



Warren Thomas Smith  
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# W. Thomas Smith: A Memorial Tribute

by  
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The news that we have received this week seems to be bad. Our friend has been snatched from us. He, who was so vigorous and energetic, has vanished from our midst. Taken in isolation, the death of Tom Smith is an unhappy event. But taken in the context of his whole life, it provides us with occasion for thanksgiving. The news that we share with each other today is good news. It is the news of a man who has finished the race and obtained the prize.

Warren Thomas Smith was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1923. His boyhood and youth were spent in Maryville, Tennessee. He was educated at Maryville College, Ohio Wesleyan University (B.A., 1945), the Candler School of Theology (B.D., 1948), and Boston University (Ph.D., 1953). In 1958 he received an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Lincoln Memorial University. In 1947 he became a deacon, and in 1949 an elder of the Methodist Church. He served as associate minister at Peachtree Road United Methodist Church. He was pastor of Sharp Memorial United Methodist Church, Young Harris, Georgia, and of Trinity United Methodist Church, Atlanta. In 1960 he moved to Nashville where he served for four years as Director of Ministerial Recruitment for the General Board of Education. On his return to Georgia he was pastor of Young Harris Memorial United Methodist Church, Athens, of North Decatur United Methodist Church, and then from 1968 until 1974 of this First United Methodist Church, College Park. From 1974 he served at the Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, where he was Professor of Church History. He was a devoted son of the United Methodist Church, and the North Georgia Conference made good use of his expertise in history.

He was a man of great vitality and abundant gifts. An eloquent preacher, he used his mastery of language, his powerful imagination, his keen intellect, and his sensitivity to human need to give expression to a deep, unswerving faith. A devoted pastor, he spent over half of his minis-

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try in the local parish, where many people can testify to his help and care in their moments of crisis. A born teacher, he transformed the names in the history books into living people. History was never dull when he was the teacher. In his book about Augustine he said, "After years of writing I feel that I have come to know him personally. He is, after all, very real - an authentic individual - an African who was flesh, blood, tears, laughter." That was Tom's secret. As he walked down the corridors of history, these were living people that he met; and he made them alive for others.

Thomas Smith was a prolific writer. Rising at an early hour each morning, he worked diligently and productively. He wrote books of sermons. He wrote works on Church History. His interests ranged across the centuries. Augustine, John and Charles Wesley, Francis Asbury, Thomas Coke, the early religious history of Georgia, and the Christmas Conference of 1784 were the themes of his writings. He wrote no book on Luther, but Luther was one of his heroes. He had a special interest in the part played by blacks in Methodism. He produced an account of the great black preacher, Harry Hosier. He reminded us in a book published only a few months ago of the stand taken by John Wesley against slavery. Tom Smith was concerned about both the salvation of the soul and the establishment of Christian standards of justice. More books would surely have come; he had already done a tremendous amount of work on the beginnings of American Methodism. We could speculate on the work he might have done, had he lived longer. But we shall be better occupied in giving thanks for the scope and substance of his achievements.

He had a remarkable sense of the dramatic. And the drama he loved most was the drama of real-life history. Six years ago he published a collection of sermons entitled *And the Play Goes On*. In that book he explained his view of the world and of the pattern of events through the centuries. History was a three-act play. The Director of the play was God. The first act began with the creation; but most of the characters disregarded the Director's orders, and the plot went askew. In the second act the Director sent Jesus to be hero; that second act ended in tragedy with Jesus on the cross. Then came the third act. It began with Christ's resurrection. It continues to this day; for the play is not yet finished. We are the actors in this third part of the drama. Listen to what Tom Smith himself says:

Actors come and go. There are the powerful ones: Toyohiko Kagawa, Albert Schweitzer, Martin Luther King Jr. There are likewise tens of thousands of unknown and unsung heroes who, acting quietly and bravely their parts, receive little spotlight, applause, or flowers. Yet, upon their exits we hear the words, "Well done, good servant!" . . . We ponder - and we are startled; we hear *our* names called. Why us? But of course, we too, are on stage. We belong to the *dramatis personae*. We are walking the boards. We made our entrances the moment we were born. We moved from the wings to the footlights of history.

. . . As Christians we have more than a highly personalized role. We have been commissioned to make a witness, to render a service. We have a role to play. It is time to fulfill our parts in the drama, ". . . looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter . . ." And the play goes on. . . .

Warren Thomas Smith speaks to us today - across the line that separates us from him. "The play," he says, "goes on."

