas, and once justified to me with the words, "Always remember

that your thoughts are worth more than the paper they're written on." These sheets would accompany him to seminars and tutorials. They were most democratic. One could see on them references to classic contributions to the subject, but if anyone happened to come up with an apt solution in a seminar, that would be written in too, in the characteristic italic handwriting. It might then appear subsequently in an article or book, and if so, would be scrupulously acknowledged. Of course, for students in his circle, it was marvellous.

He took specific steps to keep teaching fresh. His own lectures would always reflect what had most recently been filling the white space. But he was also responsible for a clever administrative move in the teaching of New Testament at New College. He arranged for lectures on books of the New Testament to be attended by all (four) undergraduate years together (and also, in his case avidly, by the postgraduate students). Somehow he was still able to get away with calling these NT1, NT2, and so on. This then allowed for the books that were the subject of the lectures to be changed every term. As he put it, teachers were constantly being challenged to test their theories against fresh texts. Anyone who has offered a module on a New Testament book for more than, say, three years, will begin to appreciate the wisdom of this system.

He encouraged, and enjoyed, questions in his lectures. None of us who asked them had any idea how brilliant they were until he answered them. These answers were serious, scholarly expositions, delivered with the lightest touch. No-one ever concluded a reply to an ill-considered point in more winsome fashion, "... but then, that would destroy your argument."

His scholarship was marked, on the one hand, by radical exegesis of the texts of the New Testament and, on the other, by conclusions that tended to confirm orthodox doctrines of the Christian faith. He saw nothing incongruous in this. A good example would be his approach to the issue of the extent to which Jesus made claims on his own behalf. He followed that exegesis of the gospels which proposes that Jesus himself made no claim to be the Messiah. To that extent he would agree with the like of Geza Vermes. Where he would depart from Vermes is in the explanation: Jesus made no

claim to be the Messiah because he believed he was. Jesus was being faithful to Jewish understanding that God alone should declare his Messiah; no-one could presume to take this honour upon himself. It was believed that Jesus had broken a law to this effect, and for that reason he was crucified (compare John 19:7,21), but in fact he was innocent of the charge. The arguments are worked out at length in *Who Did Jesus Think He Was?*

Such independence of thought, on both counts, made him a thrilling teacher and writer, albeit not one whose views always found general support in the scholarly community. He never missed the chance to quote to students the latest dismissive footnote to make mention of his work. He could, if he had wished, have pointed out that this was not the whole story. His demonstration in *The Puzzle of 1 John* of its Jewish background, and Rudolf Bultmann's acknowledgement of this in the introduction to his own commentary on the Johannine epistles, comes to mind.

He once said that the first three New Testament issues on which to establish a clear position are the synoptic problem, the composition of the fourth gospel, and the authorship of the Pauline letters. Typically, he demonstrated his independence of thought on all three. The idea that Matthew and Luke are dependent on Mark, no matter how widespread in the literature, cannot be maintained; lost written records lie behind all three. Features characteristic of the fourth gospel are to be explained by the material written before the birth of Jesus. The relationship of Paul to the corpus bearing his name is to be explained by the principle that he wrote "some of all, not all of any". This last principle is fully worked out in his commentary, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, which earned in some circles the nickname, "Paul's Postcard to the Romans", because, it was alleged, this was all that was left after O'Neill had finished with it.

He also established clear, if again independent, positions on wider issues of Christian faith and practice. The Trinity is not a Christian doctrine; it is Jewish, and so are many others that are assumed only to be Christian. So too is the practice of serving small pieces of bread and wine in the name of Christ, a practice which was to continue to be undertaken by those particular disciples of Jesus

called to do so as his followers. A key to interpreting sayings of Jesus is to work out which are addressed to this minority group. He famously once preached at a ministerial induction on Mark 6:8 to the effect that the good news for the congregation was that the words were not addressed to them; the bad news for the minister was that they *were* addressed to him!

All was accomplished with great personal humility. This was unfeigned, practical and scholarly. The second edition (with the blue cover) of *The Theology of Acts in its Historical Setting* involved substantial rewriting of the first edition (with the red cover) because, as he made clear in the preface, he had changed his mind about the nature of the sources. How many others would be prepared to do the same? I think it was this humility, above all else, that lent to all his work the thrill of the chase, and such complete absence of defensiveness or evasion.

Any sampling of his contributions to *Irish Biblical Studies* may serve as both a fascinating introduction to major themes of his work, and an opportunity to discover those themes being advanced in important respects.

His analysis of the synoptic problem informs "'Good Master' and the 'Good' Sayings in the Teaching of Jesus" *IBS* 15/4 (1993). This begins by establishing a case where it is hard to argue that Matthew is using Mark. Here is a typical example of that particular kind of reasoning which so characterises his writing. The ultimate solution is to be found, not in the model of one gospel using a source so large as another, but in that of each using short sources, sometimes as short as one word. A puzzling speech of Jesus may be explained as a compilation of such sources. The treasured sayings of Jesus, like pieces of mosaic, were preserved as part of larger pictures. "Small mosaics were enlarged and added to other mosaics. The most extensive mosaics, but not the only surviving examples, are our Gospels."

The Jewish provenance of a supposed Christian doctrine is explored in "The Origins of Christian Baptism" *IBS* 16/3 (1994). Typical features to note here are the encouragement to a postgraduate student by means of a reference to her undergraduate dissertation,

and the careful acknowledgment that awareness of certain synagogue art stems from a colleague, presumably in conversation. Readers of *Irish Biblical Studies* will have enjoyed the mischief with which this article in the third, June, edition of 1994 quietly follows, in the second, April, edition, the thoroughgoing critique of O'Neill's method in this area by Maurice Casey.

His positions on the claims of Jesus, and on the compilation of the fourth gospel, are to be found in "'Making Himself Equal With God' (John 5.17-18): The Alleged Challenge to Jewish Monotheism in the Fourth Gospel" *IBS* 17/2 (1995). Here he spells out a particular issue raised in *Who Did Jesus Think He Was?*, which was published in the same year. The Jesus of the fourth gospel would be guilty of making the claim to be the Messiah; nevertheless, that gospel itself contains evidence both that it was understood that the Messiah must not make such a claim, and also that Jesus chose words to avoid making it. The words in which the Messiah proclaims himself belong to the revelatory material composed before the birth of Jesus.

Among more recent contributions, "'This is my body...' (1 Corinthians 11.24)" *IBS* 24/1 (2002) is a fine example of his ability to allow textual criticism, together with an uncanny grasp of the relevance of other material, to offer fresh perspective on the most well known of texts. "This which is broken for you is to be my body. Do this that God may remember [my death as a sacrifice offered to him that you and others who gather in worship may receive at the hands of angels the bread of heaven]."

A Memorial Service was held at Greyfriars Kirk in Edinburgh, attended by his wife Judith, and daughters Rachel, Catherine and Philippa. This was marked by the extraordinary diversity among others attending, in terms of age, background, attire and religious vocation. It was in this respect a fitting tribute, if Hamlet without the prince. Johnston McKay was able to conclude his address with a message of condolence from the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. They were good friends, and John had preached at the first communion service he had taken. As the words were spoken, one had the sense that, with the circle of the years, John had at that moment become "mainstream". It may prove to be symbolic

of what is yet to become of his very individual contributions to New Testament scholarship.

I have no doubt that whenever those of us who had the extraordinary privilege to be his students read our Greek New Testaments, we will continue to hear his gentle encouragement at the harder passages (and his gentle request for parsing). A number of us will love the book so dearly because it reminds us of him. If only we did not have to miss him so much.

James Bewick