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& **REVIVAL**  
**JOURNAL**

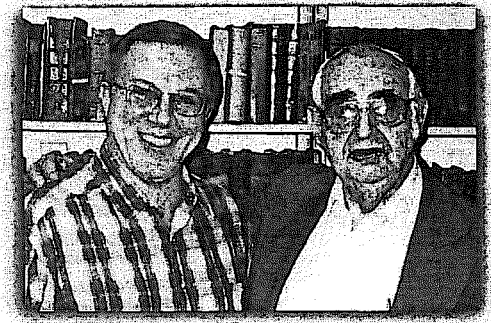
**REVIVAL:  
A SOLUTION  
OR A PROBLEM?**

*A Quarterly for Church Leadership*

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## *A Reformation & Revival Journal Interview with Roger Nicole*



Earlier this year John H. Armstrong interviewed Professor Roger Nicole at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida. Dr. Nicole is well known to many of our readers. He was a professor of theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary for forty-one years before he became a member of the faculty at Reformed Theological Seminary. Dr. Nicole recently retired from teaching but continues to write and encourage ministers and teachers.

**R R J** —How did you come to know Christ and how did the Lord lead you to become a professor of theology?

**R N** —I was born in Germany, near Berlin. My father at the time was a chaplain for the French Protestant Prisoners of War in Germany. He traveled throughout the country visiting thirty-eight different camps of prisoners. I was born in 1915, right in the middle of the war. When World War I began, the German government cancelled the French speaking services and my father, who had tenure in this position, continued to stay in Germany. He volunteered himself to work among the French Protestant prisoners of war.

My parents finally left Germany in 1920, when I was only

four-and-a-half years old. I had not learned German at home because we spoke French. My father became a minister in the Free Church in Switzerland and functioned as the pastor of a church located in three different townships. He exercised a ministry that the Lord blessed greatly. It is in this connection that, at seven years of age, actually just a week before my eighth birthday, I was permitted to attend an evangelistic meeting. My father had invited an evangelist to have a series of meetings in his church. In this context I sensed the call of God upon my life and responded to Jesus Christ by recognizing my sin and seeking his salvation.

Later on I had considerably more spiritual development, which at the time I thought was probably the time of my true



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**R R J** —Your father was a pastor?

**R N** —Yes. He did some very excellent studies in Geneva where his father was a professor of Greek at the university. In fact, my grandfather went to Egypt to pick up ancient manuscripts by the boxfuls and brought them out to the University of Geneva. At the end of the nineteenth century, Geneva rivaled Oxford, Paris, and Berlin in the number of such manuscripts that were available. My grandfather was a key person in that particular work. My father studied for the ministry in a school that had defected somewhat from its conservative origins. My dad finally studied in Scotland and then at Oxford. He was enthused about work in Old Testament but, unfortunately, had adopted a critical stance that was inspired by his professor of Old Testament, a man of singular distinction. After these studies, he was an assistant pastor in southern France and then a pastor in a very small community. From there he became an assistant to the French pastor in Frankfurt where he met my mother. From here he was called to a highly desirable position as the French pastor of a Berlin church that was the largest French speaking church in the country. It was there that he developed a very serious eye disease which virtually ruined his possibilities for further scholarship

**R R J** —Tell me about your education, not only as a boy, but your early theological education and how you eventually came to America.

**R N** —At first my parents taught my sister and me at home. This meant that I did not learn German in my early years. When the time came to enter secondary grades of advanced education, other than the regular grades which were common to all, I was placed in a public school in La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland. After a year my parents moved to Lausanne and I was registered in the college from which I got my bachelor of arts degree in classical languages, including the study of Latin and Greek. This meant that I had eight years of Latin and five years of Greek, seven years of German and quite a large amount of time learning French too, including French language, literature, and spelling. From there I went to Paris

where I was involved in a Bible institute founded by a man my father admired greatly. My brother was the main professor in this institute. While I studied at the Bible Institute, completing their full program, I was also registered at the University of Paris for the Master of Arts in classical language, which demanded examinations in Latin, Greek, philology and French literature. I received my master's degree in 1937 and then graduated from the Bible Institute in 1938.

In college I had a very serious crisis experience with my professor of philosophy. He attempted to show us that accepting any authority outside of our own mind was a surrender of the proper function of the mind. Thus he attempted to undermine the authority of the church and of a book. He pointed to contradictions in Roman Catholicism and the Scripture. My dad had a very excellent library. When the professor raised difficulties I would check these out at home and find that the difficulty was not as great as the professor imagined. When this teacher came back to teach his class in philosophy I would indicate that a solution was possible. Being a strong rationalist he made it appear that anyone who accepted an authority external to himself, rather than the logic of the mind, was really undermining the proper purpose for which we had minds. I recognized that this would certainly raise considerable difficulties in terms of the approach which I had taken in accepting the truth. At that time I read the book by Louis Gaussen on the inspiration of Scripture. It did not, however, resolve the matter altogether.

