

# Marriage to a Roman Catholic?

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**CURRENT ISSUE: MARRIAGE TO A ROMAN CATHOLIC?**

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### *From the Editor*

With the loosening of many doctrines and practices in the Roman Catholic Church, especially in America, since Vatican II, many Protestants are naïve about what hasn't changed, especially the doctrine of justification. The anathemas, aimed at this Protestant doctrine, remain in force, and the confusion between justification and sanctification endures. So, should a confessional Protestant or evangelical marry a practicing Roman Catholic? Andy Wilson offers a prudent biblical answer in "Why Reformed and Evangelical Christians Should Not Marry Roman Catholics."

Matthew Cserhati presents a straightforward biblical approach to evangelizing Roman Catholics in his article: "How to Reach Roman Catholics with the Gospel." As a former Roman Catholic, he has a great deal of experience in wisely presenting the gospel to his friends and others in that body.

Danny Olinger continues his biography of Geerhardus Vos with its penultimate chapter, "Geerhardus Vos: Whither Westminster and Retirement." He covers the reasons why Vos never taught at Westminster Theological Seminary, Vos's relationship with Machen, his retirement, and death. I was especially appreciative of the space Olinger gives to Vos's poetry, an aspect of Vos's talents and interests of which few are aware.

The recent spate of Confederate statue removals makes Darryl Hart's evenhanded review of *The Religious Life of Robert E. Lee* by R. David Cox especially poignant.

My poem this month, "Shadowbrook," is a takeoff on William Butler Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." Shadowbrook is a real place in Washington, New Hampshire, which I built as a retreat, sans electricity, running water, or cell coverage.

The lighthouse on this month's cover is the Chatham Lighthouse on Cape Cod in Chatham, Massachusetts. Shore erosion forced the town to move the lighthouse back about one hundred yards. The day I took this picture we saw a Snowy Owl on frozen Bass River, where my sister lives.

Blessings in the Lamb,  
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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*Ordained Servant* exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God-glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high-quality editorials, articles, and book reviews, we will endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

# ServantLiving

## Why Reformed and Evangelical Christians Should Not Marry Roman Catholics

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by Andy Wilson

The Bible is unambiguous in teaching that God’s people are not to take spouses who do not profess the true religion. In the Old Testament, God forbade the Israelites from intermarrying with those outside the covenant community, warning that those who do so will have their hearts turned away from him to serve other gods (see Deut. 7:3–4). Likewise, the New Testament makes it clear that Christians are only permitted to marry “in the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:39). This makes good sense when we consider the role that marriage plays in the spiritual edification of spouses and in the Christian nurture of children. How can a husband and wife live together as “heirs . . . of the grace of life” (1 Pet. 3:7) when one of them does not have title to that inheritance through the grace of justification (see Titus 1:4–7)? How can a couple raise their children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4) when they do not share the same faith in the Lord?

### The Question

While the Bible clearly forbids Christians from marrying non-Christians, one question that sometimes arises is whether or not Christians who belong to churches that preach the biblical gospel should be open to the possibility of marrying Roman Catholics. After all, Reformed churches have historically accepted Roman Catholic baptism as a valid Christian baptism,<sup>1</sup> pointing out that it is done in the name of the triune God and that the efficacy of baptism does not depend on the merit of the one who administers it but on God, the one who has instituted it. Furthermore, while the Roman Catholic Church has significantly departed from the biblical gospel in its official teachings, we grant that there can be individuals in the Roman Catholic Church who have saving faith in Christ.<sup>2</sup> In light of this, why can’t a Reformed or Evangelical Christian consider marrying a Roman Catholic who appears to have saving faith in Christ? Why does the Westminster

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<sup>1</sup> There have been a few exceptions, most notably among southern Presbyterians in nineteenth-century America. See the overall survey provided in J.V. Fesko, *Word, Water, and Spirit: A Reformed Perspective on Baptism*, (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2010), 368–94.

<sup>2</sup> In the words of James Buchanan, “Do we then deny the possibility of pardon and acceptance with God within the Church of Rome? God forbid! What we deny is that any sinner was ever justified, there or elsewhere, by his own righteousness; and we reject the Romish doctrine of justification, as having a tendency to lead men to rely on their own good works rather than on the finished work of Christ.” *The Doctrine of Justification: An Outline of Its History in the Church and of Its Exposition from Scripture*, (1867; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 149.

Confession of Faith include “papists” among those whom Christians are forbidden to marry under the biblical imperative to marry “only in the Lord” (see WCF 24.3)?

## **Professing Faith in Christ**

One way of addressing this question is to think through what it means to make a profession of faith in Jesus Christ. According to the Bible, a profession of faith in Christ is not merely a private transaction between the individual believer and God. A profession of faith in Christ needs to be public and accountable to the oversight of church leaders. This is a good and necessary inference from Scripture, derived from passages such as these:

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. (Acts 20:28)

Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. (1 Tim. 6:12)

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Heb. 13:17)

These texts make it clear that Christ does not merely rule over his people inwardly in their hearts. He also rules over us outwardly through the ministry of those whom he appoints to keep watch over our souls. This is why the authority to admit and exclude people from the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper resides not in individual believers but in the church, acting through its officers.

The idea that a profession of faith in Christ needs to be public and accountable goes against the grain in our intensely individualistic culture. Many in our day understand faith as a fundamentally personal matter between an individual and God. The problem with this way of thinking is that it leaves no way of discerning whether a person is believing in Christ as he is revealed in the gospel or is believing in the sort of thing that the apostle Paul described as “a different gospel,” a gospel of human imagining that is really no gospel at all (see Gal. 1:6–9). In other words, if we make faith into an essentially private matter we create a situation in which Christianity can no longer have any objective meaning, because it can be defined in whatever way each individual believer wants to define it.

## **Rome’s Teaching about Saving Faith**

A Roman Catholic is someone whose profession of faith is subject to the oversight of the Roman Catholic Church. The reason why this is a problem is because the Church of

Rome has officially condemned the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. This was done most definitively at the Council of Trent, which was held from 1545 to 1563.<sup>3</sup> While the sixteenth century was a long time ago, Rome's understanding of church tradition makes the pronouncements that were made at Trent just as binding today as they were when they were first made.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, these pronouncements are confirmed in the contemporary *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.<sup>5</sup> When we compare what was said at Trent with what is said in the Bible, it is clear that, as an institution, Rome itself officially teaches a different gospel, a gospel of justification by faith plus works.

At Trent, Rome insisted that a believer's good works are not to be understood as the fruit that necessarily flows from justifying faith, but as a means by which a person merits favor from God. Among the many decrees issued by Trent, Canon 9 declares,

If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification . . . let him be anathema.

Similarly, Canon 24 says,

If anyone says that the righteousness received is not preserved and also not increased before God through good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not the cause of the increase, let him be anathema.

And Canon 32 adds,

If anyone says that the good works of the one justified are in such manner the gifts of God that they are not also the good merits of him justified; or that the one justified by the good works that he performs by the grace of God and the merit of Jesus Christ, whose living member he is, does not truly merit an increase of grace, eternal life, and in case he dies in grace the attainment of eternal life itself and also an increase of glory, let him be anathema.

Stated positively, Trent declared that the good works done by a believer are meritorious and therefore contribute to, and even increase, his righteous standing before God. Compare this with the teaching of Scripture:

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that the pronouncements made at Trent actually marked a change for Rome, since prior to that point it had tolerated other views, at least officially. In the words of one historian, "One effect of Protestantism was that the Roman Catholic Church became less inclusive. Heretofore it had permitted diversity of views on some of the issues raised by Protestants. Now it felt itself constrained to state its convictions more precisely. The definitions of dogma framed by the Council of Trent . . . were consciously directed against Protestant teachings. They ruled out opinions held by some who had remained within the Roman Communion." Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, volume 2: Reformation to the Present*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 840.

<sup>4</sup> In spite of the softer and more positive tone that was expressed towards Protestants at the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), Rome's official teachings on justification remain the same as those expressed at Trent.

<sup>5</sup> See especially sections 1987–2011.

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. . . . Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.” (Rom. 3:20–28; 4:4–8)

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:8–10)

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. (Phil. 3:8–9)

Paul’s contrast between “wages” and “gift” in Romans 3–4 makes it clear that human beings can never do anything to merit God’s grace. If justification is a freely given gift, then the believer’s good works cannot in any sense contribute to his righteous standing before God. Moreover, the quotes from Ephesians and Philippians both stress that salvation is in no sense based upon anything that we do or upon any righteousness that we ourselves possess.

