

“To Know God Aright”: Puritans and the Gift of Education III

Part 3: Puritan Education in New England

Historian Richard Greaves called the Puritan dream of “a universally enlightened society” a “heritage” left to future generations.[\[i\]](#) This idea of universal literacy was slow to develop in England and Europe, but had its most immediate fruits in the Puritan colonies of New England. It was in the New England colonies in the 17th century that Puritan ideas were given the freedom to shape a society like never before. While Puritan ideals certainly impacted societal moral standards and church life, it could be argued that they had their greatest impact on education and literacy in the colonies.

Puritan New England had remarkably high literacy.

Perhaps calling Puritan New England a “universally enlightened society” is an overstatement. However, when one compares the literacy rates of colonial New England to old England and Virginia, the differences are striking. Historians that have quantitatively researched literacy rates in England, New England, and Virginia have shown this difference. By the time of the American Revolution, New England boasted a male literacy rate of about 85 percent and of nearly 100 percent in the city of Boston.[\[ii\]](#) While female literacy was considerably lower (about 60 percent), these numbers are still remarkable when compared to England and Virginia.[\[iii\]](#) In England and Virginia male literacy was still at 60 percent by 1790 and female literacy much lower.[\[iv\]](#) With nearly every man and the majority of women being able to read, Puritan New England

achieved something no other society had ever found possible.

How did the New England Puritans achieve a literate society? A partial answer to this question is that they did it through legislation. As early as 1642, Massachusetts passed a law calling for parents to educate their children. More famously, in 1647, the colony famously passed what became known as the "Old Deluder Satan Act." This law called for all towns and communities of at least 50 people to establish schools and provide teachers for those schools so that Satan would not be able to "keep men from knowledge of the Scriptures." [v] Again, one sees the theological purpose behind Puritan education. In the Puritan view, literacy and knowledge of the Bible and theology were foundational to Christian living. Unlike in England where this knowledge was limited to a literate faction, New England established it for all.

Puritans prioritized education for all levels.

It follows, therefore, that education began young and in the home. While schools were established according to the law, good Puritan families did not wait for the school to educate their children. Children needed to learn to read the Scripture, to know God's word. In Puritan New England, families sought to teach their children to read and write and to memorize their catechism as early as possible (usually five or six). There was a sense of urgency embraced by the Puritan community in New England. Early death was a regular occurrence. Children, because of original sin, were sinners by nature. They must learn to read and learn of God as young as possible. As Cotton Mather said when asked when children should learn to read, "BETIMES! BETIMES! Let the Children have the Early Knowledge of the Holy Scripture." [vi]

Sometimes historical dates seem like arbitrary numbers malevolent teachers force their ~~victims~~ students to memorize. In this case, dates tell the story. In 1620, the first group of Puritans arrived in New England aboard the famous

Mayflower. In 1630, Puritan immigrants from England founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In 1636, the theocratic government of Massachusetts founded Harvard College to train its ministers, doctors, and lawyers. Within 16 years of any settlement and with 6 years of founding Massachusetts, the Puritans had erected an institution of higher learning. While they were still taming the wilderness and erecting their modest homes, education—specifically religious education—was a priority. This is perhaps even more remarkable when compared to the foundation of the College of William and Mary in Virginia. Founded in 1693, William and Mary was established 86 years after the first settlers arrived in Jamestown colony.

The New England Primer gives us insight into the Puritan classroom.

As they established community grammar schools and Harvard College, New England Puritans began to publish educational curricula that better fit their perspective. The most popular of these materials was the *New England Primer*. First published around 1687, the *Primer* was the chief tool used in the American colonies for students to learn the alphabet.

The *Primer* used pictures and poetic couplets to teach both the alphabet and biblical lessons. It begins, “In Adam’s fall, We sinned all” and continues to teach about biblical figures such as Job, Peter, Esther, and David, as well as lessons about cats, dogs, eagles, lions, and the King.[\[vii\]](#) This section is followed by a series of statements that every child was to commit to memory. After twelve sentences on the child’s duty, the *Primer* adds another “Alphabet Lesson for Youth,” this time using Scripture verses to illustrate every letter of the alphabet.[\[viii\]](#) Some editions of the *Primer* conclude with the Story of John Roger, a Marian martyr and example of Christian virtue.

The *New England Primer* may show the overwhelming importance of theological instruction in the education of youth, but Puritan

education in New England was by no means limited to the study of Scripture. Rather than limiting themselves, New England Puritans, much like Milton and other English Puritans, saw biblical instruction as the foundation of a good education. Education in New England, especially the higher education offered by Harvard College, was very receptive to experimental science.[\[ix\]](#)

Puritan Education was broad in content but strict in discipline.

New England Puritans were also known to be students of ancient languages, pagan literature, and philosophy. They placed a high importance on reason and on logical thought. While this emphasis is a product of Renaissance humanism, it was also theologically guided. One scholar notes, “New England humanism had a moral and a theological purpose: men studied the ancient classics in order to become familiar with the ancient tongues, and men needed a knowledge of the ancient tongues in order to interpret the ancient text of the Scriptures.”[\[x\]](#) While they held the classics in high esteem, they saw that the purpose of education was not just to gain knowledge, but mostly to gain knowledge of God. It is clear that English Puritan educational theorists, like Milton, had a profound impact on Puritan society in New England.

It is certainly well established that discipline in Puritan education was strict and corporal. The *New England Primer* even says: “An idol fool, is whipped at school.”[\[xi\]](#) Cotton Mather’s famous dictum to parents “Better whipt than dam’d” is often seen as the essence of Puritan education.[\[xii\]](#) As we have seen, this is clearly not the whole story. In his extensive study of Puritan families and their education, Historian Edmond Morgan concluded: “Puritan education was intelligently planned, and the relationship between parent and child that it envisaged was not one of harshness and severity but of tenderness and sympathy.”[\[xiii\]](#)

The Puritans desired a society of lay intellectualism, a society where everyday people could read and think not necessarily for themselves, but the way God intended them to think. In New England, they built that society. They read more than any society that preceded them. More of them read than in the majority of countries to this day. They read the Bible, but not only the Bible. They read Homer and Plato, and their own authors like Milton and Bunyan. They studied both the supernatural deity that they believed gave them salvation, as well as the natural world He had made. Their philosophy of education was broad, not rigid and narrow like many believe. While it was broad, it was also focused. It had a unifying theme, a core value, and a purpose behind it—the knowledge of God.

Read Part [One](#) and [Two](#) by clicking the links.

[\[i\]](#) Richard L. Greaves, *The Puritan Revolution and Educational Thought: Background for Reform* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 146.

[\[ii\]](#) David D. Hall, "Education and the Social Order in Colonial America." *Reviews in American History* 3 (1975): 179; Gloria Main, "An Inquiry into When and Why Women Learned to Write in Colonial New England" in *Journal of Social History* 24 (1991): 585.

[\[iii\]](#) Main, 581.

[\[iv\]](#) Hall, 179.

[\[v\]](#) Joel Spring, *The American School, 1642-1985* (New York: Longman, 1986), 3.

[vi] Quoted in Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth Century New England*, 2nd edition (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), 96.

[vii] *The New England Primer* in Susan Castillo and Ivy Schweitzer, eds. *The Literatures of Colonial America: An Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 294.

[viii] Ibid., 295.

[ix] Raymond Stearns, "Assessing the New England Mind," *Church History* 10 (1941): 257.

[x] Ibid., 258.

[xi] *New England Primer*, 294.

[xii] Quoted in Morgan, *The Puritan Family*, 103.

[xiii] Ibid., 108.

“To Know God Aright”: Puritans and the Gift of Education II

Part 2: The Puritan Philosophy of Education

In 1646, in the midst of the English Civil War, leaders of the Scottish Presbyterian Church and the English Congregationalist Churches produced what could be considered the most profound philosophical statement ever written by mere mortals. It was the opening statement of a catechism, or a question and answer tool used to educate young people in religion. These men were

Puritans and they famously asked: “What is the chief end of man?” Their Answer: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” [\[i\]](#) While the Westminster Assembly of Divines said and wrote much more than these words, this concise statement describing the purpose of human existence is the summit of Puritan thought. In many ways, it was the great gift of the Puritan movement to future generations. In many ways, it describes not only their theology but also their philosophy of life, including their view of education.