When my brother came home at Christmas vacation I opened my heart to him and said I had encountered this problem regarding authority. My brother said, "Well, show me your notes from the course." I opened my notebook at the point where it referred to authority. "Well," my brother said, "What did the professor say before this?" "Never mind what he said before this," I protested. I had no problem there but it's with this issue of authority that I had a problem. "Well," my brother said, "I want to see what he said before this material." There was a chapter called The Criteria of Truth so my brother said, "What did he say there?" I told him, the professor said what

everyone says, namely that truth is made manifest by coherence, so coherence is really the test of truth. My brother said, "Did you accept that?" I said, "Of course I accepted it, what else could I say?" "Well," he said, "that's the place where the problem arose. If you accept your mind as capable of discerning the truth from error at all points then indeed you have made *yourself* the supreme authority." As simple as all this really was it became for me a flash of light in the midst of a fog and I realized at once its importance and began to reconstruct a new epistemology in which I believed the Word of God was the supreme criteria of truth. I understood that there were subsidiary criteria which functioned in daily living but that the supreme criteria had to be what God himself said.

So when I returned to school in January I went to see my professor. I told him I thought I understood why I could not get to the point that he was making. "The problem is really with the Criteria of Truth and I have determined that for me the Criteria of Truth is God's Word, that's the supreme criteria. The logic of the human mind is a subsidiary criterion." Then my professor looked at me and said, "You are impossible." That was the finest witness he could give to me. I felt as though I was a bird who had flown out of the cage to freedom. In that particular statement I had delivered myself from the whole range of what he had been tormenting me with for those three months. Thus this experience was very decisive for me because I was spending perhaps thirty hours a week trying to struggle with this problem rather than with my other subjects. I felt that if I went to a liberal school and had to do the same kind of work with liberal professors, I would never be able to think properly. If you want to prepare for ministry you need to do it in a school of faith, not in a school of doubt. Therefore I determined that I would go to a school of faith even though I didn't know of any at that time in Europe. My brother had gone to Gordon Divinity School in 1929-31 and was very satisfied. So I went to the same school with the purpose of preparing myself for ministry. I had sensed a call to ministry by the age of thirteen. This led me to studies in Greek and Latin. With my master of arts from the Sorbonne (Paris),

I was now well equipped linguistically to carry on. I found Gordon to be a very fine environment where differences in judgment regarding various things were allowed. The principle there was that of an irenic approach towards our differences within the framework of a total commitment to Scripture. When I graduated with a master's degree in theology, I was the valedictorian. At the commencement my subject was speaking the truth in love, which has been my master passage for life.

**R R J** —What years were you at Gordon and when did you graduate?

**R N** —I graduated from Gordon with a B.D. in 1938. (This was the equivalent of what we now call the M. Div. Degree.) In 1940 I got a master of theology and in 1943 I received my doctorate *summa cum laude* at Gordon.

**R R J** —At Gordon who were one or two of your professors who had a great influence in your life as a student?

**R N** —I had a number of very fine professors. There was a professor in church history and homiletics named Edwin Byington who was very inspiring to me. I also had professor Merrill Tenney, who was very strict in his organization of material. I admired him very greatly. He was clearly the most traditional evangelical in the group. There was a professor named Ralph Palmer who had been prominent in the Southern Baptist Seminary. He was a great student of Greek and Hebrew. I had him for some biblical interpretation and 1 Corinthians and also my professor for two years of Hebrew. He was also my professor of philosophy and psychology. In all these areas he was a highly competent person although somewhat less traditional in his evangelical approach. Then there was President Nathan Wood who was a genius, He had written a book which I had read in English—actually the first book I read in English—*The Secret of the Universe*. In it he shows how the structure of the universe reflects something

about the Trinitarian nature of the creator. I had a professor named Clarence Bouma, who came from Calvin Seminary for one term in 1940. He gave a course in apologetics in which, for the first time, I had the opportunity to see somebody who was thoroughly Reformed. He organized in his own mind the whole structure of the Christian faith and was prepared to present it to opponents in a way that was decisive. So this particular teacher influenced me probably more than the others because it was under his influence that I could see the way in which the Christian faith was organized and how from the inside, at any rate, there is a possibility of vindicating the faith even with people who have not accepted our presuppositions.

**R R J** —I have to ask you a little personal question. When you mentioned Merrill Tenney as your professor it brought back my own remembrance of studying under him at Wheaton College some years later. Did Dr. Tenney ever give you pop quizzes in class and were those quizzes unannounced and you came to class and heard him say, “Now, take a 3 x 5 card and write the following. . . .”

**R N** —Yes, a 3 x 5 card, that’s right. And he also wanted us to organize things in very systematic ways. He was very well organized. He had profited very much from his own master of arts in philosophy at Boston University under the leadership of Edgar Sheffield Brightman, whose views Tenney did not share but whose systematic ways influenced him greatly. This was representative of the type of approach which I greatly admired. Thus Professor Tenney became my main advisor for my master’s thesis and was the subsidiary advisor for my doctoral thesis. I had a very excellent relationship with him.

**R R J** —You’ve mentioned a great number of languages you studied. How many languages can you still use? I’ve heard people say Dr. Nicole knows “this” number of languages. What languages have you actually done work in?

