

FLAGS OUT FRONT

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A CONTRARIAN'S DAYDREAM



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canonpress
Moscow, Idaho 

Published by Canon Press
P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, Idaho 83843
800.488.2034 | www.canonpress.com

Douglas Wilson, *Flags Out Front: A Contrarian's Daydream*
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Interior layout by Valerie Anne Bost.

Printed in the United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is forthcoming.

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For George and Karen Grant,
with many thanks.*

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I. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

CHOCTAW VALLEY BIBLE COLLEGE WAS NESTLED (as I believe the expression goes) on fifty acres at the head of the valley whose name it shared—Choctaw Valley, that is, not Bible College Valley. There were no paved roads that made their way through the hills up behind the school, and so, for those motorists who took it into their heads to drive up the valley on Sunday afternoons, the college grounds served as a steeply sloped and very green dead end. In the autumn it was a very golden-red dead end, but the driving realities were not altered by any of that.

The small school was a dead end in other ways also, but a significant gift from a wealthy alumnus, generous after the fashion of old cotton, had helped to mask that reality from

most outside observers. One person from whom that reality was *not* masked was the president, a likable but evidently mild man named Tom Collins. He came from teetotaling stock, and so it should be noted he was named after a favorite uncle, and not after the cocktail.

Despite being lean and muscular, at least for a forty-five-year-old, Tom had a good-natured mildness that was universally recognized by all, for it was the only attribute that had ever had occasion to be presented to the outside world. But President Collins had himself some hidden reserves, an aquifer of moxie far beneath the deepest wells he had ever had to use. But even *he* didn't know about any of that, and I am running ahead. All the writers' workshops say not to do that, and especially not in the third paragraph.

Tom Collins, known and beloved by the students as Dr. Tom, knew that the college was drifting slowly downward—not so much mission drift as plain old gravity drift—and he had known this since before he had first taken on the job five years before. He also knew that the endowment wasn't fixing anything *really*, new dorms or no new dorms, and that something else was going to have to do the fixing, if any fixing were to happen. Though he had no idea what that might be, he did think and pray about it quite a bit.

It was a bright September morning, very early, and an afterglow-drunk sophomore from a community college at the mouth of the valley was driving home for a few hours in the

sack before he failed to get up for his first class. As it happened, he was driving right past the Bible college, just as he always did in order to get back home again. But as the hour was very early, and there was no one in sight in any direction, the student's eye was suddenly arrested by the three flagpoles just inside the entry drive of the college. The student was named Marc . . . not that it really matters . . . but his name was Marc. Pretty sure it was Marc. The central flag pole carried the American flag, and the two shorter ones on either side were for the Christian flag and the state flag respectively. Marc pulled over by the side of the road and stared malevolently. "Jesus and the two thieves," he muttered, and got out of the car.

After a few moments of quick work, the flags were all rearranged, as he would have put it—in fact as he *did* put it to himself in the car afterward—just for the hell of it. But he was still technically drunk and couldn't be expected to know not to use that kind of language on the grounds of a Bible college. The Christian flag was now flying high above the others, the state flag was where the Christian flag had been, and the American flag was where the state flag had been. Marc got back into the car, hugely pleased with himself, and headed home to bed, and clean right out of the story. But there were ripples, as they say, in his wake.



Dr. Tom had come into work very early that same day, and so he arrived about forty-five minutes after the great flag switch. He turned into the entryway, flanked on both sides with a sweeping red brick wall, curved like welcoming arms, the left side emblazoned with *Choctaw Valley* and the right side with *Bible College*. Something was funny, not right. He slowed the car down to try to get a better sense of it. He glanced up through the windshield again, started violently, slammed on the brakes, and then jumped out of the car. He stood looking at the flags for a good five minutes, stupefied.

Since his wife Darla had passed away six years before, he had noticed that he had been more emotional than he had ever been before, so maybe that was it. Close to the surface, that kind of thing. So, in passing, he felt that his eyes were kind of weepy, but it was not anything that anybody else would have noticed if they had been there. But the predominant thing, the thing that took up all the oxygen in his internal room, was an indescribable thrill, the kind of thing that he had only felt once before in his life—back when he was twelve, when he had dedicated himself to ministry at that revival over in Parkersville. He hadn't thought about *that* in years, come to think of it, but he felt exactly the same way now, and had no earthly idea why. When he saw the flags that way, a thrill had swept over the top of him and settled back down in the bottoms of his shoes. He stood another minute more, then quietly got back into his car, and drove slowly up the drive.

As he drove, the words he had memorized as a boy through the course of numerous opening ceremonies, the ones starting each day of Vacation Bible School, came back to him. “I pledge allegiance to the Christian Flag and to the Savior for whose Kingdom it stands. One Savior, crucified, risen, and coming again with life and liberty to all who believe.” Well, if that is what the flag means, then a *Bible* college, of all things, had no business flying it in any kind of second-fiddle position.



