

# Martin Rist as a Teacher

J. ALTON TEMPLIN

**T**HERE is an old legend which tells a story about St. Louis (Louis IX of France) during the seventh crusade in the middle of the Thirteenth Century. In Egypt Louis is said to have met a Muslim carrying on his head a flask of water, and in one hand a lighted torch. When the crusader asked why the stranger was carrying these he was told: "The water is to pour on the fires of Hell; the torch is to burn up the so-called glories of Heaven. After this the true Muslim will be able to worship God not out of fear of punishment, nor for hope of reward, but for Himself alone."

I am not sure the whole story can be allegorized to apply to the task at hand; but many of us are prepared to say that Dr. Martin Rist did lead us into new and more meaningful approaches to many parts of our religious knowledge, and thus he assisted us to lead others to worship God for Himself alone. It is my privilege in the following pages to speak for countless students who studied in Dr. Rist's classes. I shall attempt to analyze his method of teaching, his general classroom attitude, and some of the reasons why we appreciate the work we did under his guidance.

This writer first studied under Dr. Rist when in the University of Denver, and it was partly through his influence that I continued my work in Iliff rather than another theological school. During the six years I was associated with Iliff I took most of the courses Dr. Rist offered, and have had opportunity to correspond with him since. Most of the impressions I had of "Martin Rist as a teacher" I could have stated the day Iliff awarded me my degree. However, I would make

the same statements now, though more emphatically, since I have been associated with several other teachers in the same fields in more recent years. In discussion groups in which former Iliff students get together we take some time to recall various experiences we had at Iliff, and our fond memories of Dr. Rist's influence take their rightful place in every such discussion. In my preparation for this present tribute I corresponded with several contemporaries in Iliff and found that we share many of the same attitudes as to the place this one teacher has in our developing academic and ministerial careers. However, what follows is an exposition of why I must consider Dr. Rist an exceptional teacher.

**I. Details were important.** One of the first impressions one received as he began his work in New Testament was that Dr. Rist is a person who emphasized the details underlying his presentation in "Bible through the Ages," "New Testament," and all other courses. As he placed five or six books on one side of the desk, a recent periodical or two on the other side, and his stack of cards with finely written notes immediately before him, we knew that this person had the facts before him, and had mastered the material in the field. Often he would lecture for a whole period without referring to either the books or the notes, for he knew their contents, including New Testament chapter and verse, thoroughly. Many times a question would be asked, and even if it might not be specifically on the subject at hand, Dr. Rist could rapidly thumb through his cards to the specific reference he sought, and would give the gist of the argument, or more often, refer the student to the relevant book and chapter for his own answer.

Minute details often seemed to be the most important aspect of his class presentation. But when the student con-

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tinued to study in this field he saw through the details to the main point the professor had in mind, and he saw the relevance of the details for the problem at hand. Details such as names, dates, Biblical verses, were never ends in themselves, but rather were the tools with which one embarked on larger questions concerning trends, relationship and basic meanings throughout the warp and woof New Testament thought and history of the developing Church.

Dr. Rist knows well that precise scholarship can not be accomplished without the facts as a basis, but he never lets them become stumbling blocks preventing what he rightly considers the more meaningful and result of a particular problem.

**II. Thorough in study.** We immediately were impressed with the fact that Dr. Rist is a thorough scholar and makes heavy demands upon himself. He was more exacting on his own part than he ever was upon any student, but somehow, through his thoroughness he had learned to help students at the point of their need rather than to overwhelm them with his immense learning. The "original sin" in Dr. Rist's thinking, concerning both his students and himself, is mediocrity. In such an academic atmosphere it was indeed a rare privilege for one of us to locate a fact or an incident with which he was not already familiar.

Many of us said often that in his Greek classes we learned as much basic New Testament material as we did Greek, for the instructor was always armed with his Greek-German lexicon as well as the Greek-English dictionary plus several versions of the New Testament. Few sentences were ever translated without our seeing their relation to other possible translations, and their ramifications in their own New Testament *Sitz im Leben*. We learned not only the grammar and the mere translation of the passages, but in addition we had a feeling of reliving the whole experience with the author in Greek, in German, and ultimately in English.

The thoroughness of this teacher is further evidenced in his exegesis in the *Interpreter's Bible*. He was asked to submit his manuscript several years before it was finally published in 1957, and within the intervening time he wished in vain that the publisher would allow him to make revisions based on continuing research.