The printing presses of 17th century England proliferated new Primers, catechisms, or books on educational philosophy. Education was a hot topic in the bustling streets of early modern England. This was especially true among the Puritans who, as we saw in [Part One](#), were already a more educated lot. Like all things the Puritans did, their education reforms were guided by their desire to better know God, glorify him more, and enjoy him forever.

Milton advocated a God-centered educational curriculum.

While many Puritan tract writers sought to reform education, John Milton’s *On Education* serves as a representative work of Puritan education reforms. [\[ii\]](#) Although he is more famous for his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, Milton began his career writing Puritan tractates and running a small school. In this book, Milton challenges many medieval assumptions about education and advocates a Christian Renaissance style curriculum.

The first thing one notices about *On Education* is that his reforms in education are theologically guided. Milton establishes the purpose of education stating, “The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents [Adam and Eve] by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true virtue, which

united to the heavenly grace of faith, makes up the highest perfection.”[\[iii\]](#) In Milton’s view, education is to help humans out of their depravity by giving them tools by which they can know God.

At this point, one wonders if Milton believed that education was something humans could do to bring one closer to salvation. Could educating one’s self be seen as a work toward salvation? This certainly seems to conflict with the Calvinism so dominant in Puritan thought. Although Milton was not as Calvinistic (or even orthodox) as many of his contemporaries, this dichotomy between human responsibility to gain an education to further one’s knowledge of God and human inability to know God without divine grace is not unique to him. Historian Edmond Morgan notes that in the society of Puritan New England, “The ultimate purpose of education, then, was salvation.”[\[iv\]](#) Yet, this society never could fully reconcile their nearly sacramental view of education with their Calvinist theology.[\[v\]](#) It appears that Milton, like most Puritans, lived with this tension.

While this tension remained the theological foundation for education was still clearly communicated and implemented by the Puritan faithful. To know God, one must know his word. This is, of course, a call for biblical literacy and theological training through catechesis, but it is also a mandate for moral instruction. Milton called for a “true virtue” which was a product of knowing God’s Word.[\[vi\]](#) At its core, therefore, the purpose of education was theological and moral.

Milton proposed a liberal arts education curriculum.

A second key aspect of Milton’s program of educational reform is that it is to be broad or liberal. In this way, his program is a variation of Renaissance humanism. Students are first to learn grammar (English, Greek, and Latin), then to read and

learn to love the Greek and Latin classics.[\[vii\]](#) Undoubtedly influenced by Renaissance Humanists like Erasmus and Castiglione, as well as the Protestant Reformers, Milton called for “a complete and generous education, that which fits a man to perform justly, skillfully and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war.”[\[viii\]](#) An educated man was to be a Renaissance man, not a mere specialist. This was because a man with a liberal education was a liberated man.

Aside from the theological and moral foundation and humanist curriculum, *On Education* called for education to be practical. While Milton was no utilitarian in his philosophy, he believed that students should put in practice what they learn as soon as they are able to.[\[ix\]](#) He also argued that students should study practical subjects such as geometry, sailing, and warfare.[\[x\]](#) Milton’s approach was both a traditional humanist approach and a modern one. Like other Puritans, he believed in the importance of ancient languages, classical literature, and biblical training. Also like other Puritans, he made room for practical subjects and experimental science.[\[xi\]](#)

Many often fail to realize how practical Puritan education really was. After a solid foundation, an adolescent Puritan in England or New England would typically be apprenticed in a trade. He would often live with another family and learn from the master of the house his trade. This was most certainly part of the educational process for most Puritan families. While apprenticeships were common in all of Europe, Puritan families strove to ensure that their young men did not study a trade before they could read and understand the Scripture.[\[xii\]](#)

The Puritan philosophy of education was not puritanical.

Even a cursory reading of Milton’s tract shows that his Puritan philosophy of education is in direct contradiction to

the stereotype of Puritans as rigid, overly-pious, authoritarian men who studied the Bible and Calvinist theology to the exclusion of all other subjects. In his work *The Puritan Revolution and Education Thought*, historian Richard Greaves argues against such an understanding of the Puritans. He states, "For the Puritans theology was superior though not contradictory to the other and subordinate areas of knowledge." [xiii] He goes on to argue that the Puritans maintained the "supremacy of theology without altogether neglecting the remaining arts and sciences which, with theology, comprised the all-encompassing body of knowledge, divine and human." [xiv] The Puritan philosophy of education was, therefore, theologically founded and theologically guided, but was also liberal in its scope and was to be practical in its execution.

Greaves also makes important observations when it comes to the Puritan's goal of education in society. Focusing specifically on the sectaries or Separatists in Puritan England, he discusses their hatred of religious professionalism or dependence on clerical instruction for knowledge of the Bible. Greaves states: "What the sectaries [Puritans and Separatists] wanted was not professionalism but lay intellectualism. They rejected the idea of a society where a select group of monopolistic specialists victimized men through theology, law, and medicine." [xv] While this view may be more anti-clerical than that of most Puritans, it has much the same ethos. The Puritans were driven by the idea that Scripture was to be read, studied, and followed by each individual. A large part of their solution to social problems and spiritual decay was to produce a more educated population.

The Puritan emphasis on the salvation of the individual through knowledge of the Word of God is a logical corollary to the desire for lay intellectualism. Greaves reiterates this argument: "[The] ultimate goal was not a society dependent on professionals for knowledge of particular subjects, but a

society of enlightened, knowledgeable laymen. Their dream of a universally enlightened society is our heritage.”[\[xvi\]](#) It is this dream that the Puritans brought to the New World. As we will see in Part 3, it was in this New World context that this dream was made a reality.

The Puritans sought education for their children primarily so that they could know their Creator through reading the Scripture. They hoped this method would produce both salvation and moral excellence, or at least help them along in the process. They would not stop there, however. They wanted vocationally educated and economically competent heirs. They sought the most liberal education for their children that their society could afford. They desired to produce holy renaissance men who were not utterly dependent on elites for knowledge. They wanted much more out of education than any society had ever offered. For the most part, they achieved it.

Read Part [One](#) and [Three](#) by clicking the links.

[\[i\]](#) Westminster Shorter Catechism, https://reformed.org/documents/wsc/index.html?_top=https://reformed.org/documents/WSC.html

[\[ii\]](#) Identifying Milton as a Puritan is a subject of much debate. As I have defined Puritans broadly, Milton, especially in his early years, is certainly in this vein. Moreover, *On Education* is considered by many to be representatively Puritan on this subject. Richard L. Greaves, *The Puritan Revolution and Educational Thought: Background for Reform* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 41.

[\[iii\]](#) John Milton, *On Education* in Richard M. Gamble, ed. *The*

Great Tradition: Classic Readings on What it Means to be an Educated Human Being (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2007), 469.

[iv] Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth Century New England*, 2nd edition (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), 92.

[v] Ibid, 94.

[vi] Milton, 469.

[vii] Ibid., 471.

[viii] Ibid., 470.

[ix] Ibid.

[x] Ibid., 475.

[xi] Greaves, 41.

[xii] See Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Family*.

[xiii] Ibid., 38.

[xiv] Ibid., 39.

[xv] Ibid., 137.

[xvi] Ibid., 146.

“To Know God Aright”:

Puritans and the Gift of Education

Part One: Who were the Puritans?

Historians differ considerably on their usage of the term “Puritan.”

Along with the growing popular appeal of Calvinism among twenty-first century evangelicals is a growing interest in Puritans. What used to denote a joyless legalistic form of Christianity is now often understood to be a gospel-focused, God-centered intensity of faith. As a Christian historian, therefore, I find trying to understand the Puritans a fascinating process. Moreover, as a Christian educator I have come to understand the Puritan philosophy of education to be one of their greatest gifts to posterity. We are all the benefactors of their love of learning.

