

Hughes Oliphant Old

By Mary McCaw Old

[Hughes Oliphant Old was born in Torrance, California on April 13, 1933 to Shadburne and Emma Oliphant Old. He attended Chadwick Seaside School, Colter Academy and Redondo Union High School. Upon graduating high school he went to college at Centre College of Kentucky where he received the nickname Scoti. He graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1958 and after a year travel abroad he returned and was ordained September 30, 1959 and installed in his first pastorate. The following is taken from “Scoti” *The Life of Hughes Oliphant Old as told by Mary McCaw Old* (Copyright © Mary Old, 2010).]

THE PASTOR

During the course of his ministry, Scoti has pastored two churches. The first was in Atglen, Pennsylvania, on the edge of the Pennsylvania Dutch country. The name of the church was Penningtonville Presbyterian Church, which was the name of the village before the post office decided the name was too long. On September 30, 1959, Hughes Oliphant Old was ordained and installed as its pastor. After a year of travel, he was ready to begin his public ministry. Penningtonville Presbyterian Church served as the catalyst for further studies. It was here that the issues in worship which he later studied came into focus. How does a minister lead in prayer? Is expository preaching effective? How does one catechize a congregation? Is there a proper way to administer the sacraments? One of the church members exhorted him to “Take care of our boys and preach the Bible.”

Hughes took that seriously. The first task was to begin preaching week by week. Scoti started with a *lectio continua* series on the book of John. Then he studied up on prayer by looking at biblical examples. He had seen communion done differently in California and New Jersey. In Atglen it was different still, so he had to

learn what was essential in a communion service. His congregation contained a lot of farmers, so there were higher than usual incidents of accidental deaths. This meant he had to learn how to do a larger than usual number of funerals. All of this was very important for a new young pastor to learn, and the congregation at Atglen graciously provided him with the opportunity to develop a unique style of ministry. While he was preaching and leading worship, he had the problem of catechizing the youth group. Atglen had a large number of children with Down’s Syndrome. He ran a special communicants’ class for them. He taught them the Doxology and the Gloria Patri. They learned the Apostles’ Creed. Some of them even succeeded in mastering the Ten Commandments. These are the traditional catechetical pieces of the church. They teach the Law and the Gospel, and he discovered that even those of limited ability could learn them. Then there were the teenage boys. Remember the admonition to “Take care of our boys?” It just so happened that there were several teenage boys in the congregation. Hughes became their mentor. He ensured that they had a place to play basketball and he put them to work shoveling snow and decorating the church. They read the scripture lessons and sang in the choir, and when there were problems, they went to see the preacher, who answered their questions and helped them work through their problems. This model of mentoring has been replicated and adapted in every place that Scoti has been privileged to pastor, and is reflected in his teaching style to this day. After five wonderful years at Atglen, Scoti went off to Europe to begin his doctoral studies.

THE DOCTORATE

In 1964 Hughes left his first church in Atglen, Pennsylvania, to study worship in Europe. The situation in regard

to liturgical studies at the time was (and still is) that the only schools of higher education which offered a doctorate in liturgical studies in this country approached it from either a Roman Catholic or an Anglican position. Hughes wanted to get away from this slant and study the original documents from the Reformation period to see what the Reformers had actually said. That meant going to Europe. It also meant learning both French and German. Scoti's first stop in Europe was Tubingen. Here he spent two years learning German. He took an introductory course in German from the Goethe Institute. Then he joined a "boy scout" group so that he would be around German speakers rather than English speakers. The "boy scouts" were really a group of college age and twenty year olds who were studying to be youth leaders in local churches. Even then, at thirty-one years old, Scoti was the oldest. He learned how to scull on the Neckar River, and hiked in the Black Forest. He traveled around the area, took trips to art museums, and he studied theology. In particular he listened to lectures at the University to hone in on German theological terms he would later need for his studies.

After two years in Tubingen he went to Neuchatel in Switzerland to learn French. There he was admitted to the University of Neuchatel to study with Jean-Jacques von Allmen, who at the time was a leading advocate of the ecumenical compromise in worship. Why did von Allmen accept Scoti as a student if he knew that the two of them had a different approach to worship? The answer lies in part in the belief that von Allmen was skeptical that he could even prove his thesis, that the Reformers knew the patristic writings and used them in formulating their proposals for worship. It is a testament to von Allmen's open mindedness that he allowed this young, scholarly American to even try.

European graduate education is very different from American graduate education. In this country the student studies with a specialist in a particular field and the curriculum is very strict. The student takes courses and earns credits. In Europe, the student studies with a specialist in a particular field and that specialist directs his studies. Course of study is based on the interest of the student. Comprehensive examinations cover areas of expertise based on the needs of the dissertation, and the student moves around from university to university depending upon where specific specialists teach. Hence, Scoti studied at the Institute Catholique in Paris as well as with the Protestant Faculty in Paris. He spent summers living at monasteries, and vacations visiting churches. He took courses at Neuchatel in patristics and Bible with Swiss Reformed scholars. He

listened to lectures from an Orthodox scholar. In short, he learned the history of worship from a variety of traditions by living with those traditions and listening to their apologists. Then he compared them with the actual Reformation era documents.