The first call came at 9:34 a.m., from Mrs. McCorkadale, the chairman, as she identified herself, of a local civic women’s group. She was quite pleasant and businesslike at the beginning. “I was calling to inquire,” she said, “if you were aware of the *insult* to the American flag that is taking place just inside the gates of your college.”

“I am aware of no insult,” he said. “It must be some kind of misunderstanding...”

“Someone has removed the American flag from its proper place, and it is now occupying one of the lesser flagpoles.”

“Oh, that,” he said. “Yes, I did see that coming in this morning. Is that what you meant?”

“You *saw* that? And you did nothing? This is intolerable, outrageous. I insist that the flag be restored to its rightful place of honor immediately.”

Well, this was it. Here we were. Caesar had his Rubicon. What did Bible college presidents have? A Rubik's Cube? All his instincts were in favor of mollification. He naturally turned his mind to ways that he could reassure Mrs. McCorkadale. She was a nice woman. Meant well. Civic minded. In short, his instincts were clamoring for some sort of rapprochement. But he had decided. He thought of that revival back at Parkersville. Dr. Tom took a deep breath, held it for a moment, exhaled silently, and then said, "No. No, I think we will leave it this way."

The click on the other end of the line was a lot louder than it usually is. *Mrs. McCorkadale*. Where had he heard that name before? He was pretty sure he had met her. He pulled open one of his desk drawers, pulled out a community directory, and started flipping through it. He had only gotten to the D's when he stopped and whistled. The group that Mrs. McCorkadale was chairman of was Daughters of the Confederacy. Tom Collins rubbed his chin, and wondered what was coming next. The early returns were promising—this was going to be one of life's chapters that is full of pleasant and edifying instruction.



The eruption that followed was gorgeous and overdone, and was actually due to a number of factors. One of them

was that there was virtually nothing going on anywhere in the world. Say you were in a cafeteria with five hundred people in it, just as maybe you have been once, eating and chattering and clattering and everything, and then suddenly, for no reason, everybody went quiet at the same time, except for you. It was like that. The number of compelling human interest stories had plummeted, and the number of twenty-four-hour cable news channels had not plummeted. No news, no interesting wars, and no celebrity meltdowns were to be had anywhere. Slow news days dragged a couple of slow news weeks after them like a wet rope, and producers of news programs were starting to get desperate.

The other big factor was that there had been an infamous flag desecration case at what Dr. Tom called Behemoth State, that famous land of knowledge, just the previous year, and the university in question was only an hour or so away from Choctaw Valley. The decision that came down from the federal circuit court had favored the defendant, a long-haired hippie from another part of the country *entirely*, a place where it snowed on Yankees, a fellow who, in the course of a strident protest over something important, had peed on the flag on the front steps of the administration building. Feelings over *that* were still raw throughout that entire region. The decision favoring the defendant was written by a Carter appointee, a gentleman who had peed on the flag himself back in the glory days of the sixties, and who therefore did himself proud as he

wrote up the decision. Thinking himself most courageous, he had written expansively and in sweeping terms, and had unwittingly left a hole large enough for a drunken community college sophomore named Marc to stumble through. (Pretty sure it was Marc.) “There is *nothing* that can be done with or to our precious flag,” the judge had written, “that should *ever* cause us to flinch or step back from our commitment to *absolute* freedom of expression, which is, after all, what this precious flag represents.”

The italics were in the *original*, and by the time the whole Dr. Tom thing was over, attorneys for various groups were bent entirely out of their original shape and didn’t know what to do with themselves anymore. One ACLU attorney named Greenbaum was particularly flummoxed, and spoke quite sharply to his colleagues about it. “Urination I understand, and defecation I understand. Setting the damn thing on fire is clearly protected speech. That’s why we come to work in the morning. That’s why we’re here. That’s what freedom means. But subordinated *honor*? That is just creepy.”



The development officer for Choctaw Valley was usually all grins and spectacles, always ready with a hearty handshake. He was the man who had masterminded the cotton legacy endowment. He was invaluable to the college, and the

college knew it right well. He knew that the college knew it, and his name was Don Carpenter. “Donnie” to those who gave in the six-figure range.

Don Carpenter was now walking thoughtfully toward Tom Collins’s office, head bowed under the weight of the weighty thoughts he was going to have to bring in with him. They were so weighty he had to carry them around in an invisible duffel bag. President Collins smiled when he saw him, and gestured expansively to the two wingbacks off to the side of his desk. He liked Don, despite his slightly overdone professionalism.