Roman Catholics typically point to this passage from James to support their position: But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. (James 2:18–24)

If those verses mean what Roman Catholics say they mean, then James is in conflict with Paul, who writes the following in his letters to the Romans and Galatians:

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness.” (Rom. 4:1–3)

Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. . . . Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”? (Gal. 2:16; 3:2–6)

If we were to insist that “justified” in James 2 means the same thing that it means in these passages from Paul, we would make God’s Word contradict itself. This is why the term needs to be understood in light of the specific contexts of these letters, taking into account the different problems that were being confronted by the authors. In Romans and Galatians, Paul confronted legalism by saying that faith, apart from works, is the sole instrument of justification. In James, the writer confronted antinomianism by saying that good works are the evidence that a person has true justifying faith. James is saying that good works are necessary for salvation in an evidentiary sense, while Paul is saying that they are not necessary in an instrumental sense. James is saying that saving faith bears the fruit of good works in a believer’s life, while Paul is saying that these works do not merit anything from God. These teachings are in direct conflict with what was decreed at Trent. As we have already seen, this is precisely what was condemned at that council.

### **Unequally Yoked**

Because of its erroneous teaching on the question of how a person can be made right with God, the Church of Rome is not capable of evaluating an individual’s profession of faith in Christ. A person who belongs to the Church of Rome has not had his or her profession of faith examined by a church that teaches the biblical gospel. While an individual Roman Catholic’s faith may or may not rest upon Christ alone as he is revealed in the gospel, it is not up to some other individual to make that determination. On the contrary, this responsibility belongs to the church and needs to be carried out by its officers, because Christ has authorized the church to distinguish between believers and unbelievers through its preaching and discipline. In light of this, it follows that if a person belongs to a church that explicitly denies essential aspects of the biblical gospel, the credibility of that person’s profession of faith is called into question. This is one reason why a Reformed or Evangelical Christian should not marry a Roman Catholic. To do so is to become yoked to someone whose Christian profession is not accountable to a true



church, and is also under the authority of an institution that officially condemns the biblical gospel.

A second reason why a Reformed or Evangelical Christian should not marry a Roman Catholic has to do with the practical problems caused by such a union. A couple cannot help each other grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ when they belong to traditions that have such serious disagreements over fundamental aspects of the Christian faith. Neither can such a couple pass on a biblically robust faith to their children. When a Roman Catholic marries a non-Catholic spouse, the latter has to pledge to raise his or her children in the Church of Rome. How can a Reformed or Evangelical Christian make such a pledge? Furthermore, when a couple dismisses as inconsequential the differences between historic Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, they inevitably point to the common ground that they have in their subjective religious experiences, their moral code, and the aesthetic qualities that they associate with genuine piety (perhaps the informality and contemporaneity that are characteristic of Evangelicalism, or perhaps the rites and rituals that are characteristic of traditions that feature a “high” liturgy). The problem with finding common ground only in those things is that it is the doctrinal elements of Christian faith that make it distinctively Christian. The gospel is not an experience, a set of moral teachings, or an aesthetic style (though it does have ramifications in these areas). At its heart, the biblical gospel is the revelation of the righteousness from God that is received by faith alone in Christ alone. Any conception of Christianity that sets that message aside as unimportant is a different gospel. And as the Bible makes clear, a different gospel has no power to save.

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# Servant Witness

## How to Reach Roman Catholics with the Gospel

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by Matthew Cserhati

Roman Catholics make up the largest church denomination in the country, accounting for one-quarter of the whole US population, and their numbers are increasing. Many of us might have a lot of Roman Catholic friends or even relatives. However, Rome teaches another gospel than that found in the Bible. Thus, it is an increasingly important question as to how to reach the large number of Roman Catholics in our environment.

I am a former Roman Catholic, and I have studied Roman Catholicism in depth and have had discussions with many Roman Catholics. I have also taken part in street evangelization events where we entered into dialogue with Roman Catholics.

There are certain things we as Protestants share with Roman Catholics. For example, we both believe that Scriptures are the Word of God.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, we also share concern over a number of societal issues, such as abortion, homosexuality, and religious freedoms.

However, there are certain key issues, which separate us from them. Some of these are salvation, purgatory, the papacy, Mariology, and the mass. These numerous differences are so great so as to make ecumenical union impossible with Rome. Let us remember the words of Amos 3:3: “Do two walk together, unless they have agreed to meet?” Thus, in order to be agreed, we must present the gospel to Roman Catholics in a manner which is loving but does not lose sight of the truth.

First, and most importantly, we must keep quoting Scripture. We must know our Bibles well, and also how to defend our views. Since Roman Catholicism relies heavily on human traditions,<sup>2</sup> if we stick to the Scripture, then ultimately the truth will shine through. Also, we must be prepared to discuss the topic of Sola Scriptura, since it is guaranteed that this issue will come up during discussion. This is a key factor in Protestant/Roman Catholic debates, since epistemology defines whether or not we accept certain truths or not. A good Bible verse that supports Sola Scriptura is Acts 17:10–11:

The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

While the Bereans readily accept Paul’s teachings as a church authority, they still compare it to the sole highest authority, the Scriptures.

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<sup>1</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Are We Together? A Protestant Analyzes Roman Catholicism* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust, 2012), 13–21.

<sup>2</sup> James R. White, *Scripture Alone* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2004), 169–89.

Second, we have to remember that when we as Protestants speak with Roman Catholics, we might be perceived as antagonistic to their church, since it was Martin Luther who leveled a very heavy criticism at their church during the Reformation. Many Roman Catholics are defensive about what they perceive as multiple attacks on their church from many different quarters in society. Therefore, we have to be willing to listen to what they have to say about their own religion and ask questions, and not wish to run them into the ground straight away or be overly offensive to them.

Third, I have found that it is rather easy to talk to Roman Catholics about the gospel, since the main issue during the Reformation was how to achieve salvation. This is a great concern for many devout Roman Catholics, and if we assure them that our goal is not to win an argument but to help them towards salvation, it will be much appreciated. Roman Catholics do not have assurance of faith; the greatest gift we can give them is to tell them that salvation is free, and of no cost to them.

Fourth, devout Roman Catholics prize intellectual discussion of religion, since their priests undergo rigorous intellectual training. Unfortunately, during church history Rome has so overemphasized the intellect, that they have introduced scores of humanistic traditions into their church. Therefore, it is useful to be familiar with Roman Catholic teaching, and to show by contrast that the gospel is logically consistent and biblical. Chick tracts are definitely not something we should use with Roman Catholics. Chick tracts portray Roman Catholics in a derogatory manner and come across as insulting to many Roman Catholics, therefore I do not recommend them.

Lastly, and also quite importantly, we must pray for our Roman Catholic friends and family members. Although on the surface Rome may seem like a Christian church, its false doctrines and idolatry stifle the faith of many of its members. Also, since Roman Catholicism is a complete doctrinal system, it makes it that much harder to convince Roman Catholics of their errors and of the truth of the gospel. "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph. 4:15).

**Matthew Cserhati** *is a member of Faith Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Lincoln, Nebraska. He is presently in training for the office of elder.*

# ServantHistory

## Geerhardus Vos: Whither Westminster and Retirement

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by Danny E. Olinger

From its inception in September 1929, Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia has promoted the biblical theological teaching of Geerhardus Vos as much as the Reformed ecclesiology of its founder, J. Gresham Machen. For an outsider, this might seem ironic since Vos did not join the faculty at the invitation of his friend and theological ally Machen. Vos's longtime Princeton colleagues Robert Dick Wilson and Oswald T. Allis resigned from Princeton and joined Machen at Westminster. Machen also sought Cornelius Van Til, who had just finished the 1928–29 year as an Instructor of Apologetics at Princeton. Machen and Allis travelled to Spring Lake, Michigan, where Van Til served as pastor of the Christian Reformed Church of Spring Lake, to persuade him to accept a call to Westminster. They left Michigan with Van Til undecided about what to do. The sticking point was his membership in the Christian Reformed Church. Van Til realized that if he came to Westminster, he would almost certainly have to transfer to the Presbyterian Church.<sup>1</sup> Earlier that year when he was in Princeton, Van Til asked Vos for advice on whether to enter the fray with Machen. He recalled Vos saying to him,

Look, this is going to be a much broader matter than a single, denominational issue. Princeton may be a Presbyterian seminary under the direction of the General Assembly of the PCUSA, but don't forget that it is a rallying point for many, many wonderful Christian people all over the world—people who love Reformed doctrine and life. For years it's been used by God as a backwater against the tides of unbelief and a sounding board for the faith of our fathers. You cannot, you dare not, stand by and look on like an indifferent spectator when a conflict is being found in the arena.<sup>2</sup>

In early September, just weeks before Westminster's opening day of classes, Van Til informed Machen that he was accepting the offer.

