

The Eulogy of
Vernon Douglass "Speed" Griffin
(November 21, 1916–April 4, 2011)

Delivered by:

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at

The First Baptist Church of Troy
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I was reared by two comedians. My mother was quick of wit, laughed regularly, and enjoyed life. She lit up a room when she entered and had people laughing until she left it. Her joyful personality was a gift to Jo Henra and me and especially to our children. Her sudden death from a fall ended her marriage to my dad after 53 years. Today, I am pleased to announce, that Speed is united with her once more and the good ole days are new again.

My dad, who was known to everyone in Troy as Speed, was a comedic counterbalance to Mama. His was a dry wit. He rarely said anything that was in and of itself funny. It was his timing, delivery, word choice, and turn of phrase – the essence of repartee. I honestly cannot recall some of his best stuff because, mainly I cannot remember much anymore myself, but also the fact his bons mots were not memorable or even meaningful except within the moment. But when uttered they were hilarious. I spent my entire childhood laughing at my parents impromptu performances.

My parents' humor generally had a G rating although there were the occasional PG offerings, however, I never heard my dad use a foul word – the kind that flows off the lips of comedians today as if they were addressing fish peddlers at Billingsgate rather than to a paying audience.

By so many measures, my father was a quintessential gentleman. There are too few of them in today's society. The speech code for today's Modern Man allows one to be vulgar publically as long as he is precisely correct politically.

The qualities of a true gentleman are discussed by English clergyman Thomas Fuller in his book, *The Holy State and the Profane State*, first published in 1642. My father's bloodline does go back to England and Wales so Fuller's characteristics of the English gentleman obviously accompanied Speed's ancestors who traveled to the colonies. Here is a summary of Fuller's description of "The True Gentleman":¹

The gentleman, first of all, is a man of good breeding, that is, of courteous and graceful manners. He is extracted from ancient and worshipful parentage. He is a man of honor, who would not lie or cheat; a man of valor, who would not flee before enemies; a man of practical charity, a steward under God of what wealth he might have inherited or acquired, for the common good. The gentleman is not puffed up with pride at his inheritance; he is severe but just; he judges of any matter meditatively, but acts swiftly when the right of the matter is clear. He will be known by his openhandedness, his dress, his companions. He is courteous and affable to his neighbors. As the sword of the best tempered metal is most flexible, so the truly generous are the most pliant and courteous in their behavior to their inferiors.

Several of Fuller's attributes of the gentleman echoed those of Geoffrey Chaucer in his Prologue to *The Knight's Tale*:

A knight there was, and he a worthy man,
Who, from the moment that he first began
To ride about the world, loved chivalry,
Truth, honor, freedom and courtesy ...
And honoured everywhere for worthiness.²

Speed's parents were Alex and Mamie Griffin. When you understand Fuller's and Chaucer's descriptions of the gentleman-knight, you understand the character of my parents and grandparents. Some of their standards ran counter to the slack attitudes prevalent today where discernment is suppressed in favor of tolerance.

¹ Adapted from: Thomas Fuller, "The True Gentleman," in *The Holy State and the Profane State* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1864; repr. University of Michigan, nd), 148–53.

² Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Canterbury Tales: The Prologue: The Knight," in *Great Books of the Western World: Chaucer*, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 22:159–60.

My dad had no tolerance for liars, those dishonorable in word or deed, the arrogant, boastful, or self-promoting. He was a patriot but not political. He considered all politicians suspect. He was honest, openhanded, and above all else courteous. But those whose reputation was besmirched by bad credit, broken promises, or lack of trust earned his skepticism. I was slow on the uptake but once I correlated his standards with God's absolutes, I came around to both their ways of thinking.

His and my mother's way of thinking was based on the traditional principles and standards that were passed down from our nation's British heritage. Those roots were nourished by biblical principles of establishment truth and spiritual absolutes.

True freedom exists within a commonwealth from the content of thought possessed by the people who make up the society in which it flourishes. History testifies about the standards that maintain freedom and ideologies which do not. The former are the permanent things that God has ordained and must be followed if freedom is to be preserved.

I can attest that my parents subscribed to the permanent things and insisted upon my compliance with them. I bought into the plan—eventually. I realized that by doing so I became the beneficiary of a charmed life. And that charmed life is the same one that so many of my contemporaries enjoyed as well.