Who of us cannot remember the many class periods which were begun with further explanation of the question of the previous class? Although at least forty-eight hours had intervened, Dr. Rist would begin where he left off as though he had only paused to take a breath. The answers to such questions were usually fortified with several volumes from the New Testament shelf and an encyclopedia or two. One class in New Testament felt compassion on their instructor and purchased a little red wagon for his use to and from class, but I do not know whether or not the use of this vehicle ever became standard practice.

**III. Objective rigor a constant watchword.** In his scholarship Dr. Rist was rigorous, and never sentimental. Some students who did not know him would often become disturbed because they thought he was not sufficiently committed to and sympathetic with the Christian message. However, most of us never doubted his deep commitment to the religious faith of his church. He was deeply concerned that the Christian message as it was learned through his classes should be relevant and meaningful to the contemporary student wanting to be at home in the contemporary world. He was impatient with pious irrelevancy in New Testament studies as well as in other aspects of the religious faith in which he taught and studied.

The contemporary trend in theological studies which insists that purely "objective" scholarship must be superceded by "committed" adherence to a certain predetermined theological formulation would have a difficult time in categorizing Martin Rist. He would of course in-

sist that he be placed in the former, and I think rightly so. However, in his approach, to be "objective" does not mean to be "uncommitted" or even "disinterested." He is deeply committed to his faith, but he chooses to find his commitment growing out of his objective study, and not in lieu of objectivity. He insisted that we must let the documents speak to us, rather than that we must tell them what they are to say. In recent scholarly discussions Dr. Rist has been a staunch defender of this approach in face of a large number who choose the so-called "contemporary" method of interpretation. Dr. Rist's method of New Testament and early historical analysis is certainly in keeping with one "contemporary" Anglican church historian:

The first concern of Christian historical study is not to extract precedents from the Christian past to bind or justify the Christian present, but to understand why the Christian past took the particular form it did.

He insisted that we must build the foundation for our academic and ministerial careers for ourselves, rather than merely to adopt what someone before us had already built. For this reason I suggest that he was both objective as to his methodology, and at the same time deeply committed as to his own faith and that which he hoped would be developed by each of his students. For him a new idea is a new challenge for a developing faith, rather than a datum to be pigeon-holed in a static system.

**IV. Students led to use facts—to think.** He insisted that his students should not merely accumulate facts, but should learn to use facts. In short, he insisted that they **think**. He often answered questions which no student was asking, but these were questions which students **ought** to be asking. While he was never guilty of merely pouring in facts, as in a funnel, he was constantly injecting new ideas to help students begin to think on their own.

He had a way of dropping suggestions

in discussions, and of suggesting topics for our research papers which we had not previously considered. As we worked with these suggestions we sooner or later came to realize that he was giving us the basic blocks with which to build our own foundation in New Testament. Thus we would not erect our academic superstructure on sand and would not be concerned merely with the questions which had been answered by thinkers more skilled than ourselves.

**V. Scholarship did not always mean agreement.** Whether or not a student agreed with Dr. Rist consistently was not one of his criteria in judging scholarship. A student could not be guaranteed a passing mark merely by becoming a "yes" man, nor would he be doomed to failure if took a strongly contradictory approach. To illustrate this I quote a paragraph from a letter received from one of Dr. Rist's former students:

A truly fine teacher recognizes scholarship and intellectual ability in those with whom he disagrees. A good teacher is able to give high grades to students whose scholarship and intellectual ability warrant those grades irrespective of their theology. Judged by this standard Dr. Rist is a good teacher, as this example illustrates. In a class on "The Life and Teachings of Jesus" there were two students representing the ends of the theological spectrum. One student maintained an almost complete scepticism with respect to the historical Jesus. The other student held the position which was quite close to Fundamentalism. Each student wrote his final examination paper within his theological position. Each student received an A minus. The mark was not given because of a theological position but because each student had supported his position with logic and scholarship and although Dr. Rist did not agree with either position he realized that both students demonstrated scholarship and intellectual ability.

This paragraph was written by James Farrell, one of the students involved. It is a mark only of a mature and truly educated teacher to allow such a divergence, for in the above illustration Dr. Rist agreed with neither extreme. Many teachers, unfortunately, tend more often

\* Gregory Dix in *The Apostolic Ministry*, ed. by K. E. Kirk, p. 187.

to equate "scholarship" with "agreement with my findings." To be sure, those who disagreed with Dr. Rist appreciate this point far more than those who after honest and objective study decided that they must agree with him.

