

INTERVIEW

Interview with Robert C. Sproul (†)

PETER A. LILLBACK

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PETER LILLBACK: *Reverend Dr. R. C. Sproul, it is a pleasure to be with you again. I would like to open in prayer and then follow through with the interview. Let us pray:*

Father, thank you for the opportunity to have this dialogue with Dr. Sproul. We thank you for his faithful, fruitful, and powerful ministry, which has blessed so many. We pray now that this interview will be useful. We pray, Father, that your glory might be seen through it and that we might, by your mercy, advance your kingdom for the good of your people and the honor of your name. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

It is a pleasure to interview Dr. R. C. Sproul, who has been one of the leaders of Reformed theology and apologetics over the past several decades. Several questions will help us understand his life, the impact of his work, and the things he has come to appreciate and emphasize in his ministry. Dr. Sproul, would you please give us a summation of your academic career? Where have you taught? What books have you written? What conferences have you been involved in?

ROBERT C. SPROUL: I started my career teaching philosophy at Westminster College in Pennsylvania and then moved to Gordon College in Massachusetts and taught, principally, biblical studies and theology. Then I went to the reorganized Conwell School of Theology at Temple University in Philadelphia, where I taught part systematic theology and part philosophy.

I have also taught as a visiting professor at Gordon-Conwell Seminary and systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson. I was the founding dean of the Reformed Theological Seminary Orlando campus, where I taught systematics. I also taught systematics at Knox Theological Seminary. As far as books, I have written over a hundred books, so it is hard to summarize them. But I have been involved with many, many conferences over the years, and one of the most important ones was the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology. I was also a member of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy and served as its president for several years.

PL: *That's truly outstanding. As part of your work with the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology, you got to know and befriend the late Dr. James Boice, formerly senior pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church. Tell us a little about your relationship with him and maybe some of the recollections of the impact of his ministry and your partnership in his work.*

RCS: I first met Jim in 1969, I believe, and we hit it off immediately and spoke together at different conferences on several separate occasions and then of course when he started the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology. When Jim died, the only person who had spoken more frequently than I was Jim himself. We developed a very close relationship over the years. I counted him as one of my closest comrades and friends. We worked together on so many different enterprises. The irony is that Jim was born and raised in McKeesport, PA, and I was born in the south hills of Pittsburgh. I went to Clairton High School, and our arch enemy was McKeesport. Of course, Jim played sports but did not play for the McKeesport High School because he went to prep school. Otherwise, we would have met earlier on the fields of battle.

PL: *That's great; the Lord brought that partnership together to enrich us all. What do you see as the most significant opportunities and challenges in Reformed theology today?*

RCS: We have had a marvelous resurgence of the Reformed faith in the last half century, and at the same time have seen the spread of the Reformed faith in many different parts of the world where it had not penetrated before. There is a sizable Reformed movement in Africa, in Latin and South America, and even into the Far East, China, Korea, and elsewhere. And so we have unique opportunities because of that, but also strong challenges of the same kind we always face where the Reformed faith is proclaimed. We find pushback and resistance from those who find it almost impossible to accept because of our high doctrine of God and his sovereignty.

PL: *You recently helped develop a statement on Christology called the Ligonier Statement on Christology.¹ Why did you feel that was important, and what is the statement's unique contribution to the churches thinking about the doctrine of Christ?*

RCS: We were at a restaurant in Seattle, if I recall rightly, and somebody at the table asked me what I thought was the biggest crisis facing the church in the next decades. I replied, "I am not a prophet or a son of a prophet, so I am not sure, but I think that it is the person of Christ." The great crises of Christology were obviously in the fourth and fifth centuries, then again in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the Christological debates from the twentieth century have carried over into this century. What bothered me ... we always have had to defend the deity of Christ, the supernatural character of his activity against the unreconstructed nineteenth-century liberals ... however, a great concern at present is the fuzziness that has crept into the Evangelical world, and even strong resistance to such matters as the act of obedience of Christ and the central issue of the imputation of our sin to him and the imputation of his righteousness to us. The Ligonier statement is basically a summary of the historic affirmations of the church's faith, but with a new kind of emphasis on the aspects of imputation, both in terms of the righteousness of Christ to us and also of his passive obedience and his satisfaction of God's justice on the cross. So there is a re-emphasis of these elements.

