

# OpenTheo

## Stephen J. Nichols on R.C. Sproul

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### **Life and Books and Everything** - Clearly Reformed

Stephen J. Nichols is President of Reformation Bible College, Chief Academic Officer for Ligonier, and host of the 5 minutes in Church History podcast. He's the co-editor of Crossway's Theologians of the Christian Life series, and the reason he joins us for this episode is his new biography of R.C. Sproul.

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Have you seen that before? I had and I think his one character, I think the Tucker character had an eye patch. So this guy is so cool. Let's just put it up.

Yeah. I mean look at his name Stefan Cassidy, Tucker McCall. Have you guys ever done the game where you find your soap opera name? You take your middle name plus the street that you grew up on.

So mine is Lee Parkside, which is not a bad soap opera name. Colin, what would Christopher Rural Route one? Nope. Nope.

No. Just Gerald Blackstone. Oh, that's pretty good.

It's like a Steve Espionage novel character there. Mine would be similar to Collins. It would be Jeffrey Rural Drive number two.

Oh, you rural folks. Okay. The real Steven J. Nichols is president of Reformation Bible College, chief academic officer for Ligonier and a Ligonier teaching fellow.

He hosts a number of podcasts, five minutes in church history and others, the author of numerous books and resources related to Jonathan Edwards. And he is the co-editor of the Crossways, theologians of the Christian life series. So good to have you with us and most important, Steve and I once had a hamburger together in Hamburg.

We did. I totally remember our hamburger in Hamburg. Very poetic.

Yes. It was wonderful. All right, we're going to talk about RC.

This is a great book. Now, I know you say that at the beginning of the podcast, but really, I thought I'd read this over a couple of weeks. It's 350 pages when you get all the appendices.

I think I read it in two or three nights. I just couldn't put it down. It's really well written.

You've done a really good job. So congratulations on that. It really is in the pictures in the middle are great and tells RC story.

So well done on this really fantastic book. Steve, when did you first meet RC? So I was college student. This was back in the PCRT days.

The Philadelphia Conference Reform Theology hosted their 10th press in Philadelphia. And I remember it very vividly, a friend of mine and I were standing in line for the book signing at these conferences and classmate of mine. And he had one of RC's books.

He was getting it signed. And as RC was signing it, he asked him, "Dr. Sproul, by any chance, are you going to be speaking in New Jersey soon?" And RC Sproul looked up at him and said, "If I am going to be in New Jersey, it's not going to be by chance." So that

was my first personal meeting with Dr. Sproul.

So I decided I'm not going to say anything. I just handed him my book and had him sign it. And then several decades later, I met him again, came down here for a conference back in 2010, I believe.

And had a dinner with him. I was all nervous meeting Dr. Sproul. And honestly, I remember within just a couple minutes just being put at perfect ease with Dr. Sproul with Vesta and just had an enjoyable evening with him.

What did he think of you working on this biography? So the first time I asked him to do it, this was back a few years. We had dinner together, RC and Vesta. And I said, "Dr.

Sproul, what do you think about my writing biography?" I said, "Oh, that's great. Great idea. On who?" And I said, "Well, you." And he goes, "On me.

There's no story here." And then I think Vesta very quickly said, "Oh, we're private people." So I thought, I'll see how this conversation goes. But eventually, he came around and thought there might be some merit in it and was very gracious and gave his full blessing to the project. And I was able to spend many sessions with him just sitting in his home with an open mic and just talking about his life.

What was your process? Say a little bit more about that for doing the biography. How did you do your research? And was it hard? That's interesting that they would say they're private people. Was it hard to get access to really uncover their story? So one of the things that made it hard, Kevin, is that they don't keep things, the sprouls.

Like, they're constantly throwing out stuff. I couldn't even find the original manuscript for the holiness of God. I think they just threw it out when they made the move down here.

They had correspondence with Vantil. I think about five letters passed between RC and Vantil. They don't have it.

So I know you think of all this. But there's still a lot of things. The main sources were the sessions that I had with him recording.

Then after his passing, Vesta and I had a few more sessions to fill in some details. He did record some memoir sessions, video record with Ligonier, so I'd access to those. I had his original notebooks from his student days and the lecture outlines for his early lectures at the study center, up in Ligonier.

And then I had his library. And that was a lot of fun because I could sort of go through and see the sources and read his margin notes. So those were some of the sources that I had.

What sort of biography would you say this is? I mean, last year I interviewed James

Eglinton, of course, his great biography of Boving, a critical biography, not negative, but a critical, proper academic biography of Boving. So that's one kind. There's the John Piper biographies of heroes that it's sophisticated but it's meant to inspire and then there's missionary hagiography that's just, rah, rah.

What sort of category would you put this biography of sprawl? I would say it is not in the heavy academic category, but neither is it in the sort of inspirational approach. I think it's somewhere in between. I recognize that there's going to be more biographies to come and I hope there are and I hope there are that that are of that academic nature.

I think there could be dissertations to come. So I did recognize that maybe this could be a good source for them. So I wanted to be careful and thoughtful in the research and present it well and present sort of the whole story so that as biographers, further biographers come along, this might be a good starting point for them that they can build off of.

But I find, and I've haven't done a full, this is the first biography I wrote, you know, from terms of life to death, I had biographical material and other books that I've written or written historical theological books on historical figures. But when I do write biographical material, I find the person commendable and I want to commend them to the reader. I want to say, yeah, this person wasn't perfect, certainly, but I think this person was a faithful servant.

