The Legacy of Catherine Clark Kroeger as Teacher, Scholar, and Mentor

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Like many who knew her, I was shocked to hear the news of Cathie Kroeger’s death. She had an indomitable spirit and as much energy for life as anyone I have ever met. She was one of those rare people who possessed a contagious enthusiasm and passion for teaching, combined with an admirable ability to focus and produce substantial amounts of scholarship. And all this was done in the midst of a dizzying array of commitments, both academic and personal. It never occurred to me that Cathie would one day be gone, at least not without the intervention of an Elijah-like chariot of fire. There are many things that could be said about Cathie, but here I will focus my comments on my experience of her as a teacher and scholar of early Christianity.

The foundation for any eminent scholar in our field is a mastery of the ancient languages, and Cathie possessed this in full measure. While her study of languages began later in life than many of her colleagues, her technical ability in Greek and Latin was on par with anyone. As a student at Gordon-Conwell, I expressed my concerns about not being to continue my study of the more complicated and specialized forms of Classical Greek, and Cathie’s immediate suggestion was an independent study course that included Homer and Plato as well as Greek epigraphy (the study of inscriptions). I would spend hours working through the texts before our meetings, but she would simply pull a volume of Homer off the wall and read along. Without any preparation, she could comment on the broader semantic ranges of words or the technical use of certain terms in the religious context of the ancient world. Anyone familiar with I Suffer Not a Woman, the book that she co-authored with her husband, Dick, is well aware that many Greek words carried multiple layers of meaning and resonance. These resonances, as the book’s appendices demonstrate well, were often informed by multiple narratives and cultural traditions that lay outside the Jewish and early Christian literary traditions (e.g., legends of the Amazons, the Egyptian cult of Isis, ancient novels). Cathie possessed a profound grasp of these complexities and their interpretative implications. She had command even of the specialized subfield of Greek epigraphy. Her translations of the Cnidus curse tablets provide a chilling insight into the sometimes violent, even murderous, interactions between women and men in ancient Asia Minor, while her final days were spent working on a book on epigraphical evidence for kephalē (head) as “source.” Only in recent years, when I have begun teaching my own courses in Greek, have I fully come to appreciate the depth of expertise and the breadth of reading that she displayed in those meetings.

Cathie was also not afraid to talk about the ancient world as it was, and this meant talking about subjects that I thought were reserved for awkward conversations in pastoral counseling courses. Take pornography as an example. Today such images are readily available over the Internet and at the newsstand, but we would never expect to see pornography featured prominently in a private home or on the carafe with which we were served wine at a restaurant. The archaeological evidence shows that both were the case in the ancient world. In a class on early Christianity, she showed us images of ancient pottery that were quite shocking at the time. I have since realized that she selected some of the tamest of these images to make the point, and I have no doubt that some found even this unnecessary. However, the goal of these frank conversations was to introduce us to the grittiness of the ancient world, the world that people like the Apostle Paul actually encountered. The scandals of the Corinthian church then came alive, as we realized that those were not the “good old days” when everyone was basically honest and moral, except for these few problem cases. In Paul’s epistles, rather, we encounter a world very much like our own, full of both “saints and sinners” (as Cathie used to say).

She was also a very honest historian of the social realities of early Christianity. In her teaching and her writing, she presented neither the sanitized version of the early church that I was taught growing up, nor the self-consciously deconstructive image that has become popular among some scholars today. Her commentary on 1 Corinthians in The IVP Women’s Bible Commentary provides an illustration of this. Even a cursory reading of this letter reveals that there were big problems in this community. Honestly, how many of us would want to join a church that was dealing with internal power struggles, lawsuits, and incest (and all that before we even get to food and conflicts over the role of women)? Cathie takes these issues head-on and points out that, in Paul’s mind, the sin of individuals stained not just them, but the entire community. In the case of the sexual affair between a man and his father’s wife, for example, she notes that “the Corinthian Christians view the situation with complacency. They take pride in their permissive attitude.” This is hardly an idealized Christian community by any reckoning. Paul’s response to the perplexing collection of issues may appear to lack a central argument, yet “the letter is not the patchwork that it may seem at first. The theme most consistently running through this epistle is an
appeal to respect the unity of the church and to preserve it from doctrinal and moral corruption.” The Corinthians were a mess, but not a hopeless mess, and 2 Corinthians suggests that they did respond to Paul’s call for unity (at least for a little while).

In every scholar’s work, there are times of needing to take some leaps into the abyss of the silence of our sources. Cathie did this in ways that were fearless and provocative, but never done just for the sake of shock value. As much as I respected her, I was not always convinced that she got her reconstructions right in all cases, and she knew this. However, this very point highlights another important element of the way Cathie went about her work.

Cathie was mature enough as a scholar and a Christian to disagree with people without using that as an excuse to part ways with them. As recent conflicts within several academic societies have borne witness, it has become en vogue in certain quarters to replace meaningful engagement with meaningless rhetoric. Attention often goes to those who can cause the biggest stir, even if it means insulting or treating unfairly some of their professional colleagues. Sadly, Christian academics have proven not to be immune to this.