Given Vos's words to Van Til and the common knowledge that he was theologically sympathetic to Machen's cause, many wondered why Vos didn't join Machen at Westminster. Catherine Vos, for one, left no doubt that she was for Machen. When Machen's "The Attack Upon Princeton Seminary: A Plea for Fair Play" became available in booklet form, Catherine immediately ordered six copies. In the letter requesting the copies, she said, "I wish to send these places where they may do good."<sup>3</sup> So positive was Catherine towards the forming of Westminster that she traveled with her son Bernardus from Princeton to Philadelphia to attend the Westminster banquet held in the evening after the first day of classes on September 25,

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<sup>1</sup> Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen* (Willow Grove, PA: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2004), 396.

<sup>2</sup> William White, *Defender of the Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979), 48.

<sup>3</sup> Letter, Catherine F. Vos to Messrs. Johnson and Pruce, undated. Archives of Westminster Theology Seminary.

1929.<sup>4</sup> It was also assumed that it was Catherine who was the source of Ned Stonehouse's statement about the hard choice that confronted Vos, Casper W. Hodge, and William P. Armstrong in choosing to remain at Princeton. Stonehouse testified, "The wife of one of those concerned once told me, following the establishment of Westminster, that it was very difficult to work for one institution and pray for another."<sup>5</sup>

Vos himself was quiet on the subject, but his grown children were asked repeatedly why their father did not leave Princeton for Westminster. Bernardus said that his father was "agreeable to the formation of Westminster Seminary when the control of Princeton Seminary by the liberal faction of the Church became an actuality." Bernardus immediately added, however, that his father "took no active part" in the formation of the new seminary.<sup>6</sup>

Marianne said, "People have often asked me why my father didn't go to Westminster Seminary when Van Til and Machen did." She continued, "I think the answer is, I've heard him say, that if all the professors who were orthodox left, Princeton would collapse."<sup>7</sup>

When Johannes was asked why his father continued at Princeton, he said, "My opinion—and it is only a guess—is that my father felt too old and tired to make a change at that time. He was on the verge of retirement." Johannes then added, "I do know that his sympathies were definitely with the men who went to Philadelphia. He certainly did not agree with men like Macartney who opposed the formation of the new seminary on principle."<sup>8</sup>

Johannes's statement that his father felt "too old and tired" could be tied to the fact that Geerhardus had been in poor health continually throughout the mid-to-later part of the 1920s.<sup>9</sup> John Murray was living in Scotland in 1928 when he received word that Vos was so ill that he might die. He immediately wrote Machen,

It was with a certain amount of apprehensiveness that I learned recently of the ill-ahealth of Dr. Vos. We can only hope that he will yet be spared for some time for further usefulness in the church of Christ. His praise is in all the churches. Without question, through him as an instrument, God's truth went into all the earth.<sup>10</sup>

Murray was not the only one concerned about Vos's health. Given Vos's weak physical condition, the Princeton Board of Trustees took two unusual actions at their November 14, 1927, meeting. They designated money, up to \$1,000, to provide "instruction in Dr. Vos's

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<sup>4</sup> Letter, Bernardus Vos to Roger Nicole, December 3, 1967. Archives of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

<sup>5</sup> Stonehouse, *Machen*, 395.

<sup>6</sup> Letter, Bernardus Vos to Roger Nicole, December 3, 1967.

<sup>7</sup> Interview, Marianne Vos Radius by Charles G. Dennison, February 27, 1992, at the Raybrook Assisted Living Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Archives of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

<sup>8</sup> Letter, Johannes G. Vos to Mark R. Brown, April 16, 1976. Archives of Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

<sup>9</sup> Due to repeated poor health and even hospitalization, Vos did not appear in Princeton Seminary student body and faculty pictures for both the 1927-28 and 1928-29 years. The photos, which belonged to Everett DeVelde, president of the student body, now hang in the Archives of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. In 1926 the Free University of Amsterdam invited Vos to deliver its Calvin lectures. Due to his frail health, Vos declined the invitation. George Harinck and Hans Krabbendam, eds., *Sharing the Reformed Tradition: The Dutch-American Exchange, 1846-1996* (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1996), 128.

<sup>10</sup> Letter, John Murray to J. Gresham Machen, April 2, 1928, Archives of Westminster Theological Seminary. After receiving Murray's letter, Machen wrote Vos. He said, "I do feel that the service of real students like John Murray makes our life at Princeton worthwhile." Ian Murray, "The Life of John Murray," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 3 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1982), 30. Geerhardus and Catherine shared Machen's fondness for Murray. On March 8, 1930, they hosted a dinner in honor of Murray, then teaching systematics at Princeton Seminary, and Dr. and Mrs. Samuel Marinus Veemer. *New York Times*, March 9, 1930, "Notes of Social Activities in New York and Elsewhere," 36.

department, during his illness, as in the judgment of the Faculty may be necessary.” They also installed a toilet room on the first floor of the Vos’s residence at 52 Mercer Street.<sup>11</sup>

James T. Dennison Jr. writes that Vos’s decision could be tied to his quiet demeanor and non-combative personality. Dennison based this theory in part on two letters that Vos wrote after the 1928 General Assembly postponed action on the reorganization of the seminary and asked the Board of Directors to seek to compose the differences in the seminary. The Board of Directors on June 20, 1928, sent the following resolution for the faculty to sign.

The undersigned members of the Faculty hereby withdraw and express our regret for all statements which we have (may have) made which have seemed to fellow members of the Faculty to be unjust or unkind or untrue, and we assure the Directors of our purpose and determination to maintain peace and harmony and concord in our personal and official relations to the work of the seminary.<sup>12</sup>

Vos signed the resolution and sent it to Sylvester Beach, a board member and former pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Princeton where the Vos family worshiped. Vos told Beach that the indefinite phrasing of the resolution caused him some conscientious difficulty in signing. Vos said:

I am quite willing to confess my faults and mistakes and sins, for I should have told myself from the beginning that it would difficult for me to live through, and take part, in such a long-drawn out disagreement without falling into many things my conscience would in calmer moments tell me were wrong.<sup>13</sup>

But, “it would be quite inconceivable that regret and retraction in the technically religious sense should ever be placed on the basis of what has seemed to others to be the wrong in us.”<sup>14</sup> He added that true Christian repentance, and not a brother’s feelings, can cover what the conscience bears witness as having been wrong. Despite these personal observations, Vos told Beach that he signed the resolution *ex animo* without mental reservations.

On December 19, 1928, Vos wrote to Frank H. Stevenson, a Machen supporter and member of the Board of Directors.<sup>15</sup> In the letter Vos returned another resolution with his signature as requested by the Board. Vos wrote, “Perhaps it not superfluous to say that I consider the items specified as intended to enable the Board ‘to compose the differences in the Seminary,’ and therefore applying to the present juncture.”<sup>16</sup> He closed that he had tried to the best of his ability to keep the promises that were made to him by Dr. Beach, and were implied in his willingness to agree to the formulas put before the faculty.

There was also the possibility that finances and the potential loss of his pension influenced Vos’s decision. Ten days after Westminster started classes on September 25, 1929, Stonehouse

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<sup>11</sup> Minutes of the Board of Trustees of Princeton Theological Seminary, November 14, 1927.

<sup>12</sup> James T. Dennison Jr., “The Life of Geerhardus Vos,” in *Letters of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2005), 72.

<sup>13</sup> Letter, Geerhardus Vos to Sylvester Beach, July 13, 1928, in *Letters of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2005), 215–16.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Stevenson helped Machen form Westminster and served as the first chairman of the Westminster board of trustees. See, Judith M. Dinsmore, “Mary Rothwell, Nellie Rothwell, Mary Shillito Stevenson, Marguerite Montgomery, Anna Rath, and Gertrude Mead: The Grace of Giving,” in *Choosing the Good Portion*, eds. Patricia E. Clawson and Diane L. Olinger (Willow Grove, PA: Committee for the Historian of the OPC, 2016), 36.