And here's what I think was their life was about. Here's what some of their key ideas were. And I think if you spent some time with this person, it could be helpful to you.

So I wanted to cover his life. And I did want to cover what I thought were some of his main contributions to the church, to the Christian tradition. So I wanted to sort of pause at a few key points and elaborate a little bit to sort of stake out some claims where I think our seed made an made a good contribution and actual contribution.

Well, you've done that really well and I think it does fit that middle ground. It's not a critical biography in the academic sense, but it's not a hundred pages. It's not a funeral eulogy either just let's celebrate the man clearly.

You're sympathetic to him as all of us are and want to celebrate lots that's worth celebrating but you do a nice job of telling the story with good prose in a way that's obviously appreciative of RC without getting so purple and it's prose that we lose sight of a man. Let me ask a multi part question and then see what Colin and Justin want to chime and I got lots of questions we won't get through all of them but give me a few bullet points here shaping influences on RC and I'm going to give you four categories Pittsburgh, Gerstner, Burkauer, and Vesta. Say a little bit about those shaping influences on RC as a man and a theologian.

I think Pittsburgh has a lot to do with it. The more I got into the story, I sensed the texture of time and place, you know, I think it's true of all of us we live in contexts, and we live in a context of our times and over a place. You know, all about Pittsburgh is the place that impacts RC there was a toughness to him there was something that was real about him.

He had clearly an academic mind but so many people with academic minds have difficulty relating to audiences or relating to laity. And there was just a common man down to earth, nature to RC, and I think a lot of that has to do with Pittsburgh. There was definitely a toughness to RC.

He loved Luther because Luther was the one who took the courageous stand. And I think you can see that in Pittsburgh. And then of course he was shaped by Pittsburgh athletics.

So Steelers and Pirates were very much a part of that. So I think Pittsburgh was a huge influence just the place he wrote it himself. You can take the man out of Pittsburgh, but you can't take Pittsburgh out of the man.

You mentioned Gershner. So here he is in a liberal seminary. And Gershner is his lifeline.

You know, he comes into a class. We have a professor here who also went to Pittsburgh. And the Old Testament professor there would start the class off by holding up a Bible and saying, this is not the word of God.

This is not the word of God. This is not the word of God. He'd say it three times every single class he taught.

He mentions, RC mentions sitting in his New Testament survey class and the professor saying, okay, next is the book of Romans. But there's nothing really here. So we're just going to skip and go right to the Corinthians.

So here you go to seminary and you spend literally zero time in Romans. So now we've got Gershner who just was, he describes Gershner as a lifeline for him through seminary. And then Gershner's toughness.

RC saw Gershner's mind like a bear trap. And also Gershner's just labor. He worked hard as a scholar.

So I think all that influenced him. Then we get to Burke Hour. Of course, the funny thing is RC goes to the Netherlands is not knowing a word of Dutch.

And he spent an hour to work through, I mean, all day to work through a page of 12 hours. Yeah, 12 hours, one page. So it's funny, he went to Gershner.

Gershner hands in the reading list for his first class. Or Burke Hour. I'm sorry, Burke Hour.

Hands in, pushes the reading list across DRC and RC reads it. So many books in Dutch, so many books in Latin or German and so many books in French. And Burke Hour could see the expression of RC's phrase.

And RC couldn't totally out himself. So all he could bring himself to say to Burke Hour was, I don't, my French is not that good. Burke Hour said, "Oh, give me the list back.

Takes list back. Crosses off the French and adds three more Dutch titles." And RC said, "Truth, neither was my Dutch and neither was my German, but I just couldn't tell." But Burke Hour too, just at the time, he probably was the leading theologian in Europe. And then the other thing that was really fascinating was Burke Hour had just gotten back from Vatican II, where he had as his roommate Hans Kung.

So here RC in this classmates are getting a first row seat, a color commentary on Vatican II. So very interesting. And then Vest.

Yeah. Yeah. You know, Kevin, this is the thing I really enjoyed about the book as I got into it.

In the one sense, it's a love story, the story of RC. It really is. They meet when he's in the first grade, she's in the second.

They don't really start dating till junior high years. Then they get engaged to college married before he graduates. It really is the story of RC, and she continues to this day to be involved in Ligonier Ministries and helps us out with editing things.

Yeah. It's sort of like Martin and Katie. You know, it's the same thing with RC and Vest.

So it cannot, cannot over us make the influence. Yeah. That was a pleasant surprise.

I mean, I knew that the, the influence she had, but to see that come through often in the biography. And, you know, all of our heroes have, have clay feet in different ways, but to see a genuine warm marriage, even it's captured in some of the pictures and their zest and their smile for life and for each other was, was really sweet to see. And I'm glad you brought that out.

Justin, you have a question. Yeah, Steve, thanks for publishing the book with Crossway. It's such an honor to be publishing your biography.

And I'm really glad to be talking to you. How would you describe the way in which RC was able to combine kind of gravity and gladness? I'm trying to think of anybody else that I would compare him to that could have the sort of twinkle in his eye, the ability to just let out a gargantuan laugh. And yet also have the reverential seriousness and gravitas.

Can you talk a little bit about where that comes from? Yeah, I'd be glad to. You know,

first, Justin, you, you thank me. And I know this is going to sound like a mutual admiration society here, but really, I'm so grateful for Crossway for this project.

