

R.C.

SPROUL

A life

STEPHEN J. NICHOLS

“This theologically rich, warm, and personal look at a rare servant of the Lord is masterful. The range of R. C.’s vast interest and contribution, along with the irresistible charm of his personality, require a biographer who is a church historian, theologian, and very close friend. Stephen Nichols is the best choice, as this account demonstrates. He has brought to the pages a story truly revealing R. C.—an account that lives and breathes the man we loved as our teacher and friend. There will be other biographies of R. C., but I cannot imagine any that would come close to this one.”

John MacArthur, Pastor, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California;
Chancellor Emeritus, The Master’s University and Seminary

“This book is worth your time because it celebrates a man worth remembering. R. C. was a masterful theologian who could so easily squeeze sweetness from what others considered dry doctrine. His sermons and books beautifully adorned the gospel, but so did his life. It’s what I love about Stephen Nichols’s remarkable work. He takes us behind the scenes to reveal the true makings of this great saint of the twentieth century, why his words endure, and why we are inexorably drawn to his live-large character. I’ve always admired R. C. Sproul for his razor-sharp mind; now, with this biography, he’s printed on my heart. Thank you, Stephen Nichols, for helping the reader fall in love with this lion of a man, my friend, the good Doctor Sproul.”

Joni Eareckson Tada, Founder, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

“I couldn’t put this book down, for it doesn’t just tell the fascinating story of a life well lived; it takes you on R. C.’s own journey. Through it you see where the fire came from. Through it you get the thrill of soaking up his passion for the gospel of Christ, for biblical truth, and for the beauty of God in his holiness. But my hope for this book is not that it might provide a nice reunion for those of us who knew and loved R. C.; my prayer is that the Lord might use it to inspire more faithful Reformers, more God-fearing defenders and proclaimers of the faith, more like R. C. Sproul.”

Michael Reeves, President and Professor of Theology, Union School of
Theology, UK

“I remember once hearing R. C. Sproul preach on Psalm 51, and I asked him afterward how long it had taken him to prepare his lecture that day. He smiled and said, ‘About five minutes . . . and thirty years.’ I have no doubt that future generations will benefit from R. C.’s prolific ministry two hundred years from now, should the Lord tarry. Stephen Nichols has given us a gift in this book. Anyone whose life was marked, as mine has been, by R. C.’s life and ministry will treasure getting to know him better through these pages.”

Bob Lepine, Cohost, *FamilyLife Today*; Teaching Pastor, Redeemer Community
Church, Little Rock, Arkansas

“I am thankful for this accessible biography of R. C. Sproul by Stephen Nichols. His clear and simple way of writing is certainly appropriate in his biography of a man who always sought to communicate the glorious theology of Scripture in a clear and simple way.”

Burk Parsons, Senior Pastor, Saint Andrew’s Chapel, Sanford, Florida; Editor,
Tabletalk

“Stephen Nichols has written a fantastic biography about one of the greatest minds and finest teachers of our time. This book highlights the theology, biblical integrity, courage, character, and intellectual prowess of one the late giants of the modern-day church—a man who fought the good fight and had the honor of finishing well the race set before him by his Lord, whom he loved, revered, and worshiped all his life. R. C. immediately recognized when the gospel was at stake, and he applied his keen mind in defense of it, sometimes at great cost. It was a privilege and a delight to read about R. C. Sproul, one of the three men who have most influenced my thinking concerning the character of God in general and his piercing holiness in particular. I am indebted to him in so many ways.”

Miguel Núñez, Senior Pastor, International Baptist Church, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic; Founding President, Wisdom and Integrity Ministries

“Even though R. C. Sproul’s name will stand in the annals of church history as one of its great theologians in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, few people know about his life, career, struggles, victories, and ministries. This book will give you the historical and spiritual context around R. C.’s greatest series, books, and sermons. You will be able to understand the power of God’s grace in R. C.’s life, R. C.’s dominion of all areas in systematic theology, and his ability to understand and teach biblical text in a simple and clear way. Knowing the man helps you better understand the preacher. Stephen Nichols has helped me get to know better the man that God has used to bless my ministry.”

Augustus Nicodemus Lopes, Assistant Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Recife, Brazil; Vice President, Supreme Council, Presbyterian Church of Brazil

“This book is about a man from a small town outside Pittsburgh who was chosen by God to teach, preach, and communicate the gospel to millions of people around the world. The Lord used this disciple of Jesus Christ in a mighty way. His ability to convey the word of God in simple yet powerful ways and his love and kindness toward his fellow man were evident throughout his life. His teaching ministry, books, and lessons have taught so many the truth and holiness of God. We miss him, but he fought the good fight, he finished the race, and he kept the faith as a servant to our holy God.”

Robert M. Wohleber, Retired CFO, Kerr-McGee

“Stephen Nichols, an extraordinary scholar and exhaustive researcher, does an outstanding job portraying a man of intelligence, communicative ability, and love who devoted his life to Jesus Christ by teaching and preaching the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, the holiness of God, and the *solus*. R. C. was devoted to keeping the gospel pure, logical, and understandable for the laymen. The Holy Spirit, using R. C.’s time, patience, wit, and logic, without ever compromising biblical doctrine, led this ‘heathen’ lawyer and countless others to Jesus Christ. As Nichols so clearly illustrates in this biography of the life of a titan of the Christian faith, R. C.’s ministry will continue to ‘count forever’ for many as they live *coram Deo*.”

Guy T. Rizzo, attorney

“Stephen Nichols is thorough, well-balanced, and theologically alert in this biography of R. C. Sproul. He writes the way R. C. lived and taught. Readers of R. C. and Reformation lovers will appreciate this story of the leader of Reformed revival for a new generation.”

Russ Pulliam, Columnist, *Indianapolis Star*

R. C. SPROUL

Other Crossway books by Stephen J. Nichols

Ancient Word, Changing Worlds: The Doctrine of Scripture in a Modern Age, 2009 (coauthor)

Bible History ABCs: God's Story from A to Z, 2019

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The Church History ABCs: Augustine and 25 Other Heroes of the Faith, 2010 (coauthor)

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Reformation ABCs: The People, Places, and Things of the Reformation—from A to Z, 2017

Welcome to the Story: Reading, Loving, and Living God's Word, 2011

R. C.
SPROUL

A Life

STEPHEN J. NICHOLS

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For Vesta
Since the first and second grade,
it has been R. C. and Vesta.

