

The Intellectual Origins of Ronald Reagan's Faith

an excerpt - April 30, 2004 by Paul Kengor, Ph.D.



It has been 23 years since Ronald Wilson Reagan was inaugurated as the 40th President of the United States. During that time, innumerable books have been written on various aspects of Reagan--his political philosophy, his economic program, his trade policies, his Middle East policy, his attack on Soviet Communism, even his love letters to his wife. Yet, the single most important force in Ronald Reagan's life has been woefully neglected: his faith in God.

History has aptly acknowledged Reagan's legendary sense of conviction. Americans never had to struggle to figure out where this man stood on any particular issue. And yet, while Reagan's key political beliefs remained consistent from the late 1940s onward, his religious beliefs were consistent even longer. The historical record abundantly reflects that Reagan was driven by those core political convictions. What the record has overlooked is that his core religious convictions carried him yet longer.

Where did he get his spiritual values? There were a number of influences. First and foremost was his mother, Nelle Reagan. I'm confident that had Nelle Reagan died in the winter of 1918-19--a near-victim of the devastating influenza epidemic that killed millions of healthy, middle-aged mothers around the world--Ronald Reagan very likely would not have become President. It was Nelle who insisted her boy go to church--a request he happily obliged--and it was in church that Reagan picked up not only those core beliefs and values, but also the intangibles so vital to his success: his confidence, his eternal optimism (which he called a "God-given optimism"), and even his ability to speak. Indeed, history has also overlooked the fact that the Great Communicator found his first audiences in a church. He learned to speak in a church.

Aside from Nelle, there were others who made their mark: Ben Cleaver, Lloyd Emmert, and the Waggoners. There were figures that dropped into the story momentarily, made a crucial difference in Reagan's life and career--and thus, history--and then exited the stage forever. Some were men like the Reverend Cleveland Kleihauer, whose rather extraordinary influence (at a Hollywood church in the 1940s), I address in the book.

My book, *God and Ronald Reagan*, speaks to all of these influences. Today, however, I'd like to briefly address the role of two books in shaping Reagan's faith.

Intellectual Influences

It is interesting that for a man not considered an intellectual, two authors were fundamental to influencing Reagan's most intimate thoughts. Ronald Reagan's two favorite books--not coincidentally--both happened to have a profound effect on him spiritually. One was a 1903 book titled *That Printer of Udell's*, by a minister-novelist named Harold Bell Wright. The other was by Whittaker Chambers, who, in 1952, penned his book, *Witness*. (Actually, Reagan also cited the Bible as one of his favorite books. He called it "the greatest message ever written." This was because--at least in part--he believed its words were of "Divine inspiration." Of this, he "never had any doubt."²)

To be sure, Wright and Chambers were not the only intellectual influences on Reagan. He read C.S. Lewis, from whom he even borrowed apologetics. He was especially drawn to conservative intellectuals who converted from atheism/agnosticism to an anti-communist Christianity--figures that remarked upon the relationship (or lack thereof) between God, freedom, and communism. These were thinkers like Malcolm Muggeridge, Wilhelm Roepke, and Frank Meyer. Reagan also devoured the work of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and he greatly respected the lesser known writings of an attorney named Laurence W. Beilenson.³ (Beilenson and Reagan carried on a longtime relationship, exchanging ideas in numerous letters.⁴)

Today, I'd like to briefly focus on the influence of Wright and Chambers.

That Printer of Udell's

As an adult, Ronald Reagan was asked his favorite book as a child growing up in Dixon, Illinois, in the 1920s. He said the book that "made a lasting impression on me at about the age of 11 or 12, mainly because of the goodness of the principal character," was one "I'm sure you never heard of."⁵ The book was *That Printer of Udell's: A Story of the Middle West*, written by Harold Bell Wright in 1903.⁶

He also mentioned this work in his memoirs when speaking of his "heroes." He called Udell's a "wonderful book about a devout itinerant Christian," which "made such an impact on me that I decided to join my mother's church."⁷ In a letter he wrote from the White House to Harold Bell Wright's daughter-in-law, he added:

It is true that your father-in-law's book, indeed books, played a definite part in my growing-up years. When I was only ten or eleven years old, I picked up Harold Bell Wright's book, *That Printer of Udell's* [Reagan's underline for emphasis]... and read it from cover to cover....

That book ... had an impact I shall always remember. After reading it and thinking about it for a few days, I went to my mother and told her I wanted to declare my

faith and be baptized. We attended the Christian Church in Dixon, and I was baptized several days after finishing the book.

The term, "role model," was not a familiar term in that time and place. But I realize I found a role model in that traveling printer whom Harold Bell Wright had brought to life. He set me on a course I've tried to follow even unto this day. I shall always be grateful.⁸ [Again, Reagan's underline.]

Udell's first words are "O God, take ker o' Dick!" This was the final plea of the broken-hearted, dying mother of the novel's protagonist, Dick Falkner. Little Dickie's mother was a committed Christian who suffered at the hands of a horrible creature--an alcoholic, abusive spouse. In the opening scene, Dick's mom succumbs as his father lies passed out on the floor in a drunken stupor.

Young Dick escapes. He immediately runs away from home, and eventually becomes a tramp in Boyd City. No one will hire him, including the Christians he appeals to in a brave, moving moment when he wanders into a church, attracted by the music, words, and warmth his late mom had described to him. The young vagabond goes inside for inspiration and guidance. He knows from what his mother taught him that this is a good place--a place of refuge and stability that he can count on. Like Reagan, Dick's mom conditioned him to find comfort in God. At church--with God--he found an anchor.