And you personally, you were, you were right there from the beginning with it before I talked to Dr. Sprole about it. So thanks for, for all you've done to make this possible. You're, as they all say, you're the Forrest Gump with Evangelicals and just show up everywhere.

So I'm not sure there's a whole lot that happens that doesn't have your fingerprint somewhere behind it. I often think of Justin as Forrest Gump. That's for another day.

Yeah, I just like to box the talk. So the serious question here. I think, well, for one, let's just call it for what it was.

He was mischievous. There was a mischievous sense of humor to him that that was just fun to be around. And you never, first of all, you can never keep up with him.

So you didn't even try. But you also never, you weren't quite ready for it. And I think people weren't quite ready for it sometimes.

They expected some sort of seriousness, some sort of whatever, and then he would just deliver this one liner. I remember a quick story and then I'll answer your question. There's many stories as you like.

We love stories. So when we were doing the dedication of the new building over here. It was the spring of 2017.

RC was there. We got a mestalers construction helmet to wear for the groundbreaking. So I dug up a part of the sod prior to this and sort of left it loose on the ground there.

And I told the arch bro that, you know, when it comes time, I'll take my toe and I'll just sort of point right to where it is and you just lift it up with shovel. So I point my toe. He picks it up with shovel.

Then he looks up at me. He still sort of bent over it's shovel. He looks up at me gives me this little wink.

Then he looks at my shoes. And I knew exactly what he's going to do. And so he throws the sod onto my shoes onto my dress shoes while I was standing there.

And of course, no one's seeing this and it's off camera because the camera is, you know, just wasted up. So anyway, that was Dr. Sprole. He was mischievous and funny.

Al Moller says, you know, conference speaker dinners are just boring when RC was not there. When RC was there, it was laughter and when he wasn't there, you have a bunch of introverts, you know, sitting around eating dinner. I think, and I mentioned this a little



bit in the book, you know, it's when we realize, when we realize what salvation means when we realize that Christ has taken in my place, the wrath of God upon himself.

Then we can have true joy in the gospel. And I think there's a, there's something to that. There's, there's something to being aware of what redemption really means.

And if there's anything that Dr. Sproule vividly grasped, it was what redemption really meant. He knew the holiness of God. He knew the active and passive obedience of Christ.

He knew the atonement. These were doctrines. He really knew vividly.

And I think that gave him that outlook on life that could be at once serious and at once joking. I mean, you know, this, everyone knows the little what's wrong with you people, that thing that came out of the Q and A. I was, I was there was at that Q and A session when that happened. I sit next to Derek Thomas.

And we could both see it in our C's expression. We could see that our C was getting that he was angered by this question. We could see it.

And he says, what's, you know, what's wrong with you people and the audience started to laugh because they thought he was joking. And he was, I'm serious. He turns around and says to the, to the audience.

You know, these are all his students. I'm serious. And Derek and I both were doing one of these.

Can we, can we step back here? But, but that was our C. And, and so there was that gravitas to, to laughter. And, and I think I do think it has to do with something with understanding ultimate truths. You know, it's, it's hard.

There aren't many men of his stature and preaching and intellect and influence who are genuinely really funny. And, and, and, and, and RC certainly was, and that's a really important part. And I'm sure he would say this about himself and you would too.

It's not some, that's not something you can learn. I mean, you can't. He wasn't, it was who he was.

And it wasn't something that he thought of a strategy that I'm going to now be funny. It was his very, in some ways boyish, impish personality. You say at one point, you know, he and in Gersner both liked to growl.

They were, they were growlers. But he also had that big wide smile and laughter. And I mean, I, I didn't know him like, like you did.

I just met him a few times. But boy, I really missed that. And we really, we really could

use that proper.

I like gravity and gladness. And I think that's a very good, very good, piperian phrase there, Justin. Colin.

I would love to know Steve more about Ligonier Valley study center. I am too young to be able to relate to the study center wave, but it looks like for the late 60s into the 70s. That was a really big deal.

And I think what I did in your biography of sprawl is what he would call Gabbfest. One reason why I noticed that is because at West Hopel Presbyterian Church, Tim Keller would go on to host something into the 1am, 2am called Gabbfest. He learned it from RC and at Ligonier Valley study center, where he and Kathy had both participated.

So tell me a little bit about the real Ligonier before Ligonier Ministries with its video and relocate to Orlando, but the real location of it. And the study center phenomenon more generally, which I don't think really continues much, not in the same way, at least as it was at the time. Great question, Colin, and it was really a fun part of the book to write.

So it's in Stalstown, Pennsylvania, which is in the Ligonier Valley, which is about an hour's drive to the east and a little bit to the south of Pittsburgh. It's a beautiful place of the country. It's the Allegheny Mountains, which is part of the foothills of the vast Appalachian Mountains.

Just a lot of up down, twist and turn, rural roads, very rural, very secluded, lots of snow in the winter. And this is where it was. That area was sort of the playground for the rich of Pittsburgh.

So the Kaufman's, Frank Lloyd Wright's probably the most famous house in America, falling water by Frank Lloyd Wright for the Kaufman's is only about 15 minutes away from the study center. The Hellman's and Dora Hellman was the benefactor of Ligonier, her husband, James, John Hartwell, Hellman was billionaire, live there. The melons, carnegies.

So this is just a beautiful part of the country, Ligonier. In '71, Dora bought a 52 acre farm and turned it over to the sprawls, had an old stone house on it and had their private home, which they called Lecture House. It was a sprawling one story home.