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PROLOGUE

The Great Escape

R. C. SPROUL PACED AND ROARED when he preached. But by the end of his life he needed to sit on a stool. He relied on his portable oxygen, which went with him everywhere. He struggled with the effects of COPD. He had long ago sacrificed his knees to the athletic field. The years, but especially the miles, had caught up with him. At age seventy-eight, however, he still showed up for work. When he stepped into the pulpit, the athlete that he was burst forth. With passion his game face was on. The stool swiveled. He would clutch the edges of the pulpit, pull himself forward, and lean toward his congregation. He somehow managed still to pace while he preached. Somehow his voice would find strength. He still roared. For thirty minutes he was the sandlot quarterback again, making plays. He was on the back nine, golf balls at his mercy.

His wit—where did it come from?—liberally dispensed wisdom and humor. It's what people, over the years, had come so accustomed to hear from him. He made it look so easy. Effortless. With no notes he could preach a sermon on any text or give a lecture on the epistemological views of the modern philosophers. Whether it was before a crowd of thousands or around a dinner table, you simply wanted to listen to him. You wanted to see his smile, mischievous, as wide as the sky. You wanted to hear what he had to say.

They say that old-school Cambridge University runners were never seen training. They did not show up early to a meet and go through all the stretching and warm-up rituals like everyone else. They were casual. They just walked into the stadium, stepped to the line, and waited for the sound of the starter pistol. Then they were off, pure beauty in motion. They made it appear all so effortless. It's like the concert violinist taking her place on an empty stage. Calm, serene as she places the violin, readies the bow, and proceeds. Perfection. And it all looks so effortless. But the athlete, the musician, the preacher—they all know what lies behind the appearance. The work, the discipline, the constant honing of the skill. It is craftsmanship.

R. C. was a communicator. He not only knew what to say; he knew how to say it. Precision, passion, power. On this particular Sunday, his text was Hebrews 2:1–4. He called the sermon “A Great Salvation.”¹ He could have called it “The Great Escape.”

R. C. had always told his homiletics students, “Find the drama in the text. Then preach the drama.” He found the drama in Hebrews 2:1–4. “How shall we escape?” When we think of escape, R. C. said we think of imprisonment; we think of a jailbreak. R. C. transported the congregation of Saint Andrew’s Chapel to “the most dreadful of all French prisons, the Château d’If,” and into the pages of his second-greatest, most favorite novel, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, the harrowing tale of Edmond Dantes, framed and falsely thrown into the dreaded prison. Edmond Dantes had done the impossible. He had escaped from the inescapable prison.

But there is a far more dreadful prison than the Château d’If. “You can’t dig under it. You can’t climb over it. No guard can be bribed. The sentence cannot be ameliorated or commuted.” There is no escape from hell—except from salvation, a great salvation in Christ. R. C. echoed the plea of the author of Hebrews: “Do not neglect such a great salvation” (see 2:3).

1 R. C. Sproul, “A Great Salvation,” sermon on Heb. 2:1–4, Saint Andrew’s Chapel, Sanford, FL, November 26, 2017. A full, edited transcript of this sermon may be found in the back of the book, pages 317–23.

He once said it's what kept him up at night, that there might be professing but not possessing Christians in the congregation of Saint Andrew's. The zeal to proclaim the holiness of God and the gospel of Christ propelled him to devote his life to teaching, to preaching, to traveling, to writing. It kept him going even into his late seventies and despite the toll all the miles had taken. He prayed and labored for an awakening.

By the end of the sermon, R. C. had swept the congregation along with him in a fervent moment. It was sacred time. There was no humor or lightheartedness as this particular sermon came to a close. It was zeal, passion. R. C. was communicating the most important truth, the truth of the gospel. He was pleading that no one under the sound of his voice would neglect so great a salvation. It was palpable.

As he finished the sermon, this was his very last sentence: "So I pray with all my heart that God will awaken each one of us today to the sweetness, the loveliness, the glory of the gospel declared by Christ."

This very last sentence of his very last sermon reveals his heart, his passion. *Sweetness* is a word that he had learned from Jonathan Edwards, who in turn had learned it from Calvin, who in turn had learned it from Augustine, who in turn had learned it from the psalmist. You can read about how sweet honey is. You can hear of the experience of others who have tasted honey. Or you can taste it for yourself. Sweetness is the apprehension of truth.

Loveliness is that oftentimes forgotten category of beauty. R. C. often noted that while we contend for truth and fight for goodness, we far too often neglect beauty. God is a God of beauty. The word, *beauty*, overflows the pages of Scripture. That was enough for R. C. to want to pursue it, to desire it.

Glory is that elusive word that represents the transcendent, sheer luminosity. It belongs to the orbit of words that you heard so often from R. C., the words *holiness, splendor, majesty, refulgence*.

Sweetness, loveliness, glory—these are the words that describe God, Christ, the gospel. These words have transformative power. These words

are what a renewed mind meditates upon. There is also, in this last sentence of his sermon, the word *awaken*. Before the mind can be renewed, it must be awakened. We are dead; a fallen, rotting tree lying in the forest. We need a “divine and supernatural light,” as Edwards would put it. Or as Jesus said to Peter, “flesh and blood has not revealed this to you.” No, no, it was “My Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 16:17 NKJV). Jesus pronounced Peter blessed. The stunning truth that Jesus Himself would say to someone, “Blessed are you,” sent true joy to the core of R. C.’s being. He wanted everyone to experience it. How R. C. longed for an awakening. It was the last sentence of his sermon on Hebrews 2:1–4.

After he delivered that last sentence, R. C. offered a short, earnest prayer, and then an audible sigh. He slid off the stool, steadied his feet, and, with help, started to descend from the pulpit.

R. C. Sproul preached this sermon on November 26, 2017. By Tuesday he had a cold, which daily grew worse. By Saturday he had such difficulty breathing that he was taken to the hospital. There he remained. On December 14, 2017, as Vesta and family were gathered in the hospital room, R. C. went into the sweet, lovely, and glorious presence of the Lord.

