Michael Palmer

Scholar/Leader, Imprinter, and Gracious Christ Follower

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Over twenty years ago, in the fall of 2002, I visited Dr. Mike Palmer’s office at Evangel University (EU) with the resumé of my husband, Doug, in hand. Doug and I had felt God’s leading to move to Springfield, MO for doctoral studies and ministry, and I had come to town for a doctoral class. That day, Mike hired Doug sight unseen to teach philosophy and then asked me after getting to know more about my work, “What about you? Would you like to teach a course on the Holocaust?” Mike had taught these two courses but needed to move them to someone else so he could steward Project Envision. This was my first college-level course and a dream come true after doing a degree in Jewish Studies and working for a Holocaust oral history archive for ten years. Doug’s one Spring adjunct course was our only income after moving here; nonetheless, we knew God wanted us here—and Michael opened that door. He continued to be a mentor, encourager, and friend at EU and even after he and his wife, Connie, left in 2006 for Regent University, where Mike served as Dean of the Divinity School. When they returned to Springfield due to Mike’s challenges with Parkinson’s, we were glad to be with them again and ready to commit to the long haul of care that Mike might need. Little did we know that our precious time together would be cut short by his homegoing.

Like so many, Doug and I feel forever grateful that Mike not only took a chance on us but took us under his wings at EU and always celebrated what God was doing in us. With such humility and deference (when he certainly had plenty of his own accomplishments to discuss), he genuinely cared about what was going on in the lives of other people around him—what they thought and cared about—rather than tooting his own horn. In that, he gave anyone who spent time with him a rare gift to emulate. As one Regent student, Grace Morrison, so beautifully writes, “Dr. Palmer ... saw people for who they were. He saw the greatness God placed in each of us. He considered it a competitive sport to draw it out like gold from the side of a mountain. At each encounter he’d...
employ his intellectual chisel to the framework of who we were and ... [ask] questions we'd never considered in order to intentionally and with superior calculation awaken us to the treasure God had placed deep inside these earthen vessels.” I wrote a similar sentiment in my journal after one excellent time with Mike at Evangel: “He sure pulls the talk out of me!”

Mike was at my first SPS meeting in 2006 at Fuller. I can still remember him—a long-time veteran member of the Society—coming alongside me, the newbie, putting his arm on my shoulder and gently directing me around the room introducing me to several people and making me feel welcome. I could not have imagined that just five years later I would be asked to serve the Society then as Executive Director and later in the presidential track. Because of Mike, I felt not only welcome at SPS but also that I belonged, had a purpose, and that my contributions mattered. Every SPS since then, I have looked for people attending for the first time who need and would benefit from that same warm welcome to the best academic society around!

Though Michael suffered for years with Parkinson’s, his death was sudden, and the loss we all felt was deep. The outpouring of gratitude online from so many in the pentecostal academic world who looked up to him as a loving, joyful, encouraging, kind brother and mentor was so beautiful and apt that I began to collect those hundreds of tributes in a book for Connie and family. Doing so was a spiritual experience of holy memory, gratefulness, and even longing—to follow the example of someone who had meant so much and given so much to so many. In reading the hundreds of other tributes, I saw significant themes emerge and grouped them into three categories: a scholar/leader, an “imprinter,” and a “Spirit-led, love-filled, genuine, joyful Christ follower.” I offer here now snippets of those myriad remarks.

As a scholar, Mike was a deep thinker, sharp of intellect and wit, an outstanding Christian scholar of philosophy, an excellent teacher, and a beloved and outstanding professor. Students said he was “one of the most intelligent, challenging, and thoughtful professors ... There was no such thing as a stupid question in class ... He handled all questions with grace and unfailing patience ... He never pushed his opinions or theological positions on anyone. He taught us to examine all avenues and come to our own conclusions ... He was the most humble brilliant person I knew.” As a leader, Mike was “a gift, he built a stellar faculty and was a true champion for them ... an anchor ... He had a steady demeanor, with the ability to lead with peace through difficult times.”

As an imprinter, Mike focused on and believed deeply in others; showed others respect regardless of age, race, or academic ability; empowered them; and helped them see their potential. Drs. Kim Alexander and Diane Chandler, who worked with Michael at Regent, sum up this aspect so well: “Because he
knew his own value and gifts, and was comfortable in that, he recognized the value and gifts in others and helped to lead us into fuller realization of ours. And because he wasn't threatened—comfortable in who he was—importantly, he empowered others” (Kim). “His life touched everyone he knew and served ... If lives could be measured as tall trees, Michael's was one of the tallest. Intellectually sharp, humble, deferential, honoring, empowering, an engaged listener without being controlling, genuine, quick witted, and without artifice—Michael was a scholar, writer, teacher, and friend. I learned a lot about leadership by watching how he led by example and drew upon others' strengths. His life has imprinted my own. I am a much better person because of him” (Diane). Another student said, "With one brief conversation, he encouraged me in a way that made a long-term positive difference in the way I viewed myself, my talents and my work." Mike’s generosity to sit with students and colleagues for hours, pouring knowledge, wisdom, and leadership nuggets into their lives with authentic words of care, advice, and encouragement will never be forgotten. He left an indelible mark on others, shaping them into the people they are today. His legacy will last for generations, and those whose lives he imprinted feel indebted and deeply grateful.

Perhaps Mike’s best gift of all to those around him, though, was the fact that he interacted with others as a Spirit-led man of faith and Christlike character. James Bowers writes that Mike was “a rare man whose faith and deep peace had been forged in the fire of his own loss ... the grace that filled his life spilled over on all who knew him.” Those in his presence “all felt love, acceptance, deference, and humility.” As one “deeply in touch with his Lord,” he was a “strong man of faith, humble, unassuming, a beautiful, gracious man of integrity, courage, and fidelity” who lived what he taught. Michael “radiated love; he loved us, and we all knew it.” Numerous people who posted after Mike's loss remarked how he had comforted them in their loss, showed hospitality to them, had a wonderful sense of humor that brought joy to those around him. Full of the Spirit, he often had an apt word of wisdom, direction, and reassurance for others, and like Christ, he acted in truly compassionate ways to others.

I close with a comment by another student who so perfectly describes the mixture of these characteristics in Dr. Palmer’s life: “Dr. Palmer modeled what it means to be an academic; stay wildly curious, listen carefully to everyone you interact with, think deeply and thoughtfully with true humility and grace for others ... [his] deep faith permeated every relationship and interaction pointing to Christ sincerely and with a quiet, compelling passion” (Bernie Bannin). May such grace remain ever evident in all our lives.