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Redeemer: The Life of Jimmy Carter (Book Review)

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our lives and, perhaps, the withering away of *place* in a culture so mobile, so connected, so media-driven. “There is no there there,” Gertrude Stein once said of Oakland, California.

And while Miller is obviously right in not advancing a thesis he can’t prove, the non-existence of that common core experience becomes a little dispelling, in part because I wanted so badly to find something, anything, that could bring these folks together, other than, of course, their small-town stories and the fact that their own childhood experiences never really left them. What this collection of stories admirably demonstrates is that the child is the father of the man, even though Miller doesn’t even attempt to suggest that “the small town is the father of the man.” There are just too many variables.

And we are ourselves, often as not, puzzles. Take Miller’s assessment of Carl Sandburg, for instance, a giant in his own time, once called “the voice of the Middle West.” Yet Sandburg was a man like his region, largely lost today, even when some of his rustic contemporaries (say Robert Frost) are not. Miller quotes Sandburg asserting his own contradictions: “I hated my home town and yet I loved it. And I hated and loved myself about the same as I did the town and the people.”

Every last one of Miller’s choices deserves a place,

although I think I would have left James Dean on the cutting room floor, his early death at 24 taking him out of life long before he could have matured sufficiently to begin to separate the strands of influences in his life, to distinguish who he was from the Hollywood image he so suddenly created. What gives the stories some consistency—even though there’s little for a common denominator other than a rural American street address—is the recurrent way Miller documents his subjects’ own attitudes toward their personal histories on their own Main Streets.

Small-Town Dreams is a really fascinating read, especially if you like biographies, as I do. Even if the subjects are amply familiar, few of us, I’d guess, have a strong sense of their individual stories. I found every one of the narratives to be interesting and enlightening. What John E. Miller has done is told good stories about important men, stories otherwise too easily lost. In the process, he travels through a world that likely no longer exists, a world where some of America’s finest men and women, its leaders, grew up on fertile Midwestern soil, on streets full of vibrant life and character. As a teacher of literature for more than forty years, I couldn’t help but wonder about who’s telling the good stories these days, about whether or not there are, among the best, stories that grow from that same fertile soil.

Balmer, Randall. *Redeemer: The Life of Jimmy Carter*. New York: Basic, 2014. 257 pp. ISBN 978-0-465-02958-7. Reviewed by Dave Schelhaas, Professor of English, Emeritus, Dordt College.

I remember the excitement that many Christians felt as Jimmy Carter campaigned for president in 1976. He came out of nowhere it seemed—at least to those of us in the North—openly speaking of being born again, teaching Sunday School in Plains, Georgia (even during the campaign), saying again and again and with great genuine conviction that the single most important factor in his life was Jesus Christ. At last, we thought, a presidential candidate for whom religious faith is more than a talking point to garner votes. Among the Christians I knew, both Democrats and Republicans were excited by the candidacy of this Bible-quoting peanut farmer and former governor of Georgia.

In this biography, Randall Balmer, Episcopal priest, Dartmouth professor, and author of more than a dozen books—among them the highly re-

garded *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*—tells the life story of Jimmy Carter, but his focus is primarily on the role that religion and specifically evangelicalism played in the rise and fall of Carter. This review will also focus primarily on that theme.

When Carter was running for president, the initial response of evangelicals and fundamentalists was much like the kind that I observed in 1976. The Watergate scandal and Nixon resignation were still fresh in people’s minds, and Carter’s openness and his promise never to lie to the American people were very appealing. Michael Novak, the Catholic philosopher, said of Carter, “He’s for real. He’s them [evangelicals] in their idealized selves” (61).

Carter “embodied a particular, activist strain of evangelicalism called progressive evangelicalism.” In

the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, progressive evangelicalism was the “ascendant strain” of evangelicalism in America and was characterized by concerns for racial justice, gender equality, and poverty alleviation (xiv). A similar passion for justice and human rights was the primary focus of Carter’s presidential campaign, and his central political principle came from theologian Reinhold Niebuhr: “The sad duty of politics is to establish justice in a sinful world.”

While Carter rode to the presidency on the votes of evangelicals, already in this first campaign some southern evangelicals were somewhat suspicious of his agenda. Billy Graham, for example, while indicating appreciation of Carter’s faith, secretly pledged his vote to Gerald Ford and told him he would help his campaign in many ways. Still, Carter was able to capture a majority of evangelicals because of “his unabashed statements of faith and the sheer novelty for evangelical voters of being able to vote for someone who shared their views” (64).

Not long after Carter was elected president, however, evangelicals began to turn and to be turned away from him. Why and how this happened is undoubtedly the most engaging and informative aspect of this biography. Balmer shows how this came about through a combination of shrewd strategizing by conservative leaders and negative reactions of evangelicals to some of Carter’s policy decisions.

Though Jerry Falwell was certainly a major player in the strategy to unseat Carter, the primary architect of the blueprint to organize evangelicals into the “moral majority” was Paul Weyrich. According to Weyrich, “[t]he new political philosophy must be defined by us in moral terms, packaged in non-religious language, and propagated throughout the country” (101), and he set about to find the key issue to pique evangelical interest. For twenty years he had been searching for the right issue to arouse them, issues such as opposition to abortion, pornography, the outlawing of school prayer and the proposed Equal Rights Amendment.