**R N** —The languages that I speak are French, German and

English. The one that I speak best is English, in spite of the accent people hear. I also learned Latin in such a way as to read Latin with considerable ease. It was a specialty of mine in my undergraduate work, and then when I had the Sorbonne training I was reading Latin for my own pleasure, including some Latin classics even before graduating with my bachelor’s degree. I had some knowledge of Greek, which is much more complex, and this allowed me to do my work at the Sorbonne. As far as German was concerned I knew it well because at the age of sixteen I noticed that while I was getting good grades in school I was not speaking German or reading it with ease. I decided to read a thousand pages of German every year and did this for three years. By the end of that time I was quite fluent in German and was reading it without a dictionary. In this country, having made contact with professor Bouma, I realized I needed to know Dutch in order to have access to a great deal of important theological work so I also learned Dutch. In view of my French origins, and my studies at the Sorbonne, I can also handle Italian and Spanish to some extent, although I would need a dictionary. In light of my very Germanic approach to German, Dutch and English I am not totally at a loss with several Scandinavian languages as well.

**R R J** —You’ve mentioned a crisis of epistemology and of your coming to embrace the authority of Scripture. Throughout your life you have given yourself to teaching and expounding the doctrine of the Bible’s authority. Tell us a little about this development.

**R N** —The experience that I had gave me a strong conviction that you need to have a solid foundation in connection with the Christian faith. This foundation had to be grounded not in what humans understood or felt but rather in what God himself said. For this reason the authority of Scripture and the use of Scripture as basis for theological study was made very apparent to me early in my journey. I wrote my first thesis on the attitude of Jesus toward the Scripture. Jesus projected in his own outlook and training of the disciples an understanding of



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*Word of God. Thus it partook of his divine authority and was free from error. This was the form of language that I used through the years and this was a very profound conviction.*

inspiration that the Bible was the Word of God. Thus it partook of his divine authority and was free from error. This was the form of language that I used through the years and this was a very profound conviction.

The area of the quotations of the Old Testament in the New, where it is often claimed that verbal accuracy does not exist, raised problems I considered very carefully. I looked at every quotation of the Old Testament in the New and found that when a proper approach is taken and acceptance of the teaching of the apostles is recognized as divinely inspired there really is no reason to raise questions about the inerrancy of Scripture. I also found that the way in which the quotations were introduced and used showed a basic confidence that we had the Word of God. When the Bible had spoken the cause was settled. Therefore, I found this study confirmed my approach and my commitment to the Bible as the inerrant Word of God.

I found no difficulty in recognizing that in the Bible you have evidence of human authorship. I do not see why human authorship demands error. It often occasions error, but error is not indispensable to being human. In the case of the Bible

the sovereign good pleasure of God overruled the erroneous potential of humanity. Thus the authors of the Scripture became the agents by which an inerrant Word was communicated.

**RRJ**—Now with that background and your own experience, tell us about the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy and your involvement in that movement.

**RN**—I was one of the founders of the Evangelical Theological Society, which originated in 1949. At that point I was the professor of theology at Gordon Divinity School and quite strong in my own conviction about inerrancy. When the Evangelical Theological Society met we had a remarkable assemblage with a number of different evangelicals. We had Calvinists and Arminians, many different denominations, very different views of the organization of the church, different views about the future, the millennium, and the exact place of reason in theology. It was an extraordinary gathering of just about all the differences in the evangelical movement. But there was one thing upon which we all agreed. The foundation for an evangelical position had to be the acceptance of plenary inspiration and the full authority of Holy Scripture. For this reason we formulated the common statement of faith which very simply said "the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and therefore is inerrant in its autographs."

Later on, in 1978, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy was established because there had been considerable debate about the way in which the authority of Scripture was understood and expressed. The idea of inerrancy was central and thus again we saw an extraordinary gathering of people who were presenting many different approaches yet we could agree together in recognizing that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God. I was one of the members of the board of reference and was very active in the very first meeting in Chicago, participating with people who forged the statement of faith. I was a member of the council that continued with

this work until it came to an end in 1988. It was in Chicago, at the first meeting in 1978, that a set of nineteen propositions and denials was issued showing precisely the boundaries within which evangelicals could function in their advocacy of the inerrancy of Scripture. We wanted to dispel certain misconceptions that people had. We also wanted to emphasize that it is the original text that is actually inerrant. In the process of transmission there were various textual variants that were introduced and thus our effort today must be to recover as much as we can this original text.

**R R J** —Did you teach at Gordon for forty-one years?

**R N** —Yes, I was a professor at Gordon for over four decades. My first teaching opportunity in the divinity school came in 1945. I taught a course that was related to my doctoral thesis. I tried to show how Christian faith involved both the plane of divine life and the plane of human life. These intersect at a point that becomes a particular transcendent location with respect to the human perspective. This is manifested in positions that often appear to us to be contradictory. Ultimately these two planes are harmonious, although the harmony is not completely perceptible in terms of our human grasp, at least within terms of finite logic. My research prepared me for recognition of both the divine and human elements in the Scripture. We can see, for example, the divine foreordination of things and yet this is somehow consistent with the reality of human decisions. We can also see that there are two natures in the one person of Christ and these two natures are not in conflict. We also see both the transcendence and immanence of God in the created world. Another illustration can be seen in the Christian life where we have both the new life in Christ and yet we retain the old corrupted condition in which we all have this ongoing struggle.

