

# TABLETALK

SPECIAL ISSUE



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R.C. SPROUL

1939 - 2017

# In the Presence of the Lord

**D**R. R.C. SPROUL WENT HOME to be with the Lord on December 14, 2017. He was surrounded by his family and his dear wife, Vesta. He was known to many simply as “R.C.” and did much over the past decades to teach men and women about the God of the Bible. His influence on all of our lives is extraordinary. This issue of *Tabletalk* is a special issue commemorating his life and ministry. He founded *Tabletalk* magazine in 1977 at the Ligonier Valley Study Center simply as the newsletter of the ministry. The sustained growth of the magazine over the years surprised even him.

*Tabletalk* was always a joy for him. With the first issue of *Tabletalk*, he began writing his column Right Now Counts Forever. He described his intention for the column in his first article: “Right Now Counts Forever is designed to focus attention on the relevancy of our present lives to the eternal destinies we all face.” His column continued for more than forty years, and this issue represents the last time that it will appear in *Tabletalk*. R.C. went on to say, “Our Christian assertion is that there is more to our lives than *now*. If there is not, then even the now is meaningless. But we say now *counts*. Why? *Now* counts because we are creatures who have an origin and a destiny which is rooted and grounded in God.” R.C. really believed what he said. That’s why he was such a prolific author and teacher. He wanted people to know about the holy God he knew, and he wanted them to know the salvation in Jesus Christ that he had experienced. R.C. knew that what was most important was what lasted. He knew that eternity was at stake in the lives of every man, woman, and child. We are grateful to the Lord for R.C.’s vision of eternal things.

Through this issue, we seek to honor R.C. and give glory to God for his life and ministry. He knew that Ligonier Ministries and *Tabletalk* magazine were not about him. He might even be embarrassed to know that we’ve devoted a whole issue to describing his life and ministry. We believe, however, that by doing so we honor the Lord and thereby point people to Him.

Our greatest hope is what R.C. experiences now. He has met our sovereign and gracious Lord face-to-face and is present with Him *coram Deo*. That was always R.C.’s deepest desire. He knew that his origin and destiny were rooted and grounded in God alone. He wanted to be in His presence, to be free from the presence and power of sin, and to worship the Lord in the full splendor of His holiness and glory. We take comfort knowing that the God who called R.C. to Himself has now welcomed him into His presence to experience joy everlasting. 

**DR. BURK PARSONS** is editor of *Tabletalk* magazine, senior pastor of Saint Andrew’s Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and a Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow. He is author of *Why Do We Have Creeds?* He is on Twitter at @BurkParsons.



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# An Interview with R.C. Sproul

**F**ROM THE VERY first issue of *Tabletalk*, Dr. R.C. Sproul contributed the monthly column Right Now Counts Forever, in which he commented on important biblical, philosophical, historical, theological, and cultural topics from the perspective of a pastor-theologian. This final column features an interview with Dr. Sproul on some of the key emphases of his ministry and his thoughts concerning Ligonier Ministries and the future.

**TT: How has the Word of God shaped your life and ministry?**

**RS:** From the very first day I was converted as a freshman in college, I started to read the Scriptures. I had never read the Bible before, but in only a few weeks' time I read it from cover to cover. I ignored all my other studies. I just read the Bible all day long. I was absolutely astonished by my discovery of the character of God. I can still hear the sounds of my footsteps on the tiled floor of the halls of the freshman boys' dormitory at three o'clock in the morning as I paced like a caged lion, gripped by terror, realizing that the God of the Bible plays for keeps. I knew that if I was going to follow and worship Him, I would have to take seriously that this God, just like that, could take my life because of a single transgression. What came across to me was this otherness, this holiness, this difference between who God is and who I am

as a sinner and unworthy of the love of God. As I read the pages of Scripture, I said, "I've never heard of this God!"

But that's not all. I kept reading this history of radical rebellion against God that I was a part of, and at the same time, I was not only seeing His power and strength, but I was also being overwhelmed by the portrait of His tender mercy and grace. The Bible is the story of a gracious and holy God, so I realized that if I was going to follow Him, I would have to follow all that He is and all that He reveals of Himself. I'd say to this day that my initial reading of sacred Scripture was the most significant event for the development of my entire theology and ministry.

**TT: What have been some of the most significant challenges in your ministry over the years?**

**RS:** The challenges have been great every day, but they are no different from what every other Christian faces—the world, the flesh, and the devil. The world does everything it can to mold us and shape us, to cause us to bend into conformity to its patterns. The world has an easy target because we tend to be willing participants. By nature, we want to conform to the standards of the society in which we live. So, that's been an ongoing battle. The flesh has to do with our fallen nature. Even though we're reborn by the power of the Holy Spirit, the old man is not instantly annihilated. Until

we're glorified, we have to fight against our fallenness that would destroy us. And then there's the devil, Satan and his demonic host who are working to thwart and frustrate us, to accuse us at every point. It's a battle that causes us to sweat, to tremble, and to fear. Yet at the same time, we're being equipped with the whole armor of God, knowing that even though Satan goes around like a roaring lion seeking to devour whom he will, he'll flee from us, his tail between his legs, if we resist him. But these are powerful forces that we encounter every day.

**TT: How about the joys?**

**RS:** His mercies are new every morning. Joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. It's not something that we generate in and of ourselves, but it is a gift that the Lord gives us. There's a difference between being happy and being joyful. To be joyful is to be blessed of God, to understand something of His nearness and of His presence as He comes as the consolation of Israel to us throughout our lives. Honestly, I don't know how people who are outside of Christ endure this earthly pilgrimage, because, without Christ, they are truly without hope. The best they can achieve is temporary pleasure. They can by no means find lasting joy.

**TT: Why is it important for the church today to understand the holiness of God?**

**RS:** Several years ago, a consultant asked, "What's the single most important thing that people outside the church need to know?" And I said, "They need to know who God is. People outside the church know *that* God is because He has revealed Himself to everybody through nature and our consciences. But they don't know *who* God is. They don't

really understand His character and His behavior." Then, the consultant asked, "Well, what do you think is the most important thing that people inside the church need to know?" I said, "That's easy. The single most important thing that people inside the church need to know is the same as what people outside the church need to know, namely, the character of God."

We established Ligonier Ministries to help people inside and outside the church

know who God is, particularly in His majestic holiness. When we focus on the holiness of God, what we're really focusing on is the "Godness" of God, the deity of God. The holiness of God, according to Scripture, does concern His perfections, His virtue, and His behavior; however, the primary meaning of the holiness

of God is His otherness, His greatness, His transcendent majesty. If you want to worship God with all of your being, you've got to know who it is you're worshiping. You've got to know not only His character and His actions in history but His very being, His majestic nature as revealed in the Bible. So, we must worship God not just because of what He does for us, but because of who He is and why He is to be adored and revered. When we understand who He is, we offer up worship and awe and over time we experience the transformation of our own behavioral patterns.

**TT: Looking back on the history of Ligonier Ministries, have your expectations been exceeded?**

**RS:** Ligonier Ministries began more than forty-five years ago when Dora Hillman donated fifty-two acres and a building for our first

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lecture hall. Everybody was multitasking. I had to be a teacher/professor, but I also had to mow the yard, paint the house, and serve as business manager and accountant. We had to raise a ministry budget of \$80,000 in our first year, but we didn't make it, so the few of us who were on staff ended up taking either a half-salary or no salary for a month or two in order for the ministry to survive. By God's grace, we persevered in spite of ourselves.

Over time, the ministry slowly grew and expanded. It took a long time; you don't expand from a tiny little study center where the nearest town had a population of one hundred to a global ministry in a week. It has taken a lot of work, time, commitment, and people. It has grown in ways that we never, ever dreamed of or imagined.

And all this despite the fact that we didn't have any kind of global vision originally. However, we did have a dream, and that was to be able to reach people with our understanding of the character of God. Along the way, we've had help. Our audio- and videotape ministry, for example, began when Jack and Linda Rowley volunteered to come to the study center during their vacations and use their own equipment to film lectures.

**TT: How does a ministry such as Ligonier grow?**

**RS:** Humanly speaking, outreach grows as resources increase. If you want to do more ministry, you need more resources, including people and funding. If we have \$100 of resources, we can waste all \$100 and do no ministry or we can spend \$10 in administration and have \$90 worth of ministry. The one

thing we cannot do with \$100 of resources is more than \$100 worth of ministry. The absolute maximum amount of ministry you can do with \$100 is \$100 worth of ministry. You're limited by your resources.

The biggest barrier to effective ministry is finance, because so many people make spiritual growth a low priority. People will pay thousands of dollars for medical care for their physical well-being, but they don't attach that value to spiritual well-being. That's why it's very difficult to raise funds for education. It's true even in the secular realm.

Interestingly, resources drive ministry, but ministry also drives resources. The more ministry we do, the more resources we have. But the more resources we have, the more ministry we can do. It's a spiral. More ministry enables us to raise more resources, which enable us to do more ministry.

**TT: According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever, which speaks to our end, our goal, our measure of final success. Applying that to Ligonier Ministries, what is success?**

**RS:** I like to think of this in terms of what Thomas Watson said in his classic work *A Body of Divinity*. Watson argues that in the church, people must have their lives built upon a solid foundation, the Apostolic foundation. Otherwise, they will not persevere. As the psalmist says, if the foundations are shaken, how can the building stand (Ps. 111:3)? Paul tells us that the foundation of the church consists of the prophets and the Apostles—the Word of God (Eph. 2:20). There were good reasons why the first Christians came together

to study the teaching of the Apostles.

Ligonier is about teaching, grounding, and establishing a building that will stand forever based upon the foundation of Scripture. That's our job, whether we do it in a little study center in the hills of Western Pennsylvania or in some remote part of the world. From the very beginning, our goal has been to flood the world with knowledgeable and articulate Christians who have a firm foundation for what they believe, and that will bring the change that we pray for. As long as Ligonier helps people become established in God's Word, our work is a success.

**TT: Since 1997, you have served as pastor at Saint Andrew's Chapel. What was it like transitioning to pastoral ministry after so many years laboring in a seminary and parachurch setting?**

**RS:** When I was ordained, I was ordained to the teaching ministry, not to the pastoral ministry of the local church. And the reason I was in teaching rather than the pastorate was because I didn't believe I had what it took to be a pastor. The highest calling on the planet is to be a preacher and to be a pastor. God had one Son, and He made Him a preacher. The theologian is the guy who's working in boot camp helping the Marines get ready for their task, but the ones fighting the war are the pastors, and I just never felt I had the equipment necessary to do that. Now, in my teaching career, I would also frequently supply pulpits. But that was totally different from stepping into a pulpit where I had to preach a different sermon every Sunday morning to the same people. It was different from having a flock, a congregation.

To enter the pastorate and preach full time to the same people week after week was a massive change for me. And I struggled against the decision to do that. But there

were people who were really putting the heat on me to help start a church. Yet I was teaching in seminary full time, I was writing, I was working full time with Ligonier, and so on. Well, these people kept twisting my arm, and I finally said, "I don't know whether I can really even do this, but the only way it could possibly work is if all I did was preach and teach." So, we began Saint Andrew's Chapel with that understanding. Now our congregation has been in existence for more than twenty years, and I wish I

would have served as a pastor from the very beginning, because my greatest joy has been to be in that pulpit every Sunday morning.

**GOD HAD ONE SON,  
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A PREACHER.**

**TT: In recent years, Ligonier has made a**

**dedicated effort to promote classic orthodox Christology. Why do you think Christology is important for Christians to understand?**

**RS:** When we as believers define ourselves, we call ourselves "Christians" because at the center of our faith is the person and work of Christ. Yet what has been so often distorted throughout church history is the understanding of who Jesus is. I mean, it took the church centuries to give us definitive statements of declaration and definition of who Jesus is. It took 450 years for the church to get together again in council and produce the Definition of Chalcedon to set up boundaries regarding the person of Christ over which you cannot step if you want to confess what the Bible confesses.

Now, the Definition of Chalcedon didn't tell how exactly the mystery of the incarnation is to be understood, how the divine nature and the human nature of Christ are related to each other in the perfect unity of His person, but it said, "Here's what it's not: it's not by confusion, mixture, separation, or

division; each nature retains its own attributes.” One professor told me, “If you want to go outside the framework of those negatives, choose your heresy.” He’s been proven right ever since. You can’t go an hour watching Christian television without hearing some Christological heresy being promoted, heresy addressed by Chalcedon but of which people are unaware because they don’t know their Christology. It’s constant.

The big crisis took place in the fourth and fifth centuries, but then in the nineteenth century we saw the rise of liberalism that denied the deity of Christ for all intents and purposes.

The supernatural aspects of Christianity, including the deity of Christ, continued to be attacked in the twentieth century. And here we are in the twenty-first century, and still the attacks continue. The

worst centuries in the history of the church for the church’s wrestling with the problem of who Jesus is have been the fourth, fifth, nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. And so, when people ask me, “What’s the biggest problem the church faces right now?” I reply that it’s the church’s understanding of who Jesus is. That’s why we have engaged in this push to lift high classic Christology, producing tools such as the Ligonier Statement on Christology in order to help believers know and proclaim key truths about the person and work of Christ.

**TT: You have said that you envision Reformation Bible College as one of the key legacies of Ligonier Ministries. Will you reflect briefly on why Reformation Bible College was started and your hopes for the institution?**

**RS:** Honestly, you could say the genesis of Reformation Bible College goes all the way back to the Protestant Reformation itself. The two most towering magisterial Reform-

ers, of course, were Martin Luther and John Calvin. Both of them were first-rate scholars, and that had a tremendous impact on the Protestant Reformation. But Luther and Calvin also had an uncanny ability to take their case to the people. They were battlefield theologians, and they understood that they were in a spiritual war. And so, they not only instructed but also mobilized troops for the battle. Two very small institutions at their inception were critically important for this. One was the University of Wittenberg, where Luther and Philip Melancthon were on the faculty. Later on, in Geneva, Calvin

started the Academy. The world was changed on account of the influence of the graduates of both of those schools.

Moving forward a few hundred years, we see that something really

astonishing happened in American evangelicalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. John Nelson Darby founded a tiny movement in England—dispensationalism—among the Plymouth Brethren. It quickly moved from England to America, where in a matter of decades it became the majority report among evangelicals. How did that happen? One key factor was the Bible college movement. In a very short period of time, dispensational Bible colleges graduated enough people with enough influence to change the whole landscape of evangelicalism. So, one of the reasons that we started Ligonier was to try to propagate the tenets of historic evangelicalism, which predates dispensationalism. What are the tenets of historic evangelicalism? Nothing other than classic Reformed theology.

Along the way, I had a dream that we would one day have our own publishing company that would help disseminate Reformation theology. But the crown jewel of the vision was to start a Bible college with an influence far

beyond its size. West Point, the United States Military Academy, was founded in 1802. Six decades later, West Point had produced relatively few graduates, but among them were the commanders who led the troops in nearly every major battle of the Civil War. Later on, West Point produced the titanic American military leaders of the twentieth century—Eisenhower, MacArthur, Patton. I thought that if West Point could produce such influential leaders a few students at a time, then a Reformed Bible college could do the same.

On one occasion, I wrote down the names of a hundred people who I knew were leaders of the Reformed movement in America, mostly pastors and professors. Of those one hundred names, I could trace the roots of ninety-nine of them, in one way or another, back to Westminster Theological Seminary. And if you were to look back at the first ten or fifteen graduates of that school, you would recognize so many of the names for the impact that they have had on the life of Christianity in the United States. So, the vision for Reformation Bible College is to train up leaders, a few at a time, who will do much good for the church and the world. Numerically, we endeavor to be small, not big. But we believe that with the right training, our graduates will have incalculable influence.

**TT: Why is it important to study the Bible?**

**RS:** The Christian faith is a faith grounded in the truth content of what God Himself reveals in sacred Scripture. So, when we talk about being “saved by faith” or “justified by faith,” it’s faith in the person and work of Christ, which we know of only through studying biblical content. Thus, it’s vitally important that Christians study sacred Scripture. Notice I said “study.” We need not only to read the Bible but to study the Bible, to make a definitive effort to understand what we’re reading.

**TT: What is the central message of the Bible?**

**RS:** The kingdom of God. From start to fin-

ish, the Bible is all about God’s revealing His kingdom, His sovereign rule over all of history. The Lord God omnipotent reigns. But He is not simply removed from our affairs and our concerns. He is also a God who hears the groans of His people and who orders Pharaoh, “Let My people go.” The Bible tells the history not only of His creative and sustaining power of the universe but the story of redemption, of His entering into a covenant with us and promising to save His people. We find that the sovereign God is a promise-keeping being. And we see all those tiny little intricate details coming out in Scripture regarding how, in amazing terms, God fulfills every promise He’s ever given.