The Puritans are as difficult for twenty and twenty-first-century scholars to understand as they were for their contemporaries. Some historians have seen the Puritans as radicals who overthrew the traditional structures of monarchy and episcopacy by means of revolution. In this way, they are the forerunners of the American, French and even Communist Revolutions.[\[i\]](#) Others have portrayed the Puritan movement and its work ethic as the seedbed for eighteenth and nineteenth-century capitalism.[\[ii\]](#) This interpretation is a far cry from Communist revolutionaries. A more common approach to Puritans presents them as overly pious zealots who squelched individual liberties for the dream of a holy society or Calvinist theocracy. Those from this perspective have even coined the adjective “puritanical” as a synonym for strict, rigid or authoritarian. Still, others believe the Puritans to be the

founders of American democracy, the champions of religious liberty, and the reformers of the Church of England. If one word can mean all these things, then how can it mean anything?[\[iii\]](#) If one is to learn something from the Puritan approach to education, one must first understand who he is talking about when he talks about Puritans. This three-part series of essays seeks to define what Puritanism means, and then show how these men and women reformed education first in England and then in New England.

What the term meant in the seventeenth-century.

The problem with all of these competing understandings of Puritanism is that they place seventeenth-century people into modern terms. Rather than being concerned with revolution, capitalism or democracy, the Puritans were concerned with the issues of their time, the chief of which was the reformation of the English Church. The movement grew out of the larger movement of Protestant reforms sweeping Europe in the sixteenth century. England was brought to Protestantism by Henry VIII's desire to end his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, led back to Catholicism by his daughter Mary Tudor, and brought to a somewhat peaceful Protestant compromise by Elizabeth I. It was this compromise of Protestant theology and Catholic influences that gave rise to the Puritan movement. In short, Puritans believed that Protestant England was much too Catholic. They opposed the liturgy, feast days, clerical vestments, and the episcopal organizational structure of the Church.

At this point, it is important to point out the original usage of the term. For the most part, "Puritan" was used in a derogatory sense. Elizabeth's successor James I was particularly antagonistic toward the Puritans as they were particularly disapproving of his insistence on an episcopal church government. James categorized the Puritans as those who were "trusting the private spirit of Reformation" rather than

accepting the authority of the Church.^[iv] James' usage of the term, in many ways, gets to the heart of Puritanism—a movement dedicated to the authority of Scripture over against any other considerations. It was a movement that despite its certainty in the doctrine of human depravity believed that the Bible was powerful enough to change any man. It must be read and understood by everyman.

While the Puritans sought reform of the Church, they also sought to reform society. They wanted to eradicate sins that brought England further from its role as a Protestant kingdom, such as Sabbath-breaking, swearing, adultery, and drunkenness. They even outlawed Christmas because of its pagan associations. In their desire to reform the church and society, they were influenced by the model of John Calvin's Geneva. Eventually, the Puritans had the opportunity to implement their reforms. In England, after the defeat and execution of Charles I at the end of the Civil War in 1649, the Puritans established a short-lived republican government under Oliver Cromwell. In New England starting in 1620, they established colonies built on principles drawn from their belief in the righteousness of God, the wickedness of humanity, and the authority of the Bible.

The Puritans, however, were not a political party or a united group with central leadership. They were loosely organized and many times very diverse in their beliefs. Most were Calvinistic, some were not, many attempted to balance the extremes in various ways. One issue that illustrates this diversity is separation from the Church of England. Many historians reserve the term Puritan only for those that stayed within institutionalized church. Those that separated are labeled Separatists. This distinction, while sometimes helpful, is of little use when discussing Puritanism in New England where they all in a sense separated. Many of those Separatists who left the Church of England also left England. Since they are known as Puritans in New England, their fellow

Separatists will also be seen as a Puritans. Separatism, therefore, is a branch of Puritanism. Admittedly, this definition may be broad, but it does provide a framework for a discussion of Puritan reforms in education.

Puritans were more educated than average.

In attempting to define Puritans and discuss Puritan education, the educational background of the Puritans must be taken into consideration. Protestantism in general and Puritanism, in particular, had a special appeal to the literate lay people in towns and cities. In studying Reformation-era Germany and Switzerland, historian Steven Ozment demonstrated successfully that the message of the Reformers appealed primarily to this demographic.[\[v\]](#) Who else would read the tracts and sermons of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin?

Similarly, Puritanism grew among the more literate city and town folk. One historian points out that: "Though Puritanism appealed to men and women of every walk of life, it flourished in towns especially among the 'industrious sort' – those who had succeeded by effort which they attributed to grace."[\[vi\]](#) In less secular and caustic terms, the Puritan message appealed to the successful, the middle class, and the professional people of London and other urban areas. It appealed to the already literate. These men and women regularly read tracts, owned Bibles, and thought their way through lengthy sermons. These were not typical Englishmen of the late 16th and 17th centuries; they highly valued education for themselves and their posterity.

When it comes to literacy and education the colonies established by Puritans were also not typical English colonies. They certainly weren't typical of Spanish, French, or Portuguese colonies. As we will see in Part Three, the literacy rate in New England around the time of the 1776

Revolution was higher than any other place in the world!

Puritans wanted to radically change their society for the better.

While Puritanism was born out of dissatisfaction with the Elizabethan Settlement and the reign of James I, it began to prosper during the reign of Charles I. Many scholars have called this time the Puritan Revolution (1641-1660), the time where Puritans came to power in Parliament and used the New Model Army to defeat Charles I, execute him for treason, and establish a Puritan government under Parliament and Oliver Cromwell. War is a time of turmoil, even for those on the winning side. This period was also one of change and new ideas. In this context, the Puritans saw an opportunity for reshaping society, an opportunity to establish a holy republic.

In building a new society, they thought it a priority to reform education. As historian Richard Greaves points out, "No Puritan of any kind could envisage a Holy Commonwealth without a reformed church and piously oriented schools." [\[vii\]](#) While much is known about Puritan attempts to reform the church, their emphasis on education is underappreciated. The Puritan Revolution was a time of new government, new ideas, and new opportunities. The Puritans saw it as a time for educational reform. These ideas on education will be examined in Part Two.

Were the Puritans really puritanical? Is the reputation for joyless and thoughtless authoritarianism zeal deserved? The answer depends much more on the presuppositions of the one answering the question than on the historical record. Certainly, the Puritans had high moral standards and desired to implement their beliefs in society that makes most modern people bristle. Of course, they went too far in outlawing Christmas. The Puritans were, however, a people committed to one consuming idea—the knowledge and worship of God through the Holy Scriptures. Because of the need to read the Bible,

this consuming idea led to the greatest educational reforms the world had yet seen.

Read Part [Two](#) and [Three](#) by clicking the links.

Notes:

[\[i\]](#) For an example see the works of Marxist historian Christopher Hill. Especially *The World Turned Upside Down* (London: Penguin Books, 1972).

[\[ii\]](#) For an example of this view see that classic work by Max Webber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1930).

[\[iii\]](#) Commenting on contradictory meanings of Puritan, Raymond Stearns writes, "The Puritan was a jealous bigot but he somehow gave us religious freedom; he was a gloomy snob but he gave us democracy; he was a tight-fisted, hard-working Calvinist with a feudal background but he developed the capitalists system!" in Raymond Stearns, "Assessing the New England Mind," *Church History* 10 (1941): 246.

[\[iv\]](#) King James I, *Meditation upon the Lord's Prayer* quoted in Keith Durso, *No Armor for the Back: Baptist Prison Writings 1600s-1700s* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), 46.

[\[v\]](#) Steven Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities: The Appeal of Protestantism to sixteenth-century Germany and Switzerland* (Hartford: Yale University Press, 1980).

[\[vi\]](#) Mark Kishlansky, *A Monarchy Transformed, Britain 1603-1714* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 31.

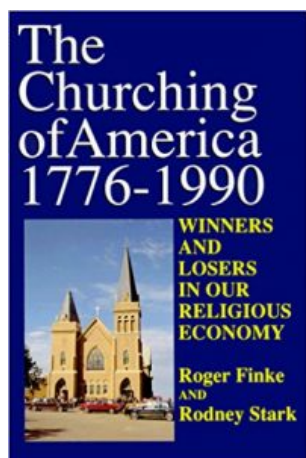
[\[vii\]](#) Richard L. Greaves, *The Puritan Revolution and*

Educational Thought: Background for Reform (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 6.