It was not just as a preacher, pastor, teacher, and writer that we knew him - we knew him as a friend; and those who knew him best knew him as husband, father, and brother. His energy, his wit, the vitality he radiated around him - these cannot be erased from the memory. His life and his faith were one. The Smiths have been a close-knit family, united by a common faith and a strong cord of love. In Barbara he was blessed with a wife who understood his spiritual aspirations and shared his convictions. A qualified Director of Christian Education, she unfailingly supported him, and was in full sympathy with his endeavors. They stood by each other in sickness and in health. They stood together in devotion to their son. Cicero, in another quotation from Tom's book on Augustine, said to his son, "You are the only man of all men whom I would wish to surpass me in all things." That was also Tom's wish for his son Warren. Just over three weeks ago at the honors and commencement ceremonies at Emory University the Smith family celebrated a proud moment in their lives. Warren had been offered admission to the Yale Divinity School. This church at College Park had promised him support of outstanding generosity. And now Barbara and Tom watched their son, resplendent with high honors in history, receive his degree from Emory. They savored to the full the joys of parental pride.

Three days later Tom entered the hospital. Then there began the fluctuating tide of events which has brought us here today. We often say our departed friends have gone to their rest. But the word "rest" alone cannot adequately describe that life which here we see as in a mirror darkly. It is difficult to imagine Tom Smith in a permanent state of rest. The scriptures do not only speak of the future as rest; they also describe it in terms of standing: "Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand." A great hymn affirms the hope

That having all things done,  
And all your conflicts past,  
Ye may o'ercome through Christ alone,  
And stand entire at last.

Last Friday evening, when we went to see Tom, he got out of his hospital bed. He walked along the corridor, and talked as he had done in former days. When we left him, he was standing there, smiling with head erect. Pictures flash before the mind - Tom standing in the pulpit, in the lecture room, a grace before a meal, in conversation on a campus. More

important, Tom was standing on the promises, standing in the might of Christ; and now, with the multitude that no one can number, he stands before the throne and before the Lamb.

Why should a powerful and eloquent preacher like Tom Smith want to teach and study Church History? Partly because he had the scholar's thirst for knowledge, the desire to confront the challenge of unsolved problems; but also for another reason. At the beginning of his book on Augustine he wrote, "My aim has been to make him come alive to the reader. In so doing, it is likewise my hope that along with Augustine I, too, might make my witness to the grace of God as seen in Jesus the Christ." Tom believed in the importance of prayer; and he believed that in prayer we shared in the communion of the saints. As he pursued his studies, he learned about the great ones of the past. He discovered their weakness; he discovered their strength; he discovered their triumphant faith; he listened to their witness. And then he told us their story. He let them speak to us as they had spoken to him. He showed us how they had fared on the "journey in faith." As we hear and read his words, we too are encompassed with a cloud of witnesses, the great men and women of the Bible, and those who followed after them, Augustine, Luther, the Wesleys, Asbury, Coke, Hosier, a multitude of others, and now - included in their number - Warren Thomas Smith.

# THE CHARLES B. COPHER ANNUAL FACULTY LECTURE SERIES

The Charles B. Copher Annual Faculty Lecture Series, originally called merely The Annual Faculty Lecture Series, was initiated in March of 1979. It formed part of the Twentieth Anniversary Celebration of the founding of the Interdenominational Theological Center. The lecture series seeks to promote a profound level of striving, keeping faculty on the cutting edge of their respective disciplines. The following persons have delivered the lectures:

1979—John W. Waters, Ph.D., Professor, Old Testament

1981—Jacquelyn Grant, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Systematic  
Theology

Justo González, Ph.D., Visiting Professor, History of  
Theology

J. Deotis Roberts, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor, System-  
atic Theology

1982—W. Thomas Smith, Ph.D., Professor, Church History

1983—Jonathan Jackson, Th.D., Professor, Christian Education

1984—Riggins R. Earl, Jr., Ph.D., Associate Professor, Christian  
Social Ethics

1985—David K. Rensberger, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, New  
Testament

1986—Jacquelyn Grant, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Systematic  
Theology

This year, 1987, the lectures are being delivered by Dr. Gayraud S. Wilmore, UNCF Distinguished Visiting Professor at ITC for 1986-87, and Dr. Charles B. Copher, for whom the lectures are named. The Series is one of the ways by which the ITC Community seeks to honor Dr. Copher who, for many years, served as Academic Dean, and for many more years taught Old Testament.

This section of JITC presents the 1987 Charles B. Copher Annual Faculty Lecture Series delivered by Professors Wilmore and Copher, as well as those lectures delivered by Professor Smith (in 1982), by Professor Rensberger (in 1985), and by Professor Jacquelyn Grant (in 1986). As space permits, the editors intend to publish other lectures in this series.

# THE CHARLES B. COPPIN

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