They knocked out all the walls and a sort of kitchen dining room living room area, and that could hold 80 people, especially this is the 70s, right? These are teenagers and they're sitting on the floor. And they would just come and sit in RC's home and be taught by RC. And one of the most popular things they did were these GAB Fests.

And it was literally any question. And RC, he wanted the study center to be a place where people could ask real questions and get real answers. I mean, this was a time of

the Cultural Revolution, Sexual Revolution.

Kent State is literally just across the river, an hour or so and a half drive away. So the Democratic Convention and Streets of Chicago, the end of the 60s, these were tumultuous times. Liberalism was a muck in the denominational churches, RC's denomination.

And so they wanted this place to be a place where people would get real answers and for RC that would mean for scripture. He wasn't alone as the teacher. Early on, they brought in teachers that Alec Mottier was an early regular teacher there, brought some faculty down from Gordon Gershner would come and teach.

And they would teach courses on theology, on biblical studies, and people just came for it. And they'd sit there and take these classes. And people could also come stay for a couple months and RC would give them their own study syllabus to study.

Russ Poliam was one of those. And he had already had his bachelor's degree, but felt like he needed some theological training. And so I believe he was at the rest says all he remembers is chopping an infinite amount of wood.

And so he said, well, he remembers other things too. But this is it. And like you mentioned Tim and Kathy Keller were there.

Here's an interesting fact. RC married Tim and Kathy Keller. So there's quite a legacy there.

But there were also unnamed folks who went. And the book story of this kid who was at parking lot and Roblle Mall and carload of girls shows up and says, hey, we're going out to the mountains for Bible study. You want to come along? And he's like, sure, hops in the car.

Next thing he knows is that study center. And he's sitting there under RC's teaching just keeps coming back and back kicking up. Well, anyway, he got a copy of, we put out a little at Ligonier.

We put out just the Ligonier chapter for ministry partners. He got it. He read it.

He sent me a text and he said, that's me. And here, this story that I'd heard is this guy. And he went on.

It was an engineer. But he's still facially teaching Sunday school and has raised his family's Sunday school teacher. And they're still using the Sproul video series for Sunday school class.

So just so many people went through the study center and it was just a place where they could get teaching and teaching a God's Word. Was it a sustainable, is that kind of why it

died out in general? Was it a sustainable lifestyle for the teachers? Because it is very much, it hearkens back to Luther house. You make a reference there.

That's the historic example that you give. I think we could throw Edwards into there as well. That was really how pastoral training.

You're the expert in Edwards, but that's how pastoral training was done domestically in the home. Of course, the most famous example. Which is more of a contemporary.

Right. And they did meet with the Shafers before they founded it. And Shafer warned them that the toll is going to be on your family because this is 24/7.

And so after a couple years of this, the sprouls moved about a mile off of the property because it really was no rest for them. And it's meals. It's being host and hostess and it's teaching.

And then what happened was you ask if it's sustainable, what they began to realize in the mid 80s was that through the reach of video, the VHS tapes. That they could have a much more extensive outreach without this 52 acre campus, which demanded a ton of the staff. And so that was really the decision to move Ligonier to Orlando in the mid 80s.

Which they did in 1984. So your question about it, was it a sustainable model? It was for a good dozen year run, but not probably sustainable for much past that. Steve, when do you think humanly speaking, RC new or other people new? Yeah, this is going to be a big deal.

I mean, you mentioned a billionaire benefactor. So somebody is seeing something that seems really significant in our C's ministry. What I was reminded of reading the biography is how parapetetic he was early on.

I mean, you talk about Amsterdam and the Netherlands and New Wilmington again, Wynnum, Massachusetts, at Gordon, Philadelphia, a Sunday school classroom in Orland, orland Presbyterian Church, Cincinnati. I mean, he went, he bounced around to a lot of different places. When do you think putting your historians head on? You would say, yep, that's when it started to go big and that's when people knew.

Yeah, this is going to make a big impact. So I do think they never started Ligonier with the idea that this was going to be huge. I really think they started Ligonier just because it was something that was put in front of them.

They wanted to be faithful. Two things led into that. One was teaching that Sunday school in the suburb of Philadelphia was Professor Gordon.

He's 28 29 going on 30. He's a seminary professor, really at the height of what his profession he wanted to be. And by his own accounting study was bored.

And the students were sort of, you know, they were busy, they had jobs, they weren't always paying, they weren't totally into everything classroom. Then he'd teach this Sunday school class to these Philadelphia professionals, lawyers and whatnot, and they were eating it up. And this was a set of schools class on Christology.

And I really think it was there at that Sunday school class in Orland that the vision for Ligonier Ministries was born. Then he went to Saranac Lake and did a Young Life Conference. And this was really a significant moment.

And Dora Holman was a supporter of a young life. She was there. Our seed did his first holiness of God series there.

And after a couple of the sessions, she pulled in the side and she said, "If you could do anything in the world, what would it be?" And he said, "I'd start a study center." And the wheels got turning and within a year, it's Ligonier. I think what happened was nobody was doing this, Kevin. Nobody was taking the 18 and 20 something seriously in the 70s.

They were being written off by a lot of people. Now we live in the age of so much lay education, but there was none of that back in the 70s. We're on the other end, Colin, of your observation of the young WrestleCyn Reformed.

Here we are, what, back '06? We're 15 years past that. Well, we're before that was even there. We didn't have the conference circuit.

We didn't have podcasts. So this was a voice in the wilderness. And I think it just connected with people because it was just, it was not patronizing them.