**R R J** —If you began teaching at Gordon in 1945 then you were a student at Gordon during the World War II.

**R N** —I was a student from 1938-1943, when I received my doctorate. When I got the doctorate I was called to teach theology. At that time I thought that this was enough of a proper certification for my orthodoxy but I also realized it did not provide the kind of academic certification that would be necessary for recognition as a professor outside the evangelical world. Because of this I decided to work towards a Ph. D. at Harvard. I did my work in historical theology, choosing particular subjects that had direct interest for me in systematic theology, thus avoiding a constant battle with the faculty over my own beliefs. It took me a particularly long time to finally write my thesis. I received my Ph. D. from Harvard in 1967.

**R R J** —So you were working on your Harvard doctorate while you were teaching at Gordon?

**R N** —Yes, and for some of that time I was the director of the library and was working to increase the library at Gordon from 5,000 to 35,000 volumes over the course of nine years.

**R R J** —Now this brings us to another interesting question. For those people who know anything about you they have heard that you have an extensive personal library. I understand that while you were building the Gordon library you were also building your own library. Tell us a little about your own library and about bibliography in terms of your interests in what books? We sit here and talk while some of your own books surround us.

**R N** —I was quite interested in collecting books. When I studied theology and looked at libraries, like the ones at Harvard and Union Seminary in New York, I realized the tremendous treasure that we have in understanding the past, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. I became interested in collecting as much as possible and the people at Gordon recognized that I seemed to have a special knack for finding books of value without spending much money. Since the school had very little money available for the expansion of their library they



felt that I would be the right person to use that money for the expansion of the school's library. I accepted this task with the understanding that this particular activity would not become a hindrance to the development of my own collection. When I found books in English I would give preference to the school, but when there were books in foreign languages that few people in the school at that time would use I tended to take these for my library. There were also periodicals that I found for the school so they could build some runs of periodicals that I considered to be quite important for the study of theology. So, by the grace of God, I was confronted with extraordinary opportunities, particularly living in New England where there were books of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that were available at very low prices. I was able to build up a research library dealing with history, particularly of the Reformed position, I was also able to find Episcopalian and Roman Catholic resources in the area of systematic theology. This makes my library extremely extensive. Though I have a special emphasis on evangelical works in my library, rather than liberal works, but not excluding those, I may now well have a better library than some great institutions.

**R R J** —Most of our readers are pastors and serious lay leaders. They like books and they buy books. Probably the greatest struggle they have is how they must learn to sneak books into their house without their wife being upset with them for buying more books. How did you manage to get all these books and remain happily married? Your wife must have been patient. Did she love books too?

**R N** —My wife is very patient but, being mortal, she has developed a certain resentment for this particular tendency in my life which leads to a kind of housekeeping not like the extremely clean and orderly approach which she has in the rest of our home. In my bedroom, at present, I have eleven bookcases and the bedroom is only ten-by-ten. As you can imagine this is really not the way in which a room ordinarily is furnished and my wife was definitely patient with this part of my

life. It is also true that I did not spend the amount of money one would expect for the books that I bought. I bought some very valuable books for ten cents or a quarter. The money that I spent on books is very inconsiderable in view of the value of the books that I now have. My library is surely worth more than \$100,000 at the present time and I never spent anything that approaches that particular amount in building it. Pastors need to develop a library of their own, particularly evangelical pastors. Many of them are serving in churches which are not in a major city where there is a suitable library. To some measure a pastor's level of presentation depends upon his continuing to study and thus upon the books that are available on his shelves. I would surely advise a pastor to have a specialty in commentaries. It would also be good to have books that will resolve difficulties and also books that will have some clever way of dealing with a particular subject. Matthew Henry, for example, provides remarks that can be used very profitably in preparing sermons. I also advise our students to keep a specialty in which they will continue to carry on their studies as they did in seminary. To remain in any scholarly discussion they should have as many commentaries as are currently appearing on that particular book or perhaps as many books on that particular subject as they can acquire. In this sense ministers should be really acquainted with the literature and remain active and able to participate in significant discussion with scholarship. I believe that this will be a help to them in the general performance of their work. What is not good is to have a pastor who lacks an active integration of theological literature and an ongoing challenge to his thinking process brought about by the examination of important works. It's important to have the pastor continuing to struggle with things and thus to be on the cutting edge, able to be effective in answering questions that may arise from parishioners.

**R R J** —Now I would like to turn to a question that I like to ask individuals who have had a career in an academic teaching arena for preparing pastors. How have you kept your intellect and devotion or piety married to each other throughout all

these years? How have you tried to keep your own heart warm and teachable and continually responsive to the Lord while retaining this immense interest in the intellect and the mind that you have had your whole life?

