

A TRIBUTE TO ROBERT BRUCE COMPTON: FAITH, SERVICE, AND LEGACY

by his son Joel



This issue of the journal is dedicated to Dr. R. Bruce Compton, who retired in May of 2025 after 41 years of faithful service as professor of Biblical Languages and Literature at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary.

Early Life and Formation

Robert Bruce Compton was born on February 27, 1944, to Robert and Shirley Compton and was greeted by his older sister, Carol. Robert was named after the famous Scottish hero Robert the Bruce, with Scottish blood flowing through the family's veins on the maternal side.

Bruce, as he was known to his friends and family to distinguish him from his father, Bob, grew up in the greater Los Angeles area in a city called Whittier. Bruce had a typical childhood in Southern California with the notable exception of a bout with rheumatic fever when he was five. Otherwise, he seems to have spent his time doing what other boys of his age and disposition would do: teasing his older sister, playing ping pong with his father, and, at least on one occasion, visiting the set of some of his favorite TV shows like *Ozzie and Harriet* and *I Love Lucy* in nearby Hollywood. He went to Whittier High School, graduating in 1962. Pictures from his senior yearbook show a young man with a buzz cut and a serious look about him, ready to have fun but knowing the importance of a formal occasion. After graduation, he entered the University of California, Los Angeles, majoring in political science. By his own admission, he was not a focused student and was drifting. The desire for enjoyment conflicted with knowledge of his mortality. Though his family attended a Congregational church, Bruce did not have a religious upbringing.

All things changed when, in his junior year, Bruce became reacquainted with a high school friend and fellow UCLA student, Skip Fonner. Skip was an evangelical Christian and part of a group called InterVarsity, known for their gospel efforts on campuses around the country. Around that time, Bruce had been thinking deeply about life: *What did it all mean? If I end up with a successful career and have what the people around me are chasing after, what would it matter?* These thoughts and his encounter with Skip marked the beginning of Bruce's journey of

faith. Skip regularly invited Bruce to his church and to the InterVarsity meetings on campus. Though he didn't attend the InterVarsity meetings, he did attend Skip's church. And after going to the church several times, Bruce placed his trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. No one had to convince him that he was a sinner, and he knows that were it not for the grace of God, his life would have been significantly different. He regularly praises the mercy of God to save a sinner like himself.

Military Service and God's Providence

After graduating from UCLA in 1966, and with his newfound faith, Bruce tried his hand at various jobs and even enrolled at Fuller Theological Seminary, but by his own admission, the professors there were giving answers that he hadn't yet formulated questions to. Bruce also served as a youth pastor at the church where he had come to know the Lord, Bel Air Presbyterian Church, where then California governor Ronald Reagan would occasionally slip in and out in order to catch the Sunday sermon. It was at this church that his mentor and U.S. Air Force veteran, Richard Horner, encouraged him to join the Air Force as an officer when Bruce's draft notice came in 1968. He then shipped off to Lubbock, Texas, in 1969, where he was in pilot's training for a year.

Bruce flew C-141s for four years in the Air Force during the Vietnam conflict. He completed over 50 missions and was honorably discharged in 1974. Later, after he moved with his family to Michigan and through the encouragement of friend and fellow church member, Colonel Dwight McEntire, Bruce joined the Air Force a second time, serving his country another fifteen years as an Air Force reserve chaplain. Thus, every fourth weekend of the month, he'd rise in the early hours of the morning and drive the eighty miles to Port Clinton, Ohio. During those years, he was able to preach to and pray for hundreds of servicemen and women. Being a reservist also meant that he served full time for two weeks every summer, ministering to men and women at bases in the United States and Europe. He retired a second time from the Air Force as a lieutenant colonel.

Family Life and Marriage

Bruce had met his future wife, Mari, in 1969 during his pilot training in Lubbock on a blind date. Bruce was twenty-five, and Mari was nineteen. Bruce jokes that Mari fell in love with a "steely-eyed killer." (Bruce flew the C-141 cargo planes.) Mari enjoyed his company—he was handsome and funny—and Bruce made sure to extend his time in Lubbock following his year-long pilot training as much as he could, spending his leave time in Lubbock while engaged in other training in Oklahoma. Mari's parents enjoyed having Bruce eat lunch with them on many Sunday afternoons after Bruce and Mari returned from the Bible church they attended in Lubbock.