**TT: What would you tell the younger generation of Christian men and women as they seek to be faithful to Christ in an increasingly hostile culture?**

**RS:** Get in the Word and stay in the Word.

**TT: As someone who has studied and taught sacred Scripture for more than fifty years, how would you like your life and ministry to be remembered?**

**RS:** Fidelity to the Word of God—that’s what I would like to be known for. I don’t know of a single idea that I’ve ever had that was in any way original. If there’s any point at which I have departed from historic Christian orthodoxy, that’s to my shame, because I never wanted to be an innovator. I didn’t want to come up with something new and different in the kingdom of God. It’s all there in the Word. And woe be to me or anybody else who wants to improve on the Word of God. So I have always wanted to be boringly orthodox, and to be remembered for that. 

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**DR. R.C. SPROUL** (1939–2017) was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew’s Chapel in Sanford, Fla., first president of Reformation Bible College, and executive editor of Tabletalk magazine.



## READ

GOD HAS REVEALED HIMSELF  
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# A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE

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VESTA SPROUL,  
SHERRIE (SPROUL) DOROTIAK,  
& R.C. SPROUL JR.

**A**fter R.C. went home to be with the Lord, R.C.'s immediate family was interviewed. This article features reflections from R.C.'s wife, Vesta; his daughter, Sherrie (Sproul) Dorotiak; and his son, R.C. Sproul Jr.

**TT: How was R.C. able to connect with so many different types of people?**

**VS:** He liked people. He thought people were interesting, and he knew he could learn from them. I particularly appreciated that he could talk to a construction worker or the president of a Fortune 500 company, and he was comfortable doing both. But he remained himself. He didn't switch between two personalities with regard to how he approached people.

**TT: What is one thing that people might find surprising about R.C.?**

**VS:** He had a desire to be kind. Sometimes he taught complex and difficult concepts, but he wanted to be kind in doing it. He wanted to convince people of what he was teaching. He didn't want to be thought of as being mean. I think he had seen unkind people, including theologians, who seemed only to care about winning arguments. His goal wasn't to win arguments but to convince people of biblical truth.

**TT: What is one of your favorite memories of your dad?**

**SD:** I had such a kind, fun, loving dad who was absolutely crazy about me. One of the greatest privileges that I had was to be able to travel with my dad to church history sites, and to be with him, and to hear him teach at places such as Mars Hill. I can say, "I was there, and I was there with my dad."

**RS:** As a little boy, each morning I would be sent in to wake up my dad. I'd stand beside the bed and tell him it was time to

get up. He would swoop me into the bed and hold me while I tried to escape, but he would not let me.

**TT: What were the early days of ministry at the Ligonier Valley Study Center like?**

**VS:** When people came to the study center, many of them came for vacation. They came to learn, but it was also time off for them. For the staff, however, it was time "on." We would have one group leave, and immediately another group would come through. People often stayed in our homes. We had meals together, and we enjoyed time with them, learning, talking, working, playing sports and games, and studying.

**SD:** We had a great sense of community as the staff children. We all lived on the same fifty-acre property for quite some time, and we had wonderful community times. In the summers we had cookouts, and we played softball and volleyball together. We enjoyed that time.

**RS:** The early days of the study center were almost like the first-century church. It wasn't a commune, but there was a great deal of shared life. Staff families lived on the property, shared meals with the students, and shared games with the students. It was idyllic.

**TT: In those early days at the study center, did you have any idea that Ligonier would grow so much?**

**VS:** Oh, my gracious, no. In fact, I had no idea of the expansiveness of Ligonier's outreach until R.C. died. We have been getting letters, texts, cards, and e-mails from around the world. People are so grateful for the teaching that comes out of Ligonier. At the memorial service, I thought, "What are all these people doing at this memorial service? Why are they all here?" I don't think R.C. had any idea of the reach of Ligonier's ministry either.

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PASTORS OFTEN DON'T TALK ABOUT GOD'S HOLINESS. IT RAISES YOUR MIND TO THINK OF GOD IN THOSE TERMS. THE EFFECT IT'S HAD ON SO, SO MANY PEOPLE IS PROFOUND.

**TT:** Why do you think R.C. poured himself into the work at Ligonier when he had the opportunity to serve in other places, such as academia?

**RS:** Because he believed everyone matters, that everyone is a theologian. When you have the gifts to teach great numbers of laypeople biblical truth, you give it to them.

**VS:** At one point, he was teaching at a seminary, and we were attending a church in Philadelphia. At that time, there weren't adult Sunday school classes in many churches, but this church asked R.C. to teach an adult Sunday school class. He was glad to do it. The response was overwhelming. The people were eager to learn and they were so enthusiastic about what they were hearing. R.C. thought, "Wow, these people really want to learn, but they haven't had the opportunity." Often at colleges and seminaries, the students aren't enthusiastic about learning. You have to win them over to get them to listen to you. Laypeople weren't like that, and he loved their eagerness. They loved the depth of what they were getting, too. R.C. said: "We need to have a place where people

can get answers. They don't have to have the answers themselves to begin with, but we can give them answers so they can give the reasons for their faith." And so the study center started.

**TT:** What is your favorite book by R.C.?

**SD:** My favorite has always been *Chosen by God*. I know predestination is something that a lot of people struggle with, but having learned from him about that from such a young age, it just made me love it, and it gave me such peace.

**VS:** *The Holiness of God*, because it so defined things people never talk about. Pastors often don't talk about God's holiness. It raises your mind to think of God in those terms. The effect it's had on so, so many people is profound.

**RS:** *If There's a God, Why Are There Atheists?* Though it is short, it is a touch more academic, and you can see the early form of his thinking in terms of the holiness of God and in terms of apologetics. He turns the tables on those unbelievers who say Christians believe because we want to believe, showing that unbelievers don't believe because they're afraid to believe. It potently unpacks Romans 1.

**TT:** Is there one enduring lesson that you learned from R.C.?

**VS:** When we were first married, if things were not going right, I'd say: "What are we going to do? I don't know what we can do." He would respond: "Vesta, there's always a way. And if it's not exactly the way we plan, we can still get to the same place if we go by a different route." So I became more relaxed, and I got in the habit of trying to think, "It won't work that way, but we could do something else." That's something I particularly appreciated about him. I think that was part of his way of life—figuring out ways.

**SD:** His strong sense of integrity was especially apparent in his business dealings at Ligonier. It was so good to know that if he gave his word, he meant it. He would go that extra mile, and I really admired that about my dad.

**RS:** One lesson that I learned is that every sin, no matter how "small," is cosmic treason. It is an attempt to wrest power and authority from the God of heaven and earth.

**TT:** Many of us are familiar with R.C.'s conversion experience from *The Holiness of God*, but, Vesta, tell us about your own conversion experience.

**VS:** R.C. became a Christian in his first year at college, and I was at a college four hours away. We were going home to Pittsburgh, so I took a bus to his college, and then he was to drive me home. He asked, "Would you mind going to a prayer meeting with me?" And I said, "Yes, I'll do that." When he became a Christian, he told everyone about Christ. I thought, "Well, it's nice that he's a Christian. He has some problems in his life, and he needs to be a Christian." I wasn't a Christian at the time, and I was happy for him, but I just wished he'd tone it down a bit.

I went to that prayer meeting, and there

was a devotional beforehand. I thought, "If my friends at college could see me now, they would die laughing." Then the prayer started, and it was like an electric current went through me. Suddenly, I said, "Oh my goodness, I know who the Holy Spirit is now." I knew there was a Holy Spirit, of course, but I didn't know He worked in people's lives. We stayed for the rest of the prayer meeting. When we came out of the room, I said, "R.C., I've got to go back in and thank those people, because I've been converted." He was excited, and I suddenly knew what R.C. was talking about when he described his conversion.

**TT:** What prompted R.C. to write several children's books?

**VS:** R.C. would always say, "If you don't deeply understand what you're teaching, then you can't simplify it without distorting it." The more he thought about that, the more he thought that he'd like to write children's books. Of course, having grandchildren was part of it. He loved all of his grandchildren very, very much. He also hoped that parents who read his children's books would understand the Bible better.

**TT:** What excited R.C. about pastoral ministry, particularly at Saint Andrew's Chapel?

**VS:** Preaching excited him. He got to go through a book of the Bible, verse by verse, word by word. It was remarkable to have the opportunity simply to preach about what the Bible teaches each Sunday. Also, we spent so many years traveling to visit new groups—conferences, colleges, and churches, with a new audience every time. It was wonderful to have in Saint Andrew's Chapel a group of people who prayed for us and were involved in ministry with us every week. He loved the local church. **TT**

# A THEOLOGIAN FROM THE BURGH



## STEPHEN J. NICHOLS

Dr. Stephen J. Nichols is president of Reformation Bible College, chief academic officer of Ligonier Ministries, and a Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow. He is author of numerous books, including *The Reformation, Peace*, and *A Time for Confidence*. He is also host of the podcast *5 Minutes in Church History*.

**S**omeone once described R.C. Sproul as an American-born theologian. That needs some modification. He was, in fact, a Pittsburgh-born theologian in the classical Reformed tradition. In October 2017, R.C. described himself as a “classical theist.” If you were around R.C. for any length of time, you would hear him speak of the doctrine of God and of the five *solas* of the Reformation. When he founded a college in 2011, he named it Reformation Bible College. He was indeed a theologian, but he was every bit a theologian of a particular kind. He was a classical Reformed theologian. And he was truly of Pittsburgh. He once wrote, “You can take the man out of Pittsburgh, but you cannot take Pittsburgh out of the man,” adding that he “loves every tree, every blade of grass, and every pothole in the Burgh.” You have to be from Pittsburgh to appreciate potholes. Clearly, R.C. was.

## SON OF PITTSBURGH

Robert Charles “R.C.” Sproul was born February 13, 1939, in the Pennsylvania borough of Pleasant Hills. In fact, with a small degree of pride, he laid claim to being the first person born in Pleasant Hills, which was minted as a borough shortly before R.C.’s birth. Within ten miles, R.C. had everything he needed. Right up the road was the elementary school and a playground. Around the bend there was a drugstore with a soda fountain. Next door to it was a TV repair shop and next to that a shoe repair shop. Turn the other direction and you bumped into Pleasant Hills Community Presbyterian Church. A few doors down from the church, and on the same side of the street, stood the Voorhis family home. A young lady named Vesta, one year older than R.C., lived in that home.

Draw a straight line from R.C.’s house to the northeast and, after ten miles, you arrive at “the Point,” known today as Point State Park. Here the Monongahela River flows in from the east while the Allegheny River flows in from the north, meeting to form the Ohio River, which then feeds into the Mississippi River. This was a crucial place in Western history. The French built Fort Duquesne here. They were dominating the interior of the New World while the British controlled the seaboard. At this very point on the map the two empires collided. The winner would control not only the American Colonies but the Western world. The French were defeated. After the capture of Fort Duquesne, the English renamed it Fort Pitt, for William Pitt, the British prime minister at the time. Today a monument on the site reads, “A Place of International Consequence.” This was also a place of consequence for young R.C. Not far at all from the Point stood the accounting firm offices of R.C. Sproul and Sons, and down the road from it stood Forbes Field, the home of the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Pittsburgh Pirates (until the opening of Three Rivers Stadium in 1970). Every year on opening day, R.C. would play hooky from school to watch the first pitch thrown and the Pirates take the field. He saw Roberto Clemente hit his first home run.

While R.C.’s world had a definite radius, his father’s world was about to become much larger. On Christmas Eve 1942, R.C.’s dad landed in Casablanca, Morocco, to begin his service as an accountant at the rank of captain in the Army Air Force. “My dad flew a desk in the war,” R.C. quipped. Just before his dad left for the war, he came home with a box, and inside was a Dachshund puppy for R.C., duly named Soldier. His dad wrote many letters to R.C., and many more to his wife,

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## HE REALIZED ACUTELY AND DEEPLY THAT THE GOD OF THE BIBLE IS A GOD WHO PLAYS FOR KEEPS.

R.C.'s mother. She typed many letters back. R.C. would climb into her lap and reach over and strike the x key and then the o key, filling the bottom of the letter with x's and o's, hugs and kisses. As a little boy, R.C. ran away from home. A neighbor spotted him and asked him where he was off to. "Italy," came the reply. He was running away to Italy to see his dad.

Near the end of his first-grade year, the students at the elementary school were introduced to a new second-grader. Her family had just moved into the neighborhood. Her name was Vesta Ann Voorhis. The first time R.C. saw her, he knew he would marry her.

R.C. once said, "As a youth I had two consuming passions. One was sports, and the other was the 'why' questions," meaning the big questions of life and meaning and existence. Truly, he had three, adding Vesta to the mix. Sports, however, more than anything, occupied his time. He excelled at baseball, though he played every sport imaginable. When he graduated from high school, he had a baseball scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh and an athletic scholarship for football and basketball to Westminster College. He chose the latter.

### ON ECCLESIASTES AND AUGUSTINE

In the fall of 1957, R.C. arrived as a freshman at Westminster College in New Wilmington, Pa. R.C. had attended church all his life, but he had never heard the gospel. His pastor at Pleasant Hills led the catechism class. He changed some of the questions from the Westminster Shorter Catechism, adding

such questions and answers as this one:

Q: Who is the greatest living Christian?

A: Albert Schweitzer

R.C. began college as an unconverted man. That changed early on in his freshman year. The captain of the football team saw R.C. in the lobby of the dorm and called him over for a conversation. All R.C. wanted to do was walk over to the vending machine, put a quarter in, get a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes, and head to Youngstown, Ohio, where the bars did not care to check IDs. But this was the captain of the football team, so he put the quarter in his pocket and sat down for a conversation. For the first time, someone talked to R.C. about Christ as a real person. He shared a verse with R.C., Ecclesiastes 11:3: "Where a tree falls . . . there it will lie." As R.C. heard these words, he saw himself as a dead tree, lying in the woods and rotting away. He knew he was dead and that he needed forgiveness of his sins. He prayed for forgiveness. That night he became a Christian.

His whole freshman year, R.C. devoured the Bible and Billy Graham sermons. He would sit in the back of his classes reading one or the other. He would have flunked out of college had it not been for his A's in physical education (automatically given due to his athletic scholarship) and in Bible survey.

As R.C. started his sophomore year, he took a required "Introduction to Philosophy" course from Dr. Thomas Gregory, who held a Ph.D. in philosophy from the

University of Pennsylvania and a master's degree from Westminster Theological Seminary. R.C. yawned through the first lecture on David Hume. But then came a lecture on Augustine's view of creation and time. R.C. was riveted. He immediately changed his major to philosophy. That decision would forever change R.C.'s life and work.

While R.C. was devouring the Old Testament, a singular impression began to emerge. He realized acutely and deeply that the God of the Bible is a God who plays for keeps. He saw the same thing in Augustine. R.C. even saw this in the classical philosophers, in Plato and Aristotle, this notion of *perfectissimus*, the Perfect Being, or the *actus purus*, Pure Act. All of these thoughts came to a climax one night as he felt compelled to leave his dorm at midnight and head to the chapel on the campus of Westminster College. He entered through the heavy oak doors under a Gothic arch, passed through the narthex, and walked by the rows of pews to the chancel. He had a transforming moment, basking in the presence of God. As he put it in the opening pages of *The Holiness of God*, "I was alone with God. A holy God. An awesome God." R.C. called this his "second conversion," his conversion to the transcendent splendor and majesty of the beauty, glory, and holiness of God.

R.C. had one more life-altering experience in college. On June 11, 1960, R.C. Sproul married his childhood sweetheart, Vesta. From that day on, it would be R.C. and Vesta. R.C. liked to tell the story of a family friend's young boy who thought R.C.'s name was actually "R.C. and Vesta" because he only ever heard R.C. referred to as R.C. and Vesta. She, indeed, would be his lifelong companion and true partner in ministry. As if getting married were not enough for a memorable 1960, the

Pittsburgh Pirates won the World Series that year. R.C. and Vesta were in the stands at Forbes Field for game seven, the final and clinching game of the series.

### A GROWLING SEMINARY PROFESSOR

After he graduated from Westminster College, R.C. entered Pittsburgh Theological Seminary (PTS), where he and Vesta would spend the next three years. They would be joined in 1961 by a daughter, Sherrie. The faculty at PTS was made up mostly of liberal theologians, with three notable exceptions: Drs. James Kelso, Robert Kelley, and John Gerstner. Of this constellation, Gerstner far and away was R.C.'s North Star. R.C. once put it very succinctly, "I would have been lost without Gerstner." It was Gerstner who took R.C. further down the path of the classical Reformed tradition. R.C. said Gerstner had a "bear trap" mind, capable of a profound reasoning that deeply impressed R.C. When R.C. first went to seminary, he espoused more of a presuppositional apologetic position, then being developed by Cornelius Van Til. R.C. thought he would take on Gerstner. Instead, when Gerstner was finished, R.C. recalled later, "You could dust off the spot where I stood." Decades later, R.C. and Gerstner would team up, along with Arthur Lindley, to write *Classical Apologetics* (1984).

