

A Tribute to Dr. Norman L. Geisler

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In the near two-week span since we first learned that Dr. Geisler was gravely ill and unlikely to survive the stroke that ultimately took him from us, tribute after tribute from students, colleagues, and family members filled social media, public addresses, and personal conversations. The most fascinating feature of these testimonies has been their utter consistency: while the particular facts differed, they all spoke the same way about Dr. G as a peerless professor, generous friend, family man, and unyielding advocate to his students and friends. While my tribute is in many ways redundant, I am nevertheless bound by loving duty to the man to add my voice to the chorus of gratitude being sung today by thousands for the gift of God he was to us and to the church at large.

In 1989 at the age of 22, I responded to the gospel and surrendered my life to Christ. I had been a high school dropout and had just recently returned from three years in the Navy, including a two-year tour in the Philippines. After Jesus got a hold of my life, I quickly earned my G.E.D., and three months later enrolled in the local community college, transferring soon after to Stephen F. Austin State University, where I began a long journey toward preparing myself for pastoral ministry, a vision God planted in my heart very early in my Christian walk.

Alas, I was completely unprepared for the way my fledgling faith would be undermined at college. Back in the early 1990s, the antagonism toward Christianity was slightly more subtle than the open hostility of today, but the ideologies undergirding the growing animosity are essentially unchanged. Why should the devil bother coming up with a new bag of tricks when the old ones are still so effective at derailing the faithful and blinding the hearts of unbelievers?

Through my university years my “faith” remained intact, but my “reason” was being intimidated into a fainthearted silence. By the time I first entered the pastorate in 1997, my faith and reason, bifurcated by the unrelenting philosophical assaults on theistic and Christian thought I absorbed while in college, seemed no longer to be on speaking terms. I wanted to be bold and passionate for Christ and the gospel, but quite honestly, I walked in stultifying fear that maybe I had in fact believed a fairy tale. I literally began debates in my own head that I inevitably lost – to myself. Oddly, before my Christian conversion I never bothered thinking about much of anything. Now that I was seeking to walk daily with Jesus, my mind was oddly restless yet I was an intellectual wreck. When I would seek counsel regarding my harassing doubts, I was told time and again by well-meaning but ill-equipped pastors: “just believe” or, “you must be harboring a secret moral problem.” Though I found such counsel most unhelpful, I at least would get a chuckle out of the latter: of course, I had moral failures, and they certainly were not secret. No one had to convince me I was a sinner. Those glaring faults were, in fact, the driving force behind my submission to Jesus as Savior in the first place. But that wasn’t my question. Instead: **can I believe the Bible is telling me the truth?** I could not find answers, at least in the places I then knew to look.

A few years later, as the pastor of a small country church about 40 miles east of Dallas, TX, I labored in abject fear of being rudely silenced in the middle of a sermon by an unidentified village atheist whose undeniably well-reasoned attack on the veracity of Christianity I could not possibly answer, if in fact such answers existed at all. Such an attack (wholly imaginary in my case as it was) would jeopardize not only my faith, but worse, that of my congregation. Setting aside the fact that there probably wasn’t an atheist in the entire county, and certainly not one in my church, all the same the battle was essentially lost in my own soul. I had no answers to the most common objections to the Bible. Ultimately, I had to resign. I had become completely ineffective because of my own disabling doubts. Utterly defeated, I decided I could no longer stick my neck out for a faith I was not equipped to defend and didn’t even know for sure that it *was* defensible. I left ministry, never intending to speak boldly for Christ again. How could I?

In July 2000, my friend Kurt Wise (SES '05) told me about a seminary in Charlotte, NC that I should look into. I wasn't interested. He told me that it had been founded by Norman Geisler. I knew the name, and probably even owned an old copy of Norm's book *Christian Apologetics* (which to that point had remained safely untouched on the bookshelf), but I still wasn't interested. Thankfully, Kurt persisted, and on Labor Day weekend in 2000 we flew together to Charlotte, rented a car, and drove to Southern Evangelical Seminary, where we spontaneously erupted into laughter as we first glanced upon the "two trailers and a shack on a gravel parking lot." We came out here for this? To borrow from today's lingo: LOL.

We walked into one of the trailers and were met there by none other than Dr. Geisler himself, who immediately invited us to his cabin for the weekend. It was there that I first heard the term "pure actuality" and wondered out loud what I was getting myself into. The real clincher to me was not really the prospect of an unmatched theological education, but the 60-degree F weather in the mountains, which contrasted with the 113 degree heat back in Dallas on Labor Day 2000. Two and half months later, my wife and I along with our five small children moved into our new home in Mint Hill, NC, and two months later I began my first seminary course.

In the summer of 2001, I took my first course with Dr. Geisler, "ST1: Prolegomena and Bibliology." In the prolegomena section, as Dr. G took us through the "preconditions" for evangelical theology, I began to notice that he was addressing the very issues that had disturbed my thinking since my college days a decade earlier. He was answering questions by the dozens, including ones I didn't even know I had! Half way through that life-changing course, every single doubt I harbored over the foundations of Christian theology were answered, convincingly and thoroughly.

I used to say that I was wheeled into SES.edu on an intellectual gurney, fighting for the life of my faith. While a metaphor, that picture accurately described my desperate situation. It aptly described the shambles of my thinking. Dr. Geisler (along with Drs. Tom and Richard

Howe) met me at the ER, diagnosed the disease(s), and administered the cure: heavy doses of well-reasoned truth grounded in undeniable first principles. For the first time since my earliest days as a young believer, I found myself free again to begin asking *new* questions, to more deeply explore the faith, and at last free from the rut of obsessing daily over the fundamental question of whether the whole fortress of Christianity was anything more than an elaborate hoax.

Speaking of fortresses, another way I have described my “conversion” through Dr. Geisler’s peerless apologetics is to say that I showed up at SES with a theological fortress built in mid-air. I knew my theology. I had a pretty robust understanding of evangelical theology. My system internally cohered fairly well. *But I had no idea if it was actually true. As far as I knew, Christianity had no explicit correspondence to actual reality.* Dr. G changed all that. He provided a firm foundation for my “theological fortress.” As a result, he put me back in service for the sake of the gospel. How can I ever repay him for that?

My relationship with Dr. G did not end with my graduation in 2005. He continued to mentor and encourage me even as I earned a second master’s degree at Baylor University, and then, after an eleven-year hiatus, returned to the pastorate in 2009. In the eight years I served fulltime as a pastor, it was my joy to bring apologetics to the local church. Rather than turning away sincere questions from congregants with calls to pious fideism, in the same spirit in which I was trained, I sought to equip church members, especially the youth, with a solid and well-reasoned defense of the faith. So much of whatever “success” I enjoyed as a pastor, I owe to Dr. G. As Ravi eulogized Dr. G at last week’s memorial: “Sir, how can we repay you for what you have done for us?”

To Dr. G:

Thank you. I love you. I’m indebted to you. You changed my life in ways you don’t even know. You’ve inspired me and you continue to challenge me. Thank you for your loving labors and thank you that you have left us a piece of your mind in the form of so many treasured books (especially the ones you signed). It is that piece of

your mind that continues to give me peace of mind as I rest in the confidence that my faith truly stands upon solid ground. I am grateful for your sake that your faith has become sight, and the beatific vision you taught us to long for is now yours for all eternity. We will see you before too long. Even more importantly, we shall see Him. Thanks to you, of that I am solidly sure. Until then, standing on the shoulders of a giant, we will carry on the work of defending the gospel of our glorious Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.