Five Great books from Rodney Stark

Rodney Stark is a Sociologist from Baylor University. He has mostly applied his craft to understanding religious history in over 30 books and countless articles. Very few authors have such a direct impact on my academic life as him. While great theological minds remain among my favorite authors, Stark has had a profound impact on the way I understand the world. Since I am in the business of communicating an understanding of the world (I'm a history teacher) Stark's influence is incalculable. For today's Friday Five, I offer a mini-review of 5 of his books.

Churching of America with Roger Fink (1992)



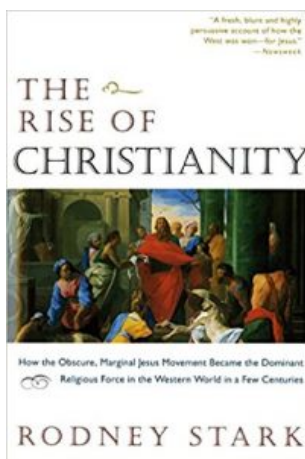
I came across this book in graduate school by recommendation of one of my best professors. As an AP US History teacher, I make frequent use of this book. The authors' argument attacks the idea that the United States was a universally Christian nation at its founding. Their major source for studying religious devotion is church attendance. What they find is that while Americans may have been largely culturally Christian in 1776, they were not zealous churchgoers. In fact, a greater percentage of Americans go to church

today than in 1776.

It's no surprise then that evangelists of the early 19th century felt the need for religious revival. It was these revivals, the Second Great Awakening, that made America a "Christian" nation in the way we tend to think of it. As conversions soared, so did church attendance. Every year, I get to teach the Second Great Awakening and using Finke's and Stark's research, I make the argument that it was the most important social or cultural event in American history.

Aside from the immense impact of the Second Great Awakening, another fascinating argument is that of religious competition. Finke and Stark assert that religious freedom in the colonies and early republic led to a sort of "Free Market" of denominations and religious groups. Each was in competition with the others and had to work for converts. As compared to established state churches in Europe, American denominations had to work to attract new members or die. This factor explains why the United States had not experienced the massive decline in church attendance that Western Europe faced, even if in 1776 we were perhaps less Christian than Europe.

The Rise of Christianity (1996)



For Christians, this may be the most important book on the list. While there were some parts that Bible-believing Christians bristle at, this book is a must-read for anyone interested in church history. The question it addresses is: how did an obscure Jewish sect become the major religion of the Roman Empire in less than 300 years? His answers are exhilarating.

First, he argues that the mission to the Jews worked much more

than readers of the Bible would think. Unfortunately, Stark too often presents this as a problem with what the New Testament says rather than what our perception of the situation is. The Bible never claims that all the Jews rejected Christianity so Stark's arguments are not incompatible with Scripture. At this point, Stark makes his classic argument about religious conversion, one that has been the staple of his career for some time. Stark argues that religious conversions do not happen (mostly) because of a preacher or missionary. He argues that people convert to a religion because of the influence of their social networks. If an individual feels a deep connection (through kinship or employment or friendship) to a group of people that are largely one religion, they tend to convert. In other words, conversion is conformity. A more positive way to say this, including people in a community of believers, is the only real way to make converts.

Interestingly, Stark argues that the social networks used by first century Christians were the network of the diaspora Jews. He claims that the number of Gentile God-fearers was probably high and it was through these networks that Jews, half-Jews, and God-fearers became Christian.

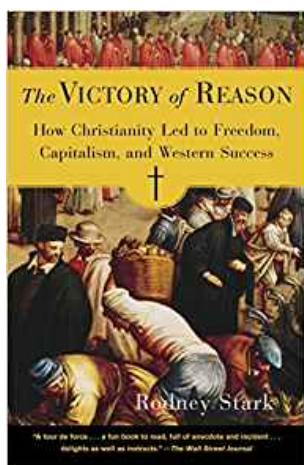
Perhaps my favorite argument in the book is how Christian sexuality transformed the Empire. Romans were not interested in reproduction; they were interested in gratification. Newborns were often abandoned to die, especially if they were girls. This led to a situation where there were more men than women and where homosexual sex, heterosexual anal sex, and temple prostitution sex were the norms. In this context, Christian sexuality simply out-reproduced the pagans. Christian women married at an older age than pagan girls who often married before puberty. As a result, Christian women had less damaged reproductive systems and were more fertile. They also kept their babies instead of the common practices of abortion and infanticide. Christian men were encouraged to

marry and have families rather than gratify themselves in other ways.

Christianity's more positive treatment of women (along with the lack of murder of girls) led to female converts. This established a situation where Christian women outnumbered Christian men significantly. According to Stark, Christian women married pagan men regularly, but would often bring their pagan husbands into their Christian community. This often led to the conversion of the husband and even more so led to more children being born and raised into the Christian community.

There are several more compelling arguments in this book, arguments that have a significant practical impact on our understanding of the early church. In short, however, it was the willingness to include others in social networks, compassion for the poor, intellectual viability, and Christian marital sexuality that won over the Roman Empire and changed the world.

Victory of Reason (2005)



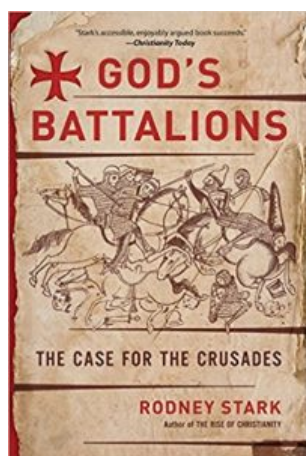
For those interested in medieval history, this is where to start. In this book, Stark goes into the Middle Ages to see the impact of Christianity in advancing the cultural and intellectual life of Western culture. The standard narrative that Stark attacks is the idea that the fall of Rome was the fall of cultural progress, learning, and any sort of modern progress. The medieval era that followed was an era hampered by religiosity and superstition. This era, called the Dark Ages, was eventually rescued by the secularism of the Renaissance.

Stark masterfully destroys this erroneous assumption about the

past. Despite some obvious hardships during the medieval period, Starks argues that they are a time of increased moral, technological, intellectual, and economic progress. The Romans used slaves in abundance, the middle ages saw greater amounts of freedom and human dignity. While the Romans built great aqueducts for the wealthy with those slaves, the medieval times saw the invention of practical labor-saving devices like the windmill. Yes, the classical period produced great minds, but the scholastic emphasis on reason was the foremost prelude to the scientific method. Moreover, the decentralization of the government after the fall of the Roman Empire produces the Italian city-state and chartered towns. These freer societies are responsible for the development of market capitalism that allowed for common born people to climb out of crushing poverty for the first time in human history.

The idea that was most behind all these advances, which give birth to the modern world, is the Christian faith's dedication to reason. Believing that a God of order and logic made the universe, the Christian societies of Western Europe were able to use reason to advance more than any society before them.

God's Battalions: The Case for the Crusades (2009)



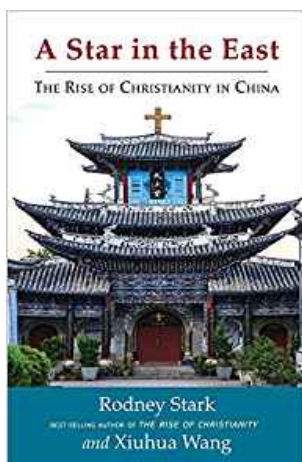
I get the feeling that Stark so enjoyed researching the Medieval period and correcting misconceptions, that he felt the need to set the record straight on the crusades. This work relies much less on originally researched that most of his other works, but is still worth the read for anyone interested in history.

God's Battalions is a fairly detailed history of the Crusades designed to defend Western Europe's involvement in the Wars.

Stark sees the Crusades as a counter-attack to centuries of Muslim aggression in Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. Aside from the centuries leading the Crusades, the specific violence toward Western pilgrims and Byzantines justify the need for the war. Not only was the reason for War justified, the warfare tactics of the Crusades (while often brutal) were typical of their time and no crueller than those tactics used by Turkish troops.

As someone who cares deeply about Muslims and Muslim-Christian relationships, I hesitate to recommend this book to just anyone. Stark does, however, seem to have a firm grip on the historiography of the Crusades and the way historical understanding has been impacted more by modern political climates than actual historical facts. If you are interested in the Crusades, it is worth the read.