**R N** —The life of the mind and the life of a person can be distinguished but they should never be separated. Love for truth and a desire to achieve truth should always be something that is of particular significance along with our personal behavior. Many times people who have a strong intellect neglect other areas of human life, particularly the feelings and the will. In my judgment the possession of truth should lead to an adequacy of life, which means feelings, will, and a conscience that is related to the truth of God. This, of course, is what the Bible very solemnly teaches. It is written right out of life, not as a book of systematic presentations of truth. So we have to pull out of the Scripture those elements that inform our theology but the Scripture itself is really addressed to us as a challenge to how we live. I had a colleague who thought that the seminary was merely an academic institution. I always said that this was a fundamental mistake, that in fact seminary was a place in which the person should be prepared spiritually as well as intellectually for the task of leadership in the church of God. In that sense I am a pietist. I believe pietism at times may err, and sometimes it has fallen into a kind of romanticism or emotionalism that is not acceptable and neglects the reality of the mind. I notice that some pietists are subject to such criticism. But people who are anti-pietistic are always wrong.

**R R J** —Tell us how you developed practical routines in this area? You spoke earlier about Dr. Tenney having this routine and that he systematized things. What did Roger Nicole do over the years in terms of feeding his own soul? I noticed, for example, that on the shelves here are various copies of *Pilgrim's Progress*. Were there books like these that fed your own heart and how did you handle the Scriptures day to day in terms of your own personal walk with God?

**R N** —I was a member of the International Bible League from the age of ten or so and thus I followed very carefully the set of Bible readings they suggested day by day. This meant that I read the New Testament twice in five years and the Old Testament once within five years. The reading was always varied between the Old and New Testament so that you would have a sense of going to both in a given period of time. This was informing my personal life during my teens. I found that F. B. Meyer was a devotional writer who was especially appealing to me. One of his books, *Saved And Kept*, contained meditations on the life of the Christian. This book had been translated into French and my grandmother was using it, so I soon discovered it. I also found some Spurgeon sermons that were very vigorous and deeply steeped in the gospel of the Free Church movement so I did have some devotional literature that was most helpful. I am sorry to say that I don't think I have always been a very good example in this respect, especially when I compare myself with my brother, who read the whole Old Testament in Hebrew, and the New Testament in Greek, every year for over fifty years. He had a remarkable faithfulness in this because every day I would see him doing it.

**R R J** —Is your brother deceased or living?

**R N** —He died in 1997.

**R R J** —Was he a pastor or teacher?

**R N** —He was a teacher in the Bible institute where I studied and he worked there for over sixty years.

**R R J** —And how long have you been married?

**R N** —We have been married fifty-six years.

**R R J** —And where did you meet Annette?

**R N** —I met her in Worcester, Massachusetts, where I was the pastor of a French-speaking Baptist Church. She was reared a Roman Catholic. She rented a room in the same home of an elderly resident lady who was renting rooms to singles. In an effort to be a witness to her, given her French-Canadian descent, I became attached to her and ultimately was privileged to marry her. She has been an extraordinary helper for my work, supporting it in remarkable ways and, as she says sometimes to students, "You may be pleased to have my husband but you are to remember that I am the one that keeps him happy."

**R R J** —That's good, very good. I was going to ask you about your pastoral labors, but you have actually touched on that a bit already. You pastored a French speaking church for a period of time. You had some other short-term pastoral situations in New England. Can you tell us a little bit about your experience in pastoring?

**R N** —I was the pastor of two French Baptist churches in New England, over the course of eight years. All the work was done for the adults in French and the work in the Sunday School and with the young people was done in English. There were some Sundays in which I preached six times so that I had quite an involvement in ministry in the summer months. I would make as many as eighty pastoral calls in one church and then in the other I would see just about the whole congregation in their homes because they all lived in the same village.

**R R J** —And all this time you were teaching and working on your Ph. D. at Harvard?

**R N** —Well, I was working on the Ph. D., yes, but that's just the point, I wasn't working very hard.

**R R J** —That's right, it took so long to complete this degree as you said earlier.

**R N** —Yes, I began teaching in 1945, but I had already been pastoring a church since May 1, 1939. I stayed with that church until the middle of 1946 when I resigned, got married, and found another person for the church who could do the work in French. Unfortunately this man stayed for only a year-and-a-half. He had an acceptable ministry but when he left the church was in the lurch because it was difficult to find somebody who could do the work in French. So I became the interim pastor for them, giving them Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. I then began to look for somebody else who could take over the responsibilities of the church. We finally had to make a decision about continuing in French. The members recognized that French had a limited outlook and that there were relatively few people of French descent who were gained in these churches during the time of my ministry. In spite of efforts to do precisely that, we were not very successful. I remained as interim pastor until one church united with an English speaking church. The church in Worcester ceased to operate since I was coming seventy miles to preach to the same three people week after week. When one of those three died I thought that God had liberated me from this responsibility and so the church closed its doors and the building was actually sold to



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Pentecostal people who seemed to have a better understanding of that particular area of the city.