Final sermon: “A Great Salvation.” Final sentence: “So I pray with all my heart that God will awaken each one of us today to the sweetness, the loveliness, the glory of the gospel declared by Christ.” Then exit stage left. And it was in the year of the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. It was all pure poetry.

The story of R. C.’s life ends in 2017 in central Florida. It had been his home, or home base, for thirty-three years. The story begins in Pittsburgh in 1939. The world was about to go to war.

PITTSBURGH

*You can take the man out of Pittsburgh, but you
can't take Pittsburgh out of the man.*

R. C. SPROUL

THE ALLEGHENY RIVER RUNS in from the north. The Monongahela runs in from the east. At their confluence, the Ohio River begins. Three rivers converge to form a point. Nearby, in 1754 the French built Fort Duquesne, a key post during the Seven Years' War. The British marched on it in November of 1758. The French knew they were greatly outnumbered. They gathered their supplies, blew up the fort, and retreated across the Ohio River. When the place where the fort had stood was taken, a new fort was built and named Fort Pitt, after William Pitt the Elder. Over the next centuries, a city, Pittsburgh, would eventually grow upon this triangular plateau with its gentle westward slope and surrounding steep and rolling hills, part of the Allegheny Mountains of the vast Appalachian Range. This was not a river valley plateau for farming but a place for industry.

Among the many immigrants who settled in Pittsburgh over the centuries were the Sprouls, from County Donegal in Ireland, who emigrated in 1849. They made their home to the south, across the Monongahela on Mount Washington. Cable cars now ascend the steep slope. Another

immigrant family, the Yardis family from Croatia, settled on the north side of the city near Troy Hill and German Hill. English-speaking Scotch-Irish to the south. Immigrants from the European continent to the north. White-collar management to the south. Blue-collar labor to the north.

The Sprouls were management, eventually establishing R. C. Sproul and Sons, an accounting firm specializing in bankruptcy. Pittsburgh has seen several cycles, several reinventions of the city—enough to keep an accounting firm specializing in bankruptcy busy and prosperous.

The Yardises were labor. Mayre Ann Yardis began her working life as a teenager and as a secretary. She learned her trade at the Sarah Heinz House, established by the son of German immigrants, H. J. Heinz. Eventually she took a job at the R. C. Sproul and Sons accounting firm.

The R. C. Sproul in the accounting firm was Robert C. Sproul (1872–1945), R. C.’s grandfather. The “Sons” were Robert Cecil Sproul (1903–1956), R. C.’s father; and his brother Charles Sproul, R. C.’s uncle. The offices were located on Grant Street in the heart of downtown. Mayre worked for Robert Cecil Sproul as a secretary. They married. Pittsburgh management married Pittsburgh labor.¹

Number Five

Robert Cecil and Mayre Sproul settled on McClellan Drive in the borough of Pleasant Hills, to the south of the city. On February 13, 1939, Marye Ann Sproul gave birth to the second of their two children, Robert Charles Sproul. The family was full of R. C.s, Roberts, and Bobs. There were even a number of Robertas. R. C.’s older sister, born in 1936, was one of the Robertas. From the day R. C. came home from the hospital, he was named “Sonny.” Newspapers would write of his sports exploits during his junior and senior high school years. In those columns he was always referred to as “Sonny” Sproul.

With a little pride, R. C. would say that he was actually the first baby

¹ “Sproul Memoirs,” session 1, recorded November 2010, Ligonier Ministries, Sanford, Florida.

born of Pleasant Hills. Incorporated as a borough in 1939, R. C.'s birth made him the first resident born into that newly minted community of Pleasant Hills. Before it was Pleasant Hills, it was known as Number Five, short for Curry Number Five Mine of the vast Pittsburgh Coalfield.²

In the late nineteenth century and through most of the twentieth, Pittsburgh by far led the nation in coal and coke production, which along with iron ore and manpower are the necessary ingredients for the steel industry. The United States dominated the world steel market, and Pittsburgh played the leading role. Andrew Carnegie pioneered the steel industry in that region. Eventually his company consolidated with others to form United States Steel, which would at one time produce fully 30 percent of the world's steel. Pittsburgh was the Steel City. Its steel bridges crisscrossing the rivers show off its hometown product. Pittsburgh, even all of western Pennsylvania, has a toughness to match the product it shipped around the world. Both Pittsburgh labor and Pittsburgh management have that toughness.

All of that coal and coke excavation also meant Pittsburgh and surrounding towns sit upon a web of subterranean tunnels and mines, like Number Five. Above ground, Number Five was home to about four thousand white-collar residents in the 1940s.

R. C.'s first memories of living in Pleasant Hills orbit his father. One is of his dad coming home one day carrying a cardboard box. He set the box in the den, which was two steps down from the rest of the first floor of the house. Inside the box was a dachshund puppy. His dad had named it Soldier. The second memory is walking hand in hand with his dad to the bus stop, his dad wearing an officer's uniform. As a pillar of the community, Robert Cecil Sproul served as the head of the draft board. One day he came home wearing an Army Air Force officer's uniform. He told his wife he could no longer send busloads of young men to war and remain at home. While thirty-nine years of age and well past the

2 Stephen Nichols with R. C. Sproul, personal interview, March 24, 2017.

draft age, he nevertheless felt duty bound to go himself. His dad was headed for training at Westover Field, now Westover Air Reserve Base, just outside of Springfield, Massachusetts. The puppy was to keep R. C. company while his dad was gone.

Two-Gun Charlie

R. C.'s dad entered the service as a captain. After his training, he arrived in Casablanca on Christmas Eve 1942. The Allied forces had, just the month before, driven the German forces out of Casablanca. It was a turning point in the North African theater that portended the continued push of the Germans, and the Axis Powers, into containment and eventual defeat three long years later.

In the war, Robert Cecil Sproul served as an accountant, mirroring his civilian occupation. He would later tell people, "I flew a desk in the war." He was in Casablanca, then Algiers, on to Sicily, and then through Italy. As the advanced guard moved forward, his unit followed, ensuring that they had all they needed and that all was accounted for and in order. He was promoted to the rank of major.