The dissertation was written in Basel because the books he needed were in the library of the University of Basel. Many of the documents in Reformed worship have never been published, and so Scoti had to read the actual manuscripts in the library itself. He read Oecolampadius' works and held in his hands Zwingli's copy of a commentary on Matthew with notations in his own handwriting. Basel at the time of the Reformation was the center of the printing industry so the manuscripts and early printed books naturally became part of the local library.

By 1971 Scoti was ready to defend his dissertation. He had already passed comprehensive examinations in patristics, ecclesiology, systematic theology, liturgies and New Testament. Now he had to prove to those who thought he couldn't that, indeed, the Protestant Reformers did know the writings of the patristic fathers when they commenced the Reformation of the church in the sixteenth century. Hughes reconstructed the patristic sources which the Reformers consulted as they sought to reform worship according to Scripture. Two hundred people arrived. Von Allmen had bragged about this precocious American to all of his friends, and kept inviting them to the defense. Some of these scholars invited themselves. Hughes was given the option of defending the dissertation in English, but he chose to do it in French. The visitors were impressed. After three hours, the committee decided that the thesis had, indeed, been proven, and granted the first doctorate from the theological faculty of the University of Neuchatel in over twenty years. Now it was time to go home.

SECOND PASTORATE

In 1971, after receiving his doctorate, Hughes Oliphant Old returned to the United States. Living in Princeton, he began to look for a church. It took him eleven months, and at the end of it all he was called to Faith Presbyterian Church in West Lafayette, Indiana. His service there began in May of 1972.

Faith Presbyterian Church was a disaster. It was a new church development which was failing, and the Synod had already decided to close it. The only problem was that no one had told the Pastor Nominating Committee! When Synod discovered that Faith Church had called a pastor, it was understandably unhappy. The Church

consisted of seventy-five people meeting in a Quonset hut three miles outside of West Lafayette next to a failed subdivision and a cornfield. This was not an auspicious beginning for someone with a brand new European doctorate. Most of the parishioners were junior professors at Purdue University, and the best of these junior professors left to go to other positions within the first eighteen months.

The first problem to be addressed was the worship service. The previous pastor had employed a combined service which consisted of a half an hour of "Sunday School," a half hour of coffee break, and a half an hour of "worship." Needless to say, the congregation was not ready for forty-five minute expository sermons and a worship service of an hour and fifteen minutes. Then there was the communion service. At Faith Church it was assumed that the less frequent the better, and, above all, please do not go over an hour.

At the end of thirteen years the congregation became accustomed to a communion service which lasted for an hour and a half, including a forty-five minute sermon, and was administered eight or nine times a year. In addition there was a full and active Sunday School program.

One of the crowning achievements at Faith Church was its Daily Vacation Bible School. Scoti insisted on a two week event. Each morning for two weeks (a total of ten sessions) children from the first to sixth grades participated in a morning worship service, memorized Scripture, and listened to a lesson which was coordinated with an interactive craft. This was on a four or five year rotation. An example of the method was the David cycle, where the children memorized psalms and studied the stories surrounding David's life. One year this culminated in half of the children being the army of the Philistines and the other half the army of Israel, with two of the leaders playing David and Goliath. After Goliath had been defeated the children of Israel chased the army of the Philistines around the churchyard. What great fun! There was never a lack of children, and in the course of two weeks they learned as much Bible as a whole year of Sunday School.

Faith Church served as a laboratory for restoring the worship which is according to Scripture.

In thirteen years there were successful experiments with vespers, morning prayer, Christian education, preaching the *lectio continua*, dignified church music, and a serious but joyful administration of the sacraments. Faith Church grew and prospered. A proper church was built, and, after he left the congregation thirteen years later, an educational building was built and the Quonset hut torn down. The membership stood

at close to three hundred and every week it was full of students from the university, young families, and curious visitors. The median age was well below that of the pastor. A presbytery committee once asked Scoti the secret to his success as a pastor. He told the members of the committee that there was no secret. He concentrated on Word, prayer, and sacrament. The committee didn't quite believe him, but it was true. As the Gospel was preached, the sacraments administered, and the prayers said, the people came.

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[Dr. Old married Mary McCaw on June 12, 1982 and the Olds spent three more years in West Lafayette.]