Gerstner would be a lifelong mentor of R.C. The two joined forces for the fights and battles in American Presbyterianism. They shared many platforms at conferences across the country. Gerstner would be a frequent lecturer at the Ligonier Valley Study Center and by 1980 would be appointed Ligonier's professor-at-large. It was John Gerstner who introduced R.C. to the thought and legacy of Jonathan Edwards, and it was Gerstner who helped R.C. steel his classical Reformed stance.

It was also John Gerstner who told R.C. to study under **CONTINUED ON PAGE 22**



# LISTEN

FAITH COMES BY HEARING. Every day, Ligonier Ministries broadcasts audio and video teaching on the air and on the web to thousands of people, free of charge. Trustworthy, life-changing teaching from R.C. Sproul, the Ligonier Ministries Teaching Fellows, and many others is available to you 24/7. Tune in.

[LIGONIER.ORG/LISTEN](https://LIGONIER.ORG/LISTEN)

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19 G.C. Berkouwer at the Free University of Amsterdam. He, Vesta, and Sherrie boarded a ship and sailed across the Atlantic. R.C. did not know Dutch. The lectures were in Dutch and most of the textbooks were in Dutch, so R.C. would sit with an open textbook and a Dutch dictionary and painstakingly work line by line through the text. He missed English. He also missed ice cubes. The Dutch didn't use them. He also played baseball and was written up in the papers. In the Netherlands, ministers don't play baseball. This American baseball-playing theologian and churchman was quite the sensation.

After a year of study, the family returned to America. R.C. had received word that his mother was gravely ill. Also, another child was on the way. That summer, his mother passed away, and on the same day—July 1, 1965—his son, R.C. Jr., was born. Just over two weeks later, on July 18, R.C. was ordained at Pleasant Hills Community Presbyterian Church into the United Presbyterian Church in the USA (UPCUSA). He would later transfer his ministerial credentials to the Presbyterian Church in America.

R.C. was not the first from his family to be ordained. R.C.'s great-grandfather emigrated to the United States in 1849. The Sproul name is not Irish, however, but lowland Scottish. The first minister ordained by the Reformer John Knox was a certain lowland Scot named R.C. Sproul. This sixteenth-century R.C. then went to Ireland as a missionary, settling the Sproul clan in County Donegal. R.C. relished this little piece of history, that the Reformation was literally in his blood.

#### PROFESSOR

From 1965 to 1966, R.C. taught at his alma mater, Westminster College, while one of the faculty was on a yearlong sabbatical.

Then the family moved to Wenham, Mass., where R.C. served for two years at Gordon College. In those days, the college was rather fundamentalistic. From 1968 to 1969, R.C. held the position of assistant professor of philosophical theology at Conwell Theological Seminary, which was then located on the campus of Temple University in Philadelphia. That spring, it was announced that Conwell would be merging with Gordon Seminary to become Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. The campus and all faculty would be moving to Massachusetts, to the exact same campus R.C. had just left. R.C. turned down the offer to go with them.

Something very significant happened while they lived in the suburbs of Philadelphia. R.C. taught an adult Sunday school class at Oreland Presbyterian Church. He far more enjoyed that than his teaching at the seminary. The Sunday school class was full of people who served in various professions. They devoured R.C.'s teaching. While R.C. was bored at Conwell, he came alive at this morning Sunday school hour at Oreland. It was in that place and time that R.C. had the original contours of the vision that would become the Ligonier Valley Study Center.

The Sprouls left Philadelphia for Cincinnati, where R.C. served as an associate pastor of evangelism, mission, and theology at College Hill Presbyterian Church. While there, he spoke in Pittsburgh in association with the Pittsburgh Offensive, a group of conservative evangelicals from various denominations. This group kept tugging at R.C. to move across the river and back to his beloved hometown of Pittsburgh. In 1971, he relented.

#### THE LIGONIER VALLEY STUDY CENTER

In August 1971, R.C. opened the Ligonier Valley Study Center in Stahlstown, on the edge of the Ligonier Valley and in the

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## R.C. OPENED THE LIGONIER VALLEY STUDY CENTER IN AUGUST 1971 IN THE FOOTHILLS OF THE APPALACHIAN MOUNTAINS IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA.

foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in Western Pennsylvania. The Sproul home was called the Lecture House, with its large open room spilling out onto a patio. There R.C. would teach. Cedar Lodge was added, and soon other buildings would round out the campus. When asked what he did there in those early years, he remembered mowing the grass, and even planting the grass after he had removed rocks and prepared the soil. And, of course, he taught courses on a range of subjects. He was always within reach of students. From the beginning, he had other teachers join him.

Students would stay for weekends or extended periods of time. Some stayed for a month, and others would stay longer. Many students came for special January term courses—their colleges would give them academic credit for it. President Gerald Ford's son stayed there for a month. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Russ Pulliam was a frequent student at the study center. Tim Keller, as well as his wife, Kathy, studied there as well, and R.C. would eventually marry them. Bill Hybels attended lectures at the study center. The study center was also open to the community on Tuesday mornings initially and then on Wednesday mornings for a Bible study. The regularly scheduled "Gab Fests" were a favorite at the study center. Churches sent groups to Ligonier for weekend retreats and seminars.

In 1973, R.C. published his first book, *The Symbol: An Exposition of the Apostles' Creed*. It won the *Christianity Today* book

award and had a most memorable dedication: "To Vesta: To the Romans a pagan goddess, to me a Godly wife." It would be the first of many, many books to come.

Early in the life of the study center, R.C. drafted the Ligonier Statement on Inerrancy. He convened a conference on inerrancy at the nearby Laurelville Mennonite Retreat Center. Shortly after that conference, the idea for a larger summit on inerrancy emerged. That summit became the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI), which produced the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. The organization purposefully gave itself a ten-year life. R.C. said: "We planned to have a ten-year crusade and dissolve. We wanted to make a ten-year effort to raise the stakes of inerrancy." The years of ICBI cemented the friendship between R.C. and Dr. James Montgomery Boice, pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and founder of the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology (PCRT). Both men were from Pittsburgh, both enjoyed sports, and both enjoyed Reformed theology even more. R.C. preached Boice's funeral sermon in 2000, noting that Boice was a "valiant warrior for the church."

On May 6, 1977, a modest eight-page newsletter shipped from the study center. The nameplate identified it as *Table Talk*, with the rest of page one displaying R.C.'s column Right Now Counts Forever. The first issue announced weekend seminars and lecture series that ran mornings and

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## MANY FIRST CAME TO KNOW R.C. IN CHURCH BASEMENTS DURING SUNDAY SCHOOLS AS THEY WATCHED A LIGONIER TEACHING SERIES.

evenings from June through August 1977. The newsletter also listed “The Top Ten Tapes” available. R.C.’s “How to Study the Bible” topped the list, while a biography of Jonathan Edwards came in at number ten.

The issue released on September 1, 1977, marked the celebration of Ligonier’s sixth year. On this occasion, R.C. wrote, “Our purpose initially was to provide biblical and theological training that was more than what is normally offered in the local church, but less than what could be obtained in a formal academic program. . . . This purpose has been fulfilled.” R.C. put a sharper focus on Ligonier’s purpose: “To be a resource center for life-long Christian education.”

R.C. also explained the name *Table Talk*. He noted first that it linked Ligonier with the Reformation, as that was the name given to Martin Luther’s notes taken down by students over meals around the great Reformer’s table. Then R.C. noted, “Secondly, *Table Talk* represents the concept of talking theology informally over meals as we do at Ligonier. . . . We believe that theology, the knowledge of God, is for everyone, not just the pastor or professor, and that it can be talked about at any time, not just in the classroom or seminary.” R.C. wasn’t only talking theology, holding seminars, and writing books. Those early *Table Talks* had a page labeled “The Field Mouse,” revealing the happenings around the study center. In one of them, readers were informed that

R.C. had a new jogging outfit and might be spotted running a mile or two, lifting weights, and jumping rope.

For the first six years, the Sproul family lived on the campus of the study center. The first three were in the Lecture House. When the Sprouls moved out, the lecture room was kept, while the family bedrooms were converted into offices. Then for three years they lived in a house on campus that later housed another staff family. They next built a home a quarter of a mile down the road from the study center, back in the woods a bit on a seven-acre lot. The blueprints included an open living room that served to hold the staff prayer meetings and a wood floor for R.C. and Vesta to practice their ballroom dancing.

In 1977, more than 10,000 people walked onto the study center campus for seminars, Gab Fests, Bible studies, and courses. A staggering 196 new audio teaching tapes were produced. But the most intriguing statistic regards videotapes. After reporting that seventy videotape programs were produced in 1977, Stu Boehmig, then executive director of the ministry, observed, “We feel that we are on the ground floor of this new ministry and look for it to explode in the coming years.”

The first time R.C. was videotaped for a teaching series was in 1974. Jack Rowley had used the newly developed technology of the videocassette record-

er to record training videos for airplane mechanics. He brought that new technology to the Ligonier Valley to record training in theology. In those early days, Ligonier would actually give churches VCRs so they could have something to play the videotapes on. Many first came to know R.C. in church basements during Sunday school classes as they watched a Ligonier teaching series. It was becoming obvious that R.C. had an audience far beyond those who made the trek to the Ligonier Valley Study Center. The board came to R.C. with the plan to move the ministry to one of three cities. Orlando won.

### ORLANDO

Since the move to Orlando in 1984, Ligonier Ministries has continued to expand its reach across the country and around the world. Some key milestones include the launch of *Renewing Your Mind* in 1994. First airing on thirty stations, this program has been heard by millions. *Table Talk* magazine expanded as well after being renamed *Tabletalk* and transformed into a publication with daily devotions and thematic articles. It has grown to its current circulation of 100,000, with an estimated readership of well over 250,000.

In 1988, Ligonier hosted its first annual national conference. This important event for the ministry continues. In addition to the national conference, Ligonier also hosts regional conferences across the country and international conferences in such places as Mexico City and Wittenberg, Germany, as well as study tours and study cruises.

Another milestone occurred in 1997, as R.C. became the founding pastor of Saint Andrew’s Chapel in Sanford, Fla. The first service was held in the Ligonier studios on July 20, 1997. Today the congregation of Saint Andrew’s meets in a Gothic cathedral-style building. R.C. was the senior

pastor from 1997 until 2012, then served as the copastor, with Dr. Burk Parsons, from 2012 until his death. When he died, R.C. had just started a sermon series on Hebrews, preaching what would be his final sermon on November 26, 2017, “So Great a Salvation,” on Hebrews 2:1–4.

Another milestone occurred in 2011, when R.C. founded Reformation Bible College (RBC). The college takes the ministry back full circle to the early days of the Ligonier Valley Study Center. The carved wooden sign for the study center, with a distinctive 1970s font, hangs in the lobby of the academic building on the college campus. The sign serves as a reminder to those at RBC of the roots of the college. R.C. established a college that emphasizes life-on-life learning and that teaches students the knowledge of God and His holiness in the classical Reformed tradition. On the fifth anniversary of the college, R.C. said that his vision was for the college “to be a small, intimate, dedicated school for developing the Christian faith, for people to understand the faith, to know the faith, to be able to defend the faith, and to be able to contend for the faith.”

John Calvin and Geneva had everything to do with the founding of the college. On a Ligonier tour to Geneva, R.C. stood looking at the impressive Reformation monument along the wall of the Old City. Behind the monument, you could see the stones of the building that was the Academy, the school Calvin founded to train the next generation. It would become the University of Geneva. In Calvin’s time, it taught the Word of God and systematic theology and then sent its students all over the world. At that precise moment in Geneva, R.C. had the vision to found Reformation Bible College.

One last milestone deserves mention. In 2015, Ligonier Ministries released

the album *Glory to the Holy One*. This hymn and sacred music project resulted from the collaboration of R.C. Sproul and award-winning composer Jeff Lippencott. That album was followed by *Saints of Zion*, released in 2017. Few things brought R.C. more joy in his final years than writing these hymn lyrics, seeing those lyrics joined with tunes, and then hearing the end result sung by choirs. R.C. attended three hymn concerts in Sanford; Lancaster, Pa.; and Nashville, Tenn. He attended the rehearsal for each of them, sitting in the front with his arm around Vesta. Watching him for just a moment, you might be tempted to think that he did all that work on the hymn projects so that he could take his childhood sweetheart on a date to a private concert.

#### AWAKENING

In the fall of 2014, Ligonier Ministries led a study tour through New England. The trip had a profound impact on R.C. It culminated at a visit to the Old South Church in Newburyport, Mass. George Whitefield, the evangelist of the First Great Awakening, preached his last sermons in this church on September 28–29, 1770. He died at six o'clock in the morning on Sunday, September 30. The next day, his first funeral service was held at Old South Church, and his body was buried in an underground crypt directly underneath the pulpit.

The plan was for the Ligonier group simply to tour the church. But then R.C. walked up to the pulpit. R.C. liked to say, referring to the sovereignty of God, that there was not a single maverick molecule in existence. Around Ligonier, we joked that there was one maverick molecule, R.C. Sproul. He liked to go off script, and those times made for beautiful moments.

On that fall day in that historic pulpit

in Old South Church, R.C. noted that he was moved to be standing over the very place where Whitefield was buried. Then he started telling a joke. “Legend has it that on the night of his last sermon, George Whitefield declared, ‘Some preacher will come someday from Orlando, Fla., to preach here.’ Then Whitefield thundered, ‘Over my dead body.’”

After the laughs settled, R.C. turned to Matthew 16:15–17, the text Jonathan Edwards, another notable figure of the First Great Awakening, used for his sermon “A Divine and Supernatural Light.” R.C. offered, from memory, the high points of Edwards’ sermon. R.C. went on to say that there have been many preachers through the ages who are great expositors, but only a handful of “anointed preachers.” These anointed preachers had two things in common, according to R.C. They were Calvinists. They knew that salvation was the work of God alone for the glory of God alone. They knew people were dead. There was no human voice powerful enough to raise them. Only a divine voice can bring forth the dead; only a divine and supernatural light can overcome the darkness. They were Calvinists, and, second, they preached for conversion. It was, R.C. declared, as if they preached under a supernatural visitation. This list included men such as Whitefield and Edwards, Charles Haddon Spurgeon in the nineteenth century, and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones in the twentieth century.

R.C. then said that God has not hidden His plan for the spread of the gospel in some technique. God is not waiting for a clever marketing plan. Instead, salvation comes to the lost through the immediate visitation of the Holy Spirit as God’s Word is preached. God has decreed His Word as the power to raise the dead to new life, to eternal life. Every gener-

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## EVERY GENERATION NEEDS TO RECOVER THE PREACHING OF THE WORD OF GOD WITH PASSION AND A COMPELLING URGENCY.

ation, R.C. continued, needs to recover the preaching of the Word of God with passion and a compelling urgency. He longed for the same passionate preaching of Whitefield and Edwards to once again animate pulpits. Every pastor must rely solely on the power of God’s Word in preaching, and every Christian must rely on the power of God’s Word. That, R.C. told those on the New England tour, is a genuine awakening.

That very moment, R.C. began a new daily habit of praying for awakening. He would often tell this to his congregation at Saint Andrew’s Chapel. Many of his sermons from 2014 until the last sermons he preached in the fall of 2017 contained impassioned pleas for sinners to come to Christ and for Christians to relish the beauty of Christ above all else and worship God alone in the splendor of His beauty, glory, and holiness. So burdened was R.C. that he selected awakening as the theme for Ligonier’s 2018 National Conference.

R.C.’s final sermon from the pulpit of Saint Andrew’s was on Hebrews 2:1–4, on November 26, 2017. He had just started a sermon series on Hebrews, preaching three sermons through chapter one and this fourth and last sermon on the opening verses of chapter two. With joy, he talked about our great salvation. With pleading, he called all those listening to come to Christ.

There are many aspects to R.C.’s legacy, including his books, hymns, the var-

ious outreaches of Ligonier Ministries, Saint Andrew’s Chapel, and Reformation Bible College. He helped a whole generation of Christians avoid shallow views of God and casual, if not flippant, approaches to the holy and transcendent God. He labored to make the five *solas* of the Reformation known far and wide. He was the leading advocate for classical apologetics. He fought vigorously for the doctrines of justification by faith alone and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer. He’s the only theologian to get a mention in the liner notes of a Van Halen album. One of his quotes made it into Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations: “Sin is cosmic treason.” He was a rare jewel.