Back home, the war dominated every aspect of life. Families tuned their Philco and RCA radios to hear the casualty reports and updates, hoping and praying. Soap, sugar, butter, gas—nearly every product was rationed. Seemingly ubiquitous "Do with less, so they'll have enough" and "Buy War Bonds" posters reminded all on the homefront to do their part for the war effort. Factories converted their assembly lines to make whatever was needed for the war effort. Pittsburgh's steel mills ran 24 hours a day, producing a staggering ninety-five million tons of steel.

The war dominated everything in R. C.'s childhood too. He missed his father. As a four-year-old he ran away, making it to the end of the street or perhaps the next street until he met up with one of the neighbors. When questioned, R. C. said he was on his way to Italy to see his dad.

Before Pittsburgh International Airport opened, the Allegheny County Airport served that region. The flight path went directly over the Sproul

home. Planes flew sometimes not more than forty or fifty feet above the house. R. C. lacked a sense of geography at this time, as already established. As a young boy he was terrified when those planes flew over during a blackout. He thought he was in the middle of a bombing raid, like the ones he heard about on the radio.

The war was an ever-present reality by night and by day. R. C. helped his mother and sister in the victory garden in the backyard. He scraped labels off cans, crushed them flat, and turned them in for reclamation. A flag hung from the front window of their home on McClellan Drive, signaling that it was the home of a soldier. Similar flags could be seen up and down the street and around the neighborhood. The Sprouls, like everyone else, had installed black curtains that were pulled across the windows when the air raid sirens were sounded.

Around the corner and on the next street stood a drugstore. Rows of pictures of uniformed men of Pleasant Hills serving in the war lined the windows. R. C. would scan the photos until he locked onto his father's face.

His mother took on extra responsibilities at the accounting firm to supplement the reduced salary his father received from the AAF. Before he left for the war, his father wanted to make sure that his family had a man living in the house, so he arranged for his wife's sister, her German husband, and their daughter to live in the home on McClellan Drive.

And R. C. would sit on his mother's lap and help her type V-mail letters to her husband. This is one of the earliest memories that R. C. has of his mom. V-mail letters were a one-sided form provided to families by the military. Once the family wrote or typed the letter onto the form, the letters went first to Washington, DC, where they were reviewed by censors, and then transferred to 16-mm film. The film would be flown overseas, the individual letters would be printed from the film, and the hand-size letters from home would be delivered to soldiers. Of the more than 550 million V-letters crossing between soldiers and their families, Mayre Ann and Robert Cecil accounted for hundreds of them. Robert Cecil handwrote his. She typed hers.

She had a rather sophisticated (for its time) electric typewriter. R. C. would sit on her lap as she typed. When she finished, it was R. C.'s turn. He would fill the bottom line with X's and O's. It was the first time he ever typed.

Robert Cecil wrote often to R. C. The letters are playful and warm, full of humor and kindness. He would remind R. C. to be a dutiful son in taking care of his mother, his older sister, and Soldier, the dog. He would address him as "Sonny" or as "Two-Gun Charlie" or with playful names like "Tootlebug." He would tell him how he missed him, and he would tell him he'd be home soon. Here's one letter sent from Sicily, June 1945, a few months before the war ended and as R. C. received his kindergarten diploma:

My Great Big Boy,

I got your letter on June 18 and sure glad to hear that you are being such a good boy getting a lot of sun and drinking your milk and buttermilk. I'm glad you are having a good time in your play yard, and I hope the old war ends real soon so I can come play with you. I am real proud that you are getting a diploma and will send you a nice present. I sure would love to see your G-I haircut. Be good to Soldier and take care of Mommy and Bobby Anne.

Love,

Daddy

R. C.'s earliest memories of his older sister, Roberta "Bobby" Anne, were also from the war years. He remembered that she had a dollhouse. Their father would send her dolls from Europe. Any time he moved along with the army, he would look for dolls that he could send home to her. R. C. also remembers getting a hand-me-down tricycle from Roberta. Much too big for him, it had enormous, oversized tires. R. C. described it as a three-wheel bicycle, adult-sized. He likely needed another year or two to even remotely fit it. But it was the only mode of transportation afforded to him. He chose mobility, despite the awkwardness. He

wrangled that tricycle up and down the hills of his community, many times his feet entirely unable to keep up with or reach the rapid rotation of the pedals. It was a sight for all to see.

In 1945 Mayre Ann got her husband back, and R. C. got his dad back. Having given so much to the war effort “over there,” it was now time to tend to matters close to home. Like the rest of the country, the Sprouls were ready to get back to the normal routines of life.

R. C. + V. V.

As R. C. entered his elementary school years, his world consisted of a few-mile radius. Just off McClellan Drive was the aforementioned drug-store, complete with a soda fountain and soda jerks. R. C.’s favorite was always the milkshake. There was the shoe repair shop and the radio and television repair shop. On a corner lot stood the elementary school, with its playground. Up and down a few hills and a few streets away was the park, perched on top of a hill and home to a newly christened ball field. R. C. played in the opening game.

Draw a straight line from R. C.’s home 9 miles to the northwest, and you arrive at the accounting office of R. C. Sproul and Sons on Grant Street. Not far from there was Forbes Field. (Today the Pittsburgh Pirates play at PNC Park, and the Steelers play on Heinz Field. Before that, they both shared Three Rivers Stadium. And before that they played at Forbes Field.) R. C. never missed a Pittsburgh Pirates’ opening day. He would skip school, hitchhike, and watch a game—all with his parents’ blessing. He could remember, play by play, the first game he ever saw. Pirates 5, Reds 3. R. C. was in the stands of Forbes Field when Roberto Clemente wore his number-13 jersey in the season opener of 1955. And he saw Clemente hit his first home run. The 1940s and 50s were not the best decades to be a Pirates fan. In sum, they lost as many games as they won. That did not stop R. C. from being a devoted fan. At any time during those years, were you to stop and ask him what he wanted to be when he grew up, he would have

said a ballplayer. And there was no other uniform he'd rather wear than the black and gold of the Bucs.

R. C.'s mother and father went to the office every day. R. C. realized how unusual that was. Few mothers worked outside the home in those days. R. C. loved the days when he could go along with his parents to work. He would sit at the window and watch the bustling activity of the city. He would play with his cars and toys under a desk somewhere in the offices. He especially loved the Christmas season. All the department store windows had amazing displays that captivated R. C. Wide-eyed, he would just stand and stare.

