
Pro Rege

Volume 30 | Number 1

Article 5

September 2001

Border Crossings: Christian Trespasses on Popular Culture and Public Affairs (Book Review)

Tim P. Vos
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Vos, Tim P. (2001) "Border Crossings: Christian Trespasses on Popular Culture and Public Affairs (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 30: No. 1, 26 - 28.
Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol30/iss1/5

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.



A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

triumphalism has functioned in American evangelicalism. In fact, the Kuyperian emphasis on the kingship of Christ over all of life is hardly typical of American evangelicalism, and is notably absent from the list of what Noll presents as common, typical evangelical beliefs (60-61). Indeed, as scholars like William G. McLoughlin have suggested, the late eighteenth-century shift from Calvinism to Methodism may help to explain the *lack* of a distinctly biblical approach to politics and society among American evangelicals. Secondly, Noll's generalization about "Calvinist" and "Lutheran" views is vastly over-simplified. Calvin never minimized the suffering Christ or the necessity of the cross, and was quick to alert us to the reality of the continuing struggle against sin; our subjection to God in all our vocations was part of that struggle against sin and the process of sanctification. And though Calvin affirmed the God-given character of authority, he by the same token insisted that all legitimate human exercise of authority was limited. Luther's Christ of the cross, by contrast, was the hidden and transcendent Word whose redemptive

work was a tangent into creation and the realm of nature. Notably, it was Luther who called upon the German princes to slaughter rebellious peasants.

Noll's turn to a Lutheran emphasis is consistent with his search for an "essential" evangelical faith. His effort to find that essence is understandable in a diverse, post-modern world that presents immense challenges to living out the claims of Christ's Kingdom. But in the end, his prescriptions give us little guidance about living that faith as Christians in the world. In his description of possibilities for "intrinsic" evangelical science, he refers to the Bible and nature as two distinct books (152-154)—presumably suggesting that intrinsic science will focus exclusively on the book of Nature (162), and only be "intersected" by faith. Noll is even more wary of seeking an obedient political order; at best, he suggests only that Christians keep their distance from politics. Noll's search for "the best" in American evangelicalism seems finally to seek a spiritual Kingdom abstracted from the redemption of a groaning creation.

Border Crossings: Christian Trespasses on Popular Culture and Public Affairs, by Rodney Clapp (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2000). 224 pages. \$16.99. 1-58743-003-7. Reviewed by Tim P. Vos, Instructor of Communication, Dordt College.

The sacrament of baptism teaches us that our Heavenly Father has adopted us as his children and made us co-heirs with Christ. But how do we understand what it means to be adopted and part of God's family? Are we guilty of seeing baptism through the eyes of our own cultural stories? Perhaps we envision baptism as little orphan Annie's adoption into a life of opulent leisure by Daddy Warbucks. Are we guilty of seeing family through the eyes of our own culture or experience? Might we see family as little more than a collection of individuals and the home as little more than a hotel, where all members have their own room with their own television, their own keys and their own schedules? To be made co-heirs with Christ means, among other things, that children are expected to grow up and join the family business. No more hanging around the house, or worse, sitting in our rooms apart from the family. We need to cross the threshold and engage the larger world.

Rodney Clapp wants Christians to "take baptism seriously" (14) and thus to take their new family, the church seriously. Clapp believes evangelical Christians haven't taken baptism as seriously as they should because they have done a poor job of negotiating borders; they have not crossed borders as Christians. Clapp introduces *Border Crossings: Christian Trespasses on Popular Culture and Public Affairs* with the claim that Christians

should engage popular culture and public affairs "first and foremost as Christians. Thus, (Christians) cross borders supposedly closed to the explicitly Christian" (15). Clapp makes his argument in support of that claim through nineteen loosely connected essays grouped in four parts: The Inevitability of Borders; Inside Christian Borders; Trespassing Secular Borders: Politics and Economics; and Trespassing Secular Borders: Popular Culture.

In part one, Clapp laments that Evangelicals have been too enamored with foundationalism: the modern, liberal epistemology that holds to rationally attainable, universal truth. Clapp devotes much of the first chapter to arguing with evangelical scholars such as Ronald Nash and Kenneth Kantzer, whom he sees as clinging to vestiges of foundationalism. Christians fail to be explicitly Christian, in Clapp's argument, when they appeal to universal truths. Christianity can be kept within borders. Instead, Clapp sides with Alasdair MacIntyre, arguing that "all inquiry is tradition-constituted and tradition-dependent." Clapp concludes, "We do better, I think, to come down from the foundationalist slide, recover an eschatologically informed epistemology, and place that epistemology firmly in the bed of ecclesiology. It is the community called 'church' that teaches people the language and culture that enables them to know Jesus as Lord" (29). Clapp wants the

reader to embrace the church as an interpretative community—a community that interprets the Bible, witnesses to the truth of Jesus Christ, and speaks its truth in any public forum. Clapp adds on to his argument the necessity of narrative. Instead of searching for universal truths, Christians need to study the particular: “the God Christians worship is a God who does not shun history and contingency” (38).

Clapp recognizes that Christians have problems crossing borders because they have been backed into some serious compromises, not the least of which is acceptance of the liberal definition of religious freedom. “Liberal religious freedom,” Clapp writes, “is freedom of the allegedly autonomous individual (not the church); it is freedom of the individual to hold religious convictions as private opinions” (46). Clapp finds such freedom to be no freedom at all – it denies Christians their true identity and traps their witness behind an illegitimate border.