<sup>16</sup> Letter, Geerhardus Vos to Frank H. Stevenson, December 19, 1928, in Dennison, *Letters*, 217.

wrote F. W. Grosheide, his doctrinal advisor at the Free University of Amsterdam. He explained to Grosheide that some Princeton men “were not so well fixed financially that they could throw over their jobs with nothing else in sight, and some of them were approaching or had approached the age when the professors are granted a pension.”<sup>17</sup>

Twenty-five years later when he penned Machen’s biography in 1954, Stonehouse stated that Vos’s decision, and Hodge’s and Armstrong’s also, to stay at Princeton was not fully explicable, though Machen sympathized with them in the peculiar predicament in which they were placed. Stonehouse then added, “It is also clear that these decisions were not made with enthusiasm; rather it appears that the spirit manifested was one of sorrowful resignation.”<sup>18</sup>

## Vos and Machen

Although he declined Machen’s invitation to come to Westminster, Vos’s fondness for Machen was evident in three letters he wrote Machen during Westminster’s first year in 1929-30. After Machen sent Vos a copy of his book *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, Vos replied:

My dear Dr. Machen, I cannot thank you enough for the copy you sent me of your book. It is a monumental work, and cannot fail to do much good and that for a long time. The completeness and the ακριβει,α of it awake my admiration. With best wishes for success in your new milieu and position.<sup>19</sup>

After reading the book, Vos sent Machen another letter on March 31, 1930. He asked Machen if he had considered the interpretation of “Shiloh” in Genesis 49:10 when compared to the use of a similar word in Deuteronomy 28:58 as a reference to the virgin birth in the Old Testament. He detailed for Machen the different scholars and textual readings found in Posnanski’s *Schiloh: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Messiaslehre*. He then apologized for bothering Machen with the information, but believed that as Machen was a *facile princeps* expert on the virgin birth that even a remote allusion to the smallest possible detail as found in Genesis 49:10 must have interest for him.<sup>20</sup>

He then wrote Machen on May 1, 1930, thanking Machen for requesting a copy of Vos’s newly published *Pauline Eschatology*. Machen had sent money, which caused Vos to reply, “I am still more ashamed that you should think it necessary to pay for your own copy. That almost hurt my feelings. Still, I am glad to say, not quite. It requires no apology.”<sup>21</sup>

Vos told Machen that he had sent a copy to Mr. Hirzel, which Machen would understand was for the University of Pennsylvania chapter of the League of Evangelical Students that Machen supported. He also told Machen that he was sending two copies of the book as a contribution to the library of Westminster.

He closed the letter by letting Machen know that his son Bernardus planned to attend Westminster’s first commencement later that week with some friends. He also asked Machen if he would kindly remember him in faith and affection.

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<sup>17</sup> Letter, Ned B. Stonehouse to F. W. Grosheide, October 6, 1929. Archives of Westminster Theological Seminary.

<sup>18</sup> Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, 395.

<sup>19</sup> Letter, Geerhardus Vos to J. Gresham Machen, [? 1930] in Dennison, *Letters*, 218. ακριβει,α is “exactness.”

<sup>20</sup> Letter, Geerhardus Vos to J. Gresham Machen, March 31, 1930, in Dennison, *Letters*, 219. Vos finished the letter with a side comment about the famed Old Testament commentator, Franz Delitsch. Delitsch opposed an allusion to the virgin birth in Genesis 49:10. Vos said, “I think that he (Delitsch) was too much of an “aesthetic” spirit always to do full justice to the O.T. realism” (219).

<sup>21</sup> Letter, Geerhardus Vos to J. Gresham Machen, May 1, 1930, in Dennison, *Letters*, 220.

Despite the strong relationship that Vos had with Machen, and with the rest of the faculty at Westminster, disappointment lingered for some that Vos had not come to the new school. Stonehouse registered his lament in a January 12, 1930 letter to Grosheide.

It is significant that the professors Drs. Vos, Armstrong and Hodge do not join in these protestations as to the soundness of Princeton. They seem to be much more sympathetic with Westminster than with President Stevenson's policy. Everyone here feels that the position of these men is therefore wholly inconsistent and misleading. They should really come out for their conviction, but whether they really will is something that only time will tell.<sup>22</sup>

Stonehouse then reported what was known even if Vos had come to Westminster. He wrote, "Dr. Vos is ready for retirement."<sup>23</sup>

## Retirement

When Vos retired from Princeton in the summer of 1932, few seemed to notice.<sup>24</sup> The excitement in Princeton was the arrival of Albert Einstein to live at 112 Mercer Street a few houses down from the Voses.<sup>25</sup>

The quiet departure was in keeping with Vos's quiet manner. A few months after his retirement he commented, "I have always been more averse to rather than a friend of a personal 'stepping into the limelight.' This is perhaps a residue of the somewhat world-repudiating spirit of the Old Seceder Pietism in which my parents lived and which I grew up."<sup>26</sup>

Catherine wrote Machen to inform him that Geerhardus had been hospitalized that spring and had almost died from bleeding hemorrhoids and infected teeth.<sup>27</sup> He would have abdominal surgery and have the teeth removed. Machen in turn wrote Vos to see if he was okay. Vos responded to Machen's letter,

I have been very much touched by your repeated expressions to me of the kindest of feelings and memories living in your heart from the days gone by. Had I not been so preoccupied with the troubles and sorrows of moving these last weeks, I would have replied sooner to what you wrote, for it brought real refreshment to me. I feel somewhat

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<sup>22</sup> Letter, Ned B. Stonehouse to F. W. Grosheide, January 12, 1930, quoted in Dennison, *Letters*, 36. From the perspective of those who were against Machen in the conflict and remained at Princeton, James H. Moorhead writes, "For those who remained, the trauma of losing approximately half their colleagues must have been painful indeed: and the sting must have been made worse for Loetscher and Stevenson because Ritchie retired that fall, and they could scarcely share any feelings of loss, of anger, or of relief with those who remained, for both Vos and Armstrong had strong sympathies for the seceders." James H. Moorhead, *Princeton Seminary in American Religion and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 369.

<sup>23</sup> Letter, Ned Stonehouse to F. W. Grosheide, January 12, 1930.

<sup>24</sup> At the time of his retirement, Vos's thirty-nine years of service was the third longest tenure at Princeton behind only Charles Hodge's fifty-eight years and William Green's forty-nine years.

<sup>25</sup> There is no record of whether Vos and Einstein met during the two months that they overlapped living so close together on Mercer Street. Ironically, they shared a March 14 birthdate, Vos being seventeen years older.

<sup>26</sup> Letter, Geerhardus Vos to Albertus Eekhof, October 28, 1932, in Dennison, *Letters*, 225–26.

<sup>27</sup> James T. Dennison Jr., "Life of Geerhardus Vos," in Dennison, *Letters*, 23.



like Paul, though in a less eschatological state of mind, that the earthly tent-house is broken up and breaking away from me.<sup>28</sup>

He ended the letter informing Machen that he had use of the house until August 1 and that it would be a pleasure to see Machen in person before he left Princeton. In a strikingly personal plea for Vos, he implored his friend, “Please come and see me.”<sup>29</sup>

Geerhardus, Catherine, Bernardus, and Geerhardus Jr. moved to the family home in Roaring Branch that August. Geerhardus wrote Paul Woolley at Westminster that the home was “an ideal place for convalescence after illness,”<sup>30</sup> an indication that he had still not fully recovered from his hospitalization that spring.

The next month when Geerhardus was well enough to travel, Bernardus drove his parents across the country to Santa Ana, California. The move to California was a compromise that Bernardus brokered. Catherine wanted to retire to Florida because of the warm climate, but Geerhardus objected. He wanted to retire to North Carolina. Bernardus suggested California, knowing that both had enjoyed being there a decade earlier during his father’s sabbatical year. His parents immediately agreed.

Vos related the details of the move in a late October letter to Albertus Eekhof, professor at the University of Leiden.

You must think that, after your kind letter, I have kept you waiting long (almost to the point of rudeness) for an answer. The reason was the only partial recovery from my illness this Spring. Although the stay in northern Pennsylvania put me more or less back on my feet because of the cool climate, I nevertheless had to abstain from much work. This was the more so because of the difficult trip from there to here was rapidly approaching. Fortunately it is now behind us. It took about two weeks by car, traveling 200–300 miles per day in a car is extremely tiring for someone who does not have his normal strength.<sup>31</sup>

Once in California, Bernardus chose the city of Santa Ana. He had friends who lived in the area. It was far enough away from Los Angeles that the air quality for his mother’s health was better. But, it was close enough to Los Angeles that his father could visit book stores. Geerhardus Jr. stayed with his mother and father, but Bernardus returned to Roaring Branch to live.<sup>32</sup>

## Poetry

The correspondence with Eekhof concerned Vos’s passion in retirement, his poetry. Once he stepped down from Princeton, Vos ceased to write theology. He sold and donated large parts of this theological library to Westminster Seminary; Van Til and Woolley helping him find homes for his “orphaned children.”<sup>33</sup> The remaining theological books were stored at the summer home in Roaring Branch, Pennsylvania.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Letter, Geerhardus Vos to J. Gresham Machen, April 28, 1932, in Dennison, *Letters*, 223.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>30</sup> Letter, Geerhardus Vos to Paul Woolley, September 9, 1932, in Dennison, *Letters*, 224.