The offices provided the best seat in the house for the parades that went by. Pittsburgh was in full throttle in the post-war years, and R. C. had a view to it all, both at a distance, perched from his home up in the south hills, and also up close from the windows of the office on Grant Street.

Years later, when the firm dissolved, the building was sold and torn down. On the very site rose the sixty-four-story United States Steel building, known as the US Steel Tower. For years, the sixty-second floor housed a restaurant dubbed "Top of the Triangle." R. C. had occasional business lunches and dinners there. As he did, the memories would come back as he thought of himself as a little kid at play and his parents at work some 800 feet below.

In 1945 a new structure went up near R. C.'s home on McClellan Drive. Next to the elementary school, Pleasant Hills Community Church, a United Presbyterian Church, opened its doors.

R. C.'s dad had been a longstanding member of the Mount Washington Methodist Church. In fact, R. C.'s grandfather had been one of the founding members. R. C.'s dad was a lay minister at times and regularly taught Sunday school. R. C. was baptized as an infant in that Methodist church. During the war years, every Sunday his family headed off to the Methodist church. But when Pleasant Hills Community Church opened, the family became Presbyterian. It was, by R. C.'s reckoning, a liberal

church—very liberal. But it left an indelible impression on him through its high liturgy, which R. C. said was quite nearly Episcopalian. His pastor was committed to a formal service, to a well-crafted, even dramatic, homily. The original building was a small structure, which now houses the church offices. A much larger sanctuary was built later. The floor was brick for acoustical purposes. The exterior was colonial revival-style red brick with white columns and a towering spire. The interior was the traditional Presbyterian rectangle, with the pulpit prominently placed on the short side and the long nave. The cornerstone outside bore a Latin inscription.

The move to a Presbyterian church would have everything to do with R. C.'s future. He would eventually attend a Presbyterian college and seminary. He would be ordained Presbyterian. He would champion the Westminster Standards—the doctrinal confession of the Presbyterian church. The move to Presbyterianism also provided a rather important link to his past. R. C. liked to regale listeners with the story of the first minister ordained by the Scottish Reformer John Knox.

The Sprouls had emigrated from County Donegal, Ireland. Sproul, however, is not an Irish name. It's lowland Scots. And here the Reformation and John Knox enter the story. Knox, a Scottish priest who found himself at odds with his church and crown, first endured a sentence on a galley ship and then a time of exile. Knox ended up in Calvin's Geneva while Bloody Mary reigned during the 1550s. Inspired by all that Geneva accomplished under Calvin's leadership, by God's grace Knox returned to his native Scotland determined to reform the entire country. "Give me Scotland or I die," he pleaded with God.

The first step to reform was to establish a new church, given the depth of corruption of the current church. This new church would be the Church of Scotland, the Kirk. The very first minister ordained by Knox in this new church was a lowlands Scot named Robert Campbell Sproul. Knox then dispatched Rev. Sproul to Ireland. One of his descendants, named John, presumably after John Knox, served as a ruling elder and

a commissioner at Raphoe Presbyterian Church in County Donegal, Ireland, during the years 1672 to 1700.³

R. C.'s great-grandfather came to America from this very place during the great potato famine in the middle of the nineteenth century. R. C. wrote this of his great-grandfather:

During the nineteenth-century potato famine in Ireland, my great-grandfather Charles Sproul, fled his native land to seek refuge in America. He left his thatched roof and mud floor cottage in a northern Ireland village and made his way barefoot to Dublin—to the wharf from which he sailed to New York. After registering as an immigrant at Ellis Island, he made his way west to Pittsburgh, where a large colony of Scots-Irish people had settled. They were drawn to that site by the industrial steel mills led by the Scot Andrew Carnegie.⁴

This Irish immigrant fought for the Union on the SS Grampas. One of his sons, R. C.'s grandfather, took the family into the Methodist church on Mount Washington. When Robert Cecil Sproul, R. C.'s father, moved his membership from the Methodist church to the Presbyterian church in 1945, he was bringing his family home.

In 1946 the Voorhis family moved into the neighborhood a few houses down from the church. They had a daughter. The family moved in sometime in May from New Castle, Pennsylvania. Mr. William Voorhis worked as a national buyer for G. C. Murphy Co., one of the five-and-dime chain stores. He spent one week every month in New York City meeting with manufacturers and wholesalers.

At this time R. C. was in the first grade at Pleasant Hills Elementary School. Vesta Voorhis was in the second grade. R. C. vividly remembers seeing her for the first time, and when he did, with clarity, he knew he would marry her. Apparently, it was all one-sided. Vesta was busy with

3 William M. Mervine, "Scottish Settlers in Raphoe, County Donegal, Ireland: A Contribution to Pennsylvania Genealogy," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1912), 272.

4 R. C. Sproul, "All Truth Is God's Truth," *Tabletalk*, July 1, 2008.

her new friends on the playground. Boys on the ball field. Girls on the playground. A few weeks of school went by and then it was summer break. R. C. would later say that during his elementary and junior high years he was all about one thing: sports. It was likely two: sports and Vesta. If you were to look on most trees lining old Clairton Road and McClellan Drive, you'd see four initials carved: "R. C. + V. V." After that first encounter, a few more years passed before R. C. and Vesta became on-again, off-again boyfriend and girlfriend. Ultimately, the story of R. C. would be that of R. C. and Vesta.

The aunt, the uncle, and the cousin stayed in the home for another six or seven years after the war. It was always busy, always full of family. The extended family often came together for gatherings at the home on McClellan Drive. R. C. recalled, "I loved it. I used to stand at the top of the street waiting for the cars to come to bring our relatives to these gatherings. Our family was everything. I was big into family. Always was, still am."⁵

Most evenings R. C. would lie on the floor with Soldier and listen to the Philco radio. The airwaves during the day were filled with soap operas, but at night the adventure shows came on. *The Falcon*, *Suspense*, *Escape*, and, his favorite, *The Lone Ranger*—these were the shows that captivated the imagination of R. C. On Saturdays and most Sundays after church, R. C. went to the movies to catch the double feature. The Frankenstein and Dracula movies with Lon Cheney and Bela Lugosi were his favorites on the silver screen.