In part two, *Inside Christian Borders*, Clapp challenges the church to be a healthy family in the face of a liberal, consumer culture that has misshapen our views of the church. Here, it seems, borders must be reinforced from outside attack – the church has let in “an individualized, rationalized, self-determining ‘Christianity.’” The challenge is to “recover a disciplined, embodied, and habituated church” (69). *Border Crossings* encourages us to see how we are disciplined by our culture and to seek out the church for our formation. But Clapp argues that the church must be more than a retreat from the real world; it must form and discipline us to engage the world (99). Clapp also argues that the church must cultivate lives that grow out of doing, not just knowing. We know how to ride a bike because we do it, not because we know the laws of physics. Likewise, we need an embodied and habituated knowledge that rises out of regular worship to allow us to successfully cross borders (65). Two short chapters in this section attempt to sketch a formative church’s approach to holidays. Clapp argues that Christian celebrations of Thanksgiving should be coupled with repentance, in contrast to celebrations that foster the myth of Americans as “the world’s greatest benefactors” (76). Clapp also wants the church to cultivate the habit of celebrating Easter, rather than Christmas, as the “central Christian holiday” (82).

In each of the book’s first two parts, Clapp includes essays that the reader will likely find difficult to connect with the surrounding chapters. For example, in part one, a discussion of epistemology segues into a brief essay on the television series, *The X-Files*. While Clapp makes the case that *The X-Files* is really about epistemology, its broader connection to the “Inevitability of Borders” is tenuous. Likewise, Clapp begins part two

with a first-person essay on the 1988 joint meeting of the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature. While the connection to “Inside Christian Borders” is less tenuous, the fit with the ensuing chapters will be hard for many readers to see.

The remaining two parts of *Border Crossings* show how a Christian approach to public affairs might differ from the predominant culture’s approach. Over several chapters, Clapp takes aim at consumerism’s encroachment on the church. However, the most thought-provoking chapter in part three is “From Family Values to Family Virtues.” Clapp has written on this topic more than once and the depth and subtlety of his argument come through here. That said, Clapp begins with the not so subtle claim that evangelical Christians have fought the battle for family values poorly. They have bought the enemy’s logic and language. The traditional family is seen as “the nuclear family, with the home as an emotional haven from the heartless realities of commerce and politics, providing all religious and moral ‘values’ for its members – values that are by definition ‘private’ and ‘personal’” (112). Clapp says such a view of family would be foreign to a Hebrew culture where “they regarded the home as something more significant, more challenging, and more exciting than a privatized, sentimentalized haven” (113). Clapp concludes that an atomized version of family is a poor social foundation. Instead, he offers the church as our best, true family, “a community of adopted siblings who are our truest sisters and brothers because they do the will of the God of Israel and Jesus the Nazarene” (125).

The book’s fourth and final part showcases Clapp’s engagement with popular culture. He rhapsodizes on Jazz in general and saxophonist John Coltrane in particular. But Clapp is more than a fan; he states, “Jazz can make us—especially the ‘us’ of white, middle- and upper-class, relatively comfortable American believers—better Christians” by correcting the “heresy of white Christianity” (185). And what is that heresy? In Clapp’s terms, there are several: the “heresies of disembodiment, privatization, and the skewing of eschatology” (191). Clapp concludes, “Jazz is the eschatological tension that is the human condition set to music, lived as music, able to celebrate and certainly to dance, but also and in the same breath aching and grieving and raging and never satisfied with the tired old world as it is” (202).

You can miss telling details in any book by starting with chapter one—the introduction and even the book jacket can help you understand a book. *Border Crossings* begins with a somewhat amusing “Nonlinear Reading Guide to this Book” (7). For example, he advises, “If you find the word epistemology intimidating (or worse), but know agent Scully’s phone number

and pray nightly for protection from the Cigarette Smoking Man, go directly to chapter 3.” After reading a few chapters, the reader begins to realize that Clapp is serious about the nonlinear approach. If you expect books to build logically toward a clear conclusion, this may be a challenging (or perhaps just annoying) read.

The relative independence of each chapter is an intentional product of the author's design but also a function of the fact that each of the chapters is getting a second life in this book. A testimonial on the book jacket states, with some unintended irony, “Clapp ... does it again!” Indeed, every chapter has already been done—each is strongly based on a previously published Clapp essay or conference paper. If you have faithfully read Clapp's work in *Books & Culture*, *Perspectives (Reformed Journal)*, or *Christianity Today*, you will find

little new for your \$17. The collected essays also create a slightly uneven texture for the reader. For example, some chapters are more academic, with heavy footnoting. Several chapters have no footnotes at all. (Some material clearly would benefit from footnotes, e.g., when Clapp quotes a “prominent leader” [107], the reader should know who that leader is.)

Clapp “does it again,” in another important respect. He does what many evangelical publications have already been doing for many years—exhorting us to walk the talk, integrate faith and learning, and take our faith into the public square. That said, Clapp says it better than most. Clapp's engaging style makes for a very readable book that will likely prod you to think anew about the significance of the Christian church in North American culture.