If you pull on the various threads of his legacy, you will likely come right back to the midnight walk to the chapel on the campus of Westminster College. You will be pulled through the oak doors under the Gothic arch, through the narthex, and past the pews to the chancel. The essence of R.C. Sproul’s teaching may be succinctly stated as this: God is holy, and we are not. R.C. called all of us to worship God alone in all of life. On December 14, 2017, R.C. Sproul completed his worship on earth and joined the choir of angels and saints before the throne, saying:

*To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever. (Rev. 5:13) *

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# A SHEPHERD OF GOD'S PEOPLE

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## BURK PARSONS

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Dr. Burk Parsons is editor of *Tabletalk* magazine, senior pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., chief publishing officer of Ligonier Ministries, a Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow, and a visiting lecturer at Reformed Theological Seminary. He is author of *Why Do We Have Creeds?*, editor of *Assured by God* and *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine, and Doxology*, and coeditor and cotranslator of *A Little Book on the Christian Life* by John Calvin.



**R**.C. admitted something to me years ago when I first began ministering at Saint Andrew's Chapel. He said that even after speaking and preaching for decades, he would still get nervous before it was time to preach on Sundays. I remember being surprised by his confession, since R.C. was one of the most gifted communicators of God's truth that I have ever had the privilege of knowing. Yet he was a humble man. He had such a profound awareness of the gravity of preaching and the seriousness of the biblical and theological truths he expounded that he could not help but get nervous before ascending the steps to the pulpit. Years later, he told me that often before preaching he would look up, and Psalm 121:1–2 would come to mind: "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth."

R.C. spent much of his life communicating the theological truths of God's Word to God's people. He had a gift for simplifying concepts without making them simplistic. This is one reason that R.C. was such a good preacher. He pastored by feeding God's people with the truths of God's Word. He knew that, above all else, pastors are called to feed Christ's sheep (John 21:15–17). As a result, R.C. strove to preach the Word. He didn't want simply to give people his opinions. He wanted people to hear the truth of God and be changed by it. To help people see the power of God's Word, he stressed the importance of bringing out the drama in a passage. He wanted to preach in such a way that people saw the drama of Scripture. R.C.'s pacing, pauses, changes in tone and volume—all of these things were intentional to keep people engaged, to help them listen to the key points in the text, and to help them experience the mag-

nificent power of God's Word. He showed me the importance of painting pictures with words and of speaking to the entire congregation, to the highly educated and to those with less schooling, to those who knew the Bible well and to those who were only just beginning to study it. He wanted people to glory in the truth, the beauty, and the sufficiency of the Scriptures as the only food that can satisfy their souls.

R.C. insisted on having an elevated pulpit at Saint Andrew's Chapel, not to elevate the preacher but to elevate the Word of God. Early in my ministry, I remember expressing to R.C. how intimidated I felt to be preaching from his pulpit. R.C. quickly corrected me in a fatherly tone: "That's not my pulpit. That's not your pulpit. That's God's pulpit." He knew well that his job was to communicate boldly, not to be afraid of preaching the whole counsel of God in season and out of season, and to rely on the Holy Spirit to illumine God's Word and impress it upon the souls of God's people. He wanted people to give glory to the Lord on account of what they learned from his preaching, but he also wanted God to be glorified in the preaching itself.

R.C. always worked hard to make himself an effective communicator because he loved his audience. Being a man of many talents, R.C. could have succeeded doing a number of things. He chose to minister primarily to laypeople. I had the privilege of seeing his ministry to laypeople firsthand with respect to the people of Saint Andrew's Chapel. He would often speak of his affection for the members of our local church. He did not see his weekly preaching as merely a job but as a true labor of love. When he had been out of town on a Sunday due to a speaking engagement, he would often remark upon his return how good it was to be back in the Word with the people of God. R.C. loved the congregation, and he felt the love of the con-

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HE NEVER LOST SIGHT OF THE PRIVILEGE  
AND HONOR IT IS TO PREACH THE WORD  
OF GOD TO GOD'S PEOPLE.

gregation for him. That love, in particular, strengthened him during his final years of ministry. R.C. was a dedicated churchman who believed the local church is the central agent for building up God's people in divine truth. He was therefore dedicated to the ministry of his local church, Saint Andrew's Chapel, and the preaching of the gospel from its pulpit. For R.C., preaching was not merely an obligation, but also a delight. Frequently on Sunday mornings, as we were preparing for worship, he would say to me, "Can you believe we get to do this?" He never lost sight of the privilege and honor it is to preach the Word of God to God's people.

When we would talk about our worship, we would often speak of what we desired for the people—that they would encounter the holy God on Sundays and be comforted by what they enjoy through faith in Christ alone. We spoke of the importance of people's feeling safe, not in the sense that they would never be challenged or confronted with their sin, but in the sense that they would not be afraid that we were trying to teach them anything original. R.C. knew that he was preaching the same gospel message that Paul had preached: Jesus Christ crucified. We wanted the people of God to feel the freedom that they have in that gospel. We wanted them to be confident that we were being good stewards of the truth

of God, that our worship was pleasing to the Lord. R.C. understood the importance of being intentional in worship. He really believed that the God of the Bible is holy, holy, holy. His desire to worship the Lord in reverence and awe is apparent in the liturgy at Saint Andrew's Chapel.

Above all else, as R.C. shepherded the people of God, he wanted God to be glorified. He knew that worship is about God and His glory. Similarly, he knew that his own life was about God's glory. He really believed what he wrote in *The Holiness of God*: "If God is the Creator of the entire universe, then it must follow that He is the Lord of the whole universe. No part of the world is outside of His lordship. That means that no part of my life must be outside of His lordship." This God whom R.C. encountered in college is a God who, as R.C. used to say, "plays for keeps." R.C. understood the lordship of Christ over his life. He wanted people to understand the lordship of Christ over their lives too. He spent a lifetime elucidating that very idea. That is why we most honor R.C. not by glorifying R.C. but by glorifying the Lord. R.C. wanted us to encounter the same holy God that he had encountered. He wanted us to experience the same forgiveness that he had experienced in Christ. R.C. wanted us to know the truth of sacred Scripture, and he wanted that truth to set us free. **TC**

"Because of Christ, our suffering is not useless. It is part of the total plan of God, who has chosen to redeem the world through the pathway of suffering."

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R.C. SPROUL

SURPRISED BY SUFFERING

# A FRIEND AND FATHER IN THE FAITH



## SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

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Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson is a Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow and Chancellor's Professor of Systematic Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary. He previously served as senior minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, S.C. He has written more than two dozen books, including *The Whole Christ*, *In Christ Alone*, and *Devoted to God*.

**I** could take you to the exact spot where I first heard R.C.'s name and to the place where we had our first conversation.

Forty years ago, at a conference I was speaking at in Scotland, a friend who had studied in the United States came up to me and asked, "Have you heard of R.C. Sproul? He's said to be the best communicator of Reformed theology in the world." I hadn't, but I was immediately intrigued. What did R.C. stand for? The best communicator of Reformed theology? In the whole world? "This man," I thought, "I would love to hear!" But for me as a twentysomething, visiting the United States and hearing R.C. seemed to be almost as unlikely as going to the moon. Little did I know. How good and kind God has been to me in the years in between. Not only did both of these unlikely things take place, but in due course, R.C. became to me a dear and esteemed friend and a beloved elder brother in Christ.

Several years were to pass before I heard R.C. speak and then had my first conversation with him and Vesta. It was on the steps of the First Baptist Church of Pensacola, Fla. We were both speaking at the old Pensacola Theological Institute, held at the McIlwain Memorial Church, in the early 1980s. R.C.'s presence had mightily increased the attendance. A much larger sanctuary had to be rented for the evening meetings at which he was preaching. Meanwhile, the other speakers had to give each of their daily addresses twice in the McIlwain Church. My first memories of his preaching are still with me. His powers of illustration were remarkable; the depth of conviction in his preaching was palpable; his ability to communicate complex philosophical ideas and trends and their effects with

clarity was unique; and in addition—a trait I have always admired in his preaching—he never said too much.

Some readers of *Tabletalk* will remember that in those days, R.C. would sometimes make a point by transforming himself into the TV detective Lieutenant Columbo. He did this superbly well—the only thing missing was the raincoat. He described Columbo as “the greatest American detective.”

In the course of our first conversation, I rather naively offered a different detective for that accolade: “I thought Hiram Holliday was the greatest American detective.” I should explain that Hiram Holliday was a somewhat wimpy-looking newspaper proofreader who despite his appearance was in fact a great man of action with unexpected skills. He was the creation of the author Paul Gallico and had appeared on TV in the United States in the 1950s. A decade or two later, the series was run (in black and white) in the United Kingdom, and I had watched it as a youngster. He was, in fact, the only American detective I knew. “Hiram who?” R.C. responded in astonishment. Half an hour later, as he rose to speak, he told the crowded sanctuary that he needed to settle a difference of opinion he had with one of the other speakers. He asked the congregation how many of them had ever heard of a detective by the name of Hiram Holliday. My hand went up—and to her credit, so did Vesta’s! But I think we were in a minority of two. Case closed.

The following morning, when I was called to answer my first question during the daily speakers’ Q&A session, I decided to take my life in my hands. “Before I respond to the question,” I said, echoing R.C.’s opening words from the previous evening, “I would like to try to settle the dispute that began last night over the identity of the greatest American detective.

How many of you know the Christian name of Detective Holliday?” A sea of hands went up. “How many of you, then, know the Christian name of Lieutenant Columbo?” The blank response delighted me. And with victory in my grasp, I went on to the question. As I returned to my seat, R.C. barked affectionately at me, “You were up all night thinking about that?” I think he knew I had been willing to take a risk. Shortly afterward, to my amazement (and pleasure), I received an invitation to speak at a Ligonier conference in Canada with him. And so began a treasured friendship that lasted through four decades of shared conferences and many hours of conversation.

I suppose it was in the Q&A sessions at conferences, and perhaps only there, that most people saw that the men R.C. invited to preach alongside him were not only invited guests but friends and brothers. He led that fellowship of brothers, and we all reveled in it. I certainly feel this for myself. Preaching is demanding and can be very costly. Travel is wearying, and the glamour of long flights and hotel rooms soon grows old. But the compensations, largely hidden from public view, have been for me very substantial indeed—behind-the-scenes times of fellowship, shared concerns for the cause of Christ and for one another, and mutual affection, appreciation, and encouragement.

In more than one letter, John Calvin described times with close friends by writing (perhaps surprisingly), “We had a good laugh.” I could certainly say the same about times with R.C. He was the epitome of the whole-souled Christian. He took even his laughter seriously, and he excelled in it. Indeed, one memorable night when several of us were having dinner together, there was such joyful humor and side-splitting laughter that we had to call Steve Lawson’s brother

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## NO ONE HAS DONE MORE TO PUT THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE HOLY ONE FRONT AND CENTER IN THE THINKING AND LIVING OF CHRISTIANS TODAY.

Mark, a physician, to come over to the restaurant to make sure that R.C. had not seriously injured himself laughing. Perhaps men who can never laugh together are not likely to be able to cry together either. It was not so with R.C.

Many of R.C.’s qualities were obvious. There were the intellectual gifts that enabled him to grasp dense and difficult subjects; the powers of mind and expression that enabled him to articulate them with such clarity; and his sense of the penetration of the world of philosophy into the day-to-day world-and-life views expressed in contemporary culture. But all of these gifts were placed in tribute to God and served his passionate commitment to communicate the truth and power of the biblical gospel to ordinary people, because he understood that how we think shapes how we live. And behind that was the profound impact on his soul of the biblical truth that in so many ways was the melody line of his life’s work—the holiness of God. No one has done more to put the knowledge of the Holy One front and center in the thinking and living of Christians today, and for that I for one am deeply grateful to and for my friend.

But I would like to mention several of R.C.’s special characteristics that perhaps one would need to have known him personally over a number of years to appreciate fully.

The first was that over the decades, I felt I saw him “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). Paul urged Timothy to minister in such a way that “all may see your progress” (1 Tim. 4:15). It is one of those hidden statements in the New Testament that is so easily (and perhaps all too readily) overlooked. But I am glad to be able to testify that I saw in R.C. a progress in Christlikeness and in the fruit of the Spirit. He was not only a great communicator; he was a man who had communion with Christ and therefore grew to be more like Him. The fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—were increasingly evident to me as he grew older.

In that context, I tasted one of those fruits in R.C.’s life in a way that reminded me of words written by Augustine in his *Confessions*. In one of Augustine’s soliloquies, he reflects on Ambrose, the great preacher-bishop of Milan (under whose ministry Augustine eventually came to Christ). He notes that Ambrose left an indelible impression on his life. But the reason he gives is illuminating. It was not so much that the bishop was a great teacher (although he was one of the greatest)—for Augustine did not expect at first to discover truth in the church. Rather, he notes, what first impressed him was that Ambrose “was kind” to him. I felt that myself from R.C. And I stumbled on the same grace in his hidden

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## ONLY THE LAST DAY WILL MAKE CLEAR WHAT BLESSINGS THE LORD GAVE THE CHURCH THROUGH R.C. AND HOW MANY CHRISTIANS WERE FIRST INTRODUCED BY HIM TO THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF THE STORY OF THE CHURCH, TO THE TEACHERS OF THE AGES, AND ULTIMATELY TO THE ENDLESS RICHES OF GOD'S WORD.

deeds of kindness to others. For example, I was playing golf one day with Edmund Clowney, president of Westminster Theological Seminary (who, humanly speaking, was responsible for bringing me to the United States). "These Ping clubs," he told me, "were given to me by R.C. Sproul." R.C. had played with Dr. Clowney on one occasion and told him he would never be able to play decent golf with such bad equipment. And then he gave him a set of top-of-the-line golf clubs.

Another feature that endeared R.C. to me was that he was not only a public stage Christian teacher and apologist but an everyday witness to Christ. One of my favorite stories in this regard comes from a mutual friend who had experienced this firsthand. His initial encounter with R.C. was at the golf club where they both played. R.C. was sitting with a group of men. When the topic of the Christian faith came up, our friend commented that the Bible was a book full of contradictions. R.C. responded wisely, "Oh? Why don't you look up several of them, note them down, and come back and we can talk about them." That was being wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove. Some years later, when our mutual friend told me this

story, he was himself leading a regular Bible study on Romans with a considerable number of men.

There is space to mention only one further quality of grace that I saw the Lord work into R.C.'s life over the years. In many ways, I think it took both of us by surprise—so much so that I am not sure which one of us it surprised more. After a lifetime of teaching college and seminary students and providing a library of teaching materials through the Ligonier Valley Study Center and then through Ligonier Ministries, R.C. became a church planter and the pastor of a local church. As the result of a series of providences, Saint Andrew's Chapel was born and has flourished.

I have never forgotten his telling me years ago how much he loved being a pastor. It was as if he had been given a late Christmas present that turned out to be the best of all those he had received. He flourished in the ups and downs of ordinary congregational life; he rejoiced in growth; he was thrilled to be able to craft a liturgy that gave expression to his long-held passion to find ways of exalting God and exulting in God in worship; and he found the deepest satisfaction in the long-term, week-by-week, consecutive exposition of God's Word to

the eager congregation that he delighted to feed. Blessing for Saint Andrew's was blessing for R.C. I appreciated and loved him the more for this, that the most fundamental ministry of all for him was serving among people he loved and who knew him not as the world-famous international speaker, theologian, and author that he was to others, but as the undershepherd of the flock of Jesus Christ, the Great Shepherd of the sheep—their own pastor, teacher, and friend.

Many years ago—I cannot now remember when or where—I found myself having dinner with a young Christian couple. The husband was keen to tell me the story of his pilgrimage to the Reformed faith. And then he related a marvelously vivid dream he had one night. In it, he had seen some of the great heroes of the faith coming over a hill toward him, like a mighty army ready to defend the truth and advance the gospel and the cause of Christ. As happens in the strange world of dreams, he was apparently able to recognize some of the great figures of the past, including Augustine and Calvin. And then, at the front of these great theologians, and leading them all toward him, he saw another figure he recognized—but this time from life, not from books. Yes, it was R.C. Sproul. For he was the one who had first introduced him to the wonders of the gospel and the privilege of belonging to the church in every age.

That young man's experience has been repeated in hundreds, thousands, yes, tens of thousands of lives. Only the last day will make clear what blessings the Lord gave the church through R.C. and how many Christians were first introduced by him to the wonderful world of the story of the church, to the teachers of the ages, and ultimately to the endless riches of God's Word.

I have been privileged to call R.C. Sproul a friend and father in the faith.

I think I can echo Paul's words and say that his friendship has encouraged me to "comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:18–19).