But it was not abortion that Weyrich used to engage evangelicals—though it is often assumed to be—but race—or, more precisely, race and religious freedom. It involved an IRS ruling ordered by Nixon in 1970 that denied Federal tax exemptions to persons making contributions to educational institu-

tions that were racially discriminatory. During Carter’s presidency the IRS required Christian schools to document that they were non-discriminatory, and even though this action had not been prompted by the White House, evangelicals who supported the new Christian schools formed in the South to avoid integration blamed Carter for the law. According to Balmer, Weyrich and the organizers of the Religious Right dismiss the idea that abortion was the key issue used to mobilize the Religious Right: “*Green v. Connally* [the U.S. District Court ruling on charitable donations] was the catalyst, not *Roe v. Wade*” (107).

The great irony in this is that Jimmy Carter had risen to the presidency, in part, because he was a “New South” Governor, committed to racial justice; yet four years later it is the latent racism of the South disguised in terms of religious liberty that was a major cause of his losing the office. But as Balmer points out, other issues contributed to the loss of the evangelical vote as well:

- His disavowal of Cold War dualism: Carter rejected a simplified version of Freedom vs Communism, which had produced U. S. alliances with dictators guilty of horrendous human rights violations. As he said in a commencement address at Notre Dame, “We are now free of that inordinate fear of Communism which once led us to embrace any dictator that joined us in our fear” (80). To some evangelicals, this, along with his completion of the process of extending full diplomatic relations to Red China that Nixon had begun, smacked of being soft on Communism.
- His association with a pro-choice party: Although Carter clearly stated that he was personally opposed to abortion, nevertheless the Democratic Platform of 1980 supported the pro-choice position.
- The perception that his leadership was weak: During Carter’s presidency, the economy was severely hampered by the OPEC oil embargo, and the Iran Hostage affair created doubts about America’s strength. Many critics of Carter concluded that he was ineffective and soft. After a somewhat clandestine meeting of evangelical leaders called by Billy Graham to plan a campaign against Carter, evangelist James Robison said, “No one was talking about Jimmy Carter’s faith. It was his ability to lead” (121).

One of the saddest aspects of the story of the Religious Right's turn against Carter is the perfidy of some of its most influential and admired leaders. As Balmer tells the story—citing sources—Billy Graham is just plain two-faced, as he cozies up to Carter while at the same time pledging support to Ford and later Reagan. Jerry Falwell tells a bald-faced lie about Carter to make political hay. A few months after professing his great love for President Carter in a personal note to him, columnist Cal Thomas signs on with Falwell's Moral Majority, "the purpose of which was to thwart Jimmy Carter's reelection" (118).

The result of all the strategizing by the Moral Majority was that fewer evangelicals voted for Carter in the 1980 Presidential election, in which he was defeated by Ronald Reagan. But it was hardly the last of Jimmy Carter. In the final chapter, "Stepping Stone," Balmer suggests that Carter is probably the only president to use the White House as a stepping stone to greater accomplishments. And while it is true that since he left the White House, Jimmy Carter has accomplished amazing things, including the winning of the Nobel Peace Prize, to say that he did more as an ex-president than as president is not quite fair.

To start with, there was and is the testimony of his personal life and faith. Having just experienced the corruption of the Nixon years, the American people were uplifted by a leader who was a model of public and private morality. But beyond that, he or-

chestrated the remarkable Camp David Accords between Egypt (Sadat) and Israel (Begin) that survives to this day; he negotiated the second Panama Canal treaty; he refused to go to war with Iran (though he was urged to do so) because such a war would violate Just War principles; he signed SALT II with Leonid Brezhnev; and he established a foreign policy that was "more collaborative, less interventionist, and sensitive above all to human rights" (79).

I have just one note of criticism about this otherwise excellent biography: Balmer suggests in an "epilogue" that Carter, as a boy, naval officer, Georgia governor, and president, was "driven...by a kind of works righteousness." After his defeat, says Balmer, Carter "reaffirmed his commitment to works righteousness" (191). To me this is sheer speculative nonsense. Carter stated countless times that his salvation was through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He was born again, as he said, born to good works, not because they would make him righteous but because they were a natural response to the righteousness imputed to him by Jesus Christ.

Though the political right continues to defame Carter for his perceived political failures, I can think of no American citizen of the last sixty years who better exemplifies a life of Christian service in both the public and private spheres than the Jimmy Carter we see in this biography.

Christopher M. Hays and Christopher B. Ansberry (editors), *Evangelical Faith and the Challenge of Historical Criticism*. Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2013. Paperback, 241 pages, including Bibliography. ISBN: 978-0-8010-4938-5. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, Emeritus Professor of History, Dordt College.

The historical-critical approach to Scripture is not a recent one. It had clearly emerged by the late seventeenth century. Arguably, it was one of the consequences of the open Bible for which the Reformation had struggled. The problem was that the expanding historical consciousness of the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was brought to scholarly expressions on the basis of the rationalistic assumptions of the Enlightenment. Inevitably, this had an immense and problematic impact on the scrutiny of the biblical texts. The self-revelation of God to his covenant people was purportedly reduced to the developing monotheistic religious sensibilities of the Hebrew people. The resulting "higher critical" biblical scholar-

ship—sometimes employing highly refined philological techniques—has been the bugbear of much evangelical Christianity for well over a century. It seems to rob them of the Bible they need to proclaim the gospel. This is particularly so for revivalist preachers of the fundamentalist and dispensationalist variety.

The editors of *Evangelical Faith and the Challenge of Historical Criticism*—Christopher Hays, professor of New Testament at the Biblical Seminary of Colombia, and Christopher Ansberry, Lecturer in Old Testament at Oak Hill College, London, England—are well aware that the problem lies not so much in the "historical critical" approach *as such*, but in the enlightenment assumptions that have typically been