



Wallace M. Alston

# LOVING GOD WITH OUR MINDS

## *The Pastor as Theologian*

✧ ESSAYS IN HONOR OF WALLACE M. ALSTON ✧

*Edited by*

Michael Welker and Cynthia A. Jarvis



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## Preface

In 2003 Wallace Alston had served the church and the academy for forty years. In 2004 he celebrates his seventieth birthday. Pondering this, friends and colleagues from the church and from the academy have contributed to a Festschrift in his honor.

I first knew Wallace as the Pastor of Nassau Presbyterian Church in Princeton and was deeply impressed with him. His pastoral energy and spirit radiated throughout the whole congregation. When he left to assume the office of the director of the Center of Theological Inquiry (CTI), the church had a very difficult time finding a successor. One day a member of the church said laconically: "We'll have to wait for the second coming of Jesus Christ to find a suitable successor to Wallace."

With Wallace the CTI turned into a theological "powerhouse." The international scope of the scholars in residence increased; female scholars and younger scholars of high quality joined the circle. Instead of one multi-year international and interdisciplinary consultation, Wallace launched four consultations simultaneously which covered a broad range of topics: Science and Theology on Eschatology; Globalization; The Common Good; Faith and Reason; The Identity of Jesus; Human Personhood and Dignity — these were treated by teams of high-profile scholars from all over the globe. With his quick eye for academic and theological quality Wallace accompanied all of these research processes. Relentlessly he pushed the groups for results that would serve both the church and the academy.

As a great missionary entrepreneur Wallace also organized consultations in parts of the world which are religiously and academically in crucial transitions: South Africa, Middle and Eastern Europe, and India. The topics

chosen were meant to invigorate theological research in these countries. Theologians from different nations were invited to create a conference that would stimulate substantial theological thinking about crucial current issues: pluralism, globalization, the mission of the church, the potentials of 'public theology'.

I was privileged to join several of these events, including three consultations on "Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity." One consultation was with primarily systematic theologians, another with mostly biblical scholars, and a third one with ethicists and practical theologians from many countries. It was a joy to harvest the richness of current theological thinking in this tradition of faith. It was a particular joy working with Wallace to look for coherences and promising perspectives in this discourse, to "weave" contributions into a tapestry, and to discover potentials which will open the Reformed tradition to constructive dialogue with other Christian traditions of faith that would provide ecumenical orientation and theological leadership.

However, Wallace's main concern has been to launch the pastor-theologian project and to see it flourish. This project has never been a mere annex to the program of the CTI. It has served as the dialogue between theological, international, and interdisciplinary research and the theology cultivated and practiced in the church. Wallace was pleased to see how readily scholars from the academic consultation agreed to join the meetings of the pastors and how well the cooperation worked in general.

This book unites voices from the various enterprises of the CTI; voices from different churches, from different theological and academic disciplines, and from different countries across the globe. The book is thus a bouquet of diverse perspectives which try to mirror what is so central and admirable in Wallace, and also what is so dear and desirable for him to see among his fellows when we all work together and hope for the coming reign of God: to love God not only with one's heart, but also with one's mind — to live and think as pastor-theologians.

Without multifarious support this volume would not have come together. We thank, above all, Kathi Morley for her great support and never-ending patience in collecting the contributions. We thank Joshua Jeffers for his careful editorial support and Bill Eerdmans for the excellent cooperation.

MICHAEL WELKER  
Heidelberg

## Introduction

Wallace Alston attended seminary on a dare. George Buttrick, then minister of Harvard Memorial Chapel, threw down the gauntlet before a young naval officer stationed in Boston, challenging him to investigate intellectually what reason had led him to believe he was so against. Years later, having placed himself under the tutelage of some of the greatest theological minds of the last century, he accepted a call to a small church in Wadesboro, North Carolina.

There the rigor and relevance of his theological training came to the fore as he set out to engage the church he served on the side of justice in the struggle for civil rights. Later in the Epilogue to *The Church of the Living God*, his observations upon those times confirmed the theological instincts with which he had engaged his ministry from the beginning. He writes, "The church was wrong when it justified slavery and segregation with *fatally flawed theology*. It was wrong when it fought scientific judgments concerning human origins with *obscurantist biblical interpretation*." Armed with the reasonable faith at which his mind had arrived in the classroom, he was relentless in the pulpit and the public square as he pressed the consequences of loving God with the mind upon the church and the world.

The boldness of his witness cut short his first call and sent him to the pulpit once occupied by his own professor of theology. It was while serving the First Presbyterian Church in Auburn, Alabama, that the influence of this young pastor-theologian began to be felt upon the next generation. Associate ministers on his staff, seminarians in the course of their summer placement, as well as the brightest and best young people in his congregation (heading toward seminary at his urging) were pressed to think critically and theologi-