**R R J**—Now, I'd like to ask you a few questions that you can give shorter answers to, I think. You mentioned apologetics earlier. Do you have any special interest in apologetics and, if so, how would you define your apologetic approach?

**R N**—Apologetics is quite simply the vindication of the truth of the Christian faith in the presence of people who have objections. It is not the same as evangelism. Evangelism attempts to reach people so that they can hear the call of God upon their lives. Apologetics attempts to show the validity of the Christian faith. Hopefully there might be some people who may be reached for true conversion, but the point in apologetics is vindication of the intellectual adequacy of the Christian faith. All who accept the Christian faith should have an interest in the ways in which this particular faith position can be presented and defended, thus in this sense it is not about an "apology" at all. It is an appropriate vindication of the truth of God and has an ability to adapt itself to other truths. In a sense, in the name of Christ, I am compelled to make a claim on all truth even though I do not presently possess all of it and may even be mistaken in some areas. The truth in itself is bound to be harmonious because God is truth.

**R R J**—In the Reformed community there has been an ongoing debate for fifty years or more between Dr. Cornelius Van Til with his presuppositional approach to apologetics and what is generally called evidentialism, or classical apologetics by some. Each has within it some modifications. Where would you put yourself in terms of this debate? I've never heard you talk about how you approach apologetics philosophically.

**R N**—Philosophically I think I would be closer to Van Til than the other perspective because I accept the authority of

the Bible as a fundamental starting point and then I provide arguments for doing this. It is not because I've been persuaded by some particular arguments that I get to the authority of the Bible. I get to the Bible in the first place because somebody has come and said look at this message, this is the Word of God. There I am put in contact with the truth. The Bible is the authority and has to be followed. After we have come to Christ we can see how truth claims can be properly vindicated on rational grounds, thus there is nothing irrational about accepting it. In this particular sense I do believe that the mind and its logic are not enemies of God. What is the enemy of God is any claim that our minds can somehow control the universe and that something that doesn't fit with our rational conception is to be rejected because in some way we fail to comprehend how this connects with another truth which God has also given us.

**R R J**—I would like for you to tell us a little about your own writing. I know that you've got two books that have recently come from Christian Focus Publications. You have contributed to several books over the years but you've never really written a systematic theology or authored larger books on theology until these two books. Tell us how you've approached your writing and tell us about these two new volumes recently released.

**R N**—One of these new volumes, *Standing Forth*, gathers several of the most important essays I have written for the purpose of interacting with the scholarly world on certain important issues. This particularly includes questions concerning the reality of propitiation as a proper description of how we relate to God. It also includes material that addresses the authority of Scripture and the propriety of the doctrine of inerrancy. There is a second Christian Focus book, *Our Sovereign Saviour*, that is made up primarily of addresses that I gave in connection with the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology over a number of years. In these sermons and lectures I write for intelligent lay people regarding some of the

major elements of the faith. I also have there a chapter on the Trinity in which I have a simple explanation of precisely what it is that is asserted by this great truth and why it is not contradictory. I expect that this latter book would have a much greater circulation than the first one but it is not one that the scholars would be attracted to.

**R R J** —Here's a little different question. Think for a moment about who are the most influential Christians you've ever known and why did they influence you?

**R N** —Well, Dr. Reuben Saillens, who was the headmaster of my Bible Institute is the most spiritual person I've known. He was a man wholly dedicated to the preaching of the gospel and possessed superb gifts as an orator. He had a way of presenting the truth and of also making it vibrate in the lives of the people who heard him that was actually remarkable. Among French speaking ministers he was without a doubt the most gifted evangelical orator we had, probably the most gifted orator that Protestantism had in the French language and perhaps the most gifted orator I have heard, period. He had studied at Spurgeon's College in England and also knew English well. He never came to earn degrees in theology but was a man with a profound grasp of the evangelical faith.

**R R J** —Who else influenced you?

**R N** —I was very greatly influenced by Professor Clarence Bouma. He combined a keen intellect and always addressed questions from a solid basis, showing how the evangelical position was genuinely a scholarly one because it functioned on the basis of what God had said and proceeded from there. People who did not build on a solid foundation were in fact not doing Christian scholarship because they were proceeding on the wrong basis. Dr. Bouma would take on the liberals and could make them furious in no time. That part was perhaps not desirable but I could see that here too I was greatly challenged by his ability to defend and vindicate the Christian

faith. Apologetics was important to me at that point in my study. Dr. Bouma was professor of apologetics and ethics at Calvin Theological Seminary.

**R R J** —You mentioned to me that you had four presidents while you were at Gordon. I know Dr. Harold J. Ockenga was one president when you were there. Tell us something about Harold J. Ockenga.

**R N** —Dr. Ockenga was president from 1969 to 1979. He had accepted the presidency for ten years. He had been a trustee of Gordon Divinity School and College before that time. He had also been the president of Fuller Theological Seminary. It seemed his major interest was Fuller. When he decided to continue to live in Boston he had to appoint another person as president of Fuller and his interest declined. His interest in Fuller also declined because the school itself had shifted in some of its major emphases. Dr. Ockenga felt Gordon was presenting the emphasis he cherished and thus he accepted the presidency. He actually resigned from Fuller at that point. He was a man of great stature, very significant in his life of prayer, and very significant in the way his leadership was exercised.