<sup>31</sup> Letter, Geerhardus Vos to Albertus Eekhof, in Dennison, *Letters*, 225.

<sup>32</sup> Letter, Bernardus Vos to Roger Nicole, December 3, 1967.

<sup>33</sup> “Vos told Machen that “Van Til, and all your Faculty” had been helping him find homes for his books, his “orphaned children.” Letter, G. Vos to J. G. Machen, April 28, 1932, in Dennison, *Letters*, 223. Davis Young confirms that Vos’s books made up a sizeable portion of the Westminster library when his father, Edward, enrolled at Westminster in 1932. Young writes, “The library consisted primarily of the personal holdings of

But, poems, primarily in Dutch, flowed from his pen. In explaining why he wrote poetry in Dutch despite living in America for his adult life, Vos said to Eekhof:

It has been a marvel to me how deep such impressions from one's youth take root in the soul, and how they surface involuntarily as soon as more than ordinary effort is made to give expression to the inner life. Although I moved in [an] English-speaking [environment] year after year, nevertheless, as soon as I took up the pen to "weave" a song, the Dutch language surfaced. It was truly something Freudian. To this day, when I have to count, I don't go "one—two—three," etc., but "een—twee—drie": this is at a still deeper level than all literary aspirations in prose or poetry.<sup>35</sup>

Vos recognized that writing in Dutch limited the literary significance of his poetic labors. "Had it been my destiny to live in the Netherlands, I would have been more successful at doing justice to the Dutch idiom."<sup>36</sup> He also confessed that he never held a high opinion of the literary significance of his poetic labors.

Still, in 1922 the Grand Rapids based Eerdsmans-Sevensma Publishing Company had published the first volume of Vos's poems in Dutch, *Spiegel der Genade* (Mirror of Grace). Dedicated to his father, Jan, and his mother, Aaltje, the first poem listed, "Religio Materna," was about his mother's faith. The other poems, fourteen in total, included four that focused on the Old Testament prophets. In "Jesus intimus," a poem on prayer, Vos wrote:

Visit me in my small room, Jesus!  
But let the house be so sealed  
That no sound or echo of earthly business  
Can reach us through the closed doors.<sup>37</sup>

Vos happily sent signed gift copies of the volume to family and friends. Many signed copies were also sent to libraries in both North America and the Netherlands.<sup>38</sup>

Five years later in 1927, Vos self-published *Spiegel der Natuur* (Mirror of Nature) to mark fifty years of his writing poems. The seventy poems (sixty-eight in Dutch, one in German, one in Latin) contained Vos's observations about nature, particularly his love of trees. In a dedicated section, "*Arboretum parvum*," Vos wrote:

The trees of my property are my intimate confidants . . . .  
Your first green in Spring is refreshment for my eyes.  
My favorite slumber place is where your shadows fell . . . .  
They invite me to rest in sultry summer days.<sup>39</sup>

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current faculty members or the books of past Princeton professors such as Geerhardus Vos." Davis A. Young, *For Me to Live is Christ: The Life of Edward J. Young* (Willow Grove, PA: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2017), 43.

<sup>34</sup> Bernardus, who lived in the family home during the Great Depression, catalogued the books, 2,091 in total. In 1936 he sold "quite a number" of the books "to Dr. Van Til, to Westminster Seminary, to Dr. Rudolph of the Reformed Episcopal Seminary in Philadelphia, to Rev. John Meeter, who edited several of Dr. Warfield's books." Letter, Bernardus Vos to Roger Nicole, December 3, 1967.

<sup>35</sup> Vos to Eekhof, *Letters*, 227.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> George Harinck, "The Poetry of Theologian Geerhardus Vos," in *Dutch-American Arts and Letters in Historical Perspective*, ed. Robert P. Swierenga, Jacob E. Nyenhuis, and Nella Kennedy (Holland, MI: Van Raalte, 2008), 77. Harinck provides the English translation.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 76.

That Vos would write lovingly about trees was no surprise to the students who were with him one memorable day at Princeton around 1930. In tears, he dismissed his class early because men across the street were cutting down a tree that stood over the house in which Jonathan Edwards died.<sup>40</sup>

In 1931 Princeton University Press published *Charis, English Verses*. The next year Wm. B. Eerdmans published another Dutch volume of Vos's poems, *Spiegel des Doods* (Mirror of Death). Vos self-published *Western Rhymes* in 1933 and *Zeis en Garve* (Scythe and Sheaf) in 1934.

George Harinck, the leading expert on Vos's poetry, attributes the increase in Vos's poetic output after the age of sixty in part to the controversy that was taking place in the 1920s at Princeton. Harinck writes, "Amid this institutional turmoil, he distanced himself from theology and concentrated on his inner life. Poetry was his escape. It held him close in a Word-centered culture."<sup>41</sup> Harinck also believes that it was more than a hobby with Vos, that he felt an inner need to compose verse.<sup>42</sup>

Some poems reflect Vos's view of biblical religion, an intimate relationship with God brought about by the person and work of Jesus Christ. Other poems are strangely impersonal in many ways. Growing old without his friends, darkness, pessimism and sleepless nights are prevalent.<sup>43</sup>

Vos was particularly fond of composing Christmas poems for friends and family. In 1924 at Christmas time he sent "A Song of the Nativity" to family, friends and students. The poem opened,

Ye pilgrims, in the tale retold  
What do your wondering eyes behold?  
A babe which, scarcely given, gives,  
Its every breath a grace that lives;  
God turned to his own sacrament,  
Spending his all, yet never spent;  
Entering our kind and ours alone,  
Flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone;  
The uncreated Light of Light,  
Heaven's noonday, swallowed by our night;  
Guileless, incapable of wrong,  
More than the lambs he lay among;  
His smallness laden with our sin;  
Born that his birth-cries might begin  
Full thirty years of tragedy,  
Each step a step towards Calvary.  
And this is the high-holy spot,  
Angels are sad to visit not!<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 77–78.

<sup>40</sup> Letter, Ray Lindquist to Frederick Walter Cassell, May 25, 1989. Geerhardus Vos, Special Collection at Princeton Theological Seminary.

<sup>41</sup> Harinck, "Poetry," 79.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Geerhardus Vos, "A Song of the Nativity," in Dennison, *Letters*, 252.

From 1942 to 1944 Vos wrote a Christmas poem for Ned Stonehouse. In December 1942, he sent Stonehouse “Kersteeest-Gebed” (Christmas Song-Prayer). Written in old Dutch, the poem celebrated the humiliation of Christ on behalf of his people. It opened,

Jezus, voor't vrome Kerstfeest-vieren Kom Gij ons hart en huis versiersen, Recht Gij ons Zelf het feestmaal aan; Leer ons van wenschen en gebeden Van al de zoete aanminnigheden Den zin door U begeerd verstaan. Geef ons seen indruk van uw liefde, Dat, wijl U onze ellende griefde, Gij hebt U glans en eere ontzeid, Om onzentwille neergekomen, Dienstknechts-gestalte hebt aangenomen	Jesus, to celebrate Christmas piously, Come to decorate our heart and house. You, Yourself, prepare the banquet in us. Teach us, with all the wishes and prayers of the sweet delicacies, to understand what you want us to know Give us an impression of your Love. We, in our misery, have hurt you. You denied yourself glory and honour, for our sake you came down as a servant <sup>45</sup>
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His “Christmas 1943” poem for Stonehouse was “The Magnificat.” Based on Mary’s song in Luke 1:46–55, Vos emphasized the Spirit’s work in Mary in producing the song.

Spirit of God, sing through me  
Thine humblest notes bring to me,  
I will exalt the Lord.

The Lord’s grace, and not Mary’s merit, was the reason that she was chosen.

With rarest grace He met me,  
Above all women set me,  
As promised me his word.  
I was his handmaid lowly,  
And his possession wholly,  
In me was nothing great.

The joy and wonder for Mary is her role in fulfilling the promise.

O Joy, that He will choose me,  
And through his wonder use me  
For of the oath, He swore  
To Abraham, our father,  
The ripened fruit to gather,  
His handmaid evermore.

