

Prof. Dr. Alexander J.M. Wedderburn (30.04.1942 – 31.03.2018)

It was when Alexander (Sandy) Wedderburn accepted the call to move from the University of Durham to the Chair of New Testament in the Protestant Faculty of the University of Munich, that I met him for the first time. His then colleague (and a future one of mine), Professor James Dunn introduced us. As the successor of Sandy Wedderburn in Durham I took the opportunity to acquaint myself with his publications up to that point. There was no question at the time that he was an outstanding scholar, who in every respect and in each of his publications came across as a highly reflective, uncompromisingly thorough, and competent theologian. His first monographs on *Baptism and Resurrection: Studies in Pauline Theology against Its Graeco-Roman Background* (Tübingen 1987) and *The Reasons for Romans* (Edinburgh 1988) demonstrated his skill in arguing a particular case with circumspect and nuance, combined with a profound feel for theological issues. More so than previous scholarly attempts, Wedderburn was able to give an account of baptism and resurrection during the early centuries of the Common Era. In this he compared the writings of Paul with the ancient mystery religions and, without necessarily assuming any direct influence, drew insightful lines of continuity and discontinuity between what can be known about the mystery religions in the first and second centuries. For him, early Christian ideas of ‘death and life’ gain plausibility in religious historical terms as part of the general intellectual world of antiquity, in which the mysteries and philosophies associated with them served as examples. The ritual significance of “life” associated with the baptismal rites in Pauline circles reflects a wider yearning for life reflected in a variety of rites practiced in the Mediterranean world. With similar circumspection, Wedderburn carried out some of the most thoroughgoing research to date on the various factors which led Paul to write his Epistle to the Romans. Common to all Wedderburn’s publications was a grounding in ‘historical critical method,’ which he applied in a balanced yet persistent way. He had the capacity to grasp issues in all their variety, whilst inferring meaning in that very variety and complexity itself.

Born 30th April 1942 in Edinburgh, Sandy Wedderburn had a gift for ancient languages, first at school and then from the early 1960s as student in Oxford (MA 1967) and Edinburgh (BD 1967). Early on, he developed a strong linguistic foundation in Greek and Latin, as well as a mastery of commenting on texts and objects of study with a methodological distance that would become so characteristic of his work. Between 1967 and 1971 at King’s College, Cambridge under the supervision of C.F.D. Moule, he wrote a doctoral dissertation on “Adam and Christ: an Investigation of the Background of I Corinthians 15 and Romans 5.12–21.” Both during and immediately after his doctoral studies, he engaged more directly with the German theological world during periods of research, first under the guidance of Günther Bornkamm (1969) in Heidelberg and then with Bernd Schaller in 1971–1972. Thus equipped, Wedderburn began his long spell of service at the University of St Andrews, first as Tutorial Assistant in New Testament Language and Literature (1972–1974) and then as Lecturer (1974–1989). In 1975 he was ordained in the Church of Scotland. In 1990 he moved to the Faculty of Theology at Durham University (Lecturer 1990, Senior Lecturer 1991–1994). From 1991 to 1995 he became editor of the renowned journal *New Testament Studies*.

In 1994 Wedderburn accepted a call to the Protestant Faculty of the University of Munich where, succeeding Ferdinand Hahn, he took the Chair of New Testament, working alongside Wolfgang Kuhn and Jörg Frey. The move to Munich brought with it a shift that had already been hinted at in his earlier work. In the first book published after his arrival in Munich, which appeared under the title *Beyond Resurrection* (London 1999), Wedderburn devoted himself to the question, fundamental for Christianity, of the significance of the resurrection. His purpose

was not only to question the resurrection of Jesus as a historical event – an idea, which he thought has led Christianity off track – but moreover to highlight a ‘this-worldly’ faith that does not hinge on the supernatural. Wedderburn inquired into the significance of the suffering (and not risen) Jesus, and he combined this question with a consideration of notions about the fate of individuals after death. Faith can essentially be found in Jewish tradition (i.e. the Old Testament and Jewish writings at the turn of the Common Era) and does not require anything beyond historically based claims to be meaningful today. Further publications, before and after his retirement, took their cue from this perspective, among them his more wide-ranging *History of the First Christians* (London 2004).

In 2006 Wedderburn had to leave his public teaching duties, as his health increasingly worsened. A few years prior to this, on the occasion of his 60th birthday, a Festschrift had been dedicated to him, *Paul, Luke and the Graeco-Roman World* (Leiden 2002; Hgg. A. Christophersen, C. Claussen, J. Frey und B. Longenecker), the contributions to which built on the research of Wedderburn’s earlier period. After his retirement, his scholarship was able to flourish, thanks to sound medical care he received in Munich and to the great support of his wife Brigitte, whom he married in 1971. Despite his increasing physical limitations, no less than four monographs appeared between 2010 and 2015. Now his work focused more on the ‘historical’ Jesus and the attendant theological significance one might infer. While *Jesus and the Historians* (Tübingen 2010), over against the ‘Third Quest’ for the historical Jesus, marked a summons back to a historical criticism led by a healthy amount of scepticism, *The Death of Jesus: Some Reflections on the Jesus-Tradition and Paul* (Tübingen 2013) can be understood as the zenith of his efforts in the same breath to combine history and theology. Here, for all the even-handed tone and rhetorical skill characterizing his writing, one can sense the Wedderburn’s own circumstances at work; carefully chosen texts and traditions, evaluated with uncommon depth in dialogue with colleagues, intimate how intensively he devoted himself to his craft. In *The Death of Jesus*, for example, he held fast to the image of the despairing man Jesus, allowing a complex and profound picture to emerge based on the way the gospel traditions represent him. In his last two books, *The God of Jesus – Our God?* (Eugene 2014) and the even more provocative *The Christian Way – Reality or Illusion?* (Eugene 2015), Wedderburn was no longer engaging with specialist scholarly literature. Nevertheless, in my opinion these publications have a contemporary edge: they could be made foundational reading for theology students who would like to engage critically with their faith. Knut Backhaus, my New Testament colleague in the Catholic Faculty, has accurately summed up this last phase of Wedderburn’s written work as follows: “There is no more secondary literature; his own experience provided sufficient context. Through the vicissitudes of his life and by means of exegesis, he was able to negotiate a meaningful path from an evangelical background into a framework that could reconcile faith, reason, and freedom.”

New Testament Scholarship has changed a lot in the last three decades. In the English-speaking realm narrative-literary, gender-oriented, contextual and reception-historical approaches have come to the fore. Over against such developments, the writings of Sandy Wedderburn kept alive an awareness that the holy scriptures of Christianity still pose strictly historical questions, not only today but also in the future; the scholarship of biblical theologians cannot, since the Enlightenment ultimately get away from challenges growing out of the gap between verifiable history and claims made through the lens of faith. The theological world takes its leave of the theologian and person, Sandy Wedderburn, but his legacy will surely live on.

Prof. Loren Stuckenbruck, Ph.D.
Lehrstuhl Neues Testament

Faculty of Protestant Theology
Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich
Germany