**R R J** —When did the merger with Conwell come? Was that under Dr. Ockenga's direction?

**R N** —It was shortly after his coming in 1969. The purchase of the new campus was engineered by Dr. Ockenga. He gave the school the visibility that it had not had before and was thoroughly committed to the inerrant Scripture. He was also committed to a life of obedience and dedication to God. His own spiritual life was quite a model. He was always attending chapel even though his presidency demanded many other things. When he resigned he still had an office and was coming to chapel even then. He had the ability to delegate tasks so that he would give some of the responsibilities of his office to others and then let them proceed with it, not always checking

on everything and challenging decisions. Whenever there was an important issue he was always present.

**R R J** —Iain Murray has written *Evangelicalism Divided*. We published a review of the book in the *Reformation & Revival Journal* last year. This review was critical of his overall thesis. It was written by David F. Wright, a professor of church history from Scotland, and a contributing editor to our journal. You've also done a review of the book that was published in the *Founder's Journal*. Tell us what you think is the strength of the book and also its weakness.

**R N** —It's always nice to start with the strengths because that shows that you are capable of recognizing some good features even when you have some criticisms to make. I would say the strength of this book is that Rev. Murray has documented a certain slippage that has occurred in certain sections of the evangelical world. That there are people who use the name evangelical who have in fact dangerously compromised the evangelical truth, particularly in relationship to the Scripture, is a fact. Murray blames this erosion, at least in the main, on four people. These people are seen as those who misled others. These four are John R. Stott, James I. Packer, Billy Graham, and Harold J. Ockenga. All four of these people are evangelical heroes to me. I think very well of them. I don't think they are responsible for this slippage because they themselves have not slipped at any major point. It is extremely unfair to blame them and Murray's argument is thus very one-sided, as if evangelicalism had really slipped as a complete movement. In fact there have been enormous gains made by evangelicalism, even more than may have been anticipated. For instance we now have the majority of the seminary students studying in evangelical schools.

**R R J** —You went through a transition in your understanding of the role of women in the church and pastoral ministry. Tell our readers how and why you began this change?

**R N** —I was raised in a very traditional atmosphere in Reformed churches in Switzerland where women were not ordained. They were often permitted to have some types of leadership, particularly in missions and Sunday school, but besides they were not given many other opportunities. When I studied at the Bible Institute, the daughter of one of the leaders became the pastor of a very buoyant and vibrant Baptist church in Paris upon the death of her husband (the pastor). This was also a missionary church. She attempted to justify this on the basis of a failure to recognize the ministry potential for women. I was honestly not very favorable to her teaching ministry. She was also one of the teachers at the Bible Institute and I was quite inclined to confront her about this role.

At the same time I had to recognize that in the Bible, at least generally speaking, God has high regard for women and their protection. I saw that in the New Testament you find leadership among women and that the support for excluding them from ministry at certain points appears to be grounded in only a few passages. The only text which really presents a serious difficulty, to my mind, is 1 Timothy 2:9 or, in context, verses 8-15. I became convinced by a thorough examination of this passage that there are very serious difficulties in this text. I then came to conclude that viewing this text so as to not allow women to teach at all must be a faulty interpretation. Particularly, I thought, this was true outside of the church, where of course there are a great many women who were teaching in primary school, in the secondary schools and even at the university level. I believed the brilliance of the feminine mind had already been demonstrated in a way that was explicit. So I was inclined to favor a more generous approach to women than that generally seen in conservative churches. I finally found that I had no difficulty recognizing that this professor at the Bible Institute was herself a superb preacher. She was doing extremely good work at preaching even though she was somewhat crusty in her attempts to defend the position that women should be accepted in this way. When I came to Gordon I found an atmosphere that was

even more favorable to women. A. J. Gordon himself had taken the position, before his death, of defending the propriety of women in missions. A passage like “your sons and your daughters would prophesy” (from the Old Testament) was proclaimed by Peter under the fullness of the Holy Spirit. From my viewpoint he is saying that both young men and young women will experience “the outpouring of my Spirit.” There seem to be some passages that implied more praise for women than these people were actually ready to acknowledge.

Well, to speed the story ahead a bit, at Gordon we had women students. I was willing to recognize for them the call of God and was certainly able to see this in terms of their gifts and ability since they were in no way inferior to men. I saw that women were able to think theologically, not just intuitively. I came to the place where I could admire the gifts that God had given to our sisters.

Well, we had one very brilliant student who had become a professor, Dr. David Scholer. He was a strong advocate for biblical equality and as a result he became a very strong leader among the women at Gordon. They viewed him as their principal hero in validating their position. Dr. Scholer accepted the call to become the dean of Northern Baptist Theological Seminary. He had some reservations about inerrancy, although he was very definitely a careful expositor of God’s Word. Inerrancy was a little too technical a word for him so he had questions about it and decided to leave Gordon. When he left I began to think “Scholer has now left so who will the women have to advocate their position? It seems to me that in the faculty there ought to be one person these women can count on to represent their point of view.” When I thought about this I felt God’s call to become an advocate for them. They were there in the seminary, yet there were many people who were opposed to their call. Some students were very thoughtless, very tactless. In fact there was a response among professors that was also very hurtful at times.

