
FIRST THINGS

THE FOUR LOVES OF ROBERT JENSON

by
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When I met the great Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson, I was a young man, just starting out in academic life. He was already an eminent figure in academia. He treated me like an equal, though—and did it in a particular way that I will describe.

What usually brought us together were seminars hosted by Fr. Richard John Neuhaus under the auspices of FIRST THINGS magazine and the Institute on Religion and Public Life. Most of the participants were famous scholars at the top of their professions—Gilbert Meilaender, David Novak, Mary Ann Glendon, Avery Dulles. I was one of a small number of freshly minted PhD's in the group: “the kids.”

The “grown-ups” would argue fiercely among themselves. If one said something another disagreed with, which happened all the time, suddenly it was *Ali vs. Frazier in the Thrilla in Manila!* When, however, I or one of the other kids said something that one of the grown-ups disagreed with, most of the grown-ups would take a firm, but somewhat softer approach—not condescending, mind you, just, well, not too aggressive. Except Professor Jenson. He treated me and the other kids no differently than he treated the grown-ups. If he disagreed with one of us (or even if he just wanted to play devil's advocate), he didn't pull his punches (if I may stick with the boxing metaphor). And I, or so it seemed to me at the time, was very often on the receiving end of his sharpest blows.

In the beginning I wondered whether Professor Jenson had something against me, or whether for some reason I rubbed him the wrong way. But it became clear in short order that the reverse was true. He treated me as he might treat, say, David Novak or Gil Meilaender because he was fond of me, saw some potential

there, and wanted me to be the best I could be. He was mentoring me—just like a tough old boxing manager with a heart of gold, mentoring a young pugilist he wanted to train to be a champion.

All of this takes me to the first of Jenson's four loves. *Jenson loved debate*. He thrived on it. He was a man of ideas, and the play of ideas was a joy to him. Still, for all his ferocity in debate, he was not an ideologue or a dogmatist. Nor was he an autocrat. He was not the sort who flew into a rage over being disagreed with. He genuinely wanted to argue with people, not dictate to them. He just loved debate.

But then there is Jenson's second—and higher—love: *Jenson loved truth*. Debate was fun, he enjoyed the heck out of it, but there was a *telos*, a purpose to it, namely, to get at the truth of things. Debate for its own sake—or to show off his debater's prowess, or to win a victory or impress an audience—had no appeal to him. Even when he would assume the role of the devil's advocate, it was always with a view to getting to the truth of the matter under discussion. The kind of debate he loved was truth-oriented debate.

Then there is Jenson's third love: *Jenson loved his wife Blanche*. My heavens, did he love that dear woman. It was not in a showy way with lots of public displays of affection. He was not uxorious in the pejorative sense of that word. But Blanche was always there, or nearby. He always treated her with respect and, indeed, esteem. In a word, he honored her. He drew strength from her. She was his rock. And never was he ashamed of that or reluctant for others to know it. Blanche meant the world to Professor Jenson, and it showed in every aspect of his life, including his life as a scholar.

And then there is Jenson's fourth love, the one that suffused all his other loves, deepening and ennobling them in every dimension. *Jenson loved Jesus*. Not all theologians do, you know. Not all pastors do. Not all Christians do. But Robert Jenson did. He may have been a rather high church Lutheran with fancy academic credentials and the author of complex and subtle works of theological scholarship that explored the question of *homoousios* or *homoiousios*; but his relationship with Christ was as intense and personal, indeed as intimate, as that of any fundamentalist preacher. Had such a preacher accosted him on the street as he was walking by and urgently demanded, "Brother, do you have a personal relationship with your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?" Jenson could, and would, have said, "Yes preacher, I do." And indeed he did.

This essay was originally written for a celebration of the life and work of Robert Jenson hosted by the Karl Barth Center at Princeton Theological Seminary.

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