R. C., like most kids, dreamed of school letting out for the freedom of the summer months. Family vacations included trips far north to Muskoka Lake in Ontario, Canada. It was a popular spot for celebrities in the summer cottages and for Toronto Maple Leaf hockey players. The Sprouls stayed next to an enclave of them. The players took to R. C., teaching him dives from a diving board on a dock and giving him all sorts

5 "Sproul Memoirs," session 1.

of hockey tips and techniques. As a ten-year-old, he was likely having the best vacation ever. The players gave him a fine leather jacket with a big embroidered emblem. It was adult-size small, sleeves dangling long past the end of R. C.'s fingertips. He posed wearing it proudly and happily along the shore of Muskoka Lake.

In between summer vacations, R. C. had Christmas to look forward to. Christmas season was especially, according to R. C., "extraordinary." During the war years, R. C.'s uncle started a tradition they called the "Christmas platform." This was an elaborate display, constructed in the den, of papier-mâché mountains with skiers dotting the slopes and a ski jump, cars moving along on a conveyer belt through a main street, a merry-go-round, and train sets.

The Christmas of 1950 proved rather memorable for R. C. Pittsburgh sat buried under three feet of snow that year. It was perfect timing for the gift he received, a toboggan. The next day R. C. along with two buddies set out for the maiden voyage. They went to the largest hill in town. At the bottom of the hill was a creek, with a rock wall bordering the banks. The first time down, the trio stopped short of the creek in an amazing ride. For trek number two, the boys plied all of their engineering skills, biggest kid in the front. The first ride had also packed the snow, so the second time, they zoomed down, slamming right into the rock wall. R. C. hurt his back. One boy broke his toe. And the third had shattered his leg. They managed to get him secure on the toboggan, which R. C. then, by himself, dragged through the snow to the first home they came to, about a half mile away. For the rest of the school year, R. C. went to visit him at his home as he sat propped up and recovering. For both of them, it was their last toboggan ride.

Other Christmas memories were much more joyous. R. C. especially remembered Christmas Eve candlelight services, starting at 11:00 p.m. and ending as the clock struck midnight. They sang "O Holy Night" a capella. And then there was the Christmas Eve of 1952. This was the year

that R. C. and Vesta began going steady—mostly. Before the candlelight church service, R. C. was at Vesta’s home for Christmas Eve.

R. C. and Vesta were in the choir together at school and at church, both run by the same director. The church paid both an organist and a choir director. As mentioned, the church also had a formal liturgy. All that taken together means that the children’s choir was all business. Robes, starched collars—they looked like a proper cathedral boys’ choir. And R. C. loved it. He would speak of how the church’s preaching was devoid of any good theology or biblical content, but they sang classical anthems and hymns. R. C. would later say, “Most of the knowledge I had of any of the content of Christianity came from the music that we were singing.”⁶

R. C. also remembered the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. The pastor, Dr. Paul Hudson, trained the elders to come forward, after the elements had been distributed, in perfectly synchronized lockstep formation. Foot-falls rhythmically struck the brick floor, echoing through the sanctuary.

But when it came to theology, there was no such precision. The pastor would catechize the children; however, rather than follow the Westminster Shorter Catechism, the confessional standard of the Presbyterian church, he wrote his own questions that he had the children focus on:

Question: Who is the greatest Christian who ever lived?

Answer: Albert Schweitzer.

Albert Schweitzer might have been a great humanitarian and was truly a genius, having taken doctorates in theology, philosophy, music, and medicine. But he was patently liberal. He was a key figure in the so-called quest for the historical Jesus, the efforts by German scholars to find the kernel of historical truth shrouded in the husks of the four Gospels.

Dr. Hudson applied to his sermon what he had learned from the higher-critical scholars. The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand was a miracle of the selfless example of the little boy. The folks in the

6 Stephen Nichols with R. C. Sproul, personal interview, April 17, 2017.

crowd brought food with them, but they didn't want to admit it in case they would be forced to share. When the little boy freely gave of what he had, this inspired the crowd to pull their lunch bags from the folds of their robes. A miracle. Every Easter, R. C. was taught that the resurrection of Jesus Christ meant that each day he, too, could rise again in newness to meet afresh the challenges of the day.

R. C. did not learn his theology from Pleasant Hills Community Church. He did not learn his biblical studies there either. These fields, which would become his profession later in life, were of little to no interest to him in his young years.

Sonny Sproul at Bat

Sports were far more interesting to the young R. C. He played baseball, basketball, and football. He was likely best at baseball but competitive at all three. The sport he actually enjoyed most was hockey, though by his own account he was the least proficient at it. R. C. and his friends flooded the field at Mowry Park and created a rink, and they also played at a quarry. They had their own version of a Zamboni. They had augers and drilled five or six holes through the ice. Overnight the water seeped out to form a perfectly smooth glaze for them to play on.

In addition to sports, writing was a part of R. C.'s early life. R. C. had a teacher named Miss Graham, until she married another teacher and became Mrs. Gregg. She taught English, and R. C. had her as a teacher in elementary school and again later in junior high. The elementary art teachers would periodically post the best student art prominently on a display board. R. C. remembered always wanting but never seeing his artwork getting the pride of place. But one time, Mrs. Gregg put R. C.'s descriptive essay on the art display board. It was a work of art. Later, when R. C. was in the eighth grade, she told him, and he never forgot it, "Don't let anyone tell you you can't write."

In the sixth grade R. C. played baseball for a sponsored team in a neighborhood league. Players were mostly in high school, some even in

their early twenties. There was R. C., punching above his weight as a sixth grader. He was a starter. He was traded. The announcement even made the local paper. He was traded for three players—all of them older than he. The paper said the three were traded for the “slick-fielding infielder, Sonny Sproul . . . who lacked a potential bat.”

That was enough to inspire R. C. In the next game, he faced a twenty-one-year-old pitcher. The first time at bat, R. C. hit a sharp single. The second time he knocked it over the fence for a home run. Sonny Sproul indeed had a bat.

