

**Remarks on the Blessed Life of Ross Lence**  
**By: Jeff Dodd**  
**Ross M. Lence Memorial Service**  
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**A.D. Bruce Religion Center**  
**University of Houston**

Today, here on the chancel, you see an empty chair. On the back of this chair appear the seal of the University of Houston, and these words: "Ross M. Lence, Distinguished Teaching Chair." Years ago, I and a number of Ross's other students, many present here, raised funds to endow the Distinguished Teaching Chair bearing Ross' name.

We did so for two major reasons. One was to recognize excellence in teaching--Ross being the exemplar, of course. Teaching is the cardinal activity of any university, regardless of whether teaching is recognized as such. Teachers, in the truest sense of the word, thus enable the university to accomplish its most noble purpose.

And the other, far more personal, reason was to express deep gratitude for the life-altering experience of learning from a teacher of the first rank.

The Distinguished Teaching Chair remains as testament, but I think a much more durable and living testament to him is held by us, his students and colleagues and friends. We who survive another's passing have a duty, I believe, to salvage from our memories fitting examples of what we find to have been particularly noble and noteworthy in the life then passed, so that we can set a true course for the balance of our journey here, cut short our grief and begin the celebration of that life. This is all the more true when the life in question was truly exceptional. I think it fitting to note here that a consistent theme in Greek thought was that mortals can, sometimes, gain immortality through the workings of collective memory. Think of the immortality of Socrates.

And so we now hold the memory of our extraordinary teacher. I hazard no prediction about the fate of the collective memory we bear, but when I think of the legions of students and colleagues that Ross touched, of the many lives transformed by the quick force of his intellect, when I recall his capacious compassion, his rapier wit, his ebullient good humor and, more fundamentally, his

example of a life of wisdom fully engaged, I cannot help but to have great optimism about that fate.

So now the challenge: how do we reckon with this gift from Ross Lence? More personally, what is incumbent upon me to do with it? Ross, of course, not only was engaged, but he engaged each of us, gave a bit of himself to us directly and personally without any expectation other than this: that we accept the challenge we have just heard, to be bold in thought, moderate in action and courageous in pursuit of truth. So he was, so was the gift he gave, so is our task and the example we must pass on.

Thus, the singular charity of Ross Lence. Here I mean “charity” in an ancient sense. The translators who gave us the magisterial King James Version rendered the Greek word *agape* (ἀγάπη) as “charity.” Consider here 1 Corinthians 13:10 in the King James translation:

And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these *is* charity.

Now, recent translations render “agape” as “love” instead of “charity.” To be true to the meaning of “agape,” however, we must not think of the love associated with intimate relations (ἔρως, *eros*) or with general relations (such as among friends, family) or activities (φιλία, *philia*), for example. “Agape” was the term early Christians used to refer to unconditional, spontaneous, self-sacrificing love, as with the love that God has for us, us for God, and us for each other. It is the love that creates, the love that acts in the interest of the beloved. And so the words of Ross: “This, then, is my philosophy of teaching: teachers love their own teachers, and they are loved in turn.” And yes, Ross, we do.

Let me close now with a thought about our teacher in action. Xenophon (*Memorabilia* I.6.5-14) quotes Socrates as saying, “Just as others are pleased by a good horse or dog or bird, I take delight to an even higher degree in good friends; and if I have anything good to teach them, I teach it, or I commend them to others from whom I think they may benefit in the quest for virtue. And the treasures of the wise men of old that are bequeathed in books, I unfold and read together with my friends, and if we discover something good we cull it, and regard it as great gain if we thus become useful to one another.” This was Ross at work. Xenophon goes on to say, “When I heard this it seemed to me both that Socrates was blessed and that he was leading those listening to him toward true virtue.” Ross was so blessed; and, thank you, Ross, my friend and mentor, for so leading.