A Star in the East with Xiuhua Wang (2015)



Stark brings his understanding of Sociology of Religion to a modern topic—the growth of Christianity in China. His research is aided significantly by one of his Chinese graduate students, Xiuhua Wang. It is in China where more people are currently converting to the Christian faith than anywhere else in the world. How is this possible given traditional oppositions to the Christianity found in

Confucianism and Buddhism as well as an officially atheist society imposed by the Communist State? The answers to the questions are multilayered, but ultimately Stark sees that what is going on in China in the 20th and 21st centuries is basically what was going on in the Roman Empire in the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

People are converting, Stark argues, in the way they always

convert-connections to social networks. In other words, friendships and family ties are how people are coming to Christ. As people feel more connected to a group of Christians than they do to their previous social group, they are willing to convert to the Christian faith. The more people convert to Christianity, the more potential social networks there are to be connected to. The momentum is moving in the direction of the Christian faith.

One of Stark's claims that I found intriguing concerned the impact of Christian missionaries of the 19th and 20th century. Stark asserts that those missionaries, like almost all missionaries, averaged about one or two real converts each. This does not mean they did not have a lasting impact. Institutions like Schools and hospitals were critical in continuing Christian witness long after the missionaries left. More importantly, one convert tended to make more converts than the missionary. As generations pass, thousands of Chinese come to a knowledge of Jesus because of the seemingly insignificant work of that missionary.

One final point about A Star in the East deals with the persecution of the Church in China. Since the Boxer Rebellion during the Qing dynasty, Christians have been objects of persecution in China. The modern state has tried to monitor Christianity in China by making some churches legal, while others have resisted. Stark's analyses of these realities is that the persecution in China has led to a more conservative, Bible-following, church than was around in China in the mid-20th century. In the mid-20th century, Protestant (and Catholic) missionaries from the West dominated Chinese Christianity. Many of these westerners were significantly impacted by the popular theological liberalism of their day. As Western influence was curtailed and Chinese Christians were forced to make the choice to conform or face persecution, the church in China became more devout and more faithful to the Scripture.

“A Star in the East” is a short book that is illuminating for anyone interested in the story of the world’s soon-to-be largest Christian nation.

As shown above, Stark is a revisionist. He seems to live for debunking accepted wisdom and providing fresh new understanding of historical or sociological questions. In doing so, he challenges our cultural’s post-enlightenment negative understanding of Christianity and advocates for the real world benefits of faith. Hopefully my efforts today will bring someone to read one of these great books. If you’ve read anything by Stark, tell us what you think in the comments below.

Five Things Our Mothers Taught Us

Mothers. None of us would be here if they weren’t around. Am I right or am I right? But our moms are so much more than just the person who brought us into the world. I don’t know about you, but there is a universe of knowledge I gleaned from my mom. For this Mother’s Day, the REO team wanted to honor our moms by relating five of the important lessons we learned from them.

Vickie Speer

When I was around 6 years old or so, I was at the supermarket with Mom, and we had finally made it to the checkout line. I

asked her if I could get some Starburst candy, and she flat out said "No"...but I just couldn't take that for an answer. When she wasn't looking, I wedged the Starburst in between a few other items on the conveyor belt and hoped she wouldn't notice.

My devious plans were foiled, but not before the cashier had already scanned the candy into the register. My mom held her up from her scanning, and the cashier asked if she should take it off and shelve it. For some reason, mom left it on the bill and bought it. And then, she didn't let me have the candy. Oh man, it was so much worse knowing for weeks that the candy was in our possession, sitting alone up in the cupboard. The poor, lonely candy. The poor, deprived child.

I probably learned my lesson: No means no. At the very least, I haven't forgotten it. Still, once enough time had passed, I snatched the candy out of the cupboard and asked Mom if I could have some, and she just hurriedly unwrapped it and let me eat it. I think she forgot about its significance. I ate it with the weight of shame upon me. How could something so sweet be simultaneously so bittersweet? Cast your pejorative gaze upon my childhood shenanigans and learn, O reader. A Starburst eaten with a clear conscience is worth 500 eaten in shame. (D.A. Speer)

Betty Lou Plunkett

When we were kids Mom told us that "Here at The Rock, we have two basic rules. The first rule is: obey all rules. Secondly: Do not write on the walls, as it takes a lot of work to erase writing off of the walls." Just kidding. That's Barney Fife. Though she kept decided discipline and order, Mom was definitely not a Barney Mom, constantly spouting off rules, regulations, and long rants of "wisdom." Mom was not one to dole out a lot of such talk and sage quotable diatribes. Her

wisdom was largely displayed through how she lived. Most of what I learned from her I learned by watching her live life and interact with those around her. And I learned so much. One of the ways she most impacted me was via her enduring innate joyfulness and contentment in all situations no matter how dark. Mom had been through a lot of heavy moments in her life: Months in the hospital as a child after accidentally drinking a glass of lye soap; months worth of hours spent in the hospital with me for various reasons; raising four kids; years of serving as a home missionary, foreign mission, and teacher; and finally lymphatic cancer. Yet, for as long as I knew her (since 1973) she always maintained her contented spirit. This is not to say she never got sad or anything like that. Yet even in sadness, there was always that feeling of joy radiating from her. No matter how dark situations got, she had a way of making it feel like matters weren't that bad. This was even true with her final battle with cancer. Like Paul the Apostle, she had learned the secret of being content even in the darkest moment. That secret was their hope in Jesus. Her contentment and joy came to a head just minutes before she died. During those moments she expressed an almost rapturous joy in Jesus, and we who were present could almost see heaven itself. (Ben Plunkett)

Yvonne Cannon

I remember once my senior year in high school my best friends Wade and John came over one afternoon on a school day – I don't recall why – but they ended up staying for dinner even though we hadn't planned for them to do so. My mother cooked extra without even a second thought. Then, again without really planning it, they slept over. On a school night.

The reasons these things happened is because my mother created a home environment where people felt welcomed to treat it like it was theirs. My living room was often packed with our

friends on weekend nights when we were teenagers. Some of our friends didn't even knock when they came over. People of other races and ethnicities were welcomed into our home. My dad's hunting buddies, Super Bowl parties, Seinfeld finale parties, Bible College visitors, church prayer times...our house was (and still is) constantly being used to host people. Even though our house was well kept, even when my mother worked full time, we worried far less about stains on the carpet and spills in the kitchen than we did about making sure everyone in Turbeville, SC knew there was a place where all were welcome. My dad is a great man, but my mother was the main reason this was so.

So of the million things I have learned from her, most of them from observation and not words, hospitality rises to the top. It takes humility and sacrifice to open up your home to so many people. It's supremely inconvenient. I wish I could say I appreciated it back then, but I do now. It's one of the most Jesus-like things about my mother's life. And one I hope to emulate here in Chicago. (Gowdy Cannon)

Judy Lytle

There is nothing more empowering than hearing the words "you are good at..." It may even be more important for a parent to affirm the things their children do well than to correct their short-comings. As a teen, I more or less floated through life. I am not particularly athletic, musical, or creative. I was fairly shy and just starting to take an interest in academics. Some people can do well just about anything they attempt. Well, I had (have) very few skills. I just was. When I was in high school, my mother told me that I would make a good history teacher or perhaps a good chef. Studying history and cooking were two things I did well and loved doing. That conversation with my mother established the trajectory of my life. This morning I got up early to pray with 30 of my

students before taking their AP United States History exam. I also baked them homemade cinnamon rolls. It has been 20 years since my mother said, "You are good at..." but I am living out the empowerment from that conversation nearly every day. (David Lytle)

My mom is the hardest worker I know. If there is a job to do, she does it. If there is a meal to make, a person to visit, a floor to tile, a room to paint, a class to teach... You get the point. Unfortunately, I did not inherit that impressive work ethic from my mother. In my defense, no one in the history of the world has a work ethic like my mother, but it would have been nice to get even 50% of the inner drive she possesses. Also in my defense, I do work very hard if it is for something I love. But my mom works hard period. Full stop. Love or no love, she jumps into every task as if it is the most important thing in the world. And while I don't have that same character trait, I do have the best example anyone could ask for to push me, nudge me, and even unintentionally shame me a little into working harder on things that I don't love that much. (Phill Lytle)

The Forgotten History of Christian Rock: Part One

Introduction by Michael Lytle

When scanning the FM radio dial in any U.S. city you come across a wide variety of stations. In my city, if I want to hear oldies from the 50s and 60s I have a couple options. I

can also listen to classic rock from the 70s, modern rock, alternative/indie rock, top 40 pop and hip-hop, and of course a variety of country options. If I am feeling particularly adventurous, I can check out mix stations that play popular songs from the last four or five decades.