Mari, the second daughter of James "Bud" and Edna Ruth Huffaker, studied education at Texas Tech University. Following Bruce's move to

Travis Air Force Base in Vacaville, California, in the summer of 1970, the couple dated long-distance for just under a year before marrying in May 1971. Mari then continued her education at the University of California, Berkeley, about an hour's drive from Vacaville, where she graduated in 1972 with a degree in English education.

It was in Vacaville that Bruce and Mari grew deeply in their walk with the Lord. Mari had made a profession of faith before they married, but after some time, she doubted whether she had truly trusted in Christ. So, on one of Bruce's missions to the Orient, Mari read parts of Romans and prayed to the Lord to save her. Upon Bruce's return, both were baptized in a pool outside their apartment building. Bruce and she loved the church plant which serviced the burgeoning community of military personnel and people escaping the Bay Area looking for cheaper housing. Bruce got involved in teaching Sunday School, and his appetite for the ministry grew during the three years they were there.

The Call to Theological Education

Once Bruce realized that flying airplanes—a job he describes as one marked by five-to-ten minutes of stark terror bookmarking hours and hours of aching boredom—was not going to be the career path for him, he and Mari decided to pursue other plans. While he was stationed at Travis Air Force Base, Bruce began to develop a love for full-time Christian ministry while attending Vacaville Bible Church. But, he needed training. So, on his discharge from the Air Force in 1974, Bruce moved with his wife to Denver, Colorado. He began studying, and, once he finished his Master of Divinity in 1977, he began teaching at Denver Baptist Theological Seminary. He also earned his Master of Theology degree there in 1979. Shortly thereafter, he began work on his doctorate at Grace Theological Seminary in Winona Lake, Indiana. His focus was on the New Covenant, a topic requiring proficiency in both Greek and Hebrew. However, during the school year of 1983–1984, Bruce did not receive a salary, so he started looking for a new job while Mari supplemented their income by making railroad conductor hats for children, blue for the boys and pink for the girls.

In the winter of 1983, Bruce interviewed with two separate theological schools—one in San Diego and the other in Detroit, Michigan. The fact that Bruce was saved and baptized in California and that many of his family members were in California was not enough to draw him back. But the other seminary impressed him deeply. Specifically, there were three aspects of this seminary that motivated him to move his family eastward yet again: two men had started working at the seminary the year before who had also studied at Grace Theological Seminary, Dr. Robert McCabe and Dr. William Combs; the church that had started the seminary was immediately across the street and pastored by a man committed to theological education, Dr. William R. Rice; and, finally, there was a Christian day school where he could send his two boys, Joel David (b. 1978) and Jared Michael (b. 1980). Both boys would go on to graduate

from the high school and then from the seminary.

So, in the summer of 1984, their U-Haul packed, the Comptons moved thirteen hundred miles away to Michigan. As Bruce showed his family the industrial city of Detroit, a melancholy settled on the family used to the vastness and beauty of the West. But the bright spots of God's people and the ministry opportunities were more than enough to overcome any doubts as to whether they were in the right place. Their new church family and Bruce's colleagues welcomed the family with open arms and helped them adjust to their new life in Michigan.

A Legacy of Teaching and Mentorship

Bruce knew early on that pastoral ministry was challenging, but he was willing to embrace it. He desired to study the Word of God and to give his life to teaching it, and if the Lord wanted him to work as a pastor or even as a foreign worker, he was open to those possibilities. But the Lord clearly directed his steps into theological education. However, his openness to other branches of ministry has translated into active support—through constant prayer and regular interaction—for pastors and missionaries, many of whom are his former students.

These years, from 1984 until 2025, have witnessed Bruce's involvement in the lives of hundreds of students. Young men, entering bright-eyed and often newly married, leave the halls and classrooms of DBTS spiritually healthier for their efforts. Those who pass through his classes, mature in their faith as they learn biblical Greek and Hebrew, exegete the epistles of Peter or James, or study the Old Testament prophets. Many of these men have stayed on as pastors in the church where he is a member, Inter-City Baptist Church, and many others pastor churches in the Detroit area. These former students often invite him back to preach. When they were young, his boys would tag along as his "bodyguards," and listen to these students regale them with stories of what would happen in the classroom and around the school with their beloved father.