R.C. wrote a hymn, "Saints of Zion," for the bicentenary of First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, S.C., where both Derek Thomas and I have served as ministers. We sang it especially when our elders greeted new members arrayed at the front of the church. Now I am especially reminded of its penultimate verse and refrain:

*The church of God triumphant  
Shall in that final day  
Have all her sons and daughters  
Home from the well fought fray.*

*Then come, O saints of Zion come  
In sweet communion wed  
The bride awaits her Glory  
Lord Jesus Christ, her Head.*

R.C. was never afraid of or shrank from the fray. He fought well, and his faith conquered. Now he beholds the Lord in His glory and is fully like Him. We do not begrudge our friend the fulfillment of his heart's desire to behold the Holy One. Long ago, by faith, he "saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up" (Isa. 6:1) and pursued "the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). Now that faith has become sight, and he sees the Holy One in all His infinite majesty. Those who loved him best will miss him most; we will all miss him. But we would not keep him back from that vision of God for which he lived and in which he has died. *Soli Deo gloria!* 📖



## W. ROBERT GODFREY

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Dr. W. Robert Godfrey is chairman of Ligonier Ministries, a Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow, and president emeritus and professor emeritus of church history at Westminster Seminary California. He is the featured teacher for the Ligonier six-part teaching series *A Survey of Church History*. He is author of several books, including *Reformation Sketches*, *An Unexpected Journey*, and *Learning to Love the Psalms*.

I met R.C. Sproul for the first time about fifty years ago. I was a young seminarian at Gordon Divinity School (now Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary), which in those days was on the same campus as Gordon College, where R.C. was a young professor of theology. He taught there only two years, but he established himself as a very thoughtful, engaging, challenging, and popular teacher. The students loved him.

We did not become friends then, but I watched his career develop over the years with great appreciation and admiration. It was through James Montgomery Boice that I began to get to know him better, first through the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy and then through the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology and the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals. He was a remarkable leader and an influence for good wherever I saw him.

Particularly through his teaching and writing for Ligonier Ministries, it became ever clearer that R.C. had that very rare combination of real academic learning and a remarkable ability to teach nonacademics in a way that is clear and infectiously engaging. Whether the topic was theological, philosophical, biblical, or historical, he taught profoundly, helpfully, and entertainingly. He had the mind and learning of a great scholar, the skill of a great teacher, and the heart of a great pastor.

R.C. was a man of prodigious energy and productivity, and he was never a dour, narrow-minded Calvinist. He enjoyed life thoroughly—food and drink, music and dance, and sports from football to golf. He relished the good gifts of God's creation. It was always easy (and engaging) to feel his enthusiasm for life. His delight was nowhere clearer than in his relationship with Vesta, his wife and

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## HE EXEMPLIFIED LOVING GOD WITH ALL ONE'S MIND.

childhood sweetheart. They were a true and remarkable team in every way and for every work.

Of all the adjectives that can and should be used to describe his life and ministry, the one that most comes to my mind is *faithful*. He began his ministry committed to Christ and the Bible as well as to the value of a thorough knowledge of theology and a vigorous intellectual defense of the faith. He believed passionately that Christianity deserved and was capable of a strong, persuasive intellectual presentation. He saw that Christians need that encouragement and depth to their faith, and that unbelievers need to be attracted (or at least confronted) with the insistent claims of Christ. He exemplified loving God with all one's mind.

Those early commitments of R.C. remained strong throughout his life. He was faithful. When others compromised the inerrancy of Scripture or the biblical, Reformation doctrine of justification or watered down the teaching of theology, he remained faithful—not only in maintaining doctrines, but in publicly criticizing the compromisers—as the Apostles did. Truth was more important than influence or friendship. He was never unfriendly, and he never failed to be winsome, but he always kept the truth of Christ first. In his life, his ministry, his teaching, and his core commitments, he was faithful.

As I think about his death, my mind goes to Isaiah 57:1–2: “The righteous man perishes; and no one lays it to heart; devout men are taken away, while no one

understands. For the righteous man is taken away from calamity; he enters into peace.” R.C. was a righteous man. Not in the sense of a sinless man. He would be the first to acknowledge that he was a sinner saved by the free grace of Christ alone. But he was righteous in the sense that Isaiah meant. He was part of Christ's covenant of grace. He was righteous by the imputed righteousness of Christ, which he received by faith alone, and he lived a new life by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

The righteous man of Isaiah 57 is contrasted with the faithless leaders or “watchmen” of Israel described in Isaiah 56, men who were ignorant, greedy, and lazy. The church in America today has too many leaders who are like the watchmen of Isaiah 56. They have worked calamity in churches by compromising the truth of Christ in the pursuit of ephemeral influence in this passing world. By contrast, R.C. was a righteous man who lived a learned, consecrated, hardworking life for Christ. His death will not make the cover of *Time* magazine or the evening news, although his life was of very great consequence for the kingdom of Christ. The world fails to notice the truly significant. But Christ knows and gives peace to His own.

Our loss is great, but so is our comfort. R.C. has entered into peace in the presence of his Savior. He is freed of physical struggles, of earthly work, and of sin. He knows now the glories of the eternal Sabbath in the presence of Jesus. The promises of the gospel, which R.C. taught so well, will be our strength even in grief.

R.C. Sproul was an honest man. The man you saw in the pulpit was the same man you would have had dinner with: he was charming, interesting, and thoughtful. And in it all, he was faithful. Now he has heard Jesus say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” ■

“If there is one single molecule in this universe running around loose, totally free of God's sovereignty, then we have no guarantee that a single promise of God will ever be fulfilled.”

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R.C. SPROUL

CHOSEN BY GOD

# A LIFE OF MINISTRY

1939 - 2017



**1945**  
meets the love of his life, Vesta Ann Voorhis, while in the first grade and she in the second



**1957**  
enters Westminster College on an athletic scholarship

**SEPT. 1957**  
is converted during his freshman year

**1958**  
has "second" conversion to the holiness of God

**JUNE 11, 1960**  
marries Vesta Ann (Voorhis) Sproul

**1961**  
receives his B.A. in philosophy

**1961-1964**  
enters Pittsburgh Theological Seminary; sits under John Gerstner

**1964**  
receives his bachelor of divinity

**1964-1965**  
begins doctoral studies under G.C. Berkouwer at the Free University of Amsterdam

**1969-1971**  
associate pastor of evangelism, mission, and theology at College Hill Presbyterian Church (UPCUSA), Cincinnati

**1971**  
opens the Ligonier Valley Study Center in Stahlstown, Pa.

**1973**  
publishes first book, *The Symbol: An Exposition of the Apostles' Creed*



**1994-1995**  
*Renewing Your Mind* begins airing, *New Geneva Study Bible* published (later becomes the *Reformation Study Bible*)

**JULY 20, 1997**  
holds the first service of Saint Andrew's Chapel



**2011**  
founds Reformation Bible College, Sanford, Fla.

**2011-2014**  
serves as first president of Reformation Bible College

**2015**  
releases first CD *Glory to the Holy One*, in collaboration with Jeff Lippencott

1930

**FEB. 13, 1939**  
Robert Charles, "R.C.," Sproul is born to Robert Cecil and Mayre Ann (Yardis) Sproul in Pleasant Hills, Pa.

1940



1950

1960

**JULY 18, 1965**  
ordained at Pleasant Hills Community Presbyterian Church (UPCUSA)

**1965-1966**  
teaches at Westminster College and Gordon College

**1968-1969**  
assistant professor of philosophical theology, Conwell Theological Seminary (Philadelphia); teaches adult Sunday school at Oreland Presbyterian Church, sparking the vision for what would become the Ligonier Valley Study Center

1970

**1974**  
produces first teaching series for videotape *How to Study the Bible*

**MAY 6, 1977**  
ships first issue of *Tabletalk*, eight-page newsletter and educational tool

**1978**  
plays a lead role in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy

1980

**1984**  
moves Ligonier Ministries to Orlando

**1988**  
hosts first National Conference with the theme *Loving a Holy God*



1990



2000

**OCT. 30, 2017**  
speaks at Ligonier's Reformation 500 Celebration

**NOV. 26, 2017**  
preaches last sermon at Saint Andrew's on Hebrews 2:1-4

**DEC. 14, 2017**  
goes home to be with the Lord

# A LASTING INFLUENCE

## STEVEN J. LAWSON

Dr. Steven J. Lawson is founder and president of OnePassion Ministries. He is a Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow, director of the doctor of ministry program at The Master's Seminary, and host of the Institute for Expository Preaching. He is author of more than two dozen books, including *The Passionate Preaching of Martyn Lloyd-Jones*, *The Evangelistic Zeal of George Whitefield*, and *The Moment of Truth*.



Can you remember when you first read *The Holiness of God*? I can vividly recall how the truth of this book hit my spiritual life with the force of a category 5 hurricane. The effect was so profound that when it came time for me to pursue a doctor of ministry degree, there was only one choice. I was compelled to attend the seminary where the distinguished professor who authored this book taught and to sit under his influence.

The classroom was filled with a buzz of excitement as we awaited his arrival. Trust me—every student was seated long before he walked in. When the door swung open, striding into our presence was our revered instructor, Dr. Robert Charles Sproul. On one side was his wife, Vesta, and on the other side was the president of the seminary. This grand entrance felt more like that of a heavyweight champion entering the ring escorted by his entourage than that of a teacher of truth entering a seminary classroom. I will always remember how this day stood out as the first of many such encounters with this man over the years.

### UNDERGOING INSPECTION

The first matter of business for Dr. Sproul that day was to have us stand to our feet. He then began pacing back and forth, inspecting all of us, assessing how each man was presenting himself. His penetrating eyes sized up each student from top to bottom, examining what each man was wearing. He then critiqued how each man presented himself, even making fun of some men who wore tasseled loafers that he called “fruit loops.” Mind you, this assessment was given publicly in front of the entire class. This class was called “Communication,” and this master communicator of the Christian faith was giving us our first lesson: not all communication is verbal.

Much of what we convey, he explained, is nonverbal.

None of us came to class that day with any idea that our appearance would be exeged by this renowned professor. This tough love instantly bonded us to him, though. The more this formidable figure jabbed at us, the more we loved it.

### MOBILIZING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Dr. Sproul then proceeded to lecture us on the proper use of the English language. If we are to preach effectively, he stressed, we must employ well-crafted words and phrases in our sermons and speech. We have little more going for us as preachers, he maintained, than what comes out of our mouths. So, we must choose our words wisely. Hence, his emphasis upon English.

This gifted theologian demanded that we not repeat our words when we stood in the pulpit. He insisted that there is a diminishing value in using the same word multiple times. So, he hammered home our need for having an arsenal of synonyms at our beck and call. He underscored that we must discard tired, overused words for stronger, more effective ones. At the end of the first day, this world-class communicator gave us two hundred English vocabulary words to study, telling us to be prepared to give a proper definition and to use them in a sentence the next morning. At first, I thought, “What does this have to do with preaching?” But I soon saw the method to his madness. This powerful wordsmith was teaching us the importance of using the right word in the right sentence to convey the right meaning.

### IDENTIFYING “THE UNIFORM”

The following day, Dr. Sproul had me stand up in front of the class. I arose in my navy blazer, dark gray pants, white button-down shirt, and red striped tie. “Where did you learn how to dress?” he questioned. Off

balance, I apologetically gave my explanation. To my amazement, he used me as an example to lecture the class on the proper attire for a minister to wear. He swore by something he called “the uniform.” Wearing this was not a mere preference with him but a staunch conviction.

This lecture he gave on dressing in “the uniform” was a tour de force in understanding the proper clothing for a leader. He explained that there is an unofficial but recognizable uniform that respected leaders wear and to which people subconsciously respond. He told us about attending a summit of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy and how he knew who the chairman would be before the vote was taken. He wrote the name on a piece of paper and kept it concealed. Sure enough, his insight was correct. The one man in the room who was wearing the uniform was James Montgomery Boice, and he was named chairman.

Professor Sproul challenged us to present ourselves as leaders. The businessmen in our congregations, he chided us, are often ashamed to introduce us to their work associates because we look like someone who is readier for a junior high lock-in than for adult conversation.

#### **SPEAKING WITH YOUR HANDS**

Soon, the time came for each of us to preach in class. Dr. Sproul assigned me Daniel 5 and the account of Belshazzar’s drunken feast. When I stood before the class, he was sitting in his customary place—in the back of the class, rocking back and forth in a chair while propped up on its back two legs. Trust me, I was aware of no one else in the room. As I progressed in my sermon, I reached the verse where the divine hand mysteriously appeared in the midst of the drunken orgy and began writing on the wall. As I was explaining this dramatic scene, I gestured with my right hand, as though it

was the finger of God writing on the wall of the banquet hall.

Dr. Sproul bolted out of his chair and flew up the center aisle to the lectern where I stood. Interrupting my delivery, he barked, “Who told you to motion like that?” Fearing his reprisal, I responded apologetically, “No one, sir. It just seemed like the thing to do.” Turning to the class, he declared, “That is exactly what I want to see each one of you do. Gesture with your hands. Now continue the message, Lawson.” He spun around and marched back to his chair in the back of the room, leaving me white as a sheet.

#### **MAKING EYE CONTACT**

I worked up my nerve to continue to preach, but it was not long before Dr. Sproul interrupted my sermon a second time. He did not like that I was using sermon notes. He never used notes. He was a genius with extraordinary recall. He grabbed my manuscript from the lectern and stomped back to his seat. He commanded, “Now preach.” He wanted better eye contact from me and greater freedom of expression, things that I desperately needed.

On another occasion, Dr. Sproul taught us how to publicly read the Scriptures when in the pulpit. He turned in his Bible to the narrative of Abraham offering Isaac in Genesis 22, stressing that we must read the text like we really believe it. He emphasized the importance of reading the passage slowly and pronouncing the words distinctly. He insisted that we should alternate the pace, reading the text slower and then faster. He maintained that even the sounds of certain words such as “Moriah” are dramatic in themselves and should be read as such. No one could draw out pronouncing “Moriah” as a five-syllable word as he could.

#### **ENCOURAGEMENT FROM THE PROFESSOR**

One particular assignment that Dr. Sproul gave us was to write a paper on a theo-

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## **I WAS COMPELLED TO SIT UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF THIS DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR AT THE SEMINARY WHERE HE TAUGHT.**

logical subject. The topic I chose escapes my memory, but I will never forget what he wrote on my paper. When it was returned to me, he wrote as plain as day at the top of the page, “Steve, you can write. I want you to pursue writing.” I would have been otherwise reluctant to consider such an endeavor. But if Dr. Sproul said I can write, then, I thought, I surely can. If he had told me I could run through a brick wall, I would have taken a running start. I took his word and began a ministry in writing. That brief comment, penned in his virtually illegible script, is what launched me in the direction of writing. I would have never done so on my own initiative. The fact that I am writing this reflection about him is the direct result of his influence upon me.

The Lord met with us through this man’s dominant presence. So impactful was it that the lay elders at my church told me that I always preached better after having been with Dr. Sproul. Truth is, it has always been that way. I have always been better at doing whatever God has called me to do as a result of being with this prodigious man.

#### **A LASTING INFLUENCE**

That was some thirty years ago, and nothing has really changed. Dr. R.C. Sproul will always be my professor, and I will always be his student. In eight years of seminary

study, I had many different professors. But in reality, I only had one. I serve the Lord under his lasting influence on my life and ministry as much now as when I first met him. He still sits on my shoulder and speaks into my ear. He still sits on the chair in the back of the classroom, at least in my mind, giving his evaluation and his guidance. The lessons he taught have not been forgotten. They are lodged in my memory as though he delivered them yesterday.

The Lord uniquely used this man in my life as He has used no other person. Dr. Sproul took me several levels higher in how to speak, write, and present myself. He taught me that what matters is not only what I say but how I say it. What is more, he taught me that it matters how I live it and how I stand for the truth.

A sacred stewardship has been entrusted to me. Dr. Sproul made an investment of himself in my life that I must now deposit into the lives of others. I now serve as the dean of the doctor of ministry program for a seminary. I rarely enter the classroom without thinking of that first encounter with my esteemed mentor. Though he is no longer with us here on earth, he nevertheless continues to multiply himself through the lasting influence of his convictions and the counsel of his words. Long may the legacy of this extraordinary life live among us. 

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# MY MOTORCYCLE COMPANION

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## AUGUSTUS NICODEMUS LOPES

Dr. Augustus Nicodemus Lopes is senior pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Goiânia, Brazil, and vice president of the Presbyterian Church of Brazil. He is author of several books, including *The Sufficiency of Christ*, *Apostles*, and *Calvin and the Social Responsibility of the Church*.

**W**hen I became a Christian in 1977, I did not understand clearly the great doctrines of grace. I remember how passionately I espoused Arminian principles and the times I confronted Presbyterian pastors to argue against the doctrine of predestination. It was by reading the works of Charles Spurgeon that I became Reformed shortly before entering seminary to prepare myself for the ministry. During my master's studies in New Testament and later during my doctoral work in biblical interpretation, I came to know the works of Dr. R.C. Sproul. Books such as *The Holiness of God*, *Chosen by God*, and *Knowing Scripture* helped me strengthen my understanding of Reformed doctrines and clarified my thinking on difficult and controversial points. Dr. Sproul impressed me with his clarity of thought, his power of synthesis, his ability to logically command complex themes, the simplicity of his language, and especially his commitment to the authority and infallibility of the Scriptures. I began to recommend his books to my students and to members of my church. At that time, more and more of his books were being translated into Portuguese, influencing generations of Brazilian pastors and their churches.