At that point then I began to reflect further about it. There was considerable agitation in the Christian world so I began to

study the matter and I became unhappy with the interpretation of 1 Timothy 2 that made it simply a cultural issue.

**R R J** —That’s one of the two passages those who differ with you would go to and argue against your view. Give us a brief response to the 1 Timothy 2 question and how you arrived at your understanding.

**R R J** —The passage in 1 Corinthians 14 is actually very easy. What Paul is objecting to is a kind of babbling in the middle of service, or an interrupting of the proper exposition of Scripture by raising questions intemperately in the middle of a service. I think it means that when you have a common service there ought to be respect and moderation so that all the speakers can continue to speak and not be interrupted.

**R R J** —And the women should not act inappropriately then?

**R N** —Yes, that’s right. And remember that this was addressed to women in Corinth because they were the ones that were doing it. They were acting as babes in Christ.

**R R J** —Now, back to the Timothy text. That’s more difficult, isn’t it?

**R N** —I felt Timothy needed first to be understood in terms of what God *permits*, not what he *forbids*. I think the question often asked is really the wrong question. I am ready to confess that I do not know exactly what Paul forbids but I know some things that he clearly permits. I find the things that he permits in the rest of the Bible.

**R R J** —You would interpret 1 Timothy 2 in the light of the abundant evidence found elsewhere. You would admit that it’s a difficult text but insist that it’s not the normative text which should judge everything else in the Bible?

**R N** —That’s correct. When you look at the Amazon River you

get the direction of the major flow and currents, not from some side eddy. I consider the passage in 1 Timothy as a kind of eddy thus I would argue that we need to consider it very carefully. When I look at this text I find eight major exegetical difficulties in this passage. As a result I would have to say that I don't know for sure what is forbidden here, but I know what is permitted based on a vast amount of other biblical evidence. I believe that it is foolish, in the light of what is permitted, to forbid things on the basis of this passage that are permitted elsewhere. It is just as foolish to doubt in the dark what you have seen in the light.

**R R J** —One final question here. I am interested in the early church and how it saw the role of women. It would appear that in the Book of Acts, at least, women certainly prophesied. This means they spoke in public. They had the gifts of the Spirit to do that ministry it seems. When did this practice begin to change? Was this in the second and third century and what evidence do we have that women did have such teaching roles earlier?

**R N** —The problems relate to those statements that appear later, especially in speakers or writers in the later centuries starting in the post-Nicene period. In the ante-Nicene period it is not very nice to speak that way but it is true that even there quite a number of leaders are masculine names. It is also true that Jesus chose twelve men as the apostles and that the term bishop in 1 Timothy is in the masculine. Even the term *deacon* is masculine but then we know that Phoebe was a deacon so the masculine term is used there. So the legitimacy of the ministry of women is not so apparent in the early centuries, even in the period before Nicea. I do think such a ministry was exercised because the church had to be in multiple places and Christians could not gather in very large numbers in one fixed place because of the persecutions. If they did they would be clay pigeons for the Roman soldiers. So, it is after Nicea and the conversion of Constantine that it became possible for Christians to meet in large buildings. In fact there are

no churches that are still standing, or buildings that still exist that were present at this earlier point. The earliest church building in the West is in Venice. The church in Venice was established because people were fleeing from the barbarian invasions and this is where the earliest churches were built.

**R R J** —But you report that you saw a mosaic in which there was a woman in the mosaic who would have been a bishop by the way she was pictured.

**R N** —She is thought of as a bishop. There certainly are women who were named bishops that we find evidence of in the catacombs.

**R R J** —And then, of course, you have the case of Junia.

**R N** —Yes, the Junia in Romans 16:7. Junia was a well-known feminine name. Junias was totally unknown. There is nobody called Junias in antiquity. So it appears a bit strange to see Paul commenting in Romans 16 about a woman who he says was an apostle. She was among the various people who were called apostles, thus she was a remarkable woman together with her husband who is also named. This is quite remarkable. Chrysostom says that this is an indication of the grace of God that can be extended even to women. Women are thus understood as equal.

Now we have people saying that equality is granted but equality was never recognized so this is really not important. But this really is a break with tradition. The question is not so much how can we interpret the Bible, or what does the Bible actually command, but simply how did the church understand it and practice it. And at that precise point all tradition must be corrected in terms of the actual statements that the Scripture makes.

**R R J** —So we're back to the authority of the Bible and *sola scriptura*?



**R N** —Yes, we are, but I am not in favor of neglecting the significance of tradition. Tradition has taught us many things and to deny that you have anything good in the whole history of the church suggests that the Holy Spirit was very inactive for two thousand years. I am willing to recognize the leadership of God and his Spirit in the church. Thus I also believe the creeds of the church are significant. But creeds are not the final and abiding word, only Scripture is.