



# The Pastor Stephen Grant Novels: A Review Article

RICHARD L. JESKE

*Warrior Monk: A Pastor Stephen Grant Novel.* By Ray Keating. Manorville, NY: Raymond J. Keating, 2010. 442 pages.

*Discussion Guide for Warrior Monk: A Pastor Stephen Grant Novel.* By Ray Keating. Manorville, NY: Raymond J. Keating, 2011. 26 pages.

*Root of All Evil? A Pastor Stephen Grant Novel.* By Ray Keating. Manorville, NY: Raymond J. Keating, 2012. 305 pages.

*An Advent for Religious Liberty: A Pastor Stephen Grant Novel.* By Ray Keating. Manorville, NY: Raymond J. Keating, 2012. 158 pages.

The moment had come. Pistol-packin', trash-talkin', booze-guzzlin', broad-bangin' CIA Agent Stephen Grant felt a *calling* coming on. Called to another career. So he became pistol-packin', trash-talkin', booze-guzzlin' Pastor Stephen Grant, a pastor of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS). No more broad-bangin' outside marriage—and thus the book's title *Warrior Monk*. Even though his former CIA hottie keeps testing him, he remains true to his new calling—or is it the elegant soon-to-be-divorced number in his church choir who has caught his other eye?

*Richard Jeske reviews a series of novels that drink deeply of certain strands of present US populist conservatism and a particular definition of “traditional” Christianity. While some readers may sympathize with aspects of the novels, few will support their simplistic solutions.*

## WHO IS PASTOR GRANT?

Grant is everybody's fantasy of the perfect pastor. Valpo grad and former Navy SEAL, he's been out there in the world, can mix it up physically with the best (or worst) of them, shoots golf in the 70s, has a built-in red alert in his brain whenever danger is afoot, sees through all those lame-brained liberals, and keeps a gun cabinet under the coffee table in his church office, stocked with a 10mm Glock 20, a Taurus PT-25, and a Harris M-89 sniper rifle, along with a supply of fully loaded extra clips. In the parsonage, he keeps a set of identical models of the handguns plus a Swiss SSG550 sniper rifle. After all, our hero had learned from the CIA and the church "enough about human nature to know that evil existed and protection was necessary." Of course, he's a member of a local sportsmen's club and therefore can rationalize his office arsenal as a convenience for quick getaways to the club for a little target practice. He's also a first-class archer and can hotwire a yacht.

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Oh yes, he's also buff. Six feet tall, with black hair, muscular chest, and a flat stomach, he's an athletic man's man who hangs out (a lot) with two buddies: an Anglican Church in North America rector (who left the Episcopal Church because, in his mind, it had abandoned traditional Christianity) and a Roman Catholic priest. They are of the same mind on most things, especially on those social perversions that are necessitating in their heads a turn to a "new ecumenism": women's right to choose, gay/lesbian marriage, and pseudoscientific environmentalism. They meet regularly for breakfast, often lunch, sometimes dinner, holding devotions together using *For All the Saints*, a (non-LCMS) Lutheran publication. Of course, the old ecumenism, Missouri-style, would frown upon such syncretistic, unionist activity. So could our Pastor Grant really be a liberal deep down, without either knowing or showing it? Not really. He's just his own man.

Grant serves St. Mary's Lutheran Church in the pine barrens of Eastern Long Island, New York. Newly constructed in Tudor architectural style (rather than a vapid warehouse style), thanks to the largesse of wealthy parishioners Hans and Flo Gunderson, it is a church that respects traditional worship forms and liturgical practice. It holds Matins on Tuesdays and Thursdays and Vespers each Wednesday, and on occasion, when attendance is low, Pastor Grant, now becoming more high church than he would have thought, fiddles with incense, but would never use it in the main Sunday services, lest he be thought "too Roman." Fast not only on the draw, he can churn out sermons in an hour if he has to.