Another way I was blessed by Dr. Sproul's ministry was through his *Renewing Your Mind* podcasts. For ten years, I served as chancellor of the Mackenzie Presbyterian University in the city of São Paulo. I lived sixteen miles away from the university. Every day, I made that trip on my Harley-Davidson listening to Dr. Sproul's podcasts via the headphones of my helmet. Dr. Sproul was my companion on that motorcycle daily, as he blessed my life with his messages, responses, and comments. Often during those journeys,

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## R.C. SPROUL WAS AN INSTRUMENT OF GOD IN MY LIFE AS A CHRISTIAN, PASTOR, AND TEACHER OF THEOLOGY.

I prayed and thanked God for R.C. and for the truths that he taught.

The highlight of my relationship with R.C. Sproul was when I was invited to be one of the main speakers at the Ligonier Ministries National Conference in 2017 on the theme *Semper Reformanda* and to talk about Christ's sufficiency in one of the workshops. I had the privilege of meeting Dr. Sproul and talking to him. He was very weak at that time, but in his electric wheelchair he moved everywhere, talked to everyone, and spent some time talking to me. I was very grateful to God.

The Sunday after the conference, I had the privilege of preaching at Saint Andrew's Chapel. I expounded John 14 from the same pulpit where R.C. Sproul had ministered the Word of God to thousands of people for many years. Unfortunately, he was not feeling well during the last days of the conference, and he could not be present for worship that Sunday. I regretted not being able to say goodbye to him, and I returned to Brazil the next day.

R.C. Sproul was an instrument of God in my life as a Christian, pastor, and teacher of theology. His books, podcasts, sermons, and videos have also blessed hundreds and hundreds of pastors and churches in Brazil. May our God raise up more pastors and teachers like Dr. Sproul for the good of His church. 🙏

# COMRADES IN ARMS



## JOHN MACARTHUR

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Dr. John MacArthur is pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, Calif., president of The Master's University and Seminary, and featured teacher with the Grace to You media ministry. He is author of numerous books, including *Ashamed of the Gospel*, *None Other: Discovering the God of the Bible*, and *The Murder of Jesus*.

**T**he first time I heard R.C. Sproul teach was several decades ago. I can't recall the exact date, but I do remember his teaching like it was yesterday. Someone had loaned me the videotape version of his signature series, *The Holiness of God*, and I took it home to watch. Within minutes of pressing play, I was riveted.

R.C. was speaking to a roomful of young adults. He stood on a slightly elevated platform. A lectern and a large chalkboard were the only furnishings. R.C. didn't lean on the lectern. He wasn't tied to any notes. He moved freely around on the platform as he spoke, walking frequently from side to side. His delivery was perfectly paced and passionate. He spoke with a rich vocabulary, never pausing to grasp for words and never wasting a single syllable.

He began in Isaiah 6, a passage I knew well. I had preached on it myself more than once. But after hearing R.C.'s powerful description of the majesty and magnificence of "the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up" (v. 1), I never looked at that passage the same way again. It was as if R.C. had taken me into the very throne room of heaven to see a glimpse of God's holiness with my own eyes.

The entire series was weighty and deeply thought provoking without ever seeming abstruse or overly academic. He was giving a detailed lecture on one of the Bible's most grand and lofty subjects, presenting biblical truth with a level of thoroughness and sophistication that would be suitable for a seminary classroom. But the teaching was so clear that even a total novice would easily be able to understand and digest the material. And it was all thoroughly biblical, carefully drawn straight from the text of Isaiah. It was an extraordinary display of the very best kind of theological instruction.

All those things were standard features of

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## THE PASSION THAT MOTIVATED R.C. WAS HIS LOVE OF THE GOSPEL AND HIS ZEAL FOR MAKING SURE THAT THE MESSAGE IS PROCLAIMED WITHOUT COMPROMISE OR CONFUSION.

R.C.'s teaching style—from the chalkboard to the remarkable clarity and theological depth of his content. I've never encountered a more gifted teacher. He was engaging and personable, simple but profound, thorough without ever being tedious, always deeply passionate about what he was teaching, and always anchored in biblical truth. R.C. was never ostentatious or gimmicky. He was not a salesman or a promoter. The one thing he had to offer was straightforward biblical instruction with perfect clarity, powerful energy, and a thorough treatment of the text.

One of R.C.'s most admirable characteristics was his refusal to shy away from difficult doctrines or shape his teaching to suit whatever might be popular or politically correct at any given moment. He was not afraid of controversy or reluctant to face and firmly answer opposing views. He and I once had a vigorous public debate on the subject of infant baptism. He was as bold and candid with me as he would have been with any other adversary. He clearly wanted me to be equally straightforward and forceful with him. Of course, I was. Although R.C. didn't change his opinion on baptism, our friendship was not sabotaged but strengthened by the robust exchange of arguments and rebuttals. That's precisely how our friendship worked behind the scenes as well.

I'm a committed Baptist premillennialist; he was a steadfast Presbyterian with somewhat fluid eschatological opinions. But we agreed on far more than we ever disagreed on—especially when it came

to the core issues of soteriology and the five Reformation *solas*. Over the years, we stood shoulder to shoulder in full agreement through several major theological controversies. We defended the principle of *sola fide* against both antinomians and legalists in the lordship salvation controversy; we fought for *sola gratia* and opposed ecumenical compromise when influential evangelical leaders were promoting Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT). We challenged charismatic and continuationist efforts to downgrade *sola Scriptura* and redefine the sufficiency of Scripture. We stressed the principle of *solus Christus* in response to the neo-Socinianism of the emerging church movement, “postmodern Christianity,” and the troubling erosion of evangelicalism's willingness to declare that Christ is the only way of salvation. We shared the same convictions on the vital doctrines of human depravity, substitutionary atonement, the sovereignty of God, and the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. Above all, we shared an unshakable conviction that all glory belongs to God alone (*solus Deo gloria*).

No nationally known Christian leader was a better friend to me than R.C. Sproul. More than I could ever express, I appreciated his willingness to confront important controversies without flinching. He could, of course, answer the errors, unbiblical notions, and sloppy thinking of theological mischief-makers with the same crystal clarity that characterized his teaching. He had the unusual ability to dissect opposing

views and cut false teaching to little shreds without malice or rancor. Indeed, he was always meticulously fair with his adversaries but relentless in his pursuit of truth.

During the controversy over ECT in the 1990s, I participated in a private summit meeting where I, R.C., and several other Protestant leaders met with several of the evangelical leaders who drafted and signed the document to express our concerns about the unbiblical ecumenical drift of the ECT document. R.C. pointed out that the document's discussion of justification by faith omitted the all-important word *alone* (the *sola* in *sola fide*). This has always been the central point of disagreement between Roman Catholics and Protestants, he said. By deliberately omitting that word and acting as if it were a nonissue, Protestants who helped draft the ECT document were capitulating to the main Roman Catholic error and undermining the gospel itself. At one point, he became so passionate in making his argument that he literally climbed onto the table, making the plea on his hands and knees until each person on the other side of the table had made direct eye contact with him. There wasn't a hint of malice in the gesture, and everyone in the room understood that. The passion that motivated R.C. was his love of the gospel and his zeal for making sure that the message is proclaimed without compromise or confusion.

R.C.'s nickname for me was “Boris.” The first time he introduced me at one of the Ligonier conferences, his introduction began with a detailed recounting of how Boris Yeltsin single-handedly stopped a coup d'état in August 1991. Armed hard-line communist insurgents were rolling through the streets of Moscow in a column of tanks, intending to seize the Soviet parliament building and overthrow President Mikhail Gorbachev, whose reforms they opposed. Yeltsin, recently elected president of the

Russian Federation, intercepted the parade of insurgents, climbed onto the turret of one of the tanks, and made a speech that effectively ended the coup.

R.C. then talked about the lordship controversy, recounting how by the 1960s a noxious variety of antinomianism had gradually all but overwhelmed the gospel among evangelical Christians. This corrupt teaching openly encouraged unbelievers to profess faith in Christ as Savior without yielding to Him as Lord.

“But then,” he said dramatically, “John MacArthur stood on a tank.” He said he regarded the publication of my book *The Gospel according to Jesus* as the first major warning blast that halted the troops and began to turn the evangelical movement back to a more sound and biblical understanding of the gospel message. He then introduced me as “the Boris Yeltsin of evangelical Christianity.” It was the most memorable introduction I have ever received anywhere, and from that point on in our private interaction, he frequently referred to me as “Boris.”

Thankfully, R.C. and the Ligonier staff have shown superb skill and foresight in harnessing all kinds of media for recording and distributing R.C.'s teaching. Thousands of resources and many hours of serious theological and biblical instruction were recorded for posterity and are now available on the Internet in various forms. R.C. leaves a legacy that I trust will endure for many, many years.

I will miss my dear friend. There was no one else quite like him. We are all blessed for having known him and heard him teach. But I rejoice in the knowledge that he is with the Lord whom he loved and served faithfully.

“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. . . . Blessed indeed . . . that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!” (Rev. 14:13). 



## R. ALBERT MOHLER JR.

Dr. R. Albert Mohler Jr. is president and Joseph Emerson Brown Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. He is a Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow and host of the daily program *The Briefing*, and he blogs at [AlbertMohler.com](http://AlbertMohler.com). He is author of numerous books, including *Culture Shift*, *Atheism Remix*, and *We Cannot Be Silent*.

*Most merciful Father, who hast been pleased to take unto thyself the soul of this thy servant; Grant to us who are still in our pilgrimage, and who walk as yet by faith, that having served thee with constancy on earth, we may be joined hereafter with thy blessed saints in glory everlasting; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (The Book of Common Prayer)*

*We cannot determine truth by counting noses. (R.C. Sproul, Chosen by God)*

For me, the story begins as a teenager stuck in a desperate struggle with huge theological questions in the 1970s. Of course, R.C. Sproul, with firm conviction and a friendly smile, would rightly insist that the story begins in the gracious will of our sovereign, eternal, and omnipotent God. Actually, those were some of the big theological questions that had me by the throat.

I had been confronted by teachers in high school who had declared their own atheism and who ridiculed theism. I was surrounded by a culture of increasing moral relativism and the first wave of what would later be called postmodernism. I knew Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and I wanted to be faithful to Him. But how?

My struggle was spiritual and moral, but it was also irreducibly intellectual. How could I know and defend the Christian faith? I did not even know where to begin. At home and at church, I was surrounded by sweet Christians who loved me and invested their lives in me. But I had big questions they could not answer. Questions that gnawed at me and kept me awake at night. Questions that I feared could not be answered. Questions that I had no idea Christians had grappled with for centuries.

Thankfully, I found help. I found other

Christians who were struggling with the same questions, and some of them passed to me cassette tapes. At that time, the cassette was a recent invention. For me, these tapes were a lifeline, bringing me expository preaching from John MacArthur and lectures from this strangely infectious and compelling teacher at an oddly named study center in Western Pennsylvania. The teacher was R.C. Sproul.

Those tapes from R.C. Sproul were not my own. They had been passed to me after several others had listened to them. They squeaked. Nevertheless, I pounced on them like a hungry tiger. I received the tapes out of sequence. No matter—I gained confidence and understanding with every tape.

R.C.'s voice was captivating. Honestly, I probably would have listened to him read *The Old Farmer's Almanac*. But the power of his teaching was the vitality and virility of biblical Christianity, presented logically, forcefully, biblically, and passionately.

My own pilgrimage as a theologian cannot be traced without noting the indelible influence of R.C. Sproul. Had I never met him in the flesh, I would have been in his debt and gifted with his influence. By God's grace, I came to know R.C. Sproul as a teacher, colleague, encourager, and friend.

He was, as the British would say, a man in full. He never made a half-argument, presented a half-correction, preached a half-sermon, or laughed a half-laugh. He was all in, all the time. His voice would fill the room, his preaching would shake the timbers, and his passion would spread like a virus. He showed up as everything he was and with everything he believed—every time.

He was one of the great defenders of historic Christianity in our time. It is fair to say that R.C. was the greatest and most

# A BRIGHT AND BURNING LIGHT

influential proponent of the recovery of Reformed theology in the last century. He was a stalwart defender of the authority and trustworthiness of the Word of God, and one of the primary architects of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy in 1978. His tapes were soon accompanied by his books and the vastly expanding influence of Ligonier Ministries.

When he taught about the holiness of God, a generation of evangelicals was rescued from the emaciated and desiccated theology of cultural Christianity. When he defended Reformed theology, he taught us all how to understand the gospel in terms of the eternal purpose of God to save, consistent with His sovereignty. He was rigorously biblical and ruthlessly logical—with a smile.

He loved to introduce Christians to both the splendors and the humbling lessons of church history. He wanted evangelical Christians to stand in a line of faithfulness that began with the Apostles and continues to the present. He had the heart and courage of Martin Luther and the theological precision and passion of John Calvin. He was a proud son of the Reformation, and the *solas* of the Reformation were the architecture of his mind. He urged and taught Christians toward the development of the Christian mind, and ideas were his battleground.

He was a preacher of the Word of God, a faithful steward of God's mysteries. In the later years of his life, he told friends that his greatest joy in ministry had come as a pastor. That comes as no surprise.

R.C. Sproul was an evangelist. "Evangelism is our duty. God commanded it," he taught, "but there is more. Evangelism is not only a duty; it is also a privilege. God allows us to participate in the greatest work in human history, the work of redemption" (*Chosen by God*). There will

be many saints in heaven who came to hear the gospel through R.C.'s talks, sermons, videos, conferences, books, and personal witnessing.

The work R.C. so courageously and brilliantly and infectiously led for so many decades goes on in the work of Ligonier Ministries. R.C. planned it so and set an example for us all in fulfilling this stewardship. His teaching and his influence will continue, channeled into successive generations. He surrounded himself and populated Ligonier Ministries with a leadership team that will continue steadfastly.

To know R.C. was also to know that the man and his ministry could never be explained—and would never have begun—without the incredible loyalty, love, and devotion of his gracious wife, Vesta. Their hearts beat as one, and few spouses in ministry have been so demonstrably faithful, insightful, affectionate, and absolutely necessary as Vesta Sproul. R.C. would insist that you know that truth.

Our prayers are with the Sproul family, and our hope is in Christ. Listening to one of R.C.'s messages in the last few hours, I realized that R.C. had been preaching—decades ago—as a man ready to die, trusting in Christ.

In a tribute to his own beloved teacher, Professor John Gerstner, written in 1976, R.C. stated, "In an era of church history when theology is in chaos, the church is being shaken at its foundations, and Christian ethics shift and slide with every novel theology, we are grateful for the vivid example of one who stands in the midst of confusion as 'a bright and burning light'" (preface to *Soli Deo Gloria*).

Indeed, we are grateful for the bright and burning light named R.C. Sproul. *Soli Deo gloria.* 

"The issue of faith is not so much whether we believe in God, but whether we believe the God we believe in."

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**R.C. SPROUL**

KNOWING SCRIPTURE



# GATHER

IRON SHARPENS IRON. Every year, in cities around the world and online, Ligonier Ministries gathers Christians at events to study God's Word for mutual edification. It's a privilege to meet, serve, and learn from God's people. Our aim is to bless the local church and strengthen its members for greater service. Join us.

[LIGONIER.ORG/GATHER](https://LIGONIER.ORG/GATHER)

# UNTIL WE MEET AGAIN

## MIGUEL NÚÑEZ

Dr. Miguel Núñez is senior pastor of *Iglesia Bautista Internacional* and president and founder of Wisdom and Integrity Ministries in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. He is a council member of The Gospel Coalition and associate professor of pastoral leadership and director of strategy for Latin America at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. He is author of several books, including *The Power of the Word in the Transformation of a Nation*, *A Church according to the Heart of God*, and *Servants for His Glory*.



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n every generation, the Lord raises up people who are passionate about His name, His glory, His Word, His cause, and His people.

In our time, one of those giants of the faith was R.C. Sproul. I initially came to know him by his messages on CDs and videos at the end of the 1980s. The first series I saw was *The Holiness of God*. I watched the series over a weekend, and by the following Monday I was a different person altogether. I had been born again previously, but I was so moved by the depth and the passion with which R.C. Sproul taught that I was gripped by a sense of awe that remains with me to this day. Quite frequently throughout Dr. Sproul's ministry, I found myself wanting to listen to him if only to hear him pray. There was no doubt in my mind that the man I heard praying was someone who knew God intimately and who was captivated by His character. If ever there was a man who taught me to love the character of God, it was Dr. Sproul. Without him, my life would not be the same.