If I want to listen to Christian music I have several stations to choose from as well. Unfortunately, they all basically play the same songs over again and their entire catalog seems to be chosen from music released in the last six to twelve months. It's as if there is a deliberate attempt to pretend that Christian music did not exist before last year. There also seems to be a mandate to play a very limited number of artists who for the most part play the same generic style of pop worship music. These stations are very proud of the fact that their music is uplifting, upbeat, positive, encouraging, and safe for the whole family. Just don't look for anything challenging, convicting, original, or thought-provoking because those qualities might alienate some of their more easily offended listeners.

Why do Christian radio stations avoid anything challenging? Why do they gravitate to easy and safe music? And more importantly, why do Christian radio stations and even Christian music listeners want to ignore their history? Regardless of whether you are a fan of the music that continues to be released in the Christian Rock or CCM genres, it is critical to recognize that there is plenty of great Christian music that has been made over the last several decades. Unfortunately, nearly all this music has been forgotten or ignored.

We want to do our part to shed some light on this overlooked music. We decided the best way to do that is a series of short articles spotlighting different time periods and styles of Christian rock music. We are including a Spotify playlist with each article featuring some of the music from each era. These playlists are by no means exhaustive. While Spotify has a vast

library of albums and songs they don't have everything we would have wanted to include. We hope you enjoy reading these as much as we enjoyed writing them. Without further ado, we present part one of The Forgotten History of Christian Rock.

Part One:

***Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?* by David Lytle**

The 1960s through late 1970s

Rock 'n' Roll was rebellion—rebellion from social conformity, rebellion from moral standards, rebellion from the church. Sure artists like Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Chuck Berry infused blues with the sounds of both black and southern gospel, but the outcome was far from the music of the sanctuary. It was the music of the night and the nightclub. As the rebels of the 1950s gave way to the hippies of the 1960s, this rebellion became increasingly clear.

Rock 'n' Roll was sinful. Both the church and the artist agreed. It was rhythmic, sexual, and broke every tradition. Teens gyrated and shouted, while fundamentalist preachers fumed. When John Lennon contrasted the popularity of the Beatles with that of Jesus he did more than make an observation—he drew battle lines. It's no surprise that this same man later found it so easy to imagine a world where there is no heaven. It was a world Christians found unimaginable.

More importantly, Rock 'n' Roll was the soul of a generation. What a generation it was! Their parents had grown up during the Great Depression and sacrificed mental and physical health to defeat the war machines of Germany and Japan. They were coming of age in the suburbs that sprouted in the soil of this post-war economic boom. The older the baby boomers got the more it became clear that they were not their parents. Their music, more than anything, was what made them different.

In this context, a handful of young people experimented with the idea of Rock 'n' Roll that was about Jesus. This first generation of Christian rockers faced a serious dilemma—the dilemma of existence. How could rock music even be Christian? How could a Christian play rock? For most churches, it was easy to dismiss rock as sinful, but there was a minority who understood that Rock n' Roll was the heart language of the new generation. They understood that rebellion from some of their parents' values (namely materialism and racial segregation) could be virtuous. They understood that Jesus transcended cultural expression. They were the Jesus Movement.

Some have tried to locate the origin of the movement to one church, like Chuck Smith's Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, CA, or one artist, like Larry Norman. Yet, the origins of Jesus Rock, like the origins of Rock 'n' Roll, are much more difficult to pin down. All over the Country musicians were melding the message of Jesus with the music of the times. Although a minority, churches in various parts of the country encouraged Christians to redeem Rock 'n' Roll. Likewise, many artists would forsake a lifestyle of sexual promiscuity and drugs for a radical relationship with Jesus Christ. They were known as Jesus Freaks. Their movement: the Jesus Movement. Their music: Jesus Music. Elton John even sang about them. They were Christian Hippies. Their message was about salvation, but their music would still rock.

Well, it would sort of rock. The fact remains that much of the Christian Rock music of the 1960s was never recorded. Recording costs were prohibitive and quality was low. Low quality was especially a problem for the heavier music of the late 60s. No matter, folk music was where it was at anyway. This was the era of Bob Dylan, Neil Young, and David Crosby. Much of the memorable Christian Rock from this era reflects these influences. Love Song, Sweet Comfort Band, 2nd Chapter of Acts, Randy Stonehill, and Larry Norman are just a few examples.

Speaking of Larry Norman. Norman is to Christian Rock what Elvis Presley is to Rock n' Roll. He wasn't the first but it is impossible to tell the story without him. He, more than anyone, is associated with the origins of Christian rock. His "Why should the Devil Have All the Good Music?" attempted to reconcile the dilemma of Christianity and Rock. His "Sweet Song of Salvation" became the anthem of the Jesus Movement and his "Great American Novel" is a scathing challenge to American values in the age of the space race in the tradition of Bob Dylan.

By the mid-1970s folk-based Christian music was well established and even accepted in some circles. Rock n' Roll, however, had gotten edgier. It was time for Christian Rock to really rock. It was time for Petra and the Resurrection Band. These bands attempted to preach the gospel with the blues-rock of the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin. Both had remarkably long careers and while their styles changed with the times, they consistently made their music about the gospel of Jesus. Petra would go on to make their name synonymous with Christian Rock throughout the 80s and 90s. They would also continue to rock.

The first generation of Christian Rockers faced opposition from all angles. They were scorned by the mainstream because of their commitment to Jesus and their denunciation of drugs and illicit sex. They were rebuked by much of the Church for even trying to redeem the music of the world. Still, they kept on message. They focused mostly on salvation and the change brought by Jesus. As can be seen in the playlist, there also seems to be a significant interest in eschatology, which was apparently brought about by the fear of the atomic bomb.

The desire to redeem Rock n' Roll made it necessary to create a musical subgenre in which the lyrics set Christian Rock apart from "secular." While this created a false dichotomy between the sacred and the secular that Christian artists still face today, their singular focus on Jesus made their

movement a success. Thousands came to a saving faith through the Jesus Movement. Today the instruments and rhythms of Rock can be heard in the majority of churches across the country.

This is most certainly an epoch on the history of the Christian church worth noting. For those Christians who enjoy rock music, this is your story. We hope you enjoy this less-than-exhaustive playlist. Sadly, due to the age of these recordings, and other issues, many great songs and artists are not available on Spotify. We did the best we could with what we had available. Please, seek out these trailblazing artists and bands we highlighted above. We also hope you leave your comments and share this series of articles. Let's not forget our past.

This is Part One of a five part series exploring the history of Christian Rock and Roll Music.

To read Part Two where we looked at the popular rock bands of the 1980s and early 1990s click [here](#).

To read Part Three covering the visionary bands of the 1980s and early 1990s click [here](#).

To read Part Four covering the music of the late 1990s through the early 2000s, click [here](#).

To read Part Five recapping the series and introducing readers to the new music being created today, click [here](#).

Thank you so much for reading. Please feel free to comment below.

Wild Card Round Preview (The NFL on REO)

Tennessee at Kansas City

The Tennessee Titans are big underdogs in the Wild Card match up with the Kansas City Chiefs. This is not surprising. The Titans are without their starting running back, they have played poorly on offense for most of the season, and they are short on playoff experience. The Chiefs, on the other hand, have an explosive offense, a very successful head coach, and are playing at home. Even as a Titans fan I admit that it makes sense that the Chiefs are a 9 point favorite.

Maybe it is the homer in me, but I expect this game to be close. The Chiefs have not won a home playoff game since 1993. This will be their sixth try and my sources are telling me their fans are nervous. On the Titans side QB Marcus Mariota is looking healthier than he has most of this season. In their playoff clinching victory last week he ran the ball several times with a good amount of success. Something he has not done most of this season due to injury. The Titans defense has also played well, especially against the run, in the majority of games this season.