## THE STORY: *WARRIOR MONK*

One Wednesday evening still in his office, over the strains of the parish choir at practice, Grant hears the sound of gunfire. A whacko eco-extremist has run amok, targeting St. Mary's for its misdeeds against the environment. Downing trees to build a church in the pine barrens demands action, and a nice girl radicalized by her college philosophy prof decides it's time to make a public statement and shoot up the church. The Gundersons are fatally wounded, the choir director seriously injured, and Grant, grabbing his Glock and running up to the loft, sees the whacko holding a gun to his elegant chorister's head. Summoning all his past expertise (along with a silent aside of "God, help me"), he calmly puts a round into the whacko's forehead, tumbling her over the balcony railing to be impaled on the point of a pew below. Saving the day, he has ushered in a new appreciation, forget all other questions, for this pistol-packin' pastor.

In the meantime, over in Rome, the Nigerian-born Pope Augustine I is planning an international tour to gather support for his "new ecumenism" program, "A Public Mission of Mere Christianity." He wants those "traditional" Christian church bodies to join forces in addressing the vexing social issues of the day, listed as genocide, abortion, marriage, Islamic terrorism, euthanasia, ethics in science, God in the public square, cultures that degrade, moral relativism, and so on. The pope feels the need for a comprehensive Christian voice to be heard amid all the relativism and secularism of the present. Of course, those left-wing liberals both inside and outside the churches are less than sanguine about such a program, and some of the radical leftists will be prone to react, from public demonstrations to provoking violence.

Pope Augustine has determined to launch his tour in Long Island, so the issue of papal security prompts Vatican calls to Pastor Grant's Roman Catholic colleague and dining buddy inquiring about Pastor Grant, who's naturally been all over world news because of his timely actions in the choir loft. Okay, so he's a Lutheran, but he wears a collar and packs a gun and hasn't lost his CIA touch. So who could be a more perfect addition to the Pope's security detail? The lines of protocol have been followed: before speaking directly with Pastor Grant, the Vatican has solicited and received the enthusiastic support of LCMS President Harrison Piepkorn, who in turn phones Grant to be reassured that Grant will not be leaving the LCMS for Rome after the dust settles.

The plot unfolds, complete with radical Muslim subplots, and an old Soviet apparatchik with a grudge undercover as a Brit-speaking Philadelphia newspaper reporter. An extremist Muslim cell—complete with a CIA mole—is a necessary but tangential part of the book's plot, but only to indicate the serious threat to American society that now exists since 9/11, so that extreme interrogation techniques can be justified in order to flesh out terrorist plots and active cells that would spread even more carnage. There are about as many deaths, all grisly, logged in this story as there are chapters in the book (85), with Pastor Grant scoring two of

the grisliest, along with vivid descriptions of two of his ten dispatchings during his CIA past.

Pastor Grant considers himself an evangelical catholic. He professes his commitment to a “new ecumenism,” of the kind now being promoted by the Bishop of Rome. The title of the Pope’s initiative, “A Public Mission of Mere Christianity,” recalls C. S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity*, a work Pope Augustine cites in his ecumenical letter addressed to “Christian leaders in all corners of the world.” Acknowledging C. S. Lewis as “the great Christian apologist and Anglican layman of the twentieth century,” the pope cites Lewis’s contention that at the center of every Christian communion there is a closeness in spirit, “a something, a Someone,” who speaks with the same voice. (Later in the book, in a sermon by Grant’s rector friend, Lewis is described as “the greatest defender of the faith during the twentieth century.”) Augustine I also favorably cites Luther’s two-kingdom ethic to mean that “when Christian leaders or the church do not have to speak out on a political issue, perhaps then they should not speak out.” The church is to “help form the Christian conscience as informed by Holy Scripture and church teachings, with individual Christians then encouraged to act and serve accordingly in the world.” The papal letter indicates that Christian leaders will be invited to a conference to join voices in presenting a unified witness to the world, addressing the three main critical challenges facing the world today: relativism, militant secularism, and radical Islam. When and where are they to meet? Next spring, in Wittenberg, Germany, “where the Reformation started, and where Christianity can come together in order to speak with one voice to the world some 500 years later.”

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As a Missouri Synod evangelical catholic, Pastor Grant considers himself more Catholic than Protestant