“Good to see you, Don,” Tom said. “what’s on development’s plate this week?” They usually met on Friday, and this was Wednesday, and Tom was surprised he hadn’t gotten this visit already. But Don . . . he knew Don . . . probably wanted to position himself like he was really open, could really go either way, had thought it through, which meant that he couldn’t really be in Tom’s office applying the pressures of donors and their realities half an hour after the controversy had made the news. Don was a master of timing. After all, as a sage once put it, the only difference between salad and garbage is timing.

Don scratched his chin thoughtfully, as he always did without thinking whenever he was going to say something he thought would be heard with something less than gladness by his auditor. “Well, Tom, it’s like this . . . I haven’t actually had to answer any calls on this flag business as of yet, but I can safely anticipate that I will have to pretty soon. And . . . just

wanted to check . . . do you feel you have really thought this thing through? Taken counsel, that kind of thing?”

“Well, I haven’t really thought it through—there hasn’t been time really. It is not as though this were part of some kind of plan . . . just happened.”

“Exactly,” Don said. “My concern exactly. If we haven’t really thought it through, and it could have repercussions to our donor base—not saying it will, but it probably will—then ought we not take it slowly? Go back to the *status quo ante*, ask a committee of the faculty to have a look see, and play it safe? Future of the college at stake, Tom.” Don’s right eyebrow was arched with deep concern.

“Know what you’re saying, Don. But hand to the plow and all that.”

“Okay, you’re the boss. Just wanted you to know the almost certain costs involved. Something in the Bible about that too, you know. Nobody wants a half-finished tower.” Don opened the door slowly, and shook his head with grave wisdom as it slowly closed behind him, and he took his duffel bag full of sorrows down the hallway with him.



Later that afternoon, Maria came in, looked over her shoulder, and closed the door behind her. She had been the administrative assistant for the previous president, and as

she was extremely competent, it had been the easiest thing in the world for Dr. Tom to keep her on. Why wouldn't he keep her on?

"May I speak to you for a moment?" she said. "I mean, not in the course of my official duties? I don't want to intrude myself . . ."

"Certainly, certainly," Tom said. He was sitting behind his desk, with a legal pad on his knees. He got up and came around the desk.

"Well, there are two things," she said. "I was talking to my father about all this," and with *all this* she gestured expansively in a way that encompassed the rearranged flags out in front. "And when he was in the Navy, he said that whenever divine services were in session on a ship of the line, the Christian flag was raised higher than the American flag. I don't know if they do that *still*, but I thought it was really interesting. You might want to have the attorney . . . ?" She trailed off.

Tom nodded. "Good. That's very good. We can use anything like that. Even as a historical precedent, that's good." Tom scribbled a few notes on the pad he was holding.

"The second thing is . . . is . . ." Maria looked over her shoulder at the closed door again. Then she looked at the floor. "I . . . I wanted to tell you that I am *very* proud to be working here." And with that, she stepped forward impulsively, kissed him on the cheek, stepped back with eyes wide open. She then retreated through the door and back to her

desk abashed, hurling silent insults at herself as she went. It was not until she was back at her desk that she realized, with a mixture of relief and sadness and some more relief again, that she had not kissed him on the cheek at all. That was only a real-time day dream, in slow-mo. But she *had* said that she was proud to be working there. And she was too.

But as the door closed behind her, Tom touched his cheek cautiously, and then wondered why he had done that. “Huh,” he thought.



Don came through the door two days later, chortling and grinning. “Five hundred eighty-two requests for admission applications. I’m thinking there might be something to this thing of yours. We have never seen anything like this before. I would urge you, in the strongest possible terms, to stick to your principles. Never compromise on principle. One of the things that made this college the pride of Choctaw Valley.” Then he held up his hand. “I know, I know . . .”

President Tom raised his coffee mug and grinned into it. “Any other news from your department?”

“Well, yes,” Don reached into his stack and pulled out another manila folder from his stack. “now that you mention it. I have received about thirteen calls . . .” he counted silently “ . . . yes, thirteen calls from donors from previous years

who had all begged off some time ago. They had given some of the standard, generic reasons at the time—restructuring priorities and all that code talk. But over half of these folks who called back told me that they had actually discontinued giving because they thought the college was going soft, or liberal, or neo-evangelical, or something. Giving is up thirty percent from this time last year. Last month we were dragging at about five percent behind.”

“And what do we take away from all this?” Tom asked.

“Like I said. Principles are the thing. Without that, we might as well be a state school for electronics repair. Obviously, you can’t ever do this kind of thing for calculated reasons—pragmatic manipulation of principle isn’t principled—but it has often occurred to me that it would be nice for us if we could. I think I mentioned something about that last time we talked.”

Tom grinned again, and Don held his hand up again.



The chairman of the board of trustees was named Peter Kramer, and he was a gruff specimen. Tom had once, years before, described him to Darla as one tough baby. He was an honest man of principle, and Tom had differed with him more than with all the other trustees put together. And so when Peter Kramer appeared in the doorway one afternoon,