Book Summary_RC Sproul: A Life (Stephen Nichols)

Summarized by Paul Schlehlein

Introduction

- With no notes Sproul could preach a sermon on any texts or lecture on any epistemological views from philosophy.
- His mischievous smile was as wide as the sky.
- They say the old-school Cambridge runners were never seen running. They'd just show up the meet and dominate, but they'd never stretch and warm up like others. But there was a ton of preparation behind the scenes. This was Sproul.
- He was a master communicator. He'd tell his homiletic students: "Find the drama in the text. Then preach the drama."
- It kept him up at night that there may be professing but not possessing Christians at his church at Saint Andrews.

1. **Pittsburgh**
    1. Born Feb 13, 1939. Known through his young years as Sonny.
    2. Surrounded by the steel mills of Pittsburgh that ran 24 hours a day. Never missed a Pirates Opening Day and would skip school, hitchhike and watch the games, all with his parents' approval.
    3. Dad devout Methodist, RC was baptized as baby but early one with parents became Presby. Very liberal church.
    4. The first minister John Knox every ordained was a Scot named Robert Campbell Sproul, who was then dispatched to Ireland.
    5. In Sproul's liberal church, pastor would catechize children but would change question from WSC and ask: "Who is the greatest Christian who ever lived?" Answer: "Albert Schweitzer." AS may have been good humanitarian with lots of degrees including medical and theology, he was patently liberal.
    6. Born leader, captain of bball team and prez of student counsel.
    7. Dad had stroke when RC in 9th grade. Idolized Dad, who always wore a crisp white shirt and tie. Speech slurred. Had to drag dad to his bed each evening. Died at 53 when RC was 17.
    8. Offered baseball scholarship to University of Pitt and bball and football to Westminster College in PA.
2. **Ecclesiastes 11:3**
    1. Sproul on autopilot through high school; history major first year in school.
    2. "I think I'm probably the only person in church history who was converted to Christ by [Ecclesiastes 11:3]." It says, "If a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie." Sproul saw himself as that tree, fallen, rotten, decaying. Knelt beside his bed and asked God to forgive his sins.
    3. Soon called to preach. Regarding Reformation Study Bible, he hoped would caused a Bible study Reformation. It's not enough to read Bible. We need to study it.
    4. Pastor at his Presby church told Sproul after his conversion: "If you believe in the physical resurrection of Christ, you're a damn fool."
    5. Natural orator. Changed major from history to philosophy. Second conversion was one evening when he went to chapel at midnight and felt overwhelming presence of God. Calls chapter 42 of Melville's Moby Dick (The Whiteness of the Whale) the greatest chapter in literature, besides Scripture. May have led him to write Holiness of God.
    6. Same year he get BA in philosophy, daughter Sherrie Lee Sproul is born and enters Pittsburgh Theo seminary.
3. **Student Professor Pastor Teacher**
    1. First grad degree before PhD. Went to seminary committed to presup apologetics. Gerstner was a theological conservative but was bulletproof from liberals trying to cancel him. Critiqued Van Til's presup. Sproul at first was presup bc of Gregory and his influence by Van Til.
    2. Lamont was a master of drama of the sermon in the pulpit, pastor of nearby Presby church. Influenced Sproul.
    3. RCC responded to Protestant Reformation in three way: Inquisition, forming society (Jesuits) and Council of Trent. For RCC, justification is synergistic. Sproul most influential in using the Five Solas to understand Reformation Theology.

4. Went to Netherlands to learn under best theologian alive, GC Berkouwer. Sailed there and lived off peanut better and jelly sandwiches. Reading list was 25 in Dutch, four in Latin, four in German and four in French.
5. Took 12 hours to read first page of Dutch book. Berkhouwers book on Person of Christ was very significant.
6. Berkouwer was middle orthodoxy, not very hard on Barth and didn't have Prolegomena section in his Theology book about methodology.
7. He returned to the US after one year to teach at Westminster College. Son was born on day of mother's death. Ordained into PCUSA. Gifted Thompson Chain Reference Bible from Vesta's parents and he devoured it.
8. McKim and Rodgers believed innerrancy wasn't biblical but historical doctrine devised by Hodge, Warfield and Princeton. Meanwhile, taught philosophy at the college. Stayed fulltime and taught at Gordon College. Friend had urge to call Sproul in middle of the night and said he should switch to Gordon. Got a Drs. from Free University in Amsterdam, though he never wrote a dissertation. Also did ETS paper on Luther.
9. Miserable at Gordon, which had fundamentalist tendencies. The Sprouls played cards and smoked. Sproul was hired on the spot to teach philosophy at Conwell SChool of Theology, a Baptist school, though Sproul Presby, even though 65 applied. Near Westminster. Would sit on porch with Van Til and speak Dutch.
10. Preached hour and a half at all black church, though he'd only preached 30 minutes before, so he strung three sermons together. Complemented: "Then the Ghost came by." *Christianity Today* paid handsomely for articles, so Sproul submitted and was published. Bored with academic life at age 30, though loved teaching. He loved teaching lay people, SS style. Then was associate pastor in 1969, by that time had been married nine years and moved eight times. Preached through Luke and Romans and EE.