Over the years, I have listened to countless hours of his teaching on theology, philosophy, apologetics, and worldview. When it came to Reformed theology, you couldn't find a better expositor with greater passion. The awareness, the impact, and the spreading of Reformed theology occurring today in the United States and beyond are clearly the result of his influence. When the history of the church is written in the years to come, Dr. Sproul will be recognized as one who defended the inerrancy of the Word, the purity of the gospel, and the need for glorious worship.

Dr. Sproul was a man of conviction and yet was gracious enough to make room for those who disagreed with him. His knowledge was vast and deep but practical. He always had a passion for teaching the laity because he was convinced that a reforma-

## HE WILL BE REMEMBERED AS ONE OF THE GIANTS OF THE FAITH OF OUR AGE.

tion could not come about without the instruction of those individuals who are not in vocational ministry.

He was a unique combination of intelligence, knowledge, wisdom, humility, godliness, transparency, and humor. I was affected in a godly way by each one of these traits of his personality and character. Dr. Sproul was never intimidated by the gifts and talents of those around him; thus, he was always willing to come alongside others who have been gifted by the Lord.

My last memory of him is from 2016, when I had the privilege of interviewing him prior to our conference, *Por Su Causa* (For His Cause), which is held annually in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. Right before the interview, Dr. Sproul looked somewhat tired, but as soon as we started talking about theology, his mood and demeanor changed dramatically. He came alive, and once again he was witty, articulate, insightful, and convincing. What a rare combination of qualities were present in this man of God.

I am grateful for what God gave to our beloved R.C. and for his sharing of it with us. He will be remembered as one of the giants of the faith of our age. His legacy lives on here on earth as his soul lives on in the presence of the God he so loved during his ministry and now loves eternally. Thank you, Dr. Sproul, for helping me see the goodness of God even in the exercise of His justice—a God greater than our imagination, transcendent above His creation, and passionate for His glory. Until we meet again, Dr. Sproul. 

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# AN UNASHAMED HERALD

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## JOHN PIPER

Dr. John Piper is founder and teacher of Desiring God and chancellor of Bethlehem College and Seminary in Minneapolis. He served as pastor for preaching and vision at Bethlehem Baptist Church for more than thirty years. He is author of numerous books, including *A Godward Heart*, *Don't Waste Your Life*, and *Lessons from a Hospital Bed*.

**T**he impact of R.C. Sproul on my life and ministry is owing to an incomparable combination of his unashamed allegiance to the absolute sovereignty and centrality of God, his total devotion to the inerrancy and radical relevance of the Christian Scriptures, his serious and rigorous attention to the actual text of Scripture in shaping his views, and his jolting formulations of biblical truth in relation to contemporary reality.

Let me illustrate. I can remember the very room in which I was standing when this incomparable combination landed on me for the first time. It was a back room of our house, where I was listening to a cassette tape on a Walkman while doing some chores. The text that Dr. Sproul was preaching on was Luke 13:1–5.

I had chosen to listen to it because I was struck by the title of the message printed on the cassette: “The Misplaced Locus of Amazement.” I had no idea what he meant. Even when I thought about the content of Luke 13:1–5, I didn’t have the wisdom to discern what he would be getting at. Then I began to listen. And as so often happens in listening to his expository messages, I was riveted.

Some people had come to Jesus and confronted Him with the horror that Pilate had slaughtered some Galileans and mingled their blood with their own sacrifices. Interestingly, those who came to Jesus didn’t ask any questions. They simply expressed amazement. But inside their amazement was a question: What horrible sin had these Galileans committed that brought down such a judgment?

Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because

they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” And to make sure they knew He saw such horrors in the world, He added this: “Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Then Dr. Sproul made a devastating—jolting—observation. He said that these crowds, who were so amazed that some people had been judged for their sin, had put their amazement entirely in the wrong place—“a misplaced locus of amazement.” They were amazed that something horrible had happened to a few Galileans. What they should have been amazed at was that something equally horrible hadn’t happened to everyone in Jerusalem—indeed, Dr. Sproul added, to everyone in the world.

As Dr. Sproul explained, the meaning of these calamities that happened to others is that I should repent. The amazing thing is that I am not now, at this moment, in hell for my sin. Jolting.

As time went on, I came to realize that the impact of his preaching was owing to this incomparable combination.

First, Dr. Sproul had a serious and rigorous attention to the actual text of Scripture. He was not making his points in general as his sermon floated in a fog above the text. He was reading the text. He was pushing my nose into the clauses. He was showing me what is really there. The shocking realities were real because they were really in the text.

Second, over time, when you hear Dr. Sproul do this kind of thing repeatedly, you realize that such serious and rigorous attention to the text is owing to

his total devotion to the inerrancy and radical relevance of the Scriptures. He didn't believe that the message of biblical texts was innocuous and unexciting and therefore in need of artificial verbal boosters to make the thunder crack. Oh no. If you take the text seriously, and you realize that this is the very Word of God, you can expect that its relevance will be repeatedly shocking.

Third, therefore, the jolting formulations of biblical truth that are sprinkled so liberally through the preaching and writing of R.C. Sproul were not artificially concocted to add effect but strategically chosen to express reality. And he would say that the jolting expressions, if anything, fall short of, rather than exaggerate, the reality of the text.

Fourth, emerging from the exegesis and rising in my heart was an unashamed allegiance to the absolute sovereignty of God to show mercy or to judge according to His infinite wisdom. This was Dr. Sproul's goal—a heart that was stunned and humbled and captivated by the transcendent greatness and purity of God.

Consider one other illustration of this kind of jolting exposition. King David decided to bring the ark of God from Kiriath-jearim to the city of David. But contrary to the law of God, it was carried on an ox-drawn cart, not on poles by the priests (Num. 4:15). The oxen stumbled, the ark tipped, Uzzah put out his hand to steady the ark, and God struck him dead (1 Chron. 13:10).

Dr. Sproul suggested that the issue here is deeper than a failure to follow Mosaic stipulations. It was a failure to see the depth of human defilement. Why, he asked, should Uzzah presume that his hands were cleaner than the soil on which the ark was about to fall? Soil is only ceremonially unclean. The hands of sinful men are morally and spiritu-

ally unclean—a vastly more serious uncleanness.

To the objection that this seems harsh, Sproul answered that there are, according to Jewish tradition, twenty-three breaches of the Mosaic law that receive capital punishment. This is an absolutely astonishing and merciful limitation on God's part since, at the beginning of human history, all sins were immediately punishable by death.

Again and again, I heard him draw out such jolting observations from Scripture—all of them in the service of magnifying the holiness of God and the humility of man. I marveled. The effect was to make me want to handle the Bible with blood-earnestness, to submit to it absolutely, to preach it faithfully, and to unashamedly herald the greatness of God's sovereign grace.

For me, it was this faithfulness to biblical texts and this high view of God's sovereignty and holiness that made Dr. Sproul's fight for the imputation of Christ's righteousness so credible and compelling. The bigger and more central and more sovereign and more holy God is in our eyes, the more clearly we see our desperate need for justification by faith alone.

When the official biography is written and the best studies of his life and ministry are done, there will, I believe, emerge a remarkably coherent body of truth and devotion. He never allowed himself to go down marginally important rabbit trails (excluding aberrations like a devotion to the Pittsburgh Steelers!). He stayed close to the great doctrines of Scripture and their profound impact on life and ministry and church and missions. These were the girders from which he built a coherent, God-centered worldview.

Let me close with one last personal memory that endeared Dr. Sproul to me

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**FOR ME, IT WAS THIS FAITHFULNESS TO BIBLICAL TEXTS, AND THIS HIGH VIEW OF GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND HOLINESS, THAT MADE DR. SPROUL'S FIGHT FOR THE IMPUTATION OF CHRIST'S RIGHTEOUSNESS SO CREDIBLE AND COMPELLING.**

in a special way. He had invited me to Orlando to be part of one of the Ligonier conferences. I was to preach after his message on faith. In his message, he pictured a chair on the platform and illustrated that if you trust the chair, you don't just say so, you sit in it. That is what faith is.

In the course of my message following his, I ventured to say that there was more to faith than that, that you must love the chair—find the chair beautiful and precious. You must treasure the chair, not just sit in it. After the message, I slipped out the back in a hurry to catch my plane home. R.C. had been watch-

ing on a monitor in the green room. He grabbed my arm, whispered his thanks, smiled, and said, "I love the chair."

How easily he might have been miffed. He was not that kind of man. His smile and his laughter and his affirmation were real and deep. They were not frivolous. We must embrace Christ not only as useful in holding us up, but as precious in being our all-satisfying treasure.

It was easy to love R.C. Sproul. I am sure I owe him more than I can even recall. My reverence for the holiness of God and the truth of His Word would not be the same without R.C.'s influence. I will miss him. ■



## JONI EARECKSON TADA

Joni Eareckson Tada is founder of Joni and Friends ([www.joniandfriends.org](http://www.joniandfriends.org)), a Christian organization that serves families affected by disability in the United States and around the world. She is author of several books, including *A Place of Healing, A Spectacle of Glory*, and *Heaven: Your Real Home*.

# A SACRIFICE OF PRAISE

**F**ifty years ago, when I snapped my neck under the weight of a dive into shallow water, quadriplegia smashed me up against the study of God. Lying in bed paralyzed, I had hard-hitting questions such as, “God, who’s behind all this suffering, You or the devil? Are You permitting this or ordaining it? I’m still a young Christian. If You’re so loving, why treat Your children so meanly?”

A well-meaning friend gave me a copy of *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* by Dr. Loraine Boettner. It was weighty and I had to turn its pages with a mouth stick, but reading it helped. Yet, I wondered, “Isn’t there something or someone out there who explains things more simply?” That’s when this same friend popped into my cassette player a tape by Dr. R.C. Sproul. I was hooked.

All during the summer of 1971, I’d park my wheelchair on the back porch of our Maryland farmhouse and listen to either Dr. John Gerstner or R.C. Up until then, God’s overarching decrees seemed scary. But Dr. S, as I liked to call him, presented God’s sovereignty as a truly comforting doctrine. It enlivened my spirit and elevated my faith to think that God had chosen me for the furnace of affliction (Isa. 48:10). R.C. helped me see that God had chosen me to be a quadriplegic for good reasons—not only good, but noble.

Fast-forward from the back porch to Joni and Friends, a California-based global ministry I began in order to reach for Christ people with disabilities and their families. Through thousands of wheelchairs and Bibles that we deliver, through every U.S. or overseas family retreat we hold for special-needs families, my heart’s desire is to help others find the same comfort and encouragement in the sovereignty of God. I want other disabled people to see that

when God chooses them for the furnace, it’s a calling. It’s a privilege. I have R.C. to thank for that vision.

And I’ve told him so. It’s what began a truly sweet friendship between my husband, Ken, and me and R.C. and Vesta. Throughout the years, R.C. often asked me to speak at Ligonier conferences, and I was always a little breathless at the prospect. As a laywoman—and as a woman in a wheelchair—I was keenly aware of the weighty responsibility of presenting from a Ligonier platform, especially with R.C. “sitting over there with his critical ear.” But he had to know I was simply parroting the many lessons I had learned from him over the years.

When I was battling stage 3 cancer in 2010, R.C. and Vesta prayed earnestly for me and my husband. During my chemotherapy treatment, R.C. wanted to encourage Ken in the midst of his nonstop caregiving routines. Knowing Ken was an avid fly fisherman, R.C. sent my weary husband a G-Loomis Stream Dance 5 weight 10-foot rod. It was the best on the market. You should have seen Ken’s eyes get wide with delight and amazement as he opened his gift. I will always treasure R.C.’s thoughtfulness with that precious gift. It was such a “guy thing” to do; he obviously knew what would brighten my husband’s heart.

My most touching memories of R.C. have to do with his granddaughter Shannon. Born with multiple disabilities, Shannon had seizure disorders, could not talk, and required constant care. It would’ve shaken the faith of most grandparents, but R.C. held fast to the goodness of his sovereign God.

Shannon’s disability opened his eyes to a world of other special-needs families, and his rapport with them moved me deeply. His grandfather’s heart broke for Shannon, but he would often echo the words of Jesus in John 11:4: “This sickness . . . is for God’s

glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." And he was right. At Joni and Friends, we have told Shannon's story to countless thousands, all to the end of helping others hold fast to the goodness of God in His sovereignty.

R.C.'s familiarity with Shannon's severe disability prepared him to enter his own world of disability. Older age wasn't easy on Dr. Sproul, and he often felt the bite of "outwardly wasting away" (2 Cor. 4:16). But just as his insights once enlivened my spirit and elevated my faith in the furnace of affliction, those same treasured doctrines bolstered his spirit and faith. And his incredible sense of humor remained—the last time I saw him, we challenged each other to a bit of wheelchair racing.

And now as I muse on the homegoing of my friend, I can't help but belt out all four stanzas of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Especially the last lines: "Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; the body they may kill, God's truth abideth still. His kingdom is forever!" I so want to be there when R.C. shakes the hand of Martin Luther—no, rather, gives him a bear hug and hearty slaps on the back.

Yes, Dr. Sproul will be remembered as a remarkable Christian statesman, standard-bearer for the Reformed faith, and advocate for the gospel once delivered to the saints. But I will miss my happy friend and the times we would spontaneously sing a hymn together in the hallway of some convention center or compete to see "who knows the most stanzas" to this hymn or that. I will miss the times when, in his older years, he would back away from me and shout, "Jezebel!" whenever I complimented him on how youthful he looked.

Our ministry at Joni and Friends is all about conveying the kindness of God in a horribly broken world of deep suffering. Dr. R.C. Sproul helped lay a foundation for our work, not only in my personal life,

but in our outreach. For when crib deaths occur, when spina bifida or autism or Alzheimer's encroaches, when people groan under the weight of significant disabilities and wonder if they've been forsaken, we can tell them that God has not taken His hands off the wheel for a nanosecond. R.C. Sproul, even to his last days, would hold forth that powerful line from Psalm 103:19: "His kingdom rules over all." Yes, God considers these awful things tragedies and He takes no delight in misery, but He is determined to steer each affliction and to use suffering for His own good and glorious ends.

And those ends are happy. God is heaven-bent on sharing His joy, peace, and power with us. But there's a catch. A caveat I learned early on from listening to R.C.'s tapes on my little cassette player: God shares His joy on His terms, and those terms call us, in some measure, to suffer as His beloved Son did while on earth. "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21).

So, I say a heartfelt thanks to R.C. Never would he have imagined how God would use his teaching ministry to touch the life of this quadriplegic and countless others like me. R.C. showed me, way back in the beginning, that of all the things I might waste here on earth, I must not waste my disability. Earth provides my one and only chance to give Jesus a "sacrifice of praise," demonstrating to the heavenly hosts that He is supremely worthy of my loyalty and love (Heb. 13:15).

And once I get to heaven, R.C. and I will have all of eternity to sing praise to the God who permits what He hates in order to accomplish what He loves. Thank you for championing that blessed message, Dr. Sproul. I'll catch up with you at the foot of the throne, where we will know—and sing—all the stanzas. 

“Everyone is looking for power in a program, in a methodology, in a technique, in anything and everything but that in which God has placed it—His Word. He alone has the power to change lives for eternity, and that power is focused on the Scriptures.”

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R.C. SPROUL

THE PRAYER OF THE LORD



LIGONIER MINISTRIES  
exists to proclaim, teach, and  
defend the holiness of God to  
as many people as possible.

LIGONIER.ORG

# HE SHOWED US CHRIST



## DEREK W.H. THOMAS

Dr. Derek W.H. Thomas is senior minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, S.C., and Chancellor's Professor of Systematic and Pastoral Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary. He is a Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow and author of several books, including *How the Gospel Brings Us All the Way Home*, *Praying the Saviour's Way*, and *Strength for the Weary*.



prince has fallen in Israel. The death of Dr. R.C. Sproul was not wholly unexpected. His declining health in recent years

helped to prepare us for his passing. Watching him decline, we sometimes allowed ourselves to ponder what life without R.C. would be like. It always proved a contemplation too painful to consider for any length of time. But now that it has happened, we prove once more that gospel certainty far outweighs the transient pain of loss. With a conviction that rises to full assurance, we believe R.C. is in heaven—that blessed place promised to the dying thief on the cross when Jesus said to him, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). R.C. is there because he was a sinner who placed his faith in Jesus Christ alone (and we can hear him even now insisting upon the word *alone*). Faith alone, in Christ alone—apart from works. Can’t you hear him saying it? How he loved these Reformation *solas*! He ran the race and finished the course. He endured to the end. And as he passed from this world to the nearer presence of the Lord Jesus, there was laid up for him the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, awarded to him on that day, and not only to him but also to all who have loved Jesus’ appearing (see 2 Tim. 4:8).