The Chiefs are a streaky team. They started off 5-0 and looked to be the best team in the NFL. They went into a 1-6 tailspin and appeared to be choking away their playoff spot. Then they rebounded and finished 4-0 to win their division and get a home game in the playoffs. Unfortunately for the Titans they Chiefs are on a hot streak right now and should win a tightly contested game. Final score prediction – KC over TN 24-20.

– Mike Lytle

Atlanta at Los Angeles (Rams)

Last year at this time we would have all been surprised to find that the LA Rams were even in the playoffs. The fact is, they are not only in the playoffs, but are expected to beat the reigning-NFC-champion Falcons by a touchdown. The new-in-town Rams have taken the NFL by storm and are trying to recreate the greatest show on turf. The Rams offense has been able to put up over 30 points in 8 games this year and over 25 points in 12 games. They average a league-high 29.9 points per game. They are a well-balanced offense that has only failed to execute a handful of time. Jared Golf has proven to be a quality quarterback and as long as Todd Gurley gets plenty of touches, the Rams should be able to put up points on Atlanta. Their defense, for the most part, has gotten the job done. With defensive genius Wade Phillips calling the shots, there is reason to have confidence that they can keep the Rams in the game.

Despite being the underdogs, I am picking the Falcons to win this game. The Falcons struggled early in the year, but they seemed to turn it around starting with week 10 against the cowboys. They have only lost two games since that time and both to strong teams. When push comes to shove, I have more confidence in Matt Ryan than Jared Golf. Ryan's experience in the playoffs will be invaluable in picking apart the Wade Phillips' defense. Perhaps more importantly, I trust Julio Jones to make big catches for his team. Sure, he has struggled to find the end zone this season, but big players live for big games. Julio was made for this moment.

Regardless of who wins, I expect this one to be a shootout. Falcons over Rams 35-30.

– David Lytle

Buffalo at Jacksonville

The Buffalo Bills enter the playoffs as the darlings of the NFL. For this storied franchise, it has been a long time (1999 season) since they have played postseason football, and it took a number of seemingly miraculous things to happen for them to finally break through this season. It is a great story and while I am happy for the team and their fans, great stories do not equal great teams, and the Bills are not a great team. They were a bottom half of the league team in both offensive and defensive statistics. They don't do any one thing really well, and do most things just good enough to get by. And LeSean McCoy being less than 100% is a back breaker.

On the other side, the Jacksonville Jaguars have been objectively good this season. They are one of the top two defenses in the league by any measurements that matter. And not to be outdone, they are the number five scoring team in the league. Their weaknesses are inexperience and Blake Bortles. While Bortles has been mostly solid this season, is there anyone out there that has any real confidence that Bad Bortles won't rear its ugly head at a critical moment?

Bortles will Bortle, the Bills are average, but the unit with the most talent on the field, the Jags defense, will dominate. Jags 30 Bills 10.

– Phill Lytle

Carolina at New Orleans

In my humble opinion this is the most crucial game of the weekend. Simply because a strong case can be made for the

winner being the NFC favorite even if they will not have home field. Many people would look at Philly, Minnesota and the L.A. Rams and point to either struggles or playoff inexperience at QB as cause for concern. As is well documented on REO by now, not me. I have less faith in the Top 3 NFC seeds mainly because none of them have won a playoff game literally since George W. Bush lived at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

That is not the case for the Panthers and Saints. On the road side you have a team that just went to the Super Bowl two years ago and were steamrolled by one of the more impressive defensive efforts by Denver we have ever seen in a game that significant. Carolina isn't as good an offense as their Super Bowl year but they do have Christian McCaffrey now, and Cam Newton still plays with a swagger that belies his less-than-elite stats and it makes a difference.

On the home side, you have a team with a very unique weapon in former-SEC two-headed monster RB Mark Alvin Ingram Kamara (combined 1850 yards rushing, 139 receptions and 25 total TDs). And also for only the third time in Drew Brees' 12 years with the franchise, the defense finished in the Top 10 in fewest points given up. It's uncanny how Brees has played with a Top 13 defense by this criteria five times in New Orleans and has made the playoffs every time and has played with a 25th or worse defense by this criteria six times and missed the playoffs every time. The one exception to this trend was the year NO won the Super Bowl with the 20th ranked defense.

In addition to being at home, I give New Orleans the advantage because of Brees. He has exceptional playoff stats in his career (320 YPG, a 4:1 TD:Int ratio) and has lost numerous times because his D could not get a stop, most notoriously against San Fransisco in 2011 when he led them to 18 fourth quarter points and still lost (Let it be noted that Drew Brees has far and away the most 4th TD passes in NFL history to give his team the lead in a game his teams would lose, nearly twice

as many as the #2 guy). Their D is nowhere close to Denver in 2015 or even Minnesota this year, but they will be good enough to help New Orleans win this game and probably at least two more. I'll say New Orleans 31, Carolina 20.

– Gowdy Cannon

Why “The Last Jedi” is the Most Christian “Star Wars” Movie Yet

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.
(Jesus quoting Isaiah in Luke 4:18-19)*

Warning: There are some spoilers ahead.

Star Wars has always had a logical problem on its hands, a paradox created by George Lucas that has forcefully resurfaced in *The Last Jedi*. The problem is that the Force, with all its eastern dualism and Buddhist amoral mysticism is pointedly antithetical to what makes the movies so powerful—our overwhelming passion to see moral good stand up to moral evil. While the Force may be able to make rocks (and even

princesses) float, good's struggle against evil gives us a necessary reason to want to see it happen.

It is because of this profoundly moral theme that *Star Wars* movies have felt familiar to Christians, like myself, who see that ultimate reality is a battle between moral good and moral evil. It is our deepest desire (and even eschatological hope) to see good destroy evil which explains why we love *Star Wars*. While the philosophy behind the Force was foreign and even off-putting, the destruction of the Death Star, and Vader's change of heart speak our language. Our greatest Saint, once hunted Christians down in vicious persecution. And once he saw the light, he couldn't stop himself from preaching Jesus's defeat of death (I Corinthians 15).

The power of good verses evil does not only appeal to Christians. It appeals to all of us because it is something we all long for. There is certainly something fundamentally unsettling about living in a world where the Empire (or the first Order) calls the shots, but our desire is not for a balance between good and evil. Our desire is for the end of the darkness. This is not a uniquely Christian idea, it is a human longing that the Christian faith proposes a solution to.

The Last Jedi delved deeper into the eastern dualism, mystical humanism, and even veganism linked to the Force, and in so doing, it may achieve the distinction of being the most religious *Star Wars* movie to date. Like with all the *Star Wars* films, *The Last Jedi* may espouse religious ideas far from the Christian faith, but its themes tell a different story.

More than any other movie in this franchise, *The Last Jedi* links the cause of right with the cause of poor, suffering and oppressed. We even find those suffering to be children that the resistance fighters are able to offer hope to. We find that the rebellion, like the Kingdom, belongs to such as these. For Christians, this speaks to the core of who we are and Jesus' own mission statement. Jesus came to preach the

good news of God's Kingdom to those being oppressed by the strong hand of the Roman Government and the powers of sin and death that stood behind that institution. (See Luke 4) The cause of the needy is a Christian cause; it's our storyline.

The makers of *The Last Jedi* fittingly settled the question of Rey's origins. After two years of online debate and speculation, we find out that she comes from nowhere. Her parents were paupers. For my money, this was one of the most brilliant choices made by the movie. A choice that is profoundly Christian, when all humanity expected a savior from a powerful family, God provided his people with Gideon from the smallest family and the smallest tribe. When the prophet sought a King, God provided the youngest son, a shepherd named David. When Israel wept for a Messiah, God sent them a man from Nazareth, a place that apparently nothing good could come from. In *The Last Jedi* we find out that Rey, whose name means king, actually comes from nowhere. Maybe this really is a Christmas movie after all!

The *Star Wars* Movies have always come from the mind of leftist thinkers. Lucas wanted to exalt eastern meditation, critique the American Empire, and denounce the Vietnam War. Similarly, Disney is using *Star Wars* for the purposes of social commentary and ironic criticisms of capitalism and greed. I'm sure the makers of the movie are convinced that the film is sufficiently liberal in its themes, and perhaps they are right (or should I say left).