Bruce is infamous for his one-liners in the classroom. A latecomer might hear, "Are we starting too early for you?" While another student, trying to add a little humor to a classroom, would get the semi-serious retort of "There's only one comedian in the room." Though he occasionally teases his students, he always does it in good fun and means it as a friendly nudge toward greater discipline and accountability. This approach to teaching—challenging yet supportive; serious yet joyful—creates an environment where his students thrive. His style of teaching is old-school, largely lecturing to his students as he meticulously covers his years-worked-over notes. But, he asks questions and seeks to help his students understand all sides of an issue. These attempts to steel-man his opponents' views led at least one student to comment that prior to Bruce explaining what position he held, the student had been persuaded one by one as Bruce explained in turn the alternative perspectives. His is an even-handed method of discovery which helps students understand that the irenic method of presenting opposing views is often the best way forward.

A Life of Evangelism and Discipleship

Bruce believes the gospel. He seeks to share the gospel with neighbors and family members alike. Most of his family and Mari's family heard the gospel through his verbal witness and many of his family members trusted in Christ through his witness. No one in either family doubts Bruce's sincerity of belief. He often is seen carrying tracts and is prepared to pass them out to people in various places around town. He looks for opportunities to share the gospel with strangers, family, and friends in the community.

In the halls of his workplace, Bruce is careful to keep an eye out for his students and specifically, the young men who come through the doors of Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary. His witticisms and humor infect them with a love for their gentle teacher. He regularly invites young men out for coffee or dinner with Mari to encourage them: to check on their spiritual well-being, their marriages, and their children. This mentoring aspect reveals his understanding that theological education isn't confined to lecture halls—it happens in coffee shops, over dinner tables, and through a godly example.

A Devoted Father and Husband

Upon retirement Bruce and Mari will have been married for 53 years. Mari has been faithfully at his side as his helper *par excellence*. She helped type his dissertation, read his various papers and articles, worked alongside of him at the Christian day school, reared two sons with him, kept him intellectually sharp for over five decades, and has fixed up many of his spelling or grammar mistakes, slips of tongue or pen that pop up under her ever watchful eye. Many dinner table conversations in the early years were accompanied by the family's dutiful blue bound Webster's Dictionary. Truth be told, it was often on her side, and Bruce took these corrections with constant good humor.

Bruce is a devoted father to his two sons. While they were growing up, his boys would challenge Bruce to games of basketball and he was always ready to hit fly balls. An athlete in his own right, Bruce was a constant presence at his boys' games cheering them on and making sure they were working hard. Win or lose he was a constant encouragement to them. When the score did not favor his sons' teams, Bruce would lighten the mood by asking if the boys wanted to go to Arby's, where they were serving five-for-five roast beef sandwiches. This small gesture helped the boys overcome the sting of a loss and taught them that their dad was more interested in them than the outcome of the game.

He raised them to work hard and to love the work of the ministry. His consistent daily joy and "I love my job" mentality, probably more than any verbal encouragement, helped to ensure that both of his sons would pursue full-time ministry themselves. They watched him live his faith day in and day out, and so it comes as no surprise that one of his sons is a seminary professor like himself and the other serves overseas in a bi-vocational capacity as an English teacher and minister.

Now, with two daughters-in-law and five grandchildren, the Lord's faithfulness to Bruce and Mari is showing fruit in a third generation. Their summer home in Florida has been the center for summer family swims, talks, prayer, games, laughter and the nurturing of a beautiful and wholesome relationship with "Papa."

The Legacy Continues

As Bruce retires after forty plus years of faithful service, his legacy continues through his family, his friends, and the hundreds of students now serving in churches, seminaries, and mission fields worldwide. Each sermon preached, each class taught, each brother or sister or family member encouraged to love Christ more has extended Bruce's ministry beyond what any single person could accomplish alone.

His commitment to biblical truth, brotherly care, and personal discipline—he still does dozens of pushups daily—has multiplied through generations of students. The investment he's made in young minds and hearts continues to yield fruit in ministries across the globe to the glory of God.

For a man named after a Scottish war hero, perhaps Bruce's heroism lies in the consistent faith that has characterized his life and ministry rather than a name highlighted by neon lights. In an age that celebrates celebrity and the spectacular, Bruce has demonstrated the power of steady faithfulness—teaching, mentoring, and serving year after year with unwavering commitment to the Lord.