Like so many others, my first acquaintance with Dr. R.C. Sproul (in the mid-1980s) was through reading two of his most well-known books, *The Holiness of God* and *Chosen by God*. The impact of these books was immediate and lasting. Here was a scholar-preacher, or preacher-scholar, touched with a gift for communication that exceeded the ordinary. More importantly, here was someone who understood what was central to the Scriptures and who desired to communicate it with passion. Here was someone who had studied philosophy and

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THOSE OF US WHO KNEW HIM PERSONALLY WILL  
THANK GOD AND SAY WITH AFFECTION  
THAT WE ARE BETTER FOR HAVING KNOWN  
HIM AS A FRIEND AND MENTOR.

could handle and dismantle worldviews without pausing for breath.

Imagine my surprise, then, when—I believe it was 2004—I was asked to speak at a Ligonier regional conference in Seattle, and that Dr. Sproul would also be present. I have to confess, by way of recollection, to being a little nervous. Ligonier Ministries had grown to be a worldwide ministry, and Dr. Sproul's reputation as a theologian, apologist, and leader in the evangelical-Reformed community was second to none. The only other encounter that I can compare this to was meeting Dr. J.I. Packer in his office at Trinity College, Bristol (England), in 1974.

What I encountered that weekend was a warm, gracious, hospitable, and generous man. He asked about my family and my interests and complimented me on the paucity of what I had said in the conference. And, at the heart of the conversation emerged a mutual love of dogs—large dogs. The bond was immediate. These four-legged

creatures stole our hearts, and it was clear that R.C. had an affection for the canine species that I fully understood. At the time, I had acquired my son's dog, Jake, and every time I saw R.C. thereafter, he would ask, "How's Jake?" and then we would proceed to ask (and answer in the affirmative) if there would be dogs in heaven. Of course, we would modify the question a little to reflect the new heavens and new earth (after the second coming rather than the intermediate state). And we both felt that our Father in heaven loved His creation more than we did and would not want it to be wasted by annihilation.

My first encounter with R.C. was a discussion about the book of Job. This lengthy and somewhat difficult book of the Old Testament canon took hold of me early in my ministry, and I have made it something of an obsession. What is the purpose of suffering? The personal questions that so often arise in the wake of "innocent suffer-

ing"—Why? Why me? Why now? Why so severe? The very last time I heard R.C. speak publicly, at a Ligonier conference in Orlando, he was asked whether he feared death. We held our breath as he began to answer. "No!" he said with absolute conviction. "I know that I will be with Jesus when I die," he continued. And then he paused and dropped his guard, and suddenly we knew we were listening to a man who had thought about this issue a great deal. "But I do fear dying," he added. And we all knew what he meant. The gospel assured him (and us) that Christians will be "with the Lord" at the moment of death (2 Cor. 5:8). Immediately, our souls (our conscious, rational, feeling selves) will be in God's presence. What a joy that is to contemplate.

But dying is another matter. And it was something he said in his response that stays with me. "We are called to suffer," he said. He was thinking of passages in Scripture such as this one: "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21).

There is always a reason for suffering, even if we cannot immediately comprehend it. More especially, the purposes of God in suffering are designed specifically for each individual. God treated Job severely because He wanted Job to be more useful for Him. After all, we still talk about Job—and study his life. Those whom God intends to use most significantly, He often treats with particular care. The training for those who are to be placed in the front line of battle is all the more intensive and painstaking. And God used R.C.'s suffering for a public display of discipleship at its best. We watched him endure to the end.

Trials are dangerous times. Not everyone is humbled by testing. Job said things that he ought never to have said. He discredited God's justice (Job 40:8). He spoke

words "without knowledge" (38:2). Trials, as the book of Hebrews reminds us, can sometimes embitter (Heb. 12:15). Trials do not contain within themselves the guarantee of spiritual benefit. Our response to them is crucial. Watchfulness and prayer are the keys to ensuring a good outcome. Of the three crosses at Calvary, one atoned, another sanctified, and, just as surely, the third hardened. Nor was Job's good response initially a guarantee against future lapses. Some sins take time to root. Constant vigilance is required.

And it is here that R.C. left his greatest legacy as we publicly watched his weakening body decline. He showed us Christ where it matters most.

I have very specific memories of R.C., especially those involving dinners in Italian restaurants with his wife, Vesta, whom he simply adored. He would range over the latest theological squabble and pronounce a verdict. He loved theology. He loved distinctions within theology. He was unashamed to call himself a Calvinist. Like B.B. Warfield, he viewed Calvinism as the purest expression of the gospel. He had little time for frivolous novelty in theology. He believed that in order to understand the present, we need to understand the past. And one of his greatest strengths—often the mark of genius—was his recall. Books he had read half a century ago he could recollect in detail and cite accurately. But he was also generous with his time and intellect. He always asked about my wife and children.

We—I—will miss him sorely. But he has left a legacy that is sure to endure for generations to come. Though dead, he still speaks. We will continue to hear his unmistakable voice and profit from his many, many books, writings, and messages. And those of us who knew him personally will thank God and say with affection that we are better for having known him as a friend and mentor. ❏



### CHRIS LARSON

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Chris Larson is president and chief executive officer of Ligonier Ministries. Having served at Ligonier since 2004, he directs and leads all strategic outreach initiatives and oversees daily ministry operations, seeking to spread the historic Christian faith to as many people as possible.

## A VITAL MISSION

**T**hese are tender days for Ligonier Ministries as we step forward without our beloved founder, Dr. R.C. Sproul. He has prepared us well, wisely and generously planning for the day when he would no longer be at the helm, and he worked with the board and ministry team toward this transition for almost fifteen years. That said, we depend on your prayers and the Lord's blessing for us to walk faithfully and fruitfully in the years to come.

Many of us have difficulty telling of our walk with the Lord without the entrance of Dr. Sproul into some point of our journey. For me, it was as a college student some twenty-six years ago, late on a Sunday night, in a church parking lot on the east coast of Florida. I was asking questions about God's will for my life and a friend was using R.C.'s teaching to help me understand God's sovereignty and His covenant-keeping gracious character. Where were you when R.C.'s Bible teaching ministry touched your life? What story would you tell? As the testimonies and tributes in this special issue of *Tabletalk* attest, God used R.C.

God continues to use R.C. through the work of Ligonier Ministries in the lives of countless individuals, families, and churches around the world. Proclaiming, teaching, and defending God's holiness in all its fullness is a task that transcends all of our lives. Just as the work of the Protestant Reformation continued in the days after Martin Luther's death, so your work and my work to spread the biblical gospel in our generation continues.

#### OUR MINISTRY

No one can replace R.C. But his vision was not to find one person to succeed him. He founded Ligonier Ministries to be a teaching fellowship designed to

flood the culture with knowledgeable and articulate Christians to the glory of God alone. Through the work of many pastors, theologians, and teachers, Ligonier has for more than forty-seven years steadfastly served Christian disciples by bridging the gap between Sunday school and seminary through broadcasting, publishing, conferences, and other unique educational outreaches around the world.

Several years ago, as part of careful succession planning, we announced that Dr. Sproul had identified specific teachers to help Ligonier Ministries remain committed to its founding purpose well into the future. Today, Drs. Sinclair Ferguson, W. Robert Godfrey, Steven Lawson, Albert Mohler, Stephen Nichols, Burk Parsons, and Derek Thomas form a band of faithful brothers who are gifted preachers and teachers. In the years to come, Ligonier's board will add to their number.

The wisdom and discernment of our teaching fellows strengthens everything we do. We prayerfully submit to the wisdom of Scripture when it comes to the task of finding faithful teachers to ensure Ligonier's biblical and theological fidelity for years to come (2 Tim. 2:2). Truth may resound in a creed, but truth's abode must be in a person's soul for it to be handed down from generation to generation. Our greatest encouragement is when we meet people whom our Lord has reached with His truth and hear how it is being put into practice in their lives.

#### OUR MISSION

We shun pragmatism and seek to have a principled ministry. We emphasize a long-term perspective, and we are willing to battle for truth's sake because of our love for our neighbor's soul. We work in partnership with churches and sister organizations around the world, emphasizing the need for a Spirit-blessed

expository ministry in order to bring awakening and renewal of minds. We ask the Lord to use Ligonier's Bible teaching and discipleship resources to provide Christians with courage and conviction even as they might witness retreat and compromise in many parts of the visible church. Challenges to the Christian faith will continue to come from without and within. False religions, cults, pundits, celebrities, and philosophers are lining up to deceive and destroy. The world, the flesh, and the devil form a powerfully enticing triumvirate of sinfulness that must be opposed in every form.

Many in the world today believe judgment is not coming, the moment is all there is, and small stakes are worth their very lives. Few in the world today know their sins are forgiven, right now counts forever, and heavenly treasures are worth their very lives.

We are redeemed by the Lord to spend our lives for the sake of God and His purposes in this world. Once we bow the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ, repent, and flee to Him as our only righteousness, we are propelled back into the world, back to proclaim His holiness to as many people as possible. This was how R.C. taught about Isaiah's encounter with the holiness of God. It was the story of R.C.'s life, and it's the story of every child of God.

This is why the mission of Ligonier endures: just as the fundamental problem of the sinfulness of humanity endures, God's Word endures, ever relevant, ever piercing to the root of our deepest need. Through the Word of God, the Holy Spirit brings life where there was death and light where there was darkness. Our prayer is that Ligonier, through our many outreaches, would be used by the Holy Spirit to equip you and generations to come to know the God of the Bible and,

by His grace, change the world for His glory alone.

#### OUR METHOD

Through our many and varied outreaches of broadcasting, publishing, and educational gatherings, there is a powerful idea that fuels our work. When we think of our growing outreach around the world, we think of it in these terms: we want to be the "first to serve" ministry in every place where Christians need greater clarity and a better understanding of the character of God. When they are searching for answers in the face of trials or joys, when they are longing for a more comprehensive understanding of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, we want to be the ones who are providing the resources they find and read or watch or listen to. We don't want these seeking souls being sucked into false theology and destructive church practices. When they start looking, we want to be there with trustworthy teaching and truthful answers.

This means we need a vast expansion of our translation and publishing efforts in other languages, an increasing number of visionary and generous donors, and an army of church partners around the globe who can fund our work and put Ligonier's discipleship resources into the hands of their congregations and communities.

No longer do we think of Ligonier as an English-only ministry. New people are discovering the historic Christian faith through what they read, watch, and listen to from Ligonier's teaching fellowship. And this outreach happens in their own language every day around the world. Our ministry team seeks to meet people at these pivotal moments when they're asking the big questions. This is the flashpoint of our helpful engagement with so many. What's more is that many souls are

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## WE HAVE A VITAL MISSION TO GET TRUSTWORTHY CHRISTIAN TEACHING TO AS MANY PEOPLE AS POSSIBLE.

hearing biblical answers to life's ultimate questions for the first time.

#### OUR MOVEMENT

Imagine the growth that might happen for Ligonier Ministries as we steward this vision. This is precisely the vision that Dr. Sproul cast for us, and it is happening more and more every year, by God's grace. This is done in partnership with thousands of faithful supporters who not only benefit from our teaching resources, but give to support the ministry's incredible expansion. Our ministry's impact has doubled in size in just the last few years.

The grace of God in R.C.'s life and ministry is not only measured by his biblical and theological insight, his logical precision, and his courageous defense

of the gospel, but also in the way that he thought about the future of Ligonier. On more than one occasion, he told me he didn't want Ligonier merely to continue, but to flourish and expand. So we have prayed and worked to that end in dependence on God's blessing.

To have been entrusted with the opportunity to serve Dr. Sproul and Ligonier Ministries is a kindness from the Lord that I will never be able to explain. We have a vital mission to get trustworthy Christian teaching to as many people as possible. And the ministry is backed by a committed board, an amazingly gifted team of employees, and thousands of partners who pray and give. *Soli Deo gloria*—to God alone be the glory (Rom. 11:36). ■

“If God is the Creator of the entire universe, then it must follow that He is the Lord of the whole universe. No part of the world is outside of His lordship. That means that no part of my life must be outside of His lordship.”

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**R.C. SPROUL**

THE HOLINESS OF GOD

# So Great a Salvation

*Excerpted from  
Dr. R.C. Sproul's Final Sermon  
November 26, 2017  
Saint Andrew's Chapel*

*Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. (Heb. 2:1–4)*

The central theme of Hebrews 2:1–4 is escape. When we think of escape, we can think of deliverance from a dire and threatening life situation—escaping from a kidnapper or soldiers being surrounded in battle and finding a way to retreat safely. That's an escape. But the most common idea with which we associate the idea of escape is imprisonment. Not just from jail, but from those prisons that are the most notoriously inescapable, such as Alcatraz in this country, Devil's Island, and the most dreadful of all French prisons, the Château d'If.

Do you remember the story? It's my second-favorite novel. The story is of Edmond Dantes, who was falsely accused of a crime and unjustly convicted and then sent forthwith to the most dreaded prison, the Château d'If. He suffered there for years in sol-

itary confinement. Until, one day, he met a coprisoner who was an aged priest. The priest had been there for decades and had spent much time trying to dig a tunnel, a possible escape. But he didn't do his math right, and he ended up digging into Dantes' chamber.

So, at last the two met, and they had fellowship. The old priest became Dantes' mentor and counselor. He taught him all things about science, philosophy, and theology. He also told him about a map that led to a vast treasure that was hidden under the sea. The old priest later died, and through an extraordinary set of circumstances, the death of the priest led to the escape of Edmond Dantes from the Château d'If. He then found the vast treasure under the sea. He financed the rest of his life with his *nom de plume*, the Count of Monte Cristo. What an escape story.

As dire and as dreadful as the circumstances were in the Château d'If, there's an even greater and more dreadful captivity than any human can imagine. The author of Hebrews here speaks of an escape from that. And he asks the question, "How can we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?" Beloved, this is a rhetorical question. And the answer to the question is simple. How should we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? The answer is we can't.

Maybe Alcatraz could possibly be escaped or Devil's Island or even the Château d'If, but the one prison from which no one ever escapes is hell. There's no escape route. You

can't dig under it. You can't climb over it. No guard can be bribed. The sentence cannot be ameliorated. And so the author of Hebrews is saying, "Do you realize what you've heard? We have heard from the Word of God Himself about a great salvation."

Let me just pause for a second and comment on the very idea of salvation. We use that word all of the time in the church. What does it mean? When someone says to me, "Are you saved?" the first thing I want to say is, "Saved from what?" The idea of salvation suggests the idea of some kind of escape or deliverance from a dire circumstance and the verb, *sōzō*, in the New Testament, is used in a variety of ways.

If you are saved from a threatening illness, as people were in the New Testament by the touch of Jesus, Jesus might comment, "Your faith has saved you." He's not speaking about eternal salvation; He's speaking about their rescue from the dreadful disease. In the Old Testament, Israel went into battle and God intervened on their behalf and saved His people. He saved them from military defeat. That was rescue from a clear and present danger. And so, this verb *to save* is used in all kinds of ways and in virtually every tense of the Greek verb. There was a sense in which you are saved, you were being saved, you have been saved, you are saved, you are being saved, and you will be saved. Salvation takes all these different tenses of the verb.

So, there's salvation in the general sense that has its manifold applications. But when the Bible speaks about salvation in the ultimate sense, it's speaking of the ultimate escape from the most dire of all human conditions. What does it mean to be saved? It means, as the Scriptures tell us, to be rescued from the wrath that is to come.

God's wrath, as we're told in Romans, is revealed to the whole world, and the Bible makes it abundantly clear that there

awaits a judgment. The greatest calamity that anybody can ever imagine is to be sentenced to hell. The Château d'If is a luxury resort compared to hell.

And so, now, the author raises the question, how do we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? We've heard the Word of God. It's a message of good news—not just good news, great news; not just great news, the greatest of all possible news—that those who believe in Christ will be saved from the wrath which is to come. How can you possibly neglect it in the first place? That's not the question the author is asking here. He says, how can you possibly escape? The question is, how can you possibly neglect such a great salvation?

Beloved, if you come to church every single Sunday of your life, and go to Sunday school every single week of your life, you may still be neglecting this great salvation. Is your heart in it? That's what I'm asking you. And you know I can't answer that question for you. You know if you're neglecting your salvation. You know that. I don't have to tell it to you. I just have to tell you what the consequences are if you continue in that neglect. So, I pray with all my heart that God will awaken each one of us today to the sweetness, the loveliness, the glory of the gospel declared by Christ.

Let's pray.

We thank You, O Jesus, that You are for us the great escape. We're thankful that because of You and what You've done for us we have nothing to fear from the wrath that it is to come. But we pray, O God, that You would feed our souls, cause us to hunger and thirst after You as the deer pants after the mountain stream. Ignite a flame in our hearts that we may not neglect You but pursue You with everything we have. For we ask You in Your name.

Amen. 

“We are secure, not because we hold tightly to Jesus, but because he holds tightly to us.”

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R.C. SPROUL