Because of her stance on the place of women in the church and the home, Cathie was openly and publicly attacked by some of her Christian detractors in ways that, to borrow a phrase, “are not even heard among the Gentiles.” The slander that she endured over these matters, which all involved would agree are “nonessentials,” was hurtful to her personally, but her family also had to absorb some of the shrapnel. Indeed, during one of my visits to the Kroegers’ home, her husband related with sadness and frustration a recent comment made about her by a prominent evangelical scholar of the New Testament. (In the spirit of Cathie, I will not name him here.) And yet, on every occasion that this issue would arise, she never returned fire in like manner, even in a private conversation over dinner. This was not her style. She would always deflect the conversation, even—or perhaps especially—when she sensed that those in her presence wanted her to react. She never reacted; she only responded, and she did so with grace, even toward those who assailed her scholarship and questioned her character and her faith. The harshest words I ever heard her speak were reserved for her own people, the Presbyterians, whom she would sometimes refer to as the “Frozen Chosen.” But, even then, she would say this with a twinkle in her eye and often a little wink. Her consistently graceful responses to these attacks were an amazing model for me as a young scholar. Cathie instilled in me that difference should never prevent dialogue, at least as far as I can control the situation.

I respected Cathie greatly for her work as a scholar and for the way she did her craft, but I was also blessed to come to know her outside the classroom. On several occasions, she invited me to come down to their house on Cape Cod: “You can stay in the library house and curl up every night with Plato.” During my doctoral studies, I made several trips to visit Dick and her, and I am very glad that I did so. (Incidentally, my wife also stayed with them on several occasions, and Cathie even invited my mother out to the Cape for a writing retreat. She clearly had the gift of hospitality in spades.) Dick was a Yale man, so he was happy to have a Yale graduate student as a guest. I enjoyed many hours sitting and talking with them at their dining room table or looking at pictures of their grandchildren reenacting Constantine’s victory at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge—pictures taken on the actual Milvian Bridge in Rome. Each time a new guest arrived, Cathie would give a tour of the house where the town of Brewster was chartered. She would show artifacts of the voyages of seafaring ancestors, including a sea captain whose ship survived the eruption of Krakatoa in 1883. Then she would show the four-poster bed in the front room: “This is the bed where most of my ancestors were conceived, born, and died,” she would say. Although prolific and in demand as a scholar and teacher, she was also very “normal” as a mother, grandmother, wife, and friend.

My time spent with the Kroegers was always enjoyable, but I cannot leave the topic without mentioning their library. Oh, that library! The collection in the “library house” (and annex) was certainly the most impressive private library that I have ever seen, and I have seen quite a few. (It was willed to the Gordon-Conwell Center for Urban Ministerial Education [CUME].) The collection was significant not just for the number of volumes, but also for the breadth of scholarly approaches represented. The library reflected who Cathie was as a scholar, a person not afraid to engage the work of others across a wide range of perspectives, even perspectives very different from her own. On one of my visits to the Kroegers’ home, a New Testament colleague from Yale accompanied me, and we spent an entire morning combing the shelves and being repeatedly amazed that anyone would have time to amass such an erudite collection.

The loss of Cathie Kroeger indeed fills me with sadness, for I have lost a teacher, a mentor, and a friend. Admittedly, I feel a particular sadness at the suddenness of her death. In academics, one of the great joys for a teacher is the success of her students, and I know that Cathie was happy for my success as a graduate student and then a lecturer at Yale. However, she eagerly awaited my first permanent academic appointment, which I was offered in early February of this year. I had been contacting friends and former teachers, but had not yet written to Cathie. On Wednesday, February 16, I came into the office early specifically for that purpose. When I opened my email, I found waiting for me the notification that she had died just two days earlier. I was stunned as I walked into the classroom that morning to teach, appropriately enough, a Greek class, and I am still left with a sense of unfinished business. Thus, this brief tribute takes on a very personal meaning for me. It is in some sense my chance to tell her a final “thank you.”

I will miss Cathie. I owe her a great deal, and I can only hope that my career as a scholar of early Christianity would make her
proud. I can think of no more fitting way to close this tribute than with the words of the twelfth-century philosopher Bernard of Chartres (words later adapted and made famous by Sir Isaac Newton): “We are like dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, so that we can see more than they, and things at a greater distance, not by virtue of any sharpness of sight on our part, or any physical distinction, but because we are carried high and raised up by their giant size.” I, like many others, see farther because I am standing on the shoulders of this giant.

I give thanks to God for the life and legacy of this amazing woman.

Notes


7. C. Kroeger, “1 Corinthians,” 646.

Call for Papers

Priscilla Papers Guidelines for Writers

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- Please try to use inclusive language for God and inclusive language versions of the Bible, such as NRSV and TNIV. Inclusive language for humanity is expected. We will treat all correspondence seriously and with respect.
- Articles should follow The Chicago Manual of Style guidelines and should average 5,000 words in length (approximately 15 pages, double spaced, twelve-point font).
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Please send all query letters and correspondence to Deb Beatty Mel at DebBeattyMel@aol.com. Please mail ms. hard copies to Rev. Dr. William David Spencer at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Box 229, South Hamilton, MA 01982. After approval, please submit all email ms. in Microsoft Word or text (*.txt) format to DebBeattyMel@ aol.com. Please include the author’s name, address, phone number, email address, and short bio.
Kroeger, CBE founder, president emerita, classics scholar, a world-renowned speaker, Cathie traveled the globe, op- friend, and advocate of biblical equality by donating to this fund, posing violence and the abuse of women, while also advancing Cathie's family, colleagues, students, and friends in the biblical basis for the shared leadership and authority of males and females. Standing in the legacy of great evangelical leaders like Dr. Katharine Bushnell (1856–1946), Cathie offers...