

F.F. Bruce as a Teacher

David F. Payne*

[p.15]

As a young undergraduate, one's first impressions of F. F. Bruce as a teacher were his clarity and lucidity. If comparisons are odious, undergraduates certainly make them—and F.F.B. came out well from any comparison within one's other lecturers and teachers. The content was nicely judged; each of his lectures was 'meaty', but yet did not demand the talents of a stenographer from the student taking notes.

The erudition was recognisable from the start, but somewhat disguised by his ease of delivery, and his remarkable avoidance of abstruse (and German!) terminology. I think one therefore came to appreciate the depth of the erudition better in retrospect. The 'footnotes' were not uttered, of course, but any question from a student immediately elicited one, without the least hesitation or playing for time. There is no doubt that every lecture had been prepared in depth. The courses at Sheffield University, it was laid down, were to be strictly 'non-doctrinal'—an impossible goal. But Mr. Bruce (as he was till

[p.16]

1955) observed the spirit of this law scrupulously, and no student could have claimed that he had been in any way indoctrinated. A breadth and a choice of viewpoint were always offered, and offered in the most objective way; at the same time, shrewd and sensible criteria were presented, so that the student was not left befogged by a vast and conflicting mass of undigested opinions. This technique had the effect of forcing one to think for oneself, to reach one's own conclusions, and to learn facility in applying criteria. At the same time, it gave one opportunity to adjust one's thinking to unpalatable facts or theories, without losing one's spiritual balance. The attempt to shock was never one of F.F.B.'s teaching methods; one was never bullied into making an immediate decision, pro or con. Hence one was schooled, almost unconsciously, to avoid snap judgments, to weigh up problems carefully and objectively, and above all to resist the temptation to oversimplify all questions into black-and-white terms ('sound' or 'unsound', 'evangelical' or 'liberal', etc.).

In his individual relationships with students, Professor Bruce was a true Barnabas. He was no taskmaster, but his pupils received every encouragement. Work done for him was assessed shrewdly—but kindly. Any burgeoning aptitudes or interests were noted and fostered. And any ideas or suggestions, however ill-conceived, one might proffer to him, consistently received courteous and sympathetic though, wisely, not uncritical attention.

F.F.B.'s literary output speaks for itself. The wonder is that he has never put research before students, and that he has always been prepared to give unstintingly of his valuable time to the needs and demands of his pupils.

Years have passed since I could speak from first-hand experience—hence the past tenses of the above paragraphs. But I do not doubt that the same—and more—could be said of the

* Mr. D. F. Payne is Lecturer in Semitic Studies in The Queen's University of Belfast.

David F. Payne, "F.F. Bruce as a Teacher," *Christian Brethren Research Fellowship Journal* 22 (Nov. 1971): 15-16,

present Rylands Professor in the University of Manchester (to which Chair he succeeded in 1959).

© 1971 *Partnership* (<http://www.partnershipuk.org/>). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in December 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/>