R. C. loved his junior high years. He excelled at sports. He was loved by his classmates. He was captain of the basketball team, president of the student council, and had earned the number two rank of all students academically. All of that stands in contrast to his high school years. While R. C. was in the ninth grade, his dad had a stroke, followed by a few more.

R. C. idolized his dad, who always wore a crisp white shirt and tie. R. C. remembers only a handful of times seeing him in casual clothes. As an accountant, his dad also enjoyed studying and discussing economics. His dad was not handy but he, too, had been an athlete. He was accepted at Princeton, but he never went. Instead, his father, R. C.'s grandfather, thrust him right into the family business. He self-studied for the CPA exam and passed. He also served as the president of the accounting firm. He had the competencies and skills, and he could lead and manage. That first stroke left him mostly debilitated; R. C.'s dad could work no longer.

Robert Cecil Sproul's speech was slurred, his vision hampered; he could no longer walk on his own. He spent most days sitting in the chair in the den. R. C. remembers him reading his Bible with a magnifying glass. In the evening R. C. would help him up out of the chair, grasp his hands around his neck and drag him to the dinner table. From the time he was a child, R. C. remembered his dad always at the dinner table with white starched shirt and tie. That didn't change after the stroke. After dinner, R. C. dragged his dad to bed.

This took its toll on the family. R. C.'s mom loved his dad. He was Prince Charming to her Cinderella. R. C. simply said, "My mother adored my father."⁷

Just before the stroke, R. C.'s dad counseled R. C. to give up football and focus on basketball and baseball. He did, much to the football coach's displeasure. That coach pressured the basketball coach to bench R. C.—who had been the team's highest scorer. R. C. had a finely tuned sense of justice and fair play. None of that set well with him. It was also the exact opposite of his prior experience with coaches. His pony league and junior high coaches were true mentors, who influenced him greatly at the time and continued to have an impact on his life decades later.

This experience did not entirely detract from his competitive spirit. R. C. could put his game face on. He continued playing in community leagues and even played on a semi-pro football team for a time. All of this caught the attention of college athletic department scouts.

But high school remained a wearisome season. R. C. was bused to Clairton High School. He had always loved his teachers at Pleasant Hills Elementary and Junior High. He spoke of how he knew his teachers were for him. That was not the case at Clairton. R. C. felt a little lost in this new environment.

With his father's illness, he took on a part-time job at the neighborhood TV repair shop up the street and around the corner from his home. He once knew nearly everything one needed to know about television tubes (when televisions actually had tubes). He slept little and simply slogged through his high school years. In his novel, R. C. writes of Scooter, the main character, as one who "mastered the art of sleeping in the back of the classroom with a book propped up in front him."⁸ Most of that novel is fiction. Some sentences are straight autobiography.

There were bright spots in those years. One was, of course, Vesta. The other was R. C.'s best friend, Johnny Coles. Johnny would be a major

7 "Sproul Memoirs," session 1.

8 R. C. Sproul, *Thy Brother's Keeper: A Novel* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1988), 39.

character in the later novel. Those were two bright spots. A third one involved a car.

When he first learned to drive, R. C. used the family car, a big boat of an Oldsmobile. Before his senior year of high school, he got his own car. Not just any car. A black and red Ford Fairlane 500 hardtop convertible with two four-barrel carburetors, dual exhaust, and lots of chrome. Yes, a muscle car. In the 1950s, Detroit knew how to make a car. This was one of them.

Just before Vesta left for college—she was one year older—the relationship ceased to be on and off. From then on, until the time of R. C.'s death, it would be R. C. and Vesta. They were steady, and nothing ever came between. From the family phone in the den, R. C. called Vesta every night while he was in his senior year of high school and she was in her freshman year at Wooster College in Ohio. R. C. would later say he had no idea why she stuck with him through that miserable time, but she did.

One night as R. C. was dragging his father from the dinner table to bed, his dad asked R. C. to stop for a moment and set him down on the couch. He had something he wanted to tell him. Through slurred speech, he said, "I have fought the good fight of the faith, I have run the race, I've finished the course, I've kept the faith." R. C., unaware that he was quoting Scripture, said to him, "Don't say that, Dad." He then dragged his father to his room and put him in bed. A little later, R. C. heard a thump. He found his dad on the floor. He slipped into a coma. For the next day and a half, R. C. sat with him. Then his dad suddenly lifted up in bed, then lay back down, and died. He was fifty-three years old. R. C. was seventeen.

R. C., like his mother, adored his father. He never heard his father complain during his illness. He only knew his father to be a kind and gracious man. He knew him to be a man of honor. And now he was gone. Decades later, R. C. recalled the whole incident in his 1983 book *The Hunger for Significance*. His extended words follow:

I remember my father's final words—how can I forget them? But what haunts me are my last words to him.

Death often leaves a burden of guilt to the survivors who are plagued by memories of things left unsaid or undone or of hurts imposed on the deceased. My guilt resides in the insensitive, nay, the stupid words I said to my father. I said the wrong thing, the juvenile thing for which death gave me no opportunity to say, "I'm sorry."

I long for the chance to replay the scene, but it is too late. I must trust the power of heaven to heal the wound. What is done can be forgiven—it can be augmented, diminished and, in some cases, repaired. But it cannot be undone.

Certain things cannot be recalled: the speeding bullet from the gun, the arrow released from the bow, the word that escapes our lips. We can pray that the bullet misses or that the arrow falls harmlessly to the ground, but we cannot command them to return in midflight.

What did I say that makes me curse my tongue? They were not words of rebellion or shouts of temper; they were words of denial—a refusal to accept my father's final statement. I simply said, "Don't say that, Dad."

In his final moments my father tried to leave me with a legacy to live by. He sought to overcome his own agony by encouraging me. He was heroic; I shrank from his words in cowardice. I could not face what he had to face.

I pled ignorance as I only understood enough of his words to recoil from them. He said, "Son, I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

He was quoting the apostle Paul's closing words to his beloved disciple Timothy. But I failed to recognize that fact. I had never read the Bible—I had no faith to keep, no race to finish.

My father was speaking from a posture of victory. He knew who he was and where he was going. But all I could hear in those words was that he was going to die.

What impertinence for me to reply, "Don't say that!" I rebuked my father in the most valiant moment of his life. I tramped on his soul with my own unbelief.