PL: *Excellent. You mentioned earlier the rivalry between your high schools and Dr. Boice's—there has been some ongoing intramural debate between R. C. Sproul and Westminster on our Van Tillian apologetics.² I know it has always been a friendly rivalry, but I was wondering, in the classic debate between traditional Reformed apologetics and the presuppositional or covenantal model of Van Til, what do you think is the crucial distinction between them, and what have been your reservations to adopting a Van Tillian approach?*

RCS: There is a lot to answer, so I will try to do it as briefly as I can. One thing where we are strongly united is in our commitment to historic Calvinism, and we both understand that apologetics can never convert anybody. We are also concerned about defending the faith from outside attacks. To understand the issues, I go back to Augustine. Both Augustine and John Calvin maintain that there was kind of a symbiotic relationship between our

¹ See the Ligonier Statement earlier in this issue.

² For more on classical apologetics and Cornelius Van Til, see Robert C. Sproul, John H. Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); and John M. Frame, "Appendix A: Van Til and the Ligonier Apologetic," in *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), 401–22.

understanding of our humanness and our understanding of God. Calvin says, in one sense you cannot really understand God until you first understand yourself, but you cannot really understand what it means to be human without having a proper knowledge of God. Going back to the original issue, Augustine said that as soon as you are self-conscious, you are immediately aware of yourself as a finite creature. That is, finitude is a corollary of self-consciousness. And so that idea of having an immediate understanding of finitude implies an immediate understanding of God himself. The basic dispute between classical apologetics and Van Tillianism is, I believe, an epistemological one. We ask: Where the starting point is for apologetics? Classical apologetics says we start with self-consciousness because it is the only place we can start. The Van Tillian approach says you cannot start with self-consciousness; you have to start with the presupposition of God's existence. My basic hesitation with that is that it involves the problem of circular reasoning. As you know, Van Til himself acknowledged that that reasoning is circular, but he defended it by saying that all reasoning is by nature circular inasmuch as your starting point, your mid-point, and your conclusion are all the same sort. My problem with that is that he defended what is usually considered to be a fallacy of circular reasoning with another fallacy, namely that of equivocation, because the definition of circular reasoning changes in the course of the discussion. He could have easily said that we start at one point, and if our thinking is rational and we go on and think that our starting point and our conclusions would end up being of the same kind, we would ask, Why would you call that circular? Why use that metaphor? Why not linear? But in any case, there has been so much discussion over the years, and it has always been, I think, warm, and friendly, and I think we are both trying to get to the same place.

PL: *Would you be comfortable if I followed up with a question as to how the noetic effects of sin play out in the two systems and whether they are similar or different?*

RCS: I do not think there is any ultimate difference, because both of us consider that the noetic effects of sin indicate that the mind is fallen as well as the rest of our humanity. But the question is whether or not our ability to reason correctly at a certain level has been vanquished. This was the substantive debate between Benjamin B. Warfield and Abraham Kuyper over whether or not it is possible for a fallen man in his natural condition to interpret general revelation substantially accurately. Warfield's answer was yes, we can, because this is the basis for human guilt. God reveals himself in nature, clearly, as Romans 1 tells us, and we are without excuse because the message gets through. Even Van Til acknowledged that the basis for our

guilt is that knowing God, we refuse to acknowledge him as God, nor are we thankful, and therefore God has given us over to the darkness of our thinking. Again, we can see through the revelation that God gives us in nature, the reality that God exists, which is one point we have in common with presuppositionalism. I know that when I talk to an unbeliever, that person already knows that God exists, because God himself has revealed it, and he is the best teacher there could possibly be. We would both agree to that. But then, when you get into the point historically of the full impact of the noetic effects, differences emerge. For example, some advocates of presuppositionalism say that if you start with self-consciousness, you end with the view of human autonomy. I debated that one several years ago with one of the leading proponents of presuppositionalism, and I said that self-consciousness does not analytically contain the idea of moral autonomy. That is a fallen conclusion, a distorted conclusion, drawn from self-consciousness. It is not immediately or formally implied, and even though we may dispute aspects of the noetic effects, ultimately, I think, we are in pretty close agreement.