Troy, Alabama, in the 1950s was a real-life manifestation of a Frank Capra script. What made it Capraesque was the safety and freedom to enjoy the privileges of a prosperous society.

Prosperity is really a mental attitude. The biblical words for peace—*shalom* and *eirēnē*—speak of the tranquility of soul that undergirds a culture that stresses traditional standards. These standards are of two major categories: the doctrines of the Word of God and the common law of the land.

When this peace produces well-being in the soul, it is reflected outwardly into the community where political peace is possible for a season. Our Lord made it clear that until His return there will be wars and rumors of them.

When children live daily in an environment that holds fast to these ideals, then that community, that state, or that nation prospers both economically as well as spiritually. Jefferson referred to it as the "pursuit of happiness."

My parents taught these things to me as the parents of my contemporaries did to them. We were all expected to comply with what were previously described by the broadcasting industry as the "standards of the community." And the enforcer of these standards in my homes at 305 East Church Street, now a vacant lot, 600 North Three-Notch Street, now a business, and 207 South Franklin Drive, now denuded of a single, solitary loblolly pine, was Speed Griffin.

I got an education in the free-enterprise economy when my dad joined with Joel Witherington to found Royal Tire Service. I was paid a dollar an hour for the first forty hours of a 72-hour work week. The last 32 hours I worked for free. My dad said that \$40.00 a week was plenty for me to spend. My response was, "When do I have time to spend it?" Then I met Jo Henra and found a way.

My parents loved Jo Henra and except for the legal proceedings, adopted her. My mother always wanted a daughter and I guess I got one for her. My dad thought Jo Henra was the greatest. Every year at Christmas he would get me aside and tell me that I was to find out what she wanted and to buy it with his money. There was no limit on the purchase; that alone coming from Speed Griffin, owner of his first nickel, lets you know how much he thought of her.

Spirited repartee was one of Speed's great enjoyments. When visiting Troy I'd go with him to the Coffee Klatch every morning at Green's Drugs and later Synco's. I'd sit there around the table with about 12 Senior Trojans and listen to their tall tales, good-natured cutting remarks, instant rejoinders, and boisterous laughs while drinking a really bad cup of Gam Green's coffee. Of that original group I think Speed is the last one to go.

In 1993, Nona fell down the steps into the lower parking lot by the church offices and died three weeks later as a result. We were all grief stricken at this sudden loss and concerned for my dad since he was now alone, did not know how to cook anything but a lemon pie, and his eyesight was failing.

Jo Henra and I came down to visit as often as we could and found that he was keeping the house up to Mama's standards. But on a visit about six months after her death we noticed that he was not making up the bed anymore; he just straightened the covers but left the bedspread folded at the bottom. We made mention of his violating Nona's household code and he said, "Well, I decided that it was wasted energy; other than y'all, the only person who ever comes in here since Nona died is Charlie Meeks and I have to pay him."

The one thing that continued uninterrupted was his golf game. His love of the links resulted in He and Virginia Oliver teaming up in a tournament out at the Troy Country Club. Apparently Cupid was the caddy and in 1995 he remarried, exchanging vows with Virginia Mary who had been widowed twice by the deaths of her first husband, Judson Colley, and her second, Nead Oliver.

Upon deciding on matrimony he called me to see if I would be upset if he remarried. I told him that it was none of my business, that the biblical instruction was "until death do you part," and since mother was now in heaven he was free to remarry.

He then told me that he wanted to marry Virginia and asked me to perform the wedding at her house in Troy. I agreed but insisted that he should remember this: "There are two obituaries on record that read 'survived by his wife.'" He said he understood but that if he turned out to be number three that was fine with him. He was.

When Speed married Virginia, his family of seven exploded to somewhere over 30. Annually Virginia hosted her Thanksgiving family reunion which drew upwards of fifty some-odd in attendance. In 2006, Virginia's health and Speed's blindness required a move to Noble Manor where they lived for almost two years. Virginia developed dementia in 2007 which ultimately required long-term care. Speed was still self-sufficient but being blind he did not qualify legally to live alone at Noble Manor. It was decided between the two families that Virginia would go to Atlanta near Kitty and Speed would come to St. Charles with us. This was unfortunate but the different levels of care appropriate for each led to these decisions.