In the end, however, the reason *The Last Jedi* (or any good *Star Wars* movie) is so compelling is not the politics or "hokey" eastern religions. The story works because it has some of the same beauty that all people long for. It's the beauty that Christians celebrate every Sunday, of every race, in every country, in nearly every language. It's the beauty of God choosing the least likely people for his purposes, of good opposing evil, of hope for the oppressed, of death destroyed. It's the beauty of the Gospel. It's a beauty that *The Last*

Jedi reminds us about—a beauty, that fortunately, our culture can't escape.

“Luther: The Life and Legacy of the German Reformer” – A Review

In celebration of the 500th anniversary of the *Ninety-five Theses* by Martin Luther, filmmaker Stephen MacCaskell made the documentary *Luther: The Life and Legacy of the German Reformer* (2017). Many scholars of the Reformation may criticize the film's evangelical bias, but it is refreshing to see a well-executed historical documentary that celebrates the same doctrine that drove Luther. Just as Luther was dedicated to the authority of Scripture and the doctrine of Justification by Grace through Faith, so are the Reformed theologians (including R.C. Sproul) who provide consistently insightful commentary.

I write this commentary as an Arminian Christian, a historian of the Reformation era, and a High School History teacher. From an Arminian perspective, there is nothing to shy away from in this documentary. Like all forms of Reformation Christianity, Arminianism fully agrees that salvation is the work of God and not a product of works. This film should serve as a catalyst for the discussion of many foundational theological truths.

An hour and a half is not sufficient to do justice to the life and influence of the “monk who changed the world.” The film was certainly made more for a congregation than for

historians. Even so, the film is historically accurate and doesn't avoid difficult issues. One section deals with Luther's temper, untamed tongue, and his "Jewish Problem" (anti-Semitism). Many may find the film's treatment of the "Jewish Problem" as unsatisfactory, but I am impressed that a short celebratory film took the time to point out Luther's significant flaws. It even uses the words of Scripture and John Calvin to do so.[1. See [this article](#) for a good discussion]

This treatment of the Reformation follows a typical Protestant, specifically Reformed, approach. Late Medieval Religion is understood to be works based and pervasively corrupt. Corrupt Popes, such as Julius II, and greedy clergy members like John Tezel, are portrayed as normative. While I don't disagree with this general narrative (examples of corruption abound), I was disappointed that the film didn't make any attempt to discuss examples of late medieval Catholic reformers like the fiery preacher Savonarola, the mystic Thomas a Kempis, or the humanist scholar Erasmus. Rather than complicate the story with a richer view of late medieval piety, the film simply discussed the condemned pre-reformers, John Wycliffe and Jan Hus and their impact on Luther. While a simplified narrative is easier on its audience, from a historical point of view, it's unsatisfying.

I teach 9th grade World History. Aside from being a little slow for an audience with the attention span of a poodle, one of the significant flaws of *Luther* is that it assumes far too much knowledge of theology and history. While it may be a great resource for a theologically educated congregation, 9th graders, even at a Christian school, lack the previous knowledge to make this video a good use of time for a classroom. This, of course, can be addressed as long as the teacher uses the video to reinforce what they have already learned of Luther and the Reformation and not to introduce it. This approach might also help the teacher facilitate a

discussion of the film's historical interpretation that could also help to mitigate some of its shortcomings.

Overall, I recommend *Luther: The Life and Legacy of the German Reformer*. It is well made, which is rare for Christian films of any kind. It makes effective use of some simple computer animation as well as crisp on-location footage. Although its interpretation of the Reformation is too simplistic to satisfy the historian and too advanced for the high school student; it can be a great resource for the man or women in the pew. Hopefully, this film will only be the beginning of a deeper exploration into the Reformation.

(Editor's note: You can rent or buy the movie at Amazon by clicking [this](#) link.)

Being Petty: A Tribute To a Legend

On Monday, October 2nd, we lost the heart and soul of American rock and roll. Tom Petty's career and influence spanned decades, leaving hit after hit in their wake. Everyone knows a Petty song. Everyone has a favorite. There are innumerable articles out right now highlighting his music, his career, and his legacy. We won't pretend that our take is the best you will read, but we do hope that for those that loved his music, it will serve as another opportunity to reminisce and reflect on an artist that helped create the soundtrack for many of our lives.

Josh Crowe

The American spirit is vast. It's hard to nail down. Many artists have tried to do so and several have failed. Some who have succeeded are Bruce Springsteen with *Thunder Road* or Bob Seger with *Against the Wind*.

For me, Tom Petty's *Free Fallin'* also gets the job done. From the first chord to the fade out, I'm swept away to the life of a Southern California teen in the 80's. It's broad and simple. It's full of tension. The girl is good and the boy is bad. How many 80's romance movies played this situation out for us? Yet, Petty made us feel it again.

Mike Lytle

When thinking of which Tom Petty song to pick it is very easy to fall back on the old joke that I can't narrow it down to one song since I celebrate his entire catalog. In this case, it is not a joke though. *Free Fallin'*, *Runnin' Down a Dream*, *I Won't Back Down*, *The Waiting*, he has so many great songs that it is very difficult to pick one to pay tribute to. So instead of choosing a song, I am going with a Tom Petty movie. That movie is none other than the Kevin Costner classic *The Postman*. For those too young to remember (or those who have tried to forget) Kevin Costner decided in the mid to late 90s to focus his acting energies on three hour, post-apocalyptic epics. *Waterworld* received the most attention because it cost so much to make and went so far over budget, but *The Postman* is the better movie. A primary reason for this is Tom Petty and his role as Bridge City Mayor. He actually plays himself in the movie, but since it is set in a world that no longer cares about famous rock stars he is content to inspire people in other ways. Whether it is for his singing, songwriting, guitar playing, or acting, Tom Petty will be missed.

Gowdy Cannon

Chances are you have heard *American Girl* not just on the radio but on any number of TV shows or movies, usually during a climax of a story about a woman triumphing. Americans have heard it in everything from sitcoms like *Scrubs* and *Parks and Rec* to movies you'd expect like *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and movies you wouldn't like *Silence of the Lambs*. I read even *The Handmade's Tale* recently made use of it. We can't get enough of this song to help tell our stories. Musically it makes you want to cut loose and "dance all night," even if you can't dance or normally don't (like me). But it's deeper than that, which is why Hollywood keeps calling and why it's been covered dozens of times the last 40 years. It's so versatile it can tell any number of stories but I find it quite appropriate that the song didn't catch on for a while but later became a mega-hit. Because that is probably the story we love best. The story of Ben Carson and his library card, of Kurt Warner and his grocery bagging, of America being the underdog in its revolution. *American Girl* is, like the song's author, as American as apple pie and absolutely what is great about this country.

Phill Lytle

I don't have a singular story to share – no transcendent moment when a Tom Petty song knocked me over and captured my heart. What I do have is decades of unreserved love for *Learning To Fly*. From the opening guitar to the triumphant, drum-laced bridge, the song is a revelation every time I hear it. It's a simple melody, played with precision and care, wonderfully mixed to bring out the most of each instrument. The guitar solo is reserved and understated, fitting perfectly with the song's laid-back vibe. Petty's voice sounds as confident as ever, singing about living, failing, and trying again. It is a song with redemption echoing in every corner and it is as beautiful a song as I will ever hear.

David Lytle

A couple weeks ago I was listening to Tom Petty and talking to my wife about him. I made the comment that Tom Petty was my go to if I wanted something that made me feel good. I never get tired of the sound of Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. Their sound makes a bad day bearable and a good day great. Then Petty died, and while the loss of a legend saddened me, I am grateful that the magic of recording allows the music to live on. For my dime, *Runnin' Down a Dream* is the quintessential feel-good song of an artist that never failed to make me feel better. It describes driving a car with music on and presumably the windows down. It's about life on the road encountering both the rain and the sunshine. The guitar riff "drives" the song so effectively that just hearing the guitar makes you want to jump in a car. Let's celebrate Tom Petty driving down the freeway as we hope for "something good waitin' down this road."