**VI. Up to date in scholarship.** As a teacher, Dr. Rist has kept himself on the forefront of contemporary knowledge. He has long emphasized what is now much better known, that the book of Revelation was written with martyrs specifically in mind, and that the Pastoral Epistles reflect a much later Church government than that of Paul's generation. In these two instances and in many others, he has been among the leaders in introducing new ideas and concepts to his students.

Most recently he has introduced a course at Iliff on the "Gospel of Thomas." This little-known book, as well as the rest of the 1946 find at Nag-Hammadi in upper Egypt, has been very slow in finding its place into American scholarship, overshadowed as these works have been by the Dead Sea Scrolls. However, almost as soon as this Gospel of Thomas was translated from the Coptic Dr. Rist developed an interest in it, and his course in this significant book is one of the very few offered today in this country. As the rest of the books in this collection find their way into a modern language, we may be assured that their significance will be expounded in Dr. Rist's classroom.

It is indeed valuable for the contemporary ministerial student to know that his teacher is well-versed not only in the traditional studies of New Testament, but is equally cognizant of the publications of the current season.

**VII. A scholar among scholars.** It is not only the student who respects him as a teacher, for he has made his reputation among other professors in the field of New Testament. Not long ago this writer was talking with a professor of New Testament who has never met Dr. Rist, but who was interested to know that I had studied with him. This person was especially grateful for Dr. Rist's scholar-

ship with respect to the Revelation material in the **Interpreter's Bible**, used in many college and seminary classrooms.

I talked with Dr. Morton Scott Enslin several years ago when he was lecturing at Iliff in the summer school. We were discussing the points especially at which Dr. Rist and he disagreed, but Dr. Enslin assured us that among many teachers of New Testament that he knew, the name of Martin Rist cannot but command respect. Surely this is borne out by the fact that Dr. Rist has been invited to teach on many summer school faculties across the country.

His ability as a teacher and scholar was recognized especially in that he was chosen to write the already-mentioned **Interpreter's Bible** exegesis of Revelation. It is noteworthy that Dr. Rist was given his choice of two commentaries. We are certainly glad that he chose Revelation, but we only hope that soon we will have the information available which he might have included in the other commentary.

**VIII. Sincere interest in students as persons.** In spite of all that has been stated above, it may well be that a teacher's real influence is only in the proportion that he is vitally interested in his students as individuals and as future ministers of the church. Who of us has not known Martin Rist as a counsellor on problems related to school work, church activities, or personal problems? Many times and on many occasions he has visited us in our apartments in the vicinity of Iliff as well as in our churches, and we have always felt encouraged to speak with him in his office or in the Iliff halls.

On one occasion Dr. Rist went to a student's church in Eastern Colorado for a meeting. On the way back to Denver he was caught in a wind storm and the blowing sand ruined the finish on one side of his car. After the arrangements were made to have the car repainted he was telling some of us of the whole experience, and included many humorous comments. Even such an experience as the sand storm had not dampened the

enthusiasm he had about his trip, for we knew that in spite of the inconvenience, Dr. Rist was thankful if the trip had been appreciated and had been a help to the student minister and the congregation of the small church.

Sometimes in class discussion a student would ask a question irrelevant to the discussion at hand. Other questions would be posed which only revealed that the student had not bothered to read the basic assignments. In either case the professor would honor the question and the student with a good and well-thought-out answer and would never attempt to be curt or embarrass the student. No matter whether our grades were high or low, we knew that our professor of New Testament was interested in us as individuals, and not merely as some statistics in his grade book.

**IX. At home in this geographical area.** Dr. Rist has been interested not only in his subject and his students, but also in the geographical area in which he works. He came to Iliff from another part of the country, but very quickly began to study the local history and traditions of the area. He has since written and taught in various aspects of local history, has directed many dissertations on the early Church History of Colorado, and has written a history of his own church, University Park. Many of us have been encouraged to look up the historical details of the student churches in which we worked. This was not only for the good of the Methodist Historical Society, but also because our instructor knew we could be more effective ministers if we were conversant with the background of our own community. Dr. Rist has practiced what he preached, and has instilled in many of his students the same concern for local church history which he has shown throughout these many years in Colorado. I remember many profitable informal hours spent listening to him tell of some of the results of his study as he told us of the history of the Iliff School, the Iliff family, Bishop Warren,

John Merritt, John Collins, or the beginnings of Methodism in the area back to Jacob Adriance and Father Dyer, the "snow-shoe itinerant."