Jo Henra and I enjoyed having my dad living in our home from December 2007 until March of 2010. It was then that an upper-respirational infection put him in the hospital for tests and upon dismissal he required rehab. The intent was to get his strength restored and return home. He never progressed to the point that he could do so.

His Parkinson's disease continued to advance and it was ultimately the condition that brought him to his death. On Monday evening, April 4th, at 7 o'clock his soul and human spirit were dismissed from his body and were entered into the eternal state in the presence of his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and reunited with my mother and beloved members of his family.

Speed was 94 years old last November 21st. He lived in parts of eleven decades, two centuries, and two millennia. At his birth there were no telephones in Troy. He remembers when the only paved streets in town were those around Court Square and they were made of brick laid by one man. He recalls as a child there being only a handful of automobiles and that owners would allow him and his friends to stand on their running boards and ride a few blocks.

Speed was alive during World Wars I & II, Korea, Vietnam, and a host of other conflicts some presently raging. He lived during the administrations of 17 presidents and 26 Alabama governors beginning with Charles Henderson and ending with Robert Bentley.

Speed's American ancestors date back to the year 1685 when Edward Boykin moved from Caernarvonshire, Wales, to Isle of Wight, now Southampton County, Virginia. His descendants later migrated to South Carolina where one of Speed's grandfathers, Major Francis Boykin, rode with Moultrie's Rangers during the War of Independence and who distinguished himself at the Battles of Fort Moultrie and Sullivan's Island. Francis's son, James Boykin, another grandfather of Speed's, fought during the War of 1812.

Speed's grandfather, Benajah Wood, had two brothers who fought in the Battle of Franklin, on November 30, 1864. James Pinckard Wood was a captain in Company A of the fifty-seventh Alabama infantry and William Ashley Wood was assigned to Company E, Quarles Brigade, of the First Alabama Infantry.

James survived the conflict but William was among those killed in action. "Bud," as he was called, is buried in the McGavock Confederate Cemetery on the grounds of the Carnton Plantation in Franklin, Tennessee.

Speed's grandparents, Benajah and Clara Boykin Wood are buried in the cemetery of Shiloh Baptist Church where his mother, Mamie, was a member before marrying his father Alex. When they settled in Troy they became members of First Baptist Church.

As I researched the Griffin, Boykin, and Wood genealogies I was struck by how openly the documents refer to our ancestors' affiliations with churches, duties assumed among them, and their confident reliance upon the Lord.

My family has been comforted by the knowledge that my dad is present with the Lord and reunited with Mama and his immediate family. But it goes much farther than this. All these people I've mentioned are, from all indications, believers in Jesus Christ and who have partaken of heavenly advantages for decades and centuries now.

From their beginnings in the New World in the sixteen hundreds among the First Families of Virginia in Southampton County, to Camden, South Carolina, to Milledgeville, Georgia, to Pike County, Alabama, the family circle has been systematically enlarged by the transfer of believers from temporal life into the glorious environs of eternal life.

And now Speed Griffin is the newest arrival back into the family fold, an ever enlarging gathering that will not be completed until the Rapture of the church. Then this hymnal refrain will reach its fulfillment, "When we *all* get to heaven, \ What a day of rejoicing that will be! \ When we *all* see Jesus, \ We'll sing and shout the victory."

The sad side of this idea is that no one's family circle will really be unbroken. The God we serve has no desire to be a tyrant but rather a benevolent monarch. His intent, according to Peter, is "not for any to perish but for all to come to repentance."

Yet His plan is so structured that only those who respond to His unfailing love are qualified to enter into His heaven. And God's unfailing love for us is expressed by His gracious provision of a solution to our sin problem.

Condemned at birth by Adam's original sin, and further indicted by personal sin, every member of the human race must come to the realization that he is spiritually dead, total depraved, and in need of the Savior.

Unfortunately, the enlargement of every family's heavenly circle is threatened today by the advent of the Fuzzy Gospel – the use of nebulous and often erroneous phrases that confuse rather than clarify how to be saved.