It was not dodging questions. It was just serious teaching for people who wanted, who were thoughtful Christians and wanted to know God's word better and know who God was. So I think that was the secret sauce.

And then it just kept as they were faithful. The other thing is, and I love this about Ligonier, and I think this is true of a lot of organizations, they're conventional and confessional. But they're very innovative when it comes to technology, and they're very, very happy to use innovative means to get the message out.

And so they were doing it. Ligonier had to send churches cassette players so that they could watch a video cassette. I mean, that's how cutting nobody was, had a video cassette player in 1977.

So they're having to send BCRs to churches so they could watch tape. So from the beginning, Ligonier was always exploring how technology could be good through good stewardship of technology, get the message out. You say in the book that RC was a populist, which you sort of been talking about, wanted to speak to lay people a popularizer.

You know, one of the criticisms, and I think it's unfair. But how would you respond, some people would say, even recently, reading somebody say, "Oh, RC and sort of others of his ilk, they never were well respected among real theologians or real academics and sort of poo poo-ing the kind of reach that RC had. Did he care about those sort of criticisms and what would be your response to those?" I think he was very capable academically.

And, you know, his first piece that he published was a journal article. And it was on Luther and the solas. And I was first seeing published journal article with the footnotes academic peer review piece.

Then the second thing he published, and this was back, you know, there was a time when Christianity today was a meaty publication back in the 50s, 60s. It had gravitas. So he published it.

His second piece was in Christianity today on existentialism and human autonomy. That was the title of this article. I think he could have done those kinds of things.

But he was in the academy. He wasn't Gordon College as a professor. He wasn't Conwell Theological Seminary.

Was invited to go up with the Conwell faculty when Conwell merged with Gordon and chose not to do that. And instead saw himself, as I said, he sort of was bored in the seminary classroom. Got really excited just talking to lay people about theology.

And so I think he said, "Yes, there's the academy." But that's not his calling. He just really enjoyed writing books for people and the people. Great.

I'm going to keep going. Justin and Colin, if you have something, jump in because I got lots of questions. I want to talk about some of the controversies that he was involved in.

So say a little bit about RC's role in the inerrancy controversy, and then we'll jump a couple of decades forward and talk about ECT evangelicals and Catholics together. What was Dr. Sproul's concern? And what was his contribution in those two really significant controversies in the evangelical world? Yeah. So the issue in his denomination was the authority and reliability of Scripture.

And then that spills out into every other issue. And so he saw at a firsthand look at liberalism, both through his college and through his seminary days, and the church he grew up in. So he was well aware of what inerrancy meant and the necessity of it.

And at the same time, he was recognizing that this could be a rallying point for folks in various denominations who were another denominations were facing the same battles, be it in Southern Baptists or even Lutherans in the Missouri Synod Lutherans, and of course, Presbyterians, and then just across the board. And so early on, they convened a

conference at Ligonier. It wasn't able to be held in Ligonier had to be held a little bit away at a retreat center.

And this was in '73, '74, and it was on inerrancy, and a book came out of that. And out of that then later came the Chicago statement, 1978. But back in that '73, '74 conference, John Warwick Montgomery was there.

A young John Frame was there. Peter Jones was there from West Coast, California. And J.I. Packer was there.

His first time, R.C. met. His book, "Fundamentals and the Word of God" had just come out, and he was invited to come and speak. And that's where they began their friendship.

And then that moved into forming the International Council of Biblical Inerrancy, and that was the Chicago statement. And R.C. is young in the '70s, but he's right in there, and of course joined by Jim Boyce. And so that organization had a 10-year lifespan to just speak into the life of the Church on the Doctrine of Inerrancy.

And its role was a significant part of it and made a significant contribution to it. So before we jump over to ECT, I want to, and then we'll get to Colin, talk about Jim Boyce, because for some listeners here, especially if they're younger than us, they may not know his name. I remember I was in seminary.

He died in 2000, I think? 2000? Yes. Yeah. Hearing that he was in a Bible study with Walt Kaiser, who said he had been diagnosed with cancer, and then it was so soon afterward that he passed away, and was such a significant figure, and for people who are younger than us, they may know some of his commentaries, but not realize the significant role that he played.

What was their friendship like between Jim and R.C.? Because they were very close, though they were different sorts of people. What was their relationship like? So when R.C. was at Conwell, that's when they first met, and that was when Jim first went to 10th Press. Curiously enough, they lived near each other in Pittsburgh, and grew up near each other.

They were in rival schools, and they would have competed against each other in athletics, but in his senior years, Jim's dad, who was a prominent surgeon in Pittsburgh, sent Jim to the Stony Brook School in New York. Otherwise, they probably would have met on football field, but they did meet there in Philadelphia. Then once the study center got up, and then the mid-70s, they just furthered that friendship, and then Darsproel was invited over to early PCRT conferences, and then they really became foxhole buddies through the Enerity and through ICBI and through their relationship there.

And they continued that. We're going to get to it, but they continued that relationship

through ECT. And the interesting thing is, too, the families were close.

So now Vesta, the widow, and Linda, Joyce, Jim's widow, still occasionally call on the phone. And when we had the funeral here, Kevin, you were here for the memorial service that we had. All three of -- Linda was not able to travel, but the three daughters all came.

And it was just a really sweet moment to spend some time with them and just remember how the kindness of RC to them. So this is a true friendship, and one of the most beautiful things I think in the book is not my writing, but it's the letter that RC wrote. That was very new, Jim.