Christmas, 1943.<sup>46</sup>

In 1944 Vos sent Stonehouse “The Sword.” Written in English, the poem recounted the events surrounding Simon’s blessing of Mary and Joseph and his words to Mary in Luke 2:34–

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<sup>45</sup> Special thanks to Grietje Rietkerk for the English translation.

<sup>46</sup> Letter, Geerhardus Vos to Ned Stonehouse, December 10, 1943, in Dennison, *Letters*, 256–57.

35. The poem rehearsed the main themes that had appeared in Vos's theological writings, the goal set before man, the necessity of the cross, and the hope of resurrection life.

## Catherine Vos

Catherine had helped care for Geerhardus through years of his poor health, but she was not well herself. In addition to her tuberculous, she was diagnosed with senile dementia a month after she and Geerhardus arrived in California in autumn 1932. The next summer Geerhardus sent railroad tickets to Marianne and her oldest son, Eddie, to come to California to help care for Catherine. Marianne accepted, as her husband, William, was away that summer attending classes for his doctor's degree at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. When Marianne and Eddie arrived, Catherine was in a wheelchair and needed assistance both for meals and bathing.<sup>47</sup> David Craighead, a regular visitor while Catherine and Geerhardus lived in Santa Ana, described Catherine's condition in a letter to Machen. "Mrs. Vos is in a pitiful condition, she has become so weak and childish as to be entirely helpless, unable to do anything for herself at all."<sup>48</sup>

Catherine's health was in serious decline while the public was recognizing her literary giftedness. She gained fame with Eerdmans's publication of the first volume of her *Child's Story Bible* in 1934. Volumes 2 and 3 followed in 1935 and 1936.<sup>49</sup> Marianne explained the origin of her mother's book.

When my brothers and I grew old enough to want to read the Bible stories for ourselves, my mother searched through the bookstores for a Bible storybook which would be both faithful to the inspired Word of God and successful in conveying the dramatic excitement and human warmth of these most wonderful of all stories. When she finally despaired of ever finding such a book, she sat down with the single determination to write one.<sup>50</sup>

The pattern for the Voses during their summer months was to have Catherine tell the children a Bible story and to have Geerhardus pray. When she started wintering in California for health reasons in the mid-1920s, she had the time to start crafting the stories. She attempted to tell the stories in the same manner that her mother had told her the stories when she was a little child.<sup>51</sup>

The *Child's Story Bible* was such a success that it sold more copies than all Geerhardus's books combined. The National Union of Christian Schools stated:

The *Child's Story Bible* is one of the most widely known and used of all Bible storybooks. By the use of simple and dignified language Mrs. Vos has preserved the beauty of the Biblical narratives and has at the same time brought out the meaning of the Scriptures.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Interview, Marianne Radius.

<sup>48</sup> Letter, David Craighead to J. Gresham Machen, April 25, 1936. Archives of Westminster Theological Seminary.

<sup>49</sup>In 1940 Eerdmans published a one-volume edition. Eerdmans reprinted the one-volume edition in 1949, 1958, and 1966, and the three-volume edition in 1983.

<sup>50</sup> Marianne Catherine Vos Radius, "Preface to the Revised Edition," in Catherine F. Vos, *Child's Story Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), vii.

<sup>51</sup> Catherine dedicated the book to her mother. She wrote, "To my dear Mother in heaven who told me these stories when I was a little child in much the same way in which I have written them in this book." Ibid., "Dedication."

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., ix.

The National Union commended the book to all teachers, parents, and children and encouraged the use of the book in Christian schools.

Catherine died on September 14, 1937, at the age of seventy-two. During the forty-four years Geerhardus and Catherine were married, he was devoted to Catherine and thankful for her. Her focus upon their family allowed him to focus on his work.<sup>53</sup> She was buried in the cemetery not far from the summer home in Roaring Branch, Pennsylvania.

## J. Gresham Machen

After Craighead wrote Machen in April 1936 about Catherine and Geerhardus, Machen immediately replied to Craighead. “It also goes right to my heart to hear about Dr. Vos. I owe a very deep debt to his instruction, and I admire him very greatly. We love to think of his heart as being with us in this battle. It is sad to know that Mrs. Vos is in such a distressing condition.”<sup>54</sup>

Machen then told Craighead that he thought that he had sent Vos a personal copy of his new book, *The Christian Faith in the Modern World*. “It was certainly a strange omission that I did not do so, and despite the fact that he had already seen the book, I am going to send a copy to him now just as a token of my gratitude and affection.”<sup>55</sup>

Less than a year later, word reached Vos in California that Machen had died on January 1, 1937, in Bismarck, North Dakota. Immediately, Vos expressed his admiration for his friend in a letter to Arthur Machen. Vos wrote:

Dr. Machen for a short while was my pupil at Princeton Seminary. Afterwards for many years, we were associated as members of the faculty, and the time soon came when I learned more from him than had ever been my privilege to impart to him as a teacher. He was indeed a profound scholar, but what counts for more than that, a great man of God and true defender of our Christian faith in its present day form.<sup>56</sup>

Just as some wondered why Vos didn’t join Machen at Westminster, others have questioned why he didn’t join the Presbyterian Church of America which Machen helped found on June 11, 1936. James Dennison Jr. suggested that Vos had no interest in joining a church with fundamentalist, tyrannical men like Carl McIntire.<sup>57</sup>

Vos left no indication on why after his retirement from Princeton he alone among his immediate family members stayed in the Presbyterian Church in the USA. Catherine, Geerhardus Jr., Johannes and his wife, Marian, became members of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America. Marianne and her husband, William, were members of the Christian Reformed Church of North America. Bernardus joined Machen’s Presbyterian Church of America, renamed the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1939, and served as a ruling elder at Calvary OPC, in Middletown, Pennsylvania.

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<sup>53</sup> Marianne testified that her father would do anything that was needed to help her mother, but he didn’t always think about what could be done to help the family as her mother did. Interview, Radius, 1992.

<sup>54</sup> Letter, J. Gresham Machen to David F. Craighead, April 28, 1936. Archives of Westminster Theological Seminary.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. In his April 25, 1936, letter to Machen, Craighead told him that Vos had read *The Christian Faith in the Modern World* with great pleasure. “The Dr. was greatly pleased and I know has found great pleasure in reading the book inasmuch as he had referred to it many times since.”

<sup>56</sup> Letter, Geerhardus Vos to Arthur Machen, January 5, 1937, in Dennison, *Letters*, 238.

<sup>57</sup> Dennison, “The Life of Geerhardus Vos,” in Dennison, *Letters*, 80.

Prior to Machen's appeal before the 1936 General Assembly, Craighead told Machen, "Both Dr. Vos and I have been with you from the beginning, and are with you still, and in all your trials and in the face of all the injustice you have received a[t] the hands of a corrupt and apostate church, you have our deepest sympathy."<sup>58</sup> But, even if Vos wanted to join Machen's Presbyterian Church of America after its June 11, 1936, beginning, it would have been difficult living in Santa Ana. The closest congregation, Beverly Church, was thirty miles north in Los Angeles.

There was also the fact that Vos, according to Craighead, enjoyed the preaching of Samuel Edgar at the Reformed Presbyterian congregation in Santa Ana. Vos said to Craighead, "What would we do if Edgar were to leave this city? I know of no other man I would go to hear." Craighead reported that many times Vos said to him about other preachers, "One rarely hears a sermon in which there is any gospel, all one hears is about money and activities."<sup>59</sup>

### **Santa Ana to Grand Rapids**

In 1937 Johannes and his wife, Marian, stayed in Santa Ana while on furlough from missionary service in Manchuria. Marian remembered her father-in-law at that time as "not very well," "rather feeble," and "stooped."<sup>60</sup> Despite his aged condition, he took a daily walk and would return with kindling he picked up for the fireplace. Craighead's words supported Marian's remembrance about Vos's frail condition. He testified that Vos was "far from being a well man."<sup>61</sup>

After Johannes and Marian's furlough stay ended, it was apparent that Geerhardus Jr. could not take care of his father by himself. Plans were made for Vos to move to Grand Rapids to live with his daughter, Marianne, and her husband, William Radius.

