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Engle, Jesse Samuel

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JESSE SAMUEL ENGLE

In September 1924 a new professor began his work at Otterbein College. In the phraseology of those days, "He was the Bible teacher."

A new Bible teacher in a college is regarded with some reservations by both faculty and students. Is he a pulpit-pounding Bible teacher or the milk toast type? or a dry-as-dust instructor?

As it turned out, the new Bible teacher at Otterbein in 1924 was none of these. He taught the spirit of the Bible. To him the Bible was vibrant, a source for a life philosophy and a guidebook for the journey of Life.

This new teacher at Otterbein in 1924 was, of course, Jesse Samuel Engle, your good friend and mine.

He graduated from Otterbein in 1914. Before coming to college he had been a school teacher for five years. After college he went on to Bonebrake Theological Seminary. He was a member of the Sandusky Conference, joining the Conference in 1912 and being ordained in 1917. He served as a pastor during his student days and shortly thereafter. He continued his studies as a graduate student at the University of Chicago. While doing advanced work beyond the M.A. toward the doctorate, the summons came from Otterbein to fill a vacancy in the Bible Department. So he gave up his graduate study and came. At that time he felt the call to duty and did what seemed best.

Many years later he told me one day that he greatly regretted his inability to complete the doctorate at the University. "The next Bible teacher at Otterbein," he said, "should have a doctor's degree."

That new teacher in 1924 rather quickly made the adjustment from pulpit to classroom, from university study to undergraduate instruction. It was clear to his colleagues on the faculty and to his students that here was a teacher, rare indeed, who combined a scholarly understanding of subject matter with a humane understanding of students. And most important in a teacher of religion, he had a winsomeness of spirit and integrity of character that made him a fitting representative of the religion which he professed.

In recent years the Department of Bible and Philosophy was formed. He has said to many of us with great earnestness: "The Department that is responsible for the teaching of the Bible must be academically respectable. There must be no snap courses, and no excuse for any one to say that the study of religion is less exacting than Chemistry or History or English."

Most of the college's pre-theological students were his advisees and he watched over them carefully. He was particularly anxious that young ministers measure up in their grades. At intervals he would prepare a memorandum in which his satisfaction

was clearly visible because the ministerial students in a preceding semester had shown a point average superior to the average for all the men students in the college. The professors at Bonebrake Theological Seminary used to say: "The students we get from Professor Engle never have to "unlearn" anything."

But we must not get the impression that he was interested only in the academic achievements of the young theologues. He wanted each to have also the heart of a pastor and feel a sense of being called to a divine vocation.

His vision reached to the ends of the earth and his eyes surveyed a wide horizon. He was eager for students to be in touch with the missionary cause of the church and he strove always to interpret to the campus the international and ecumenical aspects of the Christian Student Movement.

He was a man of intense and deep convictions. But he had Christian grace enough and humor enough to avoid the pitfalls of bigotry and narrow-mindedness.

He was a listener. He knew what he thought, but was willing, indeed he seemed glad, to listen to the beliefs and opinions of others.

Until his last illness he carried a heavy administrative load along with his teaching duties. He was chairman of his department, and also chairman of the Division of Social Studies comprising four departments. He served on numerous important faculty committees, and was faculty advisor of the Campus Christian Association.

His manner was unobtrusive. In a public discussion he usually was one of the last to speak. But when the occasion demanded he spoke forcefully and with clarity. One of his greatest qualities was his ability to see the inconsistencies of an argument. He could also make short shrift of a pompous stuffed shirt.

He had a sense of humor that was delightful. His dry wit was salty without bitterness.

I can remember faculty meetings when the debate would get considerably involved and go in circles with perhaps more heat than light. On such occasions Dr. Engle with a few wise and droll words would relieve the tension and get the discussion on the track moving toward a solution.

In my younger days I visited Otterbein from time to time to speak at chapel or to one of the religious organizations. I was very much of a synthetic public speaker and had to learn the hard way. I made many mistakes. More than once after a speech of mine he came up, expressed his appreciation for what I had tried to say, gave me some encouraging words, and then left in my hand a three by five card with the quiet remark: "Here's something for you to look at when you have time."

On the card would be some suggestions as to words I may have misused, facts I might have misquoted, or books which I would find interesting. He never embarrassed me with this help. He would have been pained to think that I would not receive it in the spirit in which it was offered, namely in the spirit of a good friend who was interested and wanted to help.

It is dangerous to make such a sweeping statement as to say that a man is universally admired and appreciated. I believe in Dr. Engle's case it is a true statement of fact.

Last fall when his prospective retirement in June 1956 became known to the students a number of them wanted to express their feelings of affection and respect. They raised funds and arranged for a portrait painter to do an oil painting to hang on the wall of Dr. Engle's classroom. Dr. Engle had several sittings with the artist.

Then one day while giving his first semester final examinations, Dr. Engle, who had not been well for some time, suddenly found himself too ill to continue. He went home from his classroom never to return. The portrait was finished by the artist shortly thereafter, brought to the college and stored in the Library. It was planned to unveil and present the picture at Commencement time. Recently when it became likely Dr. Engle might not be well enough to attend Commencement several of us discussed the idea of having a presentation of the portrait at his home. It was decided to wait until after Easter vacation. Now it is too late.

The picture will be unveiled in due time. It will preserve for us the face and figure of a real friend. More than that it will remind us of a man who lived with us and commanded and deserved our sincere friendship and our great admiration.

We have often heard the question, "Why do good people have to die so soon?"

The death of this good man raises the question again, for in every role as teacher, churchman, comrade and Christian, he was one of the best.

Solomon prayed (I Kings 8:36): "Teach them the good way wherein they should walk." In Dr. Engle we had a man who taught many of us the good way wherein we should walk.

Today we honor him and thank God it was our privilege to know him.

Prepared and given by J. Gordon Howard,
President of Otterbein College, at the
funeral of Dr. Jesse Samuel Engle.

March 31, 1956

IN TRIBUTE TO J. S. ENGLE

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From a tribute by Bishop J. Gordon Howard, '22, then president of Otterbein College, at the funeral of Professor Engle, March 31, 1956.