

Teaching moments: Tribute to a beloved professor

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [September 20, 2005](#) issue

Some theologians seem to disdain the church as they shine their scholarly light on the church's triviality, unfaithfulness and banality. Other theologians have the same capacity for critical thinking, but they sit in the pew on Sunday morning, participate in the liturgy, and live out their scholarly vocation in and for the community of faith.

One of the best theologians of the church I have ever known died last month. Walter Bouman, longtime professor of systematic theology at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, taught a generation of students to think theologically.

He brought to his teaching ministry not only his prodigious scholarship but also a profound love for the world—for music, art, literature and the St. Louis Cardinals. He could not teach or preach without celebrating and loving the way the gospel of Jesus Christ intersects with things of this world. He once began an Advent sermon on Isaiah 64:1, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," by citing one of the "Children's Letters to God": "Dear God, you better do something quick! Love, Harriet Ann."

We met when I was a pastor in Columbus and he was invited to teach an adult class at Broad Street Presbyterian Church. He was a smash hit. He spent so many Sunday mornings at our church that we made him an honorary Presbyterian. He never refused an invitation to teach or preach in a local parish. His vocation was to be a theologian of the church.

Several months ago a routine physical exam revealed a cancer that was inoperable. His physician told him he had at best a few months to live. Walt's dying was as remarkable as his living. It was faithful, worldly, wise and graced with humor. In a sermon he preached to the seminary community after the news of his illness was public, Walt recalled Woody Allen's words: "It is impossible to experience your own death and carry a tune." He said, "Some things are worse than death. Have you ever spent two hours with an insurance salesman?" He referred to Psalm 90 (a favorite),

“So teach us to count our days,” and added, “I’m counting! I’m counting!”

Then this church theologian taught one more time: “The resurrection of Jesus Christ frees us to do more with our lives than protect them. We are free to offer them. We are called to love the world, to want clean air and water for everyone, to give ourselves to the service of peace instead of blindly following our leaders in senseless wars, to commit to the cause of justice, especially when our institutions and our country are guilty of injustice. That is a big order. But you are free to pursue it by the resurrection of Christ, who has put an end to the dominion of death. We are free for the battle because the victory is already won.”

He concluded by saying that he had been praying a little prayer that he first prayed in German as a child:

Lord Jesus, who does love me,
Oh, spread thy wings above,
And shield me from alarm.
Though evil would assail me
Thy mercy will not fail me.
I rest in thy protecting arms.

Walt died with his family and friends around him. He died as he lived, a theologian of the church, teaching.