Marianne and William built an extra room for Geerhardus at the top of the stairs at the front entrance to their home. The room was lined with bookcases, a desk, an easy chair, and a bed. Vos's students, particularly those acquainted with Westminster, made frequent visits to their old mentor. According to Marianne, Van Til came regularly to see her father, as did Stonehouse. She recalled, "They would go upstairs to his room. They arrived in a taxicab to the astonishment of everyone on our street. They kept the taxicab waiting for them while they had a prolonged visit upstairs."<sup>62</sup>

Stonehouse visited Vos in the summer of 1944, and afterwards sent him his newly published book, *The Witness of Matthew and Mark to Christ*.<sup>63</sup> Vos told Stonehouse that he believed he had made a real contribution to the subject. He closed, "I trust that, in case you come to Grand Rapids in the future, while I am still on this side of the great divide, you will not fail to call on me, as you so kindly did the other day."<sup>64</sup> The next year when Stonehouse wrote to see if Vos could send a picture of himself, Vos added that he often took up *The Witness of Matthew and Mark* with great pleasure.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Letter, David Craighead to J. Gresham Machen, April 25, 1936.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Interview, Marian Vos by Charles G. Dennison, January 28, 1993 in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania. Archives of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

<sup>61</sup> Letter, David Craighead to J. Gresham Machen, April 25, 1936.

<sup>62</sup> Interview, Marianne Radius.

<sup>63</sup> Ned B. Stonehouse, *The Witness of Matthew and Mark to Christ* (London: Tyndale, 1944).

<sup>64</sup> Letter, Geerhardus Vos to Ned Stonehouse, July 21, 1944, in Dennison, *Letters*, 245.

<sup>65</sup> Letter, Geerhardus Vos to Ned Stonehouse, January 11, 1945, in Dennison, *Letters*, 246.

Marianne recalled that her father was certainly writing poetry during his stay with them. She also believed that having him live with them “was a very good experience for my children and me too.”<sup>66</sup>

Vos was no longer writing theology, but he did help give his daughter feedback as she worked on the chapters that would eventually become the basis of her book, *The Tent of God*.<sup>67</sup>

She said, “By that time, I was working on Sunday School lessons. He was always ready to answer questions and explain difficult doctrines.”<sup>68</sup>

Reformed theologians who were not associated with Christian Reformed Church, Princeton Seminary, Westminster Seminary, or the Orthodox Presbyterian Church also visited Vos in Grand Rapids. In spring 1939, Klaus Schilder made sure to stop by and see Vos when he was in Grand Rapids.<sup>69</sup>

During the last years of his life Vos virtually became a shut-in and retreated from the outside world. In January 1946, Orthodox Presbyterian minister Edwards Elliott offered to help Vos construct a bibliography of Vos’s books and articles. Vos explained that the contents of his library had been scattered and that he was physically unable to research. He said, “As to preparing a list now by research through the institutional libraries, the present state of my health renders this impossible. I am very much troubled by insomnia. My nights are almost a nightmare.”<sup>70</sup> He further explained that any unusual effort during the day aggravated his condition at night.

By the end of the decade, the only times that Vos ventured outside of the house was when the Radius family left Grand Rapids for the month of August in both 1947 and 1948. Unable to care for himself, Vos stayed with his sister, Gertrude, who lived north of Grand Rapids.<sup>71</sup>

## **Funeral: Grand Rapids**

On Saturday, August 13, 1949, at the age of eighty-seven, Geerhardus Vos died at the Hessell Convalescent Hospital after a short illness.<sup>72</sup> The funeral service was two days later at the Zaagman Chapel on the Calvin College campus. H. Henry Meeter, president of Calvin College, officiated before forty-five people.<sup>73</sup>

Thirty-three years earlier Meeter’s dissertation at the Free University of Amsterdam, “The Heavenly High Priesthood of Christ,” was published by Eerdmans-Sevensma. In it he wrote:

I want to acknowledge my indebtedness to my former teacher, Professor Geerhardus Vos, PhD, DD, of Princeton Theological Seminary, whose eminent class lectures on “The

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<sup>66</sup> Interview, Marianne Radius.

<sup>67</sup> Marianne Radius, *The Tent of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968).

<sup>68</sup> Interview, Marianne Radius.

<sup>69</sup> Jelle Faber, *American Succession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism* (Pella, Iowa: Inheritance, 1996), 46.

<sup>70</sup> Letter, Geerhardus Vos to Edwards Elliott, January 25, 1946, in Dennison, *Letters*, 247.

<sup>71</sup> Interview, Marianne Radius.

<sup>72</sup> “Geerhardus Vos, Theologian, Dies,” *New York Times*, August 14, 1949, 68. The *Times* obituary also mentioned that Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania, had awarded Vos the doctor of divinity. The honorary doctorate was awarded in 1894, the year after Vos’s appointment at Princeton Seminary. At that time, a close connection existed between Lafayette and Princeton Seminary. Ethelbert Warfield, the brother of Princeton’s Seminary’s Benjamin Warfield, served as Lafayette’s president. Lafayette also sent more students to Princeton Seminary than any other school except Princeton University.

<sup>73</sup> Dennison, “Life of Geerhardus Vos,” in Dennison, *Letters*, 63.



Teachings of the Epistle to the Hebrews” . . . and on “Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke” . . . have been a very great help to me in the writing of this dissertation.<sup>74</sup>

After officiating at the service, Meeter wrote the obituary that appeared in the September 2, 1949, issue of the *Banner*. Reflecting on Vos, Meeter recalled what J. Gresham Machen had said to him about Vos in Alexander Hall on the Princeton campus. Machen said, “If I knew half as much as Dr. Vos I would be writing all the time . . . Take for example that work of Dr. Vos on the Kingdom of God. Every sentence might well be the topic sentence of a paragraph.”

Meeter praised Vos for “his wonderfully keen mind, his thorough insight in Scripture, and his familiarity with the original languages of the Bible.”<sup>75</sup> This rare combination of gifts enabled Vos “to present ideas which were amazing.” In Vos’s courses, “How often, as one sat in his classroom, one would experience something of the sentiments of the disciples of Emmaus: Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked to us in his lectures, and while he opened to us the Scripture?”<sup>76</sup> But, what struck Meeter equally was Vos’s humility. “Dr. Vos could not write a trite sentence. And yet, learned man though he was, his modesty was a Christian virtue almost to a fault.”<sup>77</sup>

Meeter then related an anecdote that he believed accounted for the difference that existed between Vos’s view of Scripture and that of others. He said:

It could never be said of Dr. Vos that his basic philosophy of life controlled his view of Scripture, as is the case with some biblical interpreters and dogmatists. It was rather the reverse. Scripture controlled his view of life and his thought. One of his students, after a lecture on the covenant of grace, asked him how he could harmonize a thought he had expressed with his view of the covenant. His laconic reply was: You may never force your system upon the Bible.<sup>78</sup>

## **Burial: Roaring Branch**

After the Grand Rapids funeral service ended, Vos’s body was shipped to Roaring Branch for the burial service to be conducted by Orthodox Presbyterian ministers Cornelius Van Til and John DeWaard. Six people were in attendance, including Bernardus and Geerhardus Jr., but none from Princeton where Vos had served for almost four decades.<sup>79</sup> Van Til preached from 2 Corinthians 5:1, “For we know that if the earthly tabernacle of this body were dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in heaven.” Van Til remembered how Vos had exegeted the passage in class. This present age is passing away. Believers, who are a new creation in Christ, aspire to being with the Lord in heaven.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> H. H. Meeter, *The Heavenly High Priesthood of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans-Sevensma, 1916), 29.

<sup>75</sup> H. H. Meeter, “Professor Geerhardus Vos,” in *Banner* 84, September 2, 1949: 1046.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Charles G. Dennison commented that the absence of anyone from Princeton at the burial service confirmed Vos’s “obscurity and the general lack of interest in him from those that we would ordinarily think to be most closely associated with and interested in him.” See, Charles G. Dennison, “Geerhardus Vos and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church,” in *History for a Pilgrim People*, eds. Danny E. Olinger and David K. Thompson (Philadelphia: Committee for Historian, 2002), 70.