4. **Ligonier**
    1. Dora Hillman so impressed with Sproul teaching asked what he'd want if he could have anything. He said study center where he and others could teach on broad range of theological subjects. Started at Ligonier Study Center, 52 acres and 50 miles northwest of Pittsburgh. Met with Schaeffer to learn from his experience at L'Abri. Said, be careful, this would be all encompassing. 24-7, meals, discipleship....constant. He had to build up a donor list. Sproul main teacher, though several others. But LVSC was nothing like L'Abri. It was unique in Church History.
    2. EVeryone's favorite was Monday Night, GabFest, where no question was off limits. This was life on life, games, teaching, eating etc. Several tried to get Sproul to another seminary, but he saw LVSC as a bridge between SS and seminary.
    3. The Rowley's used their gifts in media to advance Ligonier, as there was no video material at the time. Little privacy, only place was bedroom. Knew Gordon Clar personally, though he differed from Sproul and Gerstner on their apologetic approach.
    4. Chuck Colson lived in Naples, Sproul's favorite place to vacation. Sproul did a lot of work in businesses teaching them principles of getting along and dignity. White collar in the AM and blue collar in the PM. He could teach in both worlds.
    5. Mike Ford, President Gerald Ford's son, studied at Ligonier, as did Bill Hybels and Tim and Kathy Keller, whom Sproul married.
    6. Lots of schools in OH and PA at schools like Geneva, Grove City and Westminster would get credit for studying at LVSC. Sproul loved sports, ball room dancing, Steelers, skiing etc.
    7. He liked to make his readers smile and made it easy for them, while not patronizing them. One book dedication: "To VESTA, to the Romans, a pagan goddess; to me, a godly wife.
5. **Inerrancy**
    1. In Oct, 1973, Ligonier played historic role in American church history, because put together conference and symposium on inerrancy, including Gerstner, Frame and Clark Pinnock. Concerned with ancient creeds of what they *didn't* say, like "bodily" with Jesus' resurrection, where Bultmann would be tricky and say Jesus only rose in the realm of faith etc.
    2. Sproul said if you agreed with Bultmann's view of Scripture, you'd lose the gospel. Barth also said innerrancy was biblical Docetism, because it requires divine authorship and this would gobble up human authorship. This brought in neo-orthodoxy and high criticism. Sproul called 1973 conference to address

this. Then came Fletcher's Situational Ethics, which said morality of an action depends on the situation.

3. PCUSA allowed ordination of women. Sproul had to get out, though Gerstner decided to stay in. Sproul was with his family all day long, except when he traveled.
4. Only a handful of years he didn't publish a book. Most years he published several. Wrote out notes in a spiral-bound notebook but left it behind when speaking. Known as a clear and cogent communicator. Geneva College gave him an honorary doctorate at age 37.
5. Inerrancy was a big issue. Lindsell's book was a bombshell and several tried to sue him when he named names. *The Battle for the Bible.* Sproul wrote in little notebook: "Need Evangelical summit...may fail but must try it.
6. Graham wouldn't join Council of Biblical Inerrancy (though he was invited) because he wouldn't separate over inerrancy but did give a $10k anonymous gift to CBI. Boice was chairman and Sproul president.
7. Fascinating section of details about the first big summit. All had responsibilities for the drafting committee. Night before council convened person assigned articles of affirmation and denial did not have them. Meeting finished at midnight, then RC went to room at Hyatt and from midnight to 0400 wrote a draft of 19 affirmations and denials. Leadership! Many countries and colleges and seminaries came to first summit, including both MacArthurs. From this came the Chicago Statement, four parts, including 19 articles of affirmations and denials. Key! Sproul said the crucial element is the denial. Denials put boundaries on the interpretation and protects from "studied ambiguity". Draws line in the sand. Nothing to be ashamed of to be inerrantist. Helped retake SCB in 1980s, influenced Mohler, who first listened to Sproul on cassette tapes.
8. Great idea. ICBI did three part topics over the years, Biblical inerrancy, hermeneutics and application before it dissolved. Produced books and conferences.
9. "In 1977 [the sixth year of the school], eighteen thousand students, and eight hundred resident students, passed through the grounds of the study center, numbers that steadily increased." (134) There was no topic in theology that he could not teach on extemporaneously.
6. **Apologetics**
    1. Published at ages 45-47 *Classical Apologetics, The Holiness of God* and *Chosen by God I(1986).*
    2. "As a youth I had two consuming passions. One was sports and the other the 'why questions.'" (141)
    3. Three views of apologetics (the reasoned defense of the Christian religion). Evidentialism (e.g. Josh McDowell, leans Arminian), presupp (majority Reformed) and classical (majority in Church History).
7. **Holiness**
    1. Missions statement: "To teach the Christian faith to as many people as possible." Finally: "To proclaim the holiness of God in all its fullness to as many people as possible." How many ministries have God's holiness in mission statement?
    2. When HOG was published in 1985, nothing like it.
    3. Asked class how many people disagreed that God ordains everything that comes to pass. Several hands went up. Then asked how many atheists. None. Said it raised hand for first then for second. If God isn't sovereign, he isn't God.
8. **Stand**
    1. Sproul teaches at RTS, some called "RCS". Many went in DMIN just to study under him.
    2. Loved teaching theology and didn't want to teach to exclusive club. Able to present complex ideas in a clear and simple way.
    3. Sproul was aboard the deadliest train crash in Amtrack history, 42 of 202 passengers were killed.
    4. ECT had Neuhuas, Kreeft, Bright, Packer and Guinness and Colson. Other side had Kennedy, MacArthur, Horton, Ankerberg. Huge disagreements, especially about imputation etc. Sproul described ECT affair as the most difficult time in his life. RTS was on the fence on ECT. ECT statement leaves out justification by faith alone. Friendships were broken. Rome denies *sola fide* and since it's essential to gospel, betrayal of gospel. Trent Canon 11 bashes sola fide. Packer had previously went against DMLJ on ecumenical items.