An example of the Fuzzy Gospel is the evangelist's instruction to the unbeliever to "*Invite* Christ into his heart." But such an idea is never presented in Scripture. When a person invites someone to do something they have initiated the action and therefore they perform the initial work. The assumption is that the Lord will respond positively to the invitation. But the invitation is issued by God to man in the Person of Christ, not by man to God.

Neither *invite* nor its derivatives are found in the Bible in the context of a gospel presentation. Invite carries the idea of offering an incentive or an inducement for another to comply. God does not respond to our invitation; we must respond to His.

Another example of the Fuzzy Gospel is the instruction to "*receive* Christ as Savior." The word *receive* indicates the act of coming into the possession of something. It is the giver who must do the giving. God has graciously given Jesus to the entire human race. In human history the sovereignty of God and the free will of man must coexist by divine decree. For salvation, the free will of man must respond positively to God's gift in order to receive it.

Among the four Gospels, John may be categorized as the most evangelistic one of the group. His Gospel contains the repeated message that all who believe in Jesus Christ receive the imputation of eternal life and, by definition, that life can never be lost.

The key to understanding biblical nomenclature essential to the gospel message is found in the noun **πίστις (pistis)** which is always translated *faith*, and the verb **πιστεύω (pisteuō)** which is always translated *believe*.

In his Gospel, John uses the verb "to believe" 98 times while the three Synoptic writers use it only 30 times among them. Thirty-eight of John's references refer to "believing in Christ."

John 1:12 contains both the words *receive* and *believe*:

But to all who have received Him—those who believe in His name—He has given the right to become God's children. (NET)

This translation from the NET Bible reveals the sequence of events that results in salvation, that is, to receive Him one must first believe in His name. Belief precedes reception.

The verb *to believe* indicates that the one believing has come to accept information about Jesus as true and real. It is one's positive response to information about the Person and work of Christ that is the object of that faith.

There are about forty things revealed in Scripture that occur at the moment a person believes in Christ. There are two that Jesus emphasizes as paramount in the third chapter of John. The best example is found in what I refer to as the Goalpost Verse.

When the Lord spoke to Nicodemus in John 3, He presented him with a choice that, if made, would result in two things. There is an important word in John 3:16, a conjunction pronounced *hē'-nā*. It is generally translated into the English by the word "that." In this context it introduces both purpose and result. Let's take a look at the verse:

John 3:16 - "God loved the world so much He gave [this is grace, no gift can be a gift that requires something on the part of the recipient] His uniquely-born Son, so that [ἵνα, *hina*: introduces both purpose and result] whoever believes in Him [this is the necessary condition to achieve the purpose and the result] shall not perish [purpose of believing: Nicodemus would be delivered from the lake of fire after he dies] but have eternal life [result of believing: Nicodemus would be imputed eternal life and would go to heaven when he dies].

John makes clear that salvation, which is deliverance from the lake of fire, and eternal life are both imputed to anyone who simply believes in Christ.

This verse and others like it are the source of the Reformers claim of *sola fide*: faith alone.

It must be remembered that both *faith* and *believe* are transitive and therefore demand an object. Jesus is that divinely approved object. The phrase is therefore expanded to read "faith alone in Christ alone." There are things about Him that must be understood by an unbeliever so that when he places his faith in Christ it is not simply recognition of his historicity but a positive response to the gospel message.

Therefore, the one who evangelizes must understand the difference between the gospel presentation and the divine act of salvation. Here is a summary:

The gospel is designed to present Jesus of Nazareth as Savior. Any number of details may be presented to describe His person and His work: He is both perfect God and sinless Man, who was sacrificed on the cross for the sins of the entire human race, after which He died physically, was buried, and three days later, was resurrected from the dead. Regardless of how many details are given, the free will of the unbeliever must be left to consider whether to accept or reject Jesus as His personal Savior.

Salvation occurs when the unbeliever responds with nonmeritorious faith alone in Christ alone. This *faith* response has both purpose and result: the *purpose* is deliverance from punishment in the lake of fire. The result is the imputation of eternal life. Taken together, salvation means that believers go to heaven when they die.

The simplicity of the gospel and the simplicity of acquiring one's salvation and eternal life are expressed by Luke's report of the gospel's introduction into Europe.