It's so touching. And I put that in there because I don't think people who see the platform speakers, they don't realize sometimes how deep some of these friendships they do have with each other and how important they are. And that just really comes out in that letter that RC wrote.

All of a sudden, RC's writing, and then he just stops and he says, "I love you, Jim." And it's just sort of sense. This was a true friendship here among these men. Now, they were very different.

They used to tease them as the odd couple of Felix and Oscar, because boys would always have the buttoned up prep school, Princeton look, and RC would be the tough guy for Pittsburgh. So they played that up quite a bit, the image of the two. Yeah.

Colin. My question was going to be about evangelicals and Catholics together, so I hope to segue us into that one. Thanks, Steve, for including my first time hearing, RC, in your book.

That was really one of my exposures to RC. I know him about him early on because of older students that introduced me to his writing about Calvinism against Plagianism and semi-Plagianism, which you kindly had mentioned, actually in the book, because I talk about it in *Young Wresses Reform* back in 2008. But then I ended up writing about evangelicals and Catholics together later on.

In college, it was RC who was my lifeline to take up a critique. And many of my mentors, whether it be Packer or Timothy George or others, were on that other side. So I've always been on the on-sproles side, even with some people that I'm really close to, but help explain the concept that I had not seen before, but I think it made a lot of sense here of studied ambiguity.

Because you really, you come back to that a number of times in the book that RC's big problem was with studied ambiguity. As he saw it in Vatican II, we talked about that earlier, and then through evangelical theology, and especially I think maybe culminating in ECT, which reminded me of why I had agreed with him about this. But that concept, I haven't quite heard it explained that way.



So I'd love to have you explain more to the listeners, what is studied ambiguity and why did RC hate it? I think he's a valued precision. And so the opposite of studied ambiguity is to be precise. And the idea of a studied ambiguity is to allow enough latitude for there to be differences under the same umbrella.

And sometimes studied ambiguity is in what you're not saying. And so this is why you go back to the statement on an erancy. One of the most important parts of that were the affirmations and denials.

And if you ask RC, he would say a really important part of that are the denials, because sometimes you have to say, and this is what we are not including. So we are saying this, and here's our parameters, but let's make it explicit. We are excluding this.

And so studied ambiguity is, allows for more latitude and doesn't make the negating statements. It sort of will look for what we have in common, but not, let's not drill down too deeply here, because we'll find their differences. And the goal of staying together here is more important.

And so let's put the emphasis on that. And I think one of the things that I've seen that I tried to bring out in the book of RC's methodology, in addition to being a populist, and some of the things we were talking about, just a really good communicator, was precision. He valued precision, and especially theological precision.

I mean, his reading mentors were Edwards and Turretin, that heavy lifting reforms, scholasticism, Aquinas, Aristotle, even as a hero. So that's the precision piece versus the studied ambiguity. And then it works itself out when he's looking at ECT, and there's not as much of a discussion of justification that he'd like.

Or it doesn't get into imputation versus infusion. And RC's asked, raising his hand here, saying, "You can't talk about the gospel and not deal with the differences on those issues between evangelicals and Roman Catholics." Steve, can you talk just a minute about the friendship fallout from that affair? Yeah, sure. It really was, as RC talked about, Vestas talked about it.

This was the most challenging time in RC's life. It was harder than when he had to leave his denomination and move over to the PCA. It was the most challenging time.

He talks about just before ECT. I think it was the Ligonier National Conference. He and Packer were on a Q&A panel, and somebody asked, "Do you two ever disagree with each other?" And RC answered, "I don't think we do." Because there really was an issue they were disagreeing on.

And then comes ECT. And it wasn't just Packer, it was Coulson. Now, these were 20-year friendships with Coulson and with Packer.

And it was a divide. It costs those friendships, ECT. So this was not easy for Dr. Sproul.

And then I'll add this too. It was a little bit challenging to write on it because while Dr. Sproul disagreed with ECT, wrote two books about it, "Justification by Faith Alone and Getting the Gospel Right." And he named names and he pointed out where he disagreed with. But it wasn't something he was comfortable in doing.

And it didn't like to go around running people down or putting down people for their views. And he just wanted to extol the opposite, what he thought was the right view. But it mattered to him to bring clarity to these doctrinal discussions.

And so it cost him the friendship. It weighed heavily on him. No doubt about it.

It weighed heavily on him. And it was both with Chuck and Dr. Packer. And one of the things that I so appreciated about Sproul was that precision.

And it seems like when our, say, broader Calvinist evangelical movement is healthy, you have both some really top-notch biblical scholars leading the way and some systematic guys. And certainly RC did both. But his theological precision, his wanting to and insisting upon those definitions is I more necessary than ever in our day.

I suppose it's always been necessary. But to say we can agree on that, but we really aren't in agreement. And so we need to get to the real issue.

A related topic, I wonder if you talk a little bit about his approach to apologetics and how he came to classical apologetics. And in particular, how did he see that over against what maybe is the majority view at present, a more vantilian approach to apologetics. I was at a conference one time.

And it was a conference for young people, late teenagers, early 20s. So just good Christian living sort of stuff. And Sproul was there.

And I was sitting in the front row. And he could, he went up and I think he was supposed to speak on the holiness of God or something. And he saw in the front row were a number of leading vantilian scholars who had also been invited.

And I'm sure the person running the conference didn't know that there was any, he must have just done something off the top of his head. And I was in the person hosting the conference looked at me and said, what is he doing? I said, he saw those other people here. And he went on, you know, a 40 minute about knowledge and epistemology.