PL: *Good. On a separate topic then, what is your concern for America as a nation, for its future? And do you see Reformed theology making a difference in the American experience?*

RCS: I guess it was about forty years ago—it may have been even longer—I was speaking on the same platform with Francis Schaeffer, and we happened to meet at the airport and shared a ride going to where we were speaking. And during the ride, I asked him the very question you just asked me. I said, “What is your biggest concern for the future of America?” And he did not hesitate even then—this was forty years ago—but replied, “Statism.” We have seen in the last half century the intrusion of government into our lives beyond the normal elements of socialism that you find in Western Europe. We are on a runaway train with respect to the growth of government and its involvement in the life of the people. I think this will make an impact on the Reformed faith in the sense that we will find more and more resistance to it. But at the same time, the influence of Reformed theology may have an impact of retarding this concept of the secular state. The concept of separation of church and state has now become the separation of the state and God. The state has declared its independence from God himself, and here is where a Reformation critique of political theory has and will have an important impact. There are, of course, disagreements on whether or not Christians should even be involved with this discussion, but I think the church has always called the people of God to offer prophetic criticism to the state. Not that we want to be the state. The state has its own function under God, but

the state is under God and has a ministry to the civil elements of society. We would still distinguish between the mission God has given the church and the mission God has given the state, but both under God.

PL: *Excellent—I will quote you on that more than once, I guarantee! What is your assessment of the Reformed theological presence on a global scale? What are the encouragements and the difficulties?*

RCS: I hinted earlier that I am really excited about what is going on in Africa, for instance, about the African Bible University that O. Palmer Robertson started in Kampala in Uganda. Eight hundred or so pastors have gone through that Reformed seminary, which is ultimately a fruit of Westminster Seminary. We also see expansion in Latin America and even in southern Europe, where there was little prior penetration of the Reformation. It is very encouraging, and it is going to continue.

PL: *Why was the Reformation Bible College³ started and what is your hope for it?*

RCS: I looked at the history of Evangelicalism in the United States—as you know as a historian, Evangelicalism had become dominated by Dispensational theology—and I wondered how that happened. Dispensational theology was invented toward the end of the nineteenth century, and how could this new idea have such a widespread influence in the American Evangelical church? From a historical perspective, there were lots of factors involved, like the publication of the Scofield Reference Bible, which had a huge impact. There was impact too from seminaries that were established and Bible colleges: Philadelphia Bible College, Moody Bible Institute. Bible colleges all over the United States had a commitment to Dispensational theology, and it spread like wildfire. When I thought about what was needed in American education from the Evangelical perspective, it was clear that we have now several solidly Reformed seminaries, but there is a huge lack with respect to the Bible college model. I thought one way we could reach future pastors initially is at the college level. From my own conversion and in my own teaching I have found that college students have a very formative time in their education in those four years. That is the reason why we decided to begin a Bible college.

PL: *To conclude our conversation: You have been a good friend of Westminster for many years and received an honorary doctorate from Westminster a few years ago,*

³ The Reformation Bible College is a Reformed college that was founded in 2011 in central Florida in conjunction with Ligonier Ministries; for more information, see <https://www.reformationbiblecollege.org/about/#history>.

so let me ask this final question: What contributions do you think Westminster Theological Seminary has made to Reformed theology, and what are your hopes for Westminster in the coming years?

RCS: At the time of the fiftieth anniversary of Westminster, I was sitting in a restaurant by myself and wrote down the names of a hundred leaders—pastors, teachers—that I knew of. The roots in the Reformed faith of ninety-nine of them could be traced to Westminster Theological Seminary. That is incredible! When you think of the school that came out of Princeton Theological Seminary and how little it was, and how massive its influence has been from its inception to this day—almost every other Reformed theological institution owes a supreme debt to the founding and teaching of Westminster Seminary. So as far as I am concerned, the church has a debt that we can never repay to that institution. My concern and hope are that it will stay absolutely faithful to its classical principles and policies and theology.

PL: *Thank you for that, and we continue to thank God for your leadership and your visionary commitments to advancing Reformed theology worldwide. Thank you for this interview and all your contributions. You remain in our prayers, and I wonder if we could be honored with a concluding prayer. Would you provide that for us?*

RCS: Absolutely, thank you so much:

Father and our God, how grateful we are that you have known us from the foundation of the world. You have, by your sheer and majestic grace—and without any contribution of merit or works of our own—called us to be inheritors of your kingdom and members of your family along with your only begotten Son, who is our elder brother. And because you have adopted us into your family and your house, we are forever grateful; and we pray that you would continue to pour out your grace on the ministry of those that are striving to be faithful to biblical truth, and we believe Reformed theology to be simply a nickname for that; and so we thank you, Lord, for your astonishing grace and abiding love and tender mercy, and we pray in Jesus's name, Amen.

PL: *Thank you, Dr. Sproul. God bless and thanks so much and keep up the great work.*

RCS: Thank you, Peter. It has been great to know you and have you in our midst.