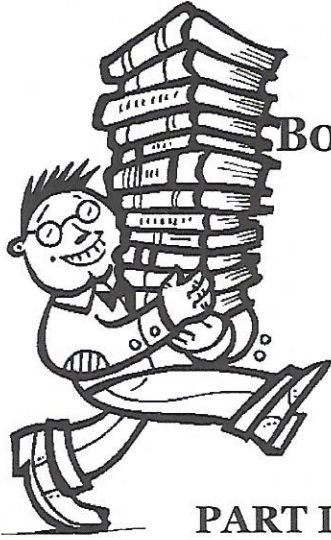


# Vic's Pics

## BOOKS EVERY METHODIST PREACHER SHOULD OWN

DR. VIC REASONER, PRESIDENT, SOUTHERN METHODIST COLLEGE



### PART IX

#### THOMAS ODEN

Thomas Oden had a happy and well-rounded childhood in Oklahoma. He knew the value of hard work. However, between 1946-1956, he described every turn as a left turn. In 1950 Reader's Digest published an article entitled "Methodism's Pink Fringe." Oden said the article attacked the very church leaders with which he most identified. He confessed to writing *Change of Heart* partly to alert people to question the realism of liberal ideals.

Once he connected with the national youth program of the Methodist Church he gained a vision of social justice that included antiwar and pacifist sentiments, along with revolutionary ideas. Even before going to college, he was a regional youth leader taking the social gospel to other church districts. In a desire for upward mobility in an academic environment, he quickly abandoned classic Christianity. He said his first forty years were prodigal; the last forty have been a homecoming.

He entered the ministry with the goal of using the church as an instrument for political change. "The trick was to learn to sound Christian while undermining traditional Christianity." Essentially, he moved from one new idea to another — Marxism and liberation theology, pacifism,

psychoanalysis, Rogerian therapy and unconditional love, demythology, existentialism, civil rights, situational ethics, ecumenicism (and an observer at the Second Vatican Council), feminism, new age, Gestalt therapy, and environmentalism. But even as some of his books were growing in popularity, he was already moving on to another theological fad. To his credit, he was intellectually honest enough to admit it when he saw that the bandwagon he was currently on was not going anywhere.

After 1950 he read the New Testament through the lens of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, rejecting a literal understanding of the incarnation and resurrection. He could use this language only in the demythological sense of Bultmann. At college he lost the capacity for heartfelt prayer and lost his love for the hymns of the church. He could discuss philosophy, psychology and social change confidently, but God made him uneasy.

Oden found the teachings of Saul Alinsky to be extremely useful. Alinsky's "push and shove" Chicago politics were a pattern for Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama. Although he never met Hillary, he said his journey closely paralleled hers. Her thesis, on the Alinsky Model, was kept under lock and key for many years, but Oden said he had read it closely. President Obama also followed it.

By the fifties, Oden identified strongly with the Vietnamese independence movement and had great admiration for Ho Chi Minh. From the University of Oklahoma, he went to Yale. While there in 1956 he broke with pacifism as he watched the brave Hungarian students standing up against Soviet tanks. He also became convinced that President Truman's decision to bomb Japan had actually spared lives in what would have been a

prolonged ground war between Japan and America.

Obviously a bright student and professor, Oden was pushed forward. He interacted with the most famous and influential theologians, including Bultmann, Pannenberg, and Barth. But he never had a serious exchange of ideas with an articulate conservative before the end of the 1960s. Oden did a U-turn in the 1970 after meeting Will Herberg, a Russian Jew who spent thirty years working for the communist party before returning to his Jewish roots. Herberg told Oden, "If you are ever going to become a credible theologian instead of a know-it-all pundit, you had best restart your life on firmer ground. You are not a theologian in name only, even if you are paid to be one." Oden confessed that he had been enamored with novelty and in love with heresy. He did a 180 degree turn, taking a dive into the early church fathers which helped him overcome his education. It is unclear, however, whether his "conversion" was an intellectual paradigm shift or a spiritual rebirth.

The first moral change was to reject the situational ethics of abortion. Oden was also disillusioned to discover that the average outcome of all types of psychological therapy is the same rate of recovery that occurs merely through the passage of time. He also discovered that the societies which most closely followed Marx became the poorest and he began to defend capitalism. He was also aware that the evidences of intelligent design were mounting. He joined the Evangelical Theological Society although membership required him to affirm the inerrancy of Scripture. When challenged to explain how he could have possibly joined the Evangelical Theological Society as a Wesleyan,

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his reply was that he had actually read the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978) and the Chicago Statement on Biblical Application (1986). He then would tell his critics to first read these statements and then he would talk to them substantively about their disagreements.

However, his realignment with orthodoxy exacted a high price from his colleagues at Drew, especially as

the feminist agenda become the majority position. The more he wrote, the less which he wrote was published by Abingdon, the Methodist publishing house. As he moved away from liberal Protestants, he found more common ground with conservative Roman Catholics, although he was personally a catholic with a small "c."

This book is a window into the apostasy of the Methodist Church as

early as the 1940's. It is an encouragement which illustrates the power of truth, the Holy Spirit, and the gospel. But how many never found their way back home?

Thomas C. Oden, *Change of Heart: A Personal and Theological Memoir* (InterVarsity Press, 2014) ISBN: 978-0830840359. Get Foundry Press to order this book for you. List price, \$40.