

Speaking the Truth in Love

The Life and Legacy of Roger Nicole | By David Bailey | Reviewed by William David Spencer

“Roger and Annette Nicole . . . form a partnership to which anyone might point to illustrate the egalitarianism of men and women together that Roger so implacably defends” (ix), writes J. I. Packer in his introduction to Dr. David Bailey’s delightful biography of CBE cofounder and evangelical statesperson Roger Nicole. In his preface, Roger explains that he allowed the author, who is a pastor, professor, and director of the Orlando Center of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, to write his biography in order “to emphasize the footsteps of God Himself in the path of my life” (xv). Typical of his well-known humility, Roger uses his “subject’s preface” to qualify his story by assuring readers of his own many faults, though those of us who know him personally, as I have for more than twenty-five years, will find this litany hard to recognize: “Proud”? When my wife was candidating for her position at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Roger was delighted to discover our then three-year-old son playing with a little stuffed lamb. Roger sat down on the floor, engaged him in conversation, and played with him until he was called away. “Insensitive”? When I was writing my own doctoral dissertation and needed rare books from Harvard’s notoriously difficult to access Widener Library, Roger invested a Saturday to accompany me, spending hours in wheedling one-of-a-kind treasures out of the barely cooperative librarians, wielding his alumni status as a wedge to pry the archives open as Paul brandished his Roman citizenship. “Selfish”? When he retired from Gordon-Conwell, he took me through his vast library of mystery novels and told me to take whatever I would like. I was just one of many blessed by his beneficence.

I add these reflections to explain the generosity of spirit of Roger Nicole. His egalitarianism is one natural aspect of this temperament. Because Roger is so firmly grounded in inerrancy and Reformed theology, he does not need artificial podiums on which to stand. He is able to rest one strong foot on orthodoxy, the other on orthopraxy.

All this may seem strange to those who know him most recently for his failed attempt to oust openness theology from the Evangelical Theological Society. To read that campaign as revealing Roger’s to be a restrictive spirit is to miss all the personal pain that request caused him and the unflinching devotion to inerrancy and Reformed thought that was its impetus. Like most of the great minds, Roger’s is a puzzle to many. This book is the passport into the fascinating world of this uniquely gifted and gracious man.

Dividing Roger’s reminiscences into eight chapters, with a conclusion, six appendices, and two indexes, the book is a scholarly work itself. Among the insights CBE readers will discover is that Roger’s elder brother, Jules, not only “shared the egalitarian view” with him, but “believed that

women might even be permitted to serve in the military,” having “derived” his position “from a careful consideration of how God treats women in Scripture” (8–9). We also learn about strong women pastors whose examples, along with “the total teaching of Scripture,” moved him toward egalitarianism (35).

Built as it is from Roger’s reminiscences, the book reads a lot like a conversation with him: witty, insightful, delightful. David Bailey is a fine writer and conveys the best of Roger’s stories to the reader. Those who read biographies to meet the subject through its pages will not be disappointed. He is here in all his wide interests. Those who read Christian biographies for uplift, inspiration, and edification will find these lessons here as well.

But the pace is very leisurely; this is not a “quick read.” It is, as is the scholarly life, full of details. My own advisor in seminary, Bruce Metzger, another scholar for whom I have the most profound appreciation and respect, once defined a scholar to us students as “one who pays attention to details.” Understandably, then, this survey of a scholar’s life includes painstaking analyses of Roger’s major works, particularly his B.D., Th.M., and Ph.D. dissertations. These yield the patient reader a wealth of solid, centrist theology with a sound defense of a high view of Scripture. In fact, the entire book is very much like sitting down with a ninety-something-year-old as he reminisces over a long and fruitful life. In and out wander many famous fellow evangelicals like Gilbert Bilezikian (with an explanation of why he became egalitarian), Carl F. H. Henry, George Eldon Ladd, Glenn Barker, E. J. Carnall, Stanley Gundry, Catherine Kroeger, and many more.

True to its title, the book ends with an extremely helpful appendix on how to speak the truth in a spirit of love, entitled, “How to Deal with Those Who Differ from Us.” This is not simply a checklist (though it includes one), but a detailed twenty-page analysis of how to defend the gospel of Jesus Christ graciously but effectively. It is both insightful into the man and helpful to the reader. Like everything else in this book, it is done with great care.

The reader will emerge from this biography satisfied: nourished spiritually and equipped intellectually. It cannot help but move readers forward in the faith, which is, after all, the goal of every great teacher of theology, which in essence Roger is.

WILLIAM DAVID SPENCER edits *Priscilla Papers*, teaches theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary’s Boston campus, and serves as Pastor of Encouragement at Pilgrim Church in Beverly, Mass. He is the author of nine books and more than one hundred published articles, stories, and poems. He is pictured here during a 2007 visit to the Sorbonne in Paris, where Roger Nicole studied.

Originally published in [*Priscilla Papers*, Volume 22, Number 2 Spring 2008, p. 29.](#)

