

Flannery and the Fundamentalist South:
Opponents of a Nihilistic Church

Lecture Summary, “Flannery O’Connor and the Fundamentalist South”
Dr. Ralph Wood and Dr. Ed Griffin
November 17, 2006

Before his November 17 discussion with Dr. Ralph Wood, University of Minnesota Professor of English Edward Griffin claimed that there were more than a few Flannery O’Connor fans hidden deep within the Minnesota woods. By the start of Wood’s lecture, the packed room in Nicholson Hall had proved Griffin’s suspicions correct. Over 90 people gathered to hear Wood and Griffin discuss Flannery O’Connor’s active engagement with and appreciation for her fundamentalist neighbors.

Dr. Wood opened his lecture by asking why O’Connor was the first seriously Christian artist this “nation with a soul of a church” has managed to produce. He suggested that the reason for this sorry state is that the church has failed to produce a version of Christianity serious enough to demand that artists contend with it. American Christianity, in O’Connor’s day as well as our own, is largely less radical than reactionary: in defining itself *against* ideas such as evolution and historical Biblical criticism, Christians have neglected to explain what they are *for*.

O’Connor’s Southern fundamentalist neighbors, however, were of a different breed. Like O’Connor (herself a Catholic), they recognized the radicalism demanded by the Christian message: our love for God must be excessive and extreme for, as O’Connor wrote, “The cross of our Lord is the *only* tree with branches long enough to embrace all the living and roots wide enough to embrace all the dead.” Such a profound salvation demands complete allegiance: the Gospel of Christ scandalizes all those attempting to fit it within their own sinful purposes.

Neither O’Connor nor the Southern fundamentalists she so respected had an easy task in proclaiming this Gospel message, however. Whether inside or outside the American church, O’Connor recognized, nihilism is the gas permeating the entire social order. Whether against the Christian nihilism which sees Jesus as the “perfect guarantor of things as they are” or the secular nihilism of progress and the social gospel, O’Connor and her fundamentalist brethren preached a cross-centered, baptismal faith only gained at great cost. As Wood explained, the only answer to our gaseous nihilism is “baptism, drowning, slow and painful.”

Dr. Griffin followed Wood’s lecture with a brief response in which he claimed that given the tumultuous events of American history separating us from O’Connor (who died in 1964)—among these the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, the Vietnam War, and Vatican II—her message is even more foreign and alienating today than it was to her original audience. But, as both speakers agreed, to say this is simply to remind ourselves that we need her message all the more.