And I said, he's giving his take on apologetics. I think the students were, you know, fairly well helped. But he saw there was something in his sights that he wanted to address.

How did that become such an important issue to him? You talked about earlier, exchanging letters with Vantil. I wouldn't think there was a personal animus toward it.

Pre-suppositional apologetics.

How do you explain his own view on classical apologetics? So I think it's one of his main contributions. So we've been talking about ECT. And Stan, he took their talk about inerrancy.

I think you have to throw it into the mix of classical apologetics as one of his contributions. He was a presuppositionalist. When he was in college, his mentor was Thomas Gregory who had a PhD from the University of Pennsylvania and his masters from Westminster Seminary and taught by Vantil.

And so his first apologetics training came from a Vantilian, a direct descendant of Vantil, if you will, intellectually. And so he went to seminary, taking on Gershner in a class, because Gershner was up there giving him a classical apologetics kind of view. So RC, freshman at seminary, first year seminary, takes on Gershner.

And RC says, "By the time Gershner was done, you could wipe up the floor with where RC had once stood." And so from then on, he was converted to classical apologetics. It mattered to him. I think it mattered to him for a couple of reasons.

Number one, and I think some of this has come out recently and some of the books that are out in the Doctrine of God. But it mattered to him because he saw classical apologetics as the better purveyor and the better sort of transponder of good old classical, robust classical theism in the reformed classical tradition. And so he saw classical apologetics as a better vehicle for bringing that to generation to generation, a good classical theist position.

What we're talking about here is a tomestic doctrine of God and a Guston's doctrine of God. We can leave Aquinas' ecclesiology on the table. We can leave his soteriology on the table, but let's take his doctrine of God.

And if you look at Turton Podge-Berkhoff, the classic Reformed Theologies, they're just following the summa and Thomas on the Doctrine of God. So it mattered to him for that. And then I think secondly, he thought classical apologetics was the better view.

He thought that you could make a rational case for the existence of God and that you could make a rational case for the reliability of Scripture. Now you still need Scripture to present the gospel, and there's still plenty of room for faith in this whole process. There's still plenty of room for the conviction of the Holy Spirit, but he thought that you could make a rational case for the existence of God.

And he used Aquinas' argument. You use that which is known to reach the unknown. You start with that which is visible to get to the invisible.

And he saw that as a perfectly healthy, apologetic methodology. And he was concerned

about presuppositionalism, especially in the Reformed world, because he didn't think it was consistent with the history of the Reformed tradition. Let's talk, change gears a little bit.

That's really helpful. We only have maybe 10 minutes left, and we haven't talked about his book on holiness. Did R.C. have a favorite book of his, either a favorite that he wrote in the process or just that he knew was the most significant? Would it be the holiness of God or is there something else? Yeah, he definitely was aware that that was the book.

After that first dinner, we talked about biography, then I had a session with him in his office, and I worked up what I thought was some of his major themes, some of his major books. We're just going to have a conversation. Am I on the right track here? And I sat down in his office.

The very first thing he said to me, Kevin, was, you know, I first started teaching on the holiness of God before we even founded Ligonier Ministries. And it signaled to me that what he wanted to be sure was conveyed in this book, that at the end of the day, the holiness of God is going to be the contribution he wants to be remembered for. I mean, we're all fans of David Wells, and, you know, I think it's his God in the Wasteland book where he just has that stinging indictment of the American church that God rests too casually on the shoulders of the American church.

And then, you know, R.C. felt that. He would say it's also true culture, that whether you're in the church in the pew or whether you're in culture, what a person must know is who God is. And that is the holiness of God.

And, you know, it was Azzah was a text that just caught R.C. early on. It was Isaiah chapter six. These are very dramatic texts.

And it was a very, very, very important book that they were very pivotal in his own formation and his own thinking. So really right from his, what he would say is very first reading of the Old Testament. He often said, you know, the first time I read the Old Testament through as a young Christian, I came to the conclusion this is a God who plays for keeps.

And you see it right on through and it culminates then with the publication in 84 of the holiness of God. Colin and Justin, I have three disjointed questions for Steve to bring us home. But before I give that final triumvirate, any questions you guys wanted to ask? I'll be, I'll be quick on this one, Steve.

You've used the term, you use the term battlefield theologian a number of different times. And I think it's suitable. And I think the inspiration of Luther makes a lot of sense.

Is there a time when that battlefield theologian can be too itching for a fight? Absolutely. And I think when you get off of those doctrines that are essential. And RC was willing to

give a lot of latitude on those.

I think you can talk about church government, talk about views, baptism. There's always just debate raging. Can you be Baptist and be genuinely reformed? And then RC would say, of course, you can be.

So I think we're talking about justification, talk about an erancy. And RC would also say, you cannot believe an erancy and still go to heaven. So he would prioritize the doctrine of justification over the doctrine of an erancy.

Certainly would. And then we're talking about the order to understand the gospel. We have to know who God is and the holiness of God.

So we're talking about those key doctrines. Yes. We're talking about some of those now moving out in the secondary and tertiary doctrines.

You know, he is the disagreement with Packer over justification is very similar to the disagreement between Lindsay and Henry over an erancy. Lindsay found it to be essential to be an evangelical and and we found it to be important. And that was enough of that rift and it sounds like that's the same with higher stakes between Packer.