Those of us who were in Dr. Rist's classes during the time he was engaged in planning the new library were constantly amazed at the thoroughness with which he embarked on that task. He was vitally concerned that the building should be as functional as possible, because he was interested not only for the sake of the school, but more important, for the students of the coming generations who would make the library the center of their work.

**X. A teacher beyond the school room.** As a teacher, Dr. Rist has maintained his concern in education beyond the walls of his theological school room. He has always been willing and anxious to go to student conferences, ministerial meetings, or other adult groups to bring the insight of modern scholarship to students not planning theological careers, ministers away from school, and to laymen in many churches. He has written not only specialized scholarly articles, but is a frequent contributor to the Church School materials of his own denomination. Certainly in the Revelation commentary, and in the more recent publications on the same biblical book he is a teacher even beyond the halls of Iliff, for I have found his work useful not only in the classroom but also with adult education scholarship this most enigmatic of all books need remain a mystery no longer, neither for students nor for the average layman.

**XI. Interdenominational conversations.** His interest has not been confined to one denomination, for he has maintained conversations with several other groups. It was because of Dr. Rist's interest in the contemporary Jewish faith that I attended my first synagog service in Denver. One of the courses he taught at the University of Denver, popular for Methodist and other students as well, was "American Types of Religion," a survey of many religious groups in con-

temporary America. We have often heard him relate conversations he has had with Roman Catholics of the area. Many of the significant questions he put to them were appreciated by them; some other searching questions were not so readily appreciated. At many points he has proved himself as much at home in the **Catholic Encyclopedia** as Roman Catholic scholars themselves.

Likewise he has maintained an interest in the Mormon Church and often takes a side trip to visit the temple grounds when in Salt Lake City. On one trip he joined the group of tourists following the guide to hear the story of the early pioneers. He was especially interested in the story of the salvation God brought to the early Mormon settlers when He sent the sea gulls to devour the crickets, and thus to save the Mormons from imminent starvation. On one occasion, showing his deep interest in all phases of the story, Dr. Rist's question to the guide was "If God sent the sea gulls, who sent the crickets?" The answer, so far as I know, has not been recorded for posterity.

**XII. The Personality of the man.** But uniting all the above there is one thing more, the personality of the man, which cannot be adequately set in type. Behind his reserved wry smile we knew was a man both exacting in scholarship, and humanly approachable in our everyday needs; a man vitally interested in furthering thought and research in his chosen field, but likewise sincerely interested in the beginning stumbling student. What he stood for we all knew: he insisted on truth and knowledge, whether orthodox or not; he encouraged us to be creative religious thinkers standing unashamed among the other academic disciplines of our day; and he taught us how to be meaningful leaders in the congregations we then served, or tasks we would one day assume. Many of us still think of him as "Mr. New Testament."

**XIII. Mrs. Rist, ideal helpmate.** Lastly, but certainly a most important part of any statement concerning Dr. Rist as a

teacher is Mrs. Rist. Most of us sooner or later came to know her through her various contacts with student groups, or in the hospitality of their home. In classes or in social hours, many of us have spent many enjoyable hours in the Rist home. Mrs. Rist is always a gracious hostess, and always interested in the students in her husband's classes. Usually she would join in our discussions around the table heavily laden with refreshments. Often in the midst of a tale her husband was telling, apocryphal or otherwise, we would hear her typical words "now, Martin!" to bring us all back to the discussion at hand.

I remember especially the evening when we were gathered in their living room in fear and trembling. It was the time for a final exam in Greek. However, at the hour set for beginning the examination, after tables were set up before us that we might write in comfort, Mrs. Rist proceeded to place on each table a game of "cootie." From then on we had a very enjoyable evening. Afterwards we wondered why such an activity was appropriate for an academic class, but then we knew the answer. Why should we go through the formality of an examination when our instructor was well aware of what we knew already?

In this and many other situations we knew that Mrs. Rist was involved in the background planning, and was a constant helpmate for her scholar-husband, and an added inspiration for the average struggling theological student.

If we may borrow the same medieval story once again, we may apply it to Dr. Rist. Indeed, he carries as it were, a flask of water which he used to wash from our thinking the half-truths with which we came to seminary; he then brought us the torch symbolizing an enthusiasm for wider learning which was at our very fingertips; but always his concern was that we too should learn to serve God wholeheartedly in our churches and in our lives.

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