Nothing more was said between us—ever. I put his paralyzed arms around my neck, hoisting his useless body partially off the ground, supporting him on my back and shoulders, and dragged him to his bed. I left his room and shifted my thought to my homework assignments.

An hour later my studies were interrupted by the sound of a crash from a distant part of the house. I hastened to investigate the sound. I found my father sprawled in a heap on the floor with blood trickling from his ear and nose.

He lingered a day and a half in a coma before the rattle of death signaled the end. When his labored breathing stopped, I leaned over and kissed his forehead.

I did not cry. I played the man, being outwardly calm through the following days of funeral home visitations and burial in the grave. But inside, I was devastated.

How much value did my father have to me then? I would have done anything I could, given everything I had, to bring him back. I had never tasted defeat so final or lost anything so precious.⁹

R. C. had no such faith, at that time, to see him through.

As he approached high school graduation, R. C. had three options. He was invited to try out for one of the farm teams that fed the Pittsburgh Pirates. He was offered a baseball scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh. And he was offered an athletic scholarship, for basketball and football, to Westminster College in New Wilmington, Pennsylvania, about an hour's drive north of Pittsburgh.

By his own account, it was an easy choice. He never applied to Pittsburgh, and never applied to any other college. "I fell in love with that college," R. C. testified.¹⁰ That fall he was in New Wilmington.

⁹ R. C. Sproul, *In Search of Dignity* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1983), 91–92. Republished as *The Hunger for Significance*, new ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2020). Used with permission from P&R Publishing Co., PO Box 817, Phillipsburg, NJ 08865.

¹⁰ Stephen Nichols with R. C. Sproul, personal interview, April 7, 2017.

Place and Time

Many decades later, after R. C. had been living for some time in central Florida, he was invited to speak at an anniversary for the pastorate of an old friend, and former Ligonier Valley Study Center colleague, back in Pittsburgh. He couldn't attend, but he wrote some words to be read for the occasion. In his typical cursive script on yellow paper, which was then typed up by his secretary, he wrote:

You can take the man out of Pittsburgh, but you cannot take Pittsburgh out of the man. My roots are in Pittsburgh and to this day, I love every tree, every blade of grass, and every pothole in the Burgh.

One has to have firsthand experience of Pittsburgh's streets to fully appreciate the comment on potholes. Pittsburgh was the place. World War II and the 1950s was the time. Both this place and this time formed R. C. Sproul. On the radio or at a conference, that distinct western PA accent gave away how significantly this particular place had shaped him.

Pittsburgh remained an important place in his life, especially up until the move to central Florida in the mid 1980s. Robert Carro, author of the (yet) unfinished monumental biography of Lyndon Baynes Johnson, has noted, "The importance of a sense of place is commonly accepted in the world of fiction. I wish that were also true about biography and history."¹¹ No doubt, the life of R. C. Sproul is better understood against the setting of this place and time.

While Pittsburgh was the place of his early years, World War II was the significant and determining factor of the time. His father's absence in the service was by R. C.'s own account "very formative." His father was of that "Greatest Generation," being, in fact, one of the older members of that storied generation. The unpredictable nature of the war gave way to an ordered post-war society: neighborhood drugstore, neighborhood grocer, and neighborhood repairman. This age provided the solidity and

11 Robert A. Carro, *Working: Researching, Interviewing, Writing* (New York: Knopf, 2019), 141.

security of life within a walking circumference: school, church, playground, ball field, girlfriend's home. There were rhythms: school, play, sports, a movie. R. C.'s father's illness disrupted the rhythms. Being bused to high school broke the circumference. But this space and time were filling in the backdrop of the portrait that would become R. C. Sproul.

In the opening pages of *Classical Apologetics*, R. C., writing of the growing secularism, draws attention to two Latin words: *saeculum* and *mundum*, translated as time and place.¹² The Latin words *chronos* and *tempus* also mean time. The distinctive nuance of *saeculum* in this word group entails the connotation of "age." There is the 1940s, then there is the age of World War II. There is the 1950s, then there is the "golden age of television." It's not just about the moment, but the texture and the particularity of the moment, the ethos around the moment.

So it is with *mundum*. *Topos* also means place, as in a spot on a map. But *mundum*, which entails topography and geography, also captures all of the granular detail of a place, the ethos around the spot on a map. So it is with Pittsburgh. The ethos is a toughness equal to the moniker "Steel City." The ethos is management on the South Hills, labor in the North Hills—all neighborhoods of immigrants. There are rivers that separate and bridges that connect. Coal and coke mines below the surface, steel mills above. This was a one-time frontier outpost. No one plays defense quite like the Steelers. There are mountains. There are potholes.

In 1957, R. C. headed north for Westminster College, but he didn't go too far from Pittsburgh. In one sense, he never did.

¹² R. C. Sproul, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 6.

"This theologically rich, warm, and personal look at a rare servant of the Lord is masterful. There will be other biographies of R. C., but I cannot imagine any that would come close to this one."

JOHN MACARTHUR

Pastor, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California;
Chancellor Emeritus, The Master's University and Seminary

"This book is worth your time because it celebrates a man worth remembering. Thank you, Stephen Nichols, for helping the reader fall in love with this lion of a man, my friend, the good Doctor Sproul."

JONI EARECKSON TADA

Founder, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

"I couldn't put this book down, for it doesn't just tell the fascinating story of a life well lived; it takes you on R. C.'s own journey. My prayer is that the Lord might use it to inspire more faithful Reformers, more God-fearing defenders and proclaimers of the faith, more like R. C. Sproul."

MICHAEL REEVES

President and Professor of Theology, Union School of Theology

"Stephen Nichols has given us a gift in this book. Anyone whose life was marked, as mine has been, by Sproul's life and ministry will treasure getting to know him better through these pages."

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"I am thankful for this accessible biography of R. C. Sproul by Stephen Nichols. His clear and simple way of writing is certainly appropriate in his biography of a man who always sought to communicate the glorious theology of Scripture in a clear and simple way."

BURK PARSONS

Senior Pastor, Saint Andrew's Chapel, Sanford, Florida; Editor, *Tabletalk*

BIOGRAPHY