When Paul and Silas crossed the Dardanelles bringing the doctrines of New Testament theology into the West, their first stop was the Roman colony of Philippi where their preaching in the public square landed them in jail. Undaunted, these two men began evangelizing their fellow inmates when an earthquake hit the area causing the prison's doors to open wide. But no one tried to escape because they were riveted to the men's message. Having overheard the testimonies of Paul and Silas, the jailer asked them, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

Now get this: it was Paul and Silas's responsibility to tell this man the correct answer, to not leave anything out, yet be brief. Here's what they told him:

Acts 16:31 - Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved ...

That's all they said to him regarding what he needed to do, because all that is required is faith alone in Christ alone.

Absolute confidence in the fact you have eternal life and that you will be transferred out of this life into the presence of God and Christ when you die gives you courage to do your duty for the Lord right up until the moment you exit the Death-Shadowed Valley.

Faith alone in Christ alone results in the new believer entering into the second phase of God's plan which is the Christian way of life. But no believer will ever be happy in this world until he understands this world cannot make him happy. Only God can do this and He accomplishes it by the provision of the Holy Spirit's teaching ministry for those who are serious students of His Word.

The Bible clearly indicates there are three phases to the plan of God: (1) salvation, (2) the Christian way of life, and (3) eternity.

The tragedy that has occurred in this nation is that theologians have inverted the first two phases. There is the false doctrine that claims how one lives his life determines whether or not he will be saved and go to heaven when he dies. This asserts that eternal salvation is dependent upon human good, human works, and human energy.

But we have demonstrated from Scripture that salvation is based on the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. The lie that salvation is based on good works causes many to spend a lifetime trying to be good but sadly learn the moment after death they were not good enough. The reason? They placed their faith in their own good works. The Bible tells us that our faith must be placed in the work of Christ for salvation.

Ephesians 2:8 - By grace you have been saved through faith, and this salvation is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God;

v. 9 - not as a result of works, so that no one should boast.

Galatians 2:16 - A man is not justified by the works of the Law but rather through faith in Christ Jesus. We have believed in Christ Jesus, in order that we may be justified by faith in Christ, not by works of the Law. By the works of the Law shall no individual be justified.

Consequently, when any person believes in Christ at that moment his soul is saved, he is imputed eternal life, and he enters into phase two, the spiritual life of the believer in time. No one can live the Christian way of life unless he is a Christian. No one can be a Christian unless he believes in Christ.

I am happy to report that my father understood these things and as a result he went to heaven when he died.

Early on day he died, Speed was quite agitated. He was suffering from arthritic pain in his joints; he had not eaten in over a week due to the effects of Parkinson's disease upon the swallowing mechanism; he had consumed only water for the past several days; his body was shutting down, and he was struggling to deal with all that was going on throughout his system.

One of the physical indicators of this stress was the very visible bulging of his carotid arteries as a rapid heartbeat was shoving blood throughout the body in an attempt to stabilize his condition.

One of Speed's favorite people at the Villages Long-Term Nursing division was Bonnie Shuremann who provided music therapy. She came into his room at about twelve noon on April 4th. She sat down by his bed and began softly singing hymns to him a cappella. At that point his speech was such that he wasn't putting together complete sentences, but as Bonnie sang he made the effort to join in. As each song was sung he became more and more relaxed and when Bonnie stopped after about twenty minutes the heart beat was normal and the carotid arteries were no longer visibly throbbing. The lyrics to those hymns and Bonnie's soothing voice had returned peace to his soul and his body responded.

I am sad that I no longer have my dad with me. But in no way am I sad to see him go. I celebrate the fact that on the evening of April 4th his soul and spirit were transferred into the presence of his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The members of the family circle were presented to him beginning with Mama and then others who have gone before. He was able to see them, a sense which macular degeneration had stolen; he was able to walk again, eat again, talk again, sing again.

Our God is a loving and gracious God. He has a magnificent plan for every person who has ever been born but that plan must be accepted by grace through faith in His Son Jesus Christ. I know that this church provided him the clear gospel of salvation.

I know I was saved here. I don't remember when but I do know it was on a Sunday and that it occurred in Sunday school where every week we heard the gospel from Mrs. Dixie Jernigan. I know that my dad was saved because he clearly expressed to me his belief that salvation is based on the principle of faith alone in Christ alone.