This church scene is a pivotal part of the book. Here he learns about the church, himself, and "fake" versus "real," or "practical," Christianity. A practical Christian is one that would give Dick a job.⁹ And one such Christian does just that: A man named George Udell hires him as a printer, beginning for Dick somewhat of a Horatio Alger path to personal and spiritual improvement and fulfillment. Dick becomes a prominent player in the church and the community--a man of action.

That Printer of Udell's is an evangelical novel. Today, it might only find a spot in fiction sections of Christian bookstores. It features chapters with titles like "Philippians 4:8." This section of the New Testament emphasizes the importance of prayer for "everything" and, in Christ's words, exhorts Christians: "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put it into practice."¹⁰ Reagan himself would later say that the novel made him "a practical Christian."¹¹

The novel's clear lines of right and wrong left a mark on Dutch Reagan. More than fifty years after reading Udell's, he reminisced that it--and other books from his youth--left him with "an abiding belief in the triumph of good over evil." These books, he said, contained "heroes who lived by standards of morality and fair play."¹² There was no doubt about good and bad guys, and no moral equivalency.

The moral of the story takes shape as the new, improved Dick, now a printer at Udell's, and on his way to becoming a "practical" Christian, conceives a plan to help save the wretched city. Just as Reagan came to believe that God had a plan for him,

Dick Falkner believed himself to be moved by God--even unwittingly at times--as part of a greater plan. In Dick's case, it was a plan to do "Christ's work in the city"--Boyd City, with its "low standard of morality."¹³ (Like Reagan, too, Dick learned to speak in a chapel. The budding rhetorician was discovered as he honed his craft--in a church.)

Dick's plan goes on to make a real difference. The city's bums, burglars, and prostitutes find good work; bars are supplanted by reputable businesses, concerts replace burlesque shows. Churches, naturally, grow, as does attendance at colleges and high schools. Boyd City becomes a model--a kind of shining city--of how applied Christianity and common-sense solutions can make a difference. At one point, a traveling salesman peering out the window of a passing train is struck by the improvement; "I'm sure of one thing," he mutters, "they were struck by good, common-sense business Christianity."

Ultimately, Dick, a committed Christian, marries a brown-eyed girl named Amy Goodrich, with whom he is instantly smitten. She becomes his life partner. He is sent off to Washington, D.C., as a polished, elected representative from Boyd City. The last image we get of Dick is one that would have moistened Reagan's eyes: kneeling in prayer before heading to Washington to change the world--the admiring Amy at his side. Dick is such a success that he can't be confined to little Boyd City. He needs to make a difference in his country as a whole.

Upon finishing Udell's final page, Reagan closed the book, and walked over to his mother. "I want to be like that man," he exclaimed, referring to Dick, "and I want to be baptized." The book changed his life.

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2. Jerry Griswold, "I'm a sucker for hero worship," *The New York Times Book Review*, August 30, 1981, p. 11. Also see: Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Annual National Prayer Breakfast," February 3, 1983; and a 1967 Reagan letter published in Kiron Skinner, Martin Anderson, and Annelise Anderson, *Reagan: A Life in Letters* (New York: The Free Press, 2003), p. 276.
3. Laurence W. Beilenson, *The Treaty Trap: A History of the Performance of Political Treaties by the United States & European Nations* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1969).
4. This lasted throughout the White House years. Of the many people with whom Reagan exchanged letters as President, Beilenson was among the most frequent.
5. Reagan said this in 1977. Griswold, "I'm a sucker for hero worship," p. 11.
6. Harold Bell Wright, *That Printer of Udell's* (New York: A. L. Burt Company Publishers, 1903).
7. Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 32.
8. A copy of the March 13, 1984, letter is on file at the Dixon Public Library.
9. Wright, *That Printer of Udell's*, pp. 29-33.
10. *New International Version of New Testament*.
11. Edmund Morris, *Dutch* (New York: Random House, 1999), p. 40.
12. Griswold, "I'm a sucker for hero worship," p. 11.
13. See Wright, *That Printer of Udell's*, pp. 118-119 and 206.

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

March 13, 1984

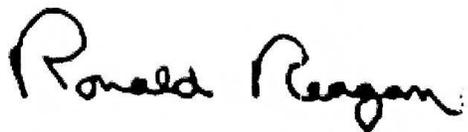
Dear Mrs. Wright:

It is true that your father-in-law's book, indeed books, played a definite part in my growing-up years. When I was ten or eleven years old, I picked up Harold Bell Wright's book, That Printer of Udell's, which I'd seen my mother reading, and read it from cover to cover. Perhaps I should tell you I became an avid reader at a very early age and had my own card for the Dixon, Illinois Public Library. I made regular use of that card.

That book, That Printer of Udell's, had an impact I shall always remember. After reading it and thinking about it for a few days, I went to my mother and told her I wanted to be baptized. We attended the Christian Church in Dixon, and I was baptized several days after finishing the book.

The term, "role model," was not a familiar term in that time and place. But I realize I found a role model in that traveling printer whom Harold Bell Wright had brought to life. He set me on a course I've tried to follow even unto this day. I shall always be grateful.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ronald Reagan". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Mrs. Jean B. Wright
[address]