<sup>80</sup> Commenting upon Van Til’s sermon at the burial service, John Muether writes, “Eschatological life, Vos had taught Van Til, is more than merely another stage in the culmination of the benefits of redemption; it is life of a different order. Van Til’s appropriation of Vos prompted an important restraint on his use of Kuyper. The creation-fall-redemption paradigm of neo-Calvinism could not fully account for the qualitative difference of the

DeWaard returned to Rochester, New York, where he served as pastor of Memorial OPC. In his sermon on the Lord's Day of August 21, 1949, "Love of the Truth," from 2 Thessalonians 2:10, he opened talking about Vos. He said, "Wednesday Dr. Geerhardus Vos was buried in Roaring Branch, PA. He was one of the four great teachers God has in recent years given to the Church, Warfield, Bavinck, Kuyper and Vos." God gave each of these men a special talent, "but whatever their great talents may have been, however learned these men were, the one thing about all four which we recall with greatest praise is that they all received the love of the truth and did not reject it."<sup>81</sup>

DeWaard then focused on Vos's love of the Word of God and the truth. Recalling his student days in the early 1920s at Princeton under Vos, DeWaard said:

It was not easy to follow Dr. Vos in his journeys of explorations through the precious Word of God. Dr. Vos did not prepare pretty little sermon topics, give three points, Dr. Vos demanded hard work from his students. Students said they did not get anything out of the class room lectures of Dr. Vos. They said that he was not practical.<sup>82</sup>

DeWaard concluded, "Dr. Vos was not popular but that was no fault of Dr. Vos, it was the offense of the gospel."<sup>83</sup>

Van Til considered the solemn honor of conducting the service among the most cherished memories of his life.<sup>84</sup> Years later when Geerhardus Jr. was trying to track down where one of the daughters of Robert Dick Wilson lived, Van Til ended up finding the information for him. After sharing with Geerhardus Jr. what he had learned, Van Til told him:

I remember meeting you at the time of your father's funeral in Roaring Branch, Pennsylvania. You may remember that Mr. DeWaard and I had charge of the funeral. I think your father was the finest teacher I have ever had as well as the greatest scholar I have ever known, and the most lovable Christian person.<sup>85</sup>

Despite Van Til's high opinion of Vos, a renewed appreciation of Vos's biblical-theological insights took time to develop after his death.

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resurrected life, life in the consummate state. Van Til embraced Vos's teaching that this present age is earthly and mortal. In contrast, the life to come, which believers enjoy even now in union with Christ, is "eternal in the heavens." John R. Muether, *Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg, NJ: 2008), 131.

<sup>81</sup> John J. DeWaard, "Love of the Truth," 2 Thessalonians 2:10, preached at Memorial Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Rochester, New York, August 21, 1949. Archives of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Van Til related this to Richard Gaffin. See, Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Geerhardus Vos and the Interpretation of Paul," in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E.R. Geehan (Nutley, NJ: P&R, 1971), 228.

<sup>85</sup> Letter, Cornelius Van Til to Geerhardus Vos Jr., December 10, 1971. Archives of Westminster Theological Seminary.

# ServantReading

## The Religious Life of Robert E. Lee

by R. David Cox

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by Darryl G. Hart

*The Religious Life of Robert E. Lee*, by R. David Cox. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017, xxi + 336 pages, \$26.00, paper.

To say that this religious biography of the Confederate general Robert E. Lee is timely is an understatement. At the same time, to say that anything said about Lee is an understatement is potentially inflammatory. During the controversy surrounding monuments to Confederate leaders during the summer of 2017, Adam Serwer, a contributor to the *Atlantic Monthly*, debunked the myth that Lee was “a brilliant strategist and devoted Christian man who abhorred slavery and labored tirelessly after the war to bring the country back together.”<sup>1</sup> Serwer says little about Lee’s faith but the general’s racism is sufficient to disqualify any claim that the Virginian was a good Christian. Not only was the Confederate officer a bad strategist, according to Serwer, but “White supremacy was one of Lee’s most fundamental convictions.”<sup>2</sup>

R. David Cox’s biography was in the works well before debates about Confederate monuments reopened public debates about the Civil War and the South’s aims in secession. Even so, his book will provide plenty of assistance to those still partial to the Lee “myth” as well as lots of evidence for revilers like Serwer. Cox does not sugar coat even as he handles his subject with empathy. The Lee of this biography is fully human with all the virtues and vices that go with the species.

Born on January 19, 1807, son of Revolutionary War hero Henry “Light Horse Harry” Lee, Robert was a native of Stratford Hall, Virginia. An appointment to the US Military Academy at West Point set the course of Lee’s life. In 1829 he graduated from the Academy and served for seventeen years in the Corps of Engineers, chiefly responsible for securing the young nation’s coastal defenses. Lee’s first active combat duty was in the Mexican-American War, in which his service was sufficiently distinguished to merit the rank of colonel. After that war, Lee took a post at West Point as superintendent (1852–1855) and from there joined the cavalry, a post that required him to lead the effort in 1859 to subdue John Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry. Lee’s wife, Mary Custis Lee, according to Cox, recalled that Brown’s insurrection “should have opened our eyes to the machinations of the . . . fanatical abolitionists” (162). Lee himself did not comment on the politics of the growing sectional crisis. He did believe that “secession would bode catastrophe” (163). Lee’s ambivalence about the Confederacy would not last. In the same week that he declined President Lincoln’s offer to serve as head of the Union’s army, Lee accepted a position as general of Virginia’s army. Cox adds that Lee may be the “only soldier in history to be offered the command of two opposing armies” in the same week (170). The Virginian’s strategy during the war of taking the offense

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Serwer, “The Myth of the Kindly General Lee,” *The Atlantic* (June 4, 2017), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/06/the-myth-of-the-kindly-general-lee/529038/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

north proved surprisingly successful until Gettysburg in 1863 when Confederate soldiers lost in the most remembered battle of the war. Lee was, as all school children know, the Confederate general to accept the terms of surrender at Appomattox from Ulysses S. Grant. Soon after the war, Lee presided over Washington College in Lexington, Virginia, an institution that he helped to rebuild after the war's devastation until 1870 when he died.

Cox's biography is the latest entry in the Eerdmans's Library of Religious Biography series, a forum that invites more exploration of Lee's spiritual life than other historians have produced. In Cox's able hands, Lee is neither an enthusiast who wore his piety on his sleeve nor a nominal Anglican who went through the motions of acceptable Christianity. The general grew up in an Anglican home that reflected the father's enlightened understanding of Christianity and the mother's evangelical experience. Lee himself was not obviously devout in the ways recommended by evangelicals who denounced polite Christianity. He attended church dutifully but did not seek confirmation until he was forty-six years old. When signs of High Church Anglicanism surfaced during the 1840s, an associate reported Lee as declaring, "*Beware of Pussysism (sic)! Pussysism (sic) is always bad, and may lead to unchristian feeling; therefore beware of Pussysism (sic)*" (85). Whether Lee understood the theological subtleties of the Oxford Movement or simply wanted to avoid ecclesiastical controversy is unclear. When he oversaw West Point and a Presbyterian pastor took over duties as chaplain, Lee reassured a cadet's worried Episcopalian father that the services avoided "doctrinal questions" in favor of inculcating "principles of piety & morality" (106). Incidents like these, scattered throughout the book, underscore Cox's general assessment:

Lee was not a religious thinker. He never formally studied theology, much less attended seminary. He was not a preacher, though he heard many a sermon and often commented on them and those who preached them. He was not a theologian but a soldier. His beliefs were far more practical than speculative. (xvi)

Cox departs from this evaluation, however, when discussing the doctrine of providence which informed the very practical and yet speculative nature of assigning meaning to combat, defeat, and death. At the heart of Lee's Christian outlook was a trust in God's control of all things. In what Cox describes as a summary of Lee's theology, the general confessed that "I feel always as safe in the wilderness as in the crowded city" because "I know in whose powerful hands I am & in them rely." According to Cox, this was no fatalism or stoicism for Lee added that "Providence requires us to use the means he has put under our control." Reliance on God's providence did not encourage idleness but work for truth and justice "in this wicked world" (129). This outlook informed Lee's understanding of the South's defeat. The region had "actively offended the Almighty" who "afflict(s) us most deeply" (198). Whatever Lee caught from services, reciting the prayer book and reflecting on God's ways, his faith sustained hope and perseverance throughout his pilgrimage.

For those incapable of forgiving the South, Cox's biography will provide another occasion for offense. Those readers may simply write off Lee's Christian beliefs as mere justification for his views on race and politics. Those who still harbor some attraction for the "Lost Cause" will likely receive Cox's book as a vindication at least of Lee's admirable character. For everyone else, Cox's book provides a welcome study of Lee's piety in the context of Virginia Episcopalianism. This biography will not bring back the monuments of Lee, but it does restore some of the luster so recently denied to Americans who fought for the Confederacy.

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# ServantPoetry

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G. E. Reynolds (1949–)

## The Waterfall of Shadowbrook

The Lake Isle of Innisfree: an update

I will awake and drive to Shadowbrook  
And a small camp build there of wide pine,  
Six beams and a place to read a book  
And live in solitude in my rock-moss mine.

And here I shall find and make peace  
As the evening shadows prevail  
To beat the sun, whose splintery fleece  
Covers the brook and woods as a veil.

I will arise and walk now to the waterfall  
In the torrent-filled air to meet the day  
By the silent pond with the loon call  
To hear what the God-filled world will say.