I trust if there is anyone here today who arrived without hope, without Christ, and without eternal life that what has been presented here today will challenge your free will to give Jesus of Nazareth objective consideration for the salvation of your soul.

In closing, I'd like to recall one of the fond memories I have of my father and this church. I don't know if this is still practiced but back in the fifties the Baraca Class observed father and son Sundays each year. Mama would dress me in high cotton including a tie, and I would accompany my dad to the Baraca class which met underneath this building at the time. Those men would sing hymns before the lesson was taught and there apparently were some they liked better than others because they'd sing those with more volume and gusto. The one I remember most was entitled "Dwelling in Beulah Land."

בְּעוֹלָה (Be'ulah) is the passive participle of the **בָּעַל (ba'al)**. It refers to marriage and is found in Isaiah 62:4 where it refers to the millennial kingdom when believing Israel is assembled in the land. Jesus is pictured as the Husband of His restored nation Israel and His chosen people. The New Testament application pictures Jesus Christ as the Bridegroom or Husband of His people, the church, as is taught in Ephesians 5:22-33

I requested to Gwen that she conclude her introductory music with that hymn. Just as with the men of Baraca in my childhood, I find the hymn uplifting and inspirational still. It reminds me of those halcyon days long ago singing with my dad in the basement of this church. Its words describe the present reality that this precious man, my dear father, now enjoys:

Dwelling in Beulah Land

Far away the noise of strife upon my ear is falling,
Then I know the sins of earth beset on ev'ry hand:
Doubt and fear and things of earth in vain to me are calling,
None of these shall move me from Beulah Land.

Far below the storm of doubt upon the world is beating,
Sons of men in battle long the enemy withstand:
Safe am I within the castle of God's word retreating,
Nothing then can reach me—'tis Beulah Land.

Let the stormy breezes blow, their cry cannot alarm me;
I am safely sheltered here, protected by God's hand:
Here the sun is always shining, here there's naught can harm me,
I am safe forever in Beulah Land.

Viewing here the works of God, I sink in contemplation,
Hearing now His blessed voice, I see the way He planned:
Dwelling in the Spirit, here I learn of full salvation.
Gladly will I tarry in Beulah Land.

I'm living on the mountain, underneath the cloudless sky,
I'm drinking at the fountain that never shall run dry;
O yes! I'm feasting on the manna from a bountiful supply,
For I am dwelling in Beulah Land.³

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father, we come to your throne of grace today, saddened by the death of a father, husband, grandfather, great-grandfather, uncle, brother-in-law, and friend. Yet we have learned from Your Word that such sorrow is only experienced by those who are left behind. And so we are encouraged by the knowledge that You rejoice in the death of Your saints and that my earthly father is happily in Your presence.

Thus, it is our prayer that Your grace will comfort those of us who now find ourselves missing him. Shower upon us your gracious mercies which will bring tranquility to our souls.

Such tranquility springs from biblical principles which sustain, give strength, and provide the ability to endure. May the Holy Spirit empower each one to draw from this reservoir of confidence, enabling each to keep his eyes focused on the Source of all good and perfect gifts, our Lord Jesus Christ. Speed was indeed a good gift, now made perfect in Him.

There is no substitute for victory. There can be no victory without Christ, a victory that was won through His substitutionary sacrifice on the cross and made available to all through faith alone in Him.

Speed, Your child, is victorious. As the sun sank in the western sky on April 4, 2011, You ushered him into the realm of Your eternal glory about which we are confident and for which we are grateful. Thank You for Your matchless grace for allowing us to have this quintessential gentleman as part of our lives. We rest in the confidence that the sorrow we now endure due to his absence will be soon transformed by the joyous expectation of the promised future reunion.

And we lift our prayer in the name of Your uniquely-born Son, namely, Jesus Christ, who is *Yahweh Sebaoth*: the Lord of the Armies. Amen.

³ C. Austin Miles, "Dwelling in Beulah Land," in *Inspiring Hymns: A Choice Selection of Hymns and Gospel Songs for the Singing Church* (Grand Rapids: Singspiration Music, 1951), 320–21.