

Book review

Arthur Paul Boers

Reading Is Believing: The Christian Faith through Literature and Film, by David S. Cunningham. Grand Rapids: Brazos Pr., 2002.

When my father—who was not a Mennonite—died, many Mennonite ministers came to his funeral to support me, a Mennonite pastor. Afterward several remarked appreciatively on the congregation’s recitation from memory of the Apostles’ Creed. With the grave open and ready to receive my father’s coffin, I found it moving to confess with others gathered there that we believe in “the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” The confession was the more meaningful because in the church in which I grew up we so often repeated this brief summary of our faith, and because we knew that it had come down to us through the millennia from ancient believers.

The Apostles’ Creed, being short, has *shortcomings*! But brevity is also a gift: the creed is accessible and easy to memorize, while evoking a narrative that goes from God’s creation to Christ’s future return. The church calendar expands the creed; following the church year ensures that vital aspects and truths of our faith story are revisited at least annually. How much richer and more nourishing this pattern is than devoting Sunday morning services to themes such as gifts, mutual aid, church history, or stewardship.

What a joy that David S. Cunningham, professor of theology and ethics at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, has written a winsome book, *Reading Is Believing*, on the Apostles’ Creed. He introduces the creed with notes on its origins and its primary purposes: it summarizes essential narratives of our faith; it is a resource for study and conversation; and it establishes a goal that encourages us as we try to live into those narratives in our worship and life. Originally used in catechism and baptism, the creed’s phrases were transposed to address questions to candidates.

Cunningham divides the book into chapters that pair a phrase of the creed with a work of fiction or a film that highlights an aspect of that particular profession. We are treated to brilliant reflections on Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, David James Duncan's *The Brothers K*, William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*, Helen Prejean's *Dead Man Walking*, and Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*. Cunningham defends this approach articulately, and his juxtapositions of creedal statements and literary works effectively deepen our appreciation of both.

Working through the creed phrase by phrase is a good discipline. Along the way, we reflect deeply on the Trinity, eternal life, suffering, the communion of saints, eschatology, and the resurrection of the body, among others. Cunningham is not shy about naming the creed's confessions that are problematic these days, "the most remote from our ordinary experience of the contemporary world." He also shows how the creed is explicitly countercultural. And he deals with questions and criticisms Anabaptists raise: Why, for example, does the creed say so little about Jesus' life, ministry, and teachings?

The book is not perfect. Sometimes Cunningham does not focus on the part of the creed I would most like to explore: for example, he reflects on God as almighty but says little about God as creator. That said, *Reading Is Believing* would be excellent for study with a committed Sunday school class or book group. Reading the novels and short stories and seeing the films would make the study even more memorable and fun.

I appreciated Cunningham's conclusion that the creeds are not so much laundry lists of statements about the Christian faith; "In fact, they are really much more like *prayers*. When we say them, we are not merely announcing what we think or describing the state in which we find ourselves; we are also asking God for help and guidance in living into the faith that the creeds attempt to articulate" (235).

About the reviewer

Arthur Paul Boers teaches pastoral theology at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and is author of several books, including *The Rhythm of God's Grace: Uncovering Morning and Evening Hours of Prayer* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Pr., 2003).