

Prof. Takeshi Nagata: A Retrospective Appreciation

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Prof. Nagata
at his final lecture

Prof. Takeshi Nagata was born in 1947 in the city Ichinomiya, Aichi Prefecture. His father worked his whole life for the Post Office, while his mother dedicated herself to the home. He was to be the eldest of five children. His family belonged to the Rinzaï sect of Buddhism. After his younger sister began to attend church school Prof. Nagata also got interested. The local church was staffed by foreign missionaries and his initial interest was not so much on the spiritual plane as his amazement at something so different from his own culture. He

was fascinated. Prof. Nagata was baptized on Easter as he began high school.

Already in high school he decided he would study Christianity in college. Thus, in 1966 he enrolled in Tokyo Christian College (currently Tokyo Christian University), which, at that time, was located in Kunitachi. While he enjoyed his years there, the time was also marked by internal questions and some external conflicts. Prof. Nagata thought deeply about the meaning of Christianity and his questioning did not always sit well

with his teachers. In fact, in his third year he was temporarily forbidden by the University to attend church. Still, he had very good relationships with some of his professors who encouraged him to go abroad and study further. In 1971, after working for one year to gather the necessary funds, he departed for America and enrolled in Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary about twenty miles north of Boston. He studied there for three years and was again blessed with some excellent teachers. His original area of study was Gnosticism, but he soon became more interested in the New Testament itself, especially the Pauline Letters.

In 1973, after earning his Masters of Divinity, he enrolled in the Princeton Theological Seminary from which he would eventually receive his Ph.D. in New Testament Studies. His director was Prof. J. Christiaan Beker, a very interesting man. He had gone underground in wartime Holland, his native country, to escape cooperating with the Nazi occupiers. He surrendered himself to save his family and ended up in prison in Berlin. He was scarred for life by this experience. The Rev. Michael L. Lindvall in a recent post recalls Prof. Beker in these words: He “was a riveting classroom lecturer, especially when the subject was the apostle Paul. Paul was his specialty, and Beker had famously passionate convictions about the apostle. By the end of a lecture, Beker would have often ascended to a paroxysm of academic passion. He paced the dais in his classroom, his Dutch accent thickening as he became increasingly animated by some question of Pauline scholarship. He was convinced of his convictions and often rhetorically lacerated scholars who stubbornly held to what Becker considered patently absurd notions. He waved his arms and jabbed his index finger this way and that; his voice rose; his face reddened.” (<http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-03/truth-proportional>)

For Prof. Nagata this passionate conviction of his teacher had to do with the fact that he read the Bible out of his own experience of suffering in World War II. This was not just theory or a game for Prof. Beker and neither would it be for Prof. Nagata. He wrote a dissertation titled, *Philippians 2:5-11: A Case Study in the Contextual Shaping of Early Christology.*

This study marked a life-long interest not just in Paul but in the way the context, especially the cultural context, shapes the message.

Prof. Nagata organized Bible study groups for Japanese who were studying at Princeton. These groups would meet in his apartment. In this way he continued to do his theology not simply in the context of a classroom with other theologians, but with people with different academic specialities and different backgrounds altogether.

In 1976-77, Prof. Yasuo Furuya from ICU spent his sabbatical at Princeton Theological Seminary. Standing one day in front of the library he asked a young, skinny Asian man if he was Japanese. Prof. Nagata (who apparently was frequently asked this question) said he was. This was the beginning of Prof. Nagata's path to ICU.

In May of 1980, with most of his dissertation written, but the Ph.D. not yet in hand, Prof. Nagata was asked to take up the duties of Assistant Pastor at ICU Church. He would officially be awarded his degree in 1981. His first contract was for three years, but the three became six as he continued his work full-time at the Church until 1986. This was time of intense companionship with the students of ICU. Not so very distant from the students in age, understanding their questions and concerns, Rev. Nagata spent hours and hours in conversation with these young people, often staying up the whole night with them. Several times each year he would accompany student groups to Hachioji Student Center for even more extensive talks.

Beginning in 1986 Prof. Nagata was hired as a faculty member for the Humanities Division. From 1992 until 2002 he worked strictly as a member of the faculty of ICU. From the beginning he emphasized the text of the New Testament. His regular courses included: Introduction to the New Testament, Problems in Biblical Studies and the General Education course, Introduction to Christianity. In this course he not only introduced many ICU students to knowledge of the historical Jesus but also challenged them to think about how being Japanese affects the way in which they understand the life of Christ and the Church. In the Graduate School Prof. Nagata taught the Christianity and Culture course for many years. He

brought students to see not only the complex interplay of Hellenism and Hebraism in the history of early Christianity, but also the significance of being Japanese or being in Japan and dealing with these questions. Finally, over the years Prof. Nagata has taught many students biblical Greek.

There have been a number of Prof. Nagata's students who have gone on for further studies in the New Testament and related fields. He has shown himself to be a trusted mentor who knows how to mix the necessary strictness with warmth. He talks happily about what his various students are now doing, what their research concerns, and their progress in the academic world.

Prof. Nagata has also made a substantial contribution to the intellectual life of the Japanese Christian community through his thirteen years of editing *New Testament Studies* in a capacity as an executive officer of the board of trustees, Japan Society of New Testament Studies. This journal has kept many ministers and the faithful informed on the latest Biblical scholarship as well as providing a forum for Japanese scholars to share the results of their research. The years of editing coincided with times when Prof. Nagata had many other pressing duties at ICU, beyond those of the regular teaching and administration.

Prof. Nagata has also suffered heartbreak. In 1998 his first wife, the mother of his daughter died of cancer. His daughter was second year student at ICU. It was a difficult time.

Beginning in 2002 and up to today, Prof. Nagata has had, in effect, three positions, any one of which could be considered a full time job. He has been the Head Pastor of ICU Church, the head of the Religious Center, and Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion. In each of these positions and in their combination he has had a profound impact on the religious life of the campus, affecting students, faculty and staff. Allow me to relate some thoughts from a co-worker.

The coworker has known Prof. Nagata for many years and the following things stand out. Prof. Nagata lives his faith in the concrete sense that he does not care whether anyone notices the good that he does or not. He does it because it is good to do it and trusts that God sees it and

that is enough for him. He does not need to get “credit.” Second, he does not encourage or even allow unnecessary worry or self-criticism in those who work at the church. He simply encourages everyone to do what they can and to leave the rest to God. When he is there, one can believe in Christ a little more easily. Christ is somehow more tangible.

Personally, I have had the privilege of working with Prof. Nagata for the last four years. In spite of the many demands on his time and his heavy administrative duties, he continued to teach a full load and sometimes even more than that. His presence at meetings was a calming one. It was good to have his experience and wisdom in our deliberations. From my very first meeting with him I have been struck by his humility.

Prof. Nagata’s own reflection on reaching retirement is the conviction, which is not new but has taken on increasing strength and clarity with each passing year, that theological scholarship, especially Biblical scholarship, has to be done at the service of the Church. Its ultimate telos is the edification of the community, the building up of the Church. Done apart from that, no matter how brilliant it might be, the research has no real meaning. He feels this deeply and this vision will inform his own work after he retires from ICU.