5. "The Reformers heralded *sola fide,* faith alone. Rome responded with *fide et opera,* faith and works. To put a fine point on it, the Reformers are defined by the word *sola,* whereas Rome is defined by *et.*"
6. Sproul was an early riser and would often get a round of golf, then would write in the locker room.
7. When RC founded Reformation Bible College, he wrote vows for board members and faculty to recite annually, which included Apostles' and Chalcedonian creeds, the five solas and the consensus of the Reformed confessions.
8. Some thoughts on Luther and dispys.

9. **Holy Space, Holy Time**
    1. Named church New St. Andrews because Andrew was always bringing people to Christ. Always served coffee, tea and cookies for fellowship time between services. Church was built in Gothic style. Luther's Rose on pulpit. Not affiliated with particular denomination. Pastors ordained in PCA.
    2. Greatest theologians were pastors...Augustine, Anselm, Luther, Calvin, Edwards. Sproul said he'd like to be a ballplayer if he could do something else.
    3. When discouraged, he remembered it's not his job to convict but to preach the word and trust God to honor the Word.
    4. When teaching homiletics, conveyed two points very important to him:
        1. Don't preach from manuscript; would often use 3x5 card. Loved his TCR Bible.
        2. "Find the drama in the text, then preach the drama."
    5. Five steps to sermon prep
        1. Read, read, read the text.
        2. Look for drama in text
        3. Check commentaries for interpretive issues
        4. Think about it all week
        5. Preach it
    6. He used everything in his preaching...humor, music, economics, movies, history.
    7. He'd press the word. When he spoke, it was like he was speaking right at you.
    8. "He could turn a phrase. He understood that words have timbre, and together they have melody, harmony. He was a master of pace and of gestures."
    9. In 2000, eight weeks after Boice was told he had aggressive liver cancer, he died. The letter he wrote dying Boice was amazing.
    10. Tried to learn violin later in life. He was 63.
    11. He would write some manuscripts for books on his notepad with no mistakes, no cross-outs or false starts. Also fought against New Perspective on Paul and Federal Vision. DJ Kennedy died in 2007. He was a ballroom dance instructor before he became a pastor and helped Sproul with his moves.
10. **New Reformation**
    1. Reformation Bible College started in 2011. Small, like Luther's and Calvin's academies. Special forces. Small is good. Wanted it small.
    2. In his 1967 syllabus, he encouraged students to visit him in his home. He encouraged free-wheeling, informal classroom with lots of questions. Always maintain respect and decency in class.
    3. Logos were important to him. Used lots of Latin and designed Colon's prison ministry logo.
    4. Refused to sign Manhattan Declaration. Prayed everyday for awakening at NSA church.
    5. Luther: "Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise." He wrote 38 hymns, including A Mighty Fortress, based off Ps. 46.
    6. Sproul wrote a number of hymns. Loved music. Wisely transitioned out of Ligonier. Only a couple lines in the book about his son. One month before Luther died at age 62 (life expectancy under 40), he wrote: "I am writing as an old man, decrepit, sluggish, tired, cold and now also one-eyed."
    7. Sproul dies Dec. 14, 2018.
11. **Doxology**
    1. Crossway offered people to respond to this prompt: "I am grateful for R.C. Sproul because..." In a few days they had over 17,000 responses from around the world.
    2. He wrote over 100 books and vaults of teachings and sermons. Quoted at end of vampire movie, The Addiction, 1995. "We are not sinners because we sin, but we sin because we are sinners."
    3. He was a populist and his humor was legendary. Lots of contributions but greatest was holiness of God. Said greatest novel was Moby Dick. Changed his mind on eschatology often. Changed his view on "day" in Gn. 1.

4. Hilarious story about Sinclair Ferguson mixing up his preaching stories.