THE RESEARCH THEOLOGIAN

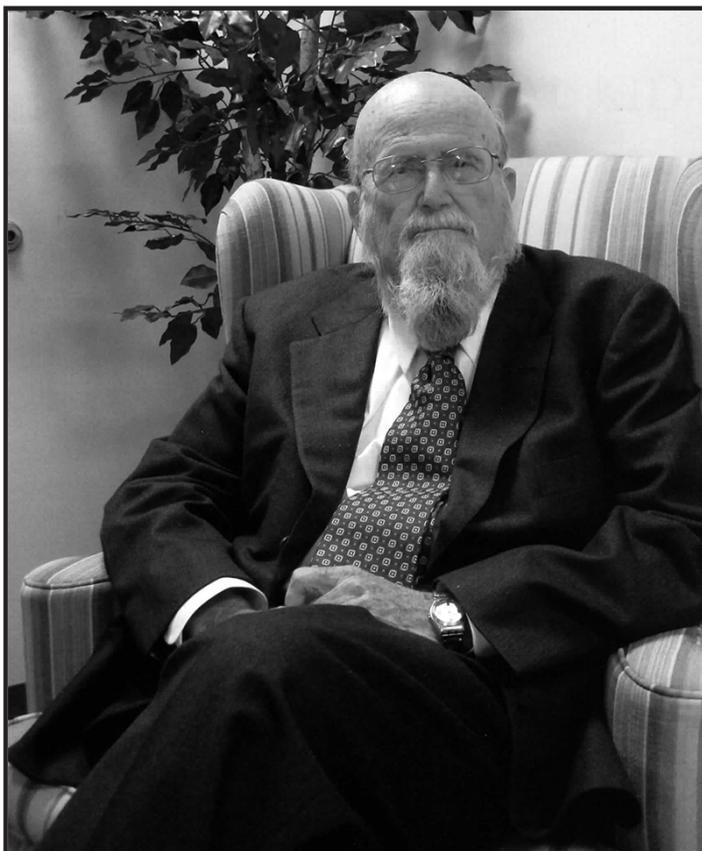
In 1985 we moved to Princeton. Scoti had been called to the Center of Theological Inquiry, a theological think tank situated right next to the campus of the seminary. James I. McCord, the Director of the Center and immediate past president of the seminary, had asked Scoti to come and study. His project was to be a one volume history of preaching. Thus began over twenty years of research and writing.

It is ironic that the original assignment was a one volume work. The Center of Theological Inquiry usually gives residencies of a year or less, renewable for a total of three years. It became obvious as he began his work that one volume was not going to be enough, and that it would be a long term project. As the project grew, the fellow members of the Center began to wonder if it would ever get finished. One remarked that writing a history of preaching was "audacious." Thirteen years after moving to New Jersey, the first two volumes were published. It has taken another twelve years for the other five volumes to appear. Scoti was in residence at CTI for four and a half years. Then he became a non-resident member. At that point we bought our house and moved to Trenton, about ten miles away.

THE PROFESSOR

As more and more books came out, Scoti was asked to do more lecturing. He had already done some teaching

and lecturing, but now the pace increased. He was asked by Dubuque Seminary to teach an entire semester in Iowa. Those lectures became the book *Themes and Variations for a Christian Doxology*. His signature book, *Worship Reformed According to Scripture*, became the textbook on worship in seminaries across the country. Reformed Seminary asked him to teach courses in Orlando and Charlotte. Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary asked him to lecture on the subject of prayer. Fuller Seminary in California sponsored doctoral courses at the Asian Center for Theological Studies in Seoul, Korea, and Princeton Seminary made him a regular adjunct professor. He taught at Princeton for four or five years while continuing to write.



DEAN OF THE INSTITUTE

Finally, in 2004 Scoti received a call from Erskine Theological Seminary. Would he be interested in coming and talking to the Seminary about teaching worship? Scoti was intrigued. He had heard of Erskine from me, because my father's family was originally from Chester County, South Carolina. They were ARP's who had migrated west to Arkansas around 1857. The youngest brother of my triple great grandfather had been the first Latin tutor at Erskine College. Yes, Scoti was interested. The Seminary agreed to call this association the Institute for Reformed Worship.

Founded in 2004, the Institute for Reformed Worship exists to promote the worship of God according to Scripture. It provides courses, conferences, workshops, and other resources for the study and practice of Christian worship, including prayer, praise, the reading and

preaching of Scripture, and the celebration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

The Institute seeks to promote research and scholarship in the Biblical foundations, theology, history, and practice of worship, and to equip those who serve in leading the worship of the Christian church, such as ministers and musicians. In conjunction with Erskine Theological Seminary, courses offered by the Institute may be taken for credit towards a Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.) degree or for continuing education. Through this wonderful association with Erskine Seminary, the volumes on preaching have been completed. Many new friends and colleagues have developed, and there have been many more students to mentor. At Atglen

the mentoring was done with high school students. In Indiana the students were from Purdue. In New Jersey he worked with seminary students. Now he is working with established pastors. In all of this, Scoti has remained what he has always wanted to be—a pastor-scholar. We are grateful to have been given this opportunity.

A Lifetime Achievement Award for Liturgies was presented to Dr. Hughes Oliphant Old at the Calvin 500 Commemoration in Geneva, Switzerland, July 8, 2009. Dr. Old is the John Leith Professor of Reformed Theology and Worship and Dean of the Institute of Reformed Worship at Erskine Theological Seminary. Acknowledged by the Calvin Quincentenary as the “dean of Reformed liturgical scholars in our day,” Dr. Old was honored “for calling the Church back to the sources for worship according to Scripture.”

[Hughes Oliphant Old died on May 24, 2016 in White River Junction, Vermont.]■