Yeah, sure. And you know RC he would do he definitely would prioritize scripture or us. I'm sorry, justification over over an erancy, not that he was saying it's okay, whatever you believe on an erancy.

He wanted to fight for that but just vacations at the center. Just in anything. Just about the church, the founding of St Andrews and preaching from a pulpit weekend and week out and the last chapter, the last part of his ministry.

Why did he feel compelled to do that he didn't didn't need the money didn't need the fame. What was it that drew him to the expository preaching of the word. I think he, I think, well what drew him was the group of people that sort of just hounded him to start St Andrews and he did.

But I think it's something that he told John Piper wants Justin. I said I wish I'd done this earlier. I think that's the thing that I did in my ministry.

It's my only regret that I didn't have a local church earlier and a local church pastor ministry earlier than than what he did. She started 97. And I think even now you know invest his life now that she's a widow and RC is past.

And so I think this is the thing about his church. It was St Andrews is a genuinely local church and he really enjoyed being part of that. So he loved it.

And I think he, he says it and I have the line in the book, you know, then in 1997 God did something that I'd never expected. And he's talking about St Andrews. Steve three

disjointed questions.

We'll start with the least important, but a fun one. We talked about his humor talk about the importance of sports. You can't understand RC if you don't understand his love for sports he was also a very good athlete back in the day.

So how, how did sports shape RC the man. He was an athlete and got college on an athletic scholarship, probably baseball is his best sport and a rectum self plan the others is needs and so forth playing football got concussions playing basketball. So you probably should have just stuck to baseball, but a tremendous athlete and of course love golf too.

And so I think it did shape him in terms of that, you know, game day, put on that game faith and I mentioned this in the book that idea. He was the athlete who just left everything on the field. This is some I don't think people realize how fatiguing it was for him to speak towards the end of his life because of the COPD.

So he's not sleeping well. So that's in fact interfering with everything else going on in his life. He would just get up and do it, you know, at 78 years of age, just get up and do it.

And I think a lot of that was the athlete in him. And I think he goes back to some of that toughness that Pittsburgh toughness also was the athlete in him. So second question of these final three, as you look at his life.

We're right to celebrate and see what God did through him and of course he was a man as any of us are. Were there were there weaknesses that you encountered in doing the biography surely there there were or if you don't want to look at that just things that RC had to grow into that the RC of, you know, 1980 was different than the RC of the world in in 15. So however you want to take that lessons to be learned from his imperfections the areas he needed to grow regrets change his mind.

What can we learn from those? You know, one point he gave this in the teaching series and he was talking about sanctification, talking about, you know, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. And then finally the doctors just said, well, no, you're going to give up smoking. So that was it.

But you know, he talked about his own Christian life and the struggles that he had in sanctification that we all have to do with that. And I think that was true even sometimes of folks at Ligonier and Ligonier, but I think that's a very important thing to do with that. And I think that's a very important thing to do with that.

And I think that's a very important thing to do with that. And I think that's a very important thing to do with that. And I think that's a very important thing to do with that.

And I think that was true even sometimes of folks at Ligonier, Rand Ligonier, and just

had an implicit trust in them. And, and maybe could have been, you know, looking a little bit closer at what they were doing and he also shared some of that by his own admission and his own expression. I don't really think, you know, I can't hear a lot about the celebrity culture and there's a lot of who sort of who poo that and sort of see him in that and would consider him one of those that was all part of that.

And honestly, I don't think that was a weakness though, I didn't really see that in him, that need for affirmation and that sort of big on his own ego. So I think some have accused of him of that or just by nature they accuse some big celebrity evangelicalism. I don't think he was that.

He never struck me as someone who was psychologically needy. I don't think you would describe RC that way, needing people to give him affirmations and strokes. Okay, so here's the last question.

You have a mountain of books from Dr. Sproul, you have various institutions, you have the legacy and different movements and controversies. What would you say is his enduring legacy. What do you think Christians will still be benefiting from learning from 50 years from now.

I think it's holiness of God, the book, there's just something about that book, it draws you in and it's got so much in it. So I think the book will stand as a classic text. He wanted people to study scripture.

And so I think two things will stand there. One is the Reformation study Bible and I'm a big fan of study Bibles, the more the merrier. So I think the Reformation study Bible, but I also think his Dust to Glory teaching series.

I think if people were to just take the time and work through that, they would have such a foundation in the Word of God. And I think that is going to come to be one of those series that's just going to be rare and be sort of rarefied air. Because who's doing that sort of really lengthy teaching series.

So I would think those are two things. And then the other thing is, you know he wrote these beautiful hymns. And two hymn projects at the end of his life.

And you think about some of the figures from church history. We don't read their books, but we sing their hymns. So maybe a few centuries out, some of those sprawl hymns will make their way into the hymnals.

It's great. The book is RC Sprawl A Life by our friend and a very good author and historian and theologian, Stephen J. Nichols. So really crossways and a great job.

It's a handsome sturdy book. I know you can't see this on the podcast. It has some great photographs that Steve found in the middle and it's about 300 pages of text and then

some appendices and some index.

But it's a wonderful read. So Steve thanks for being on here. Thanks for being our friend.

Thanks for the work you're doing down there in sunny, warm Florida. It's the only place right now that is sunny and warm. So only one.

So hope you enjoy it. Come visit us anytime. We will go to bed.

Okay. Wonderful. Good to be with you all and thank you for listening.

And until next time, hope you glorify God, enjoy him forever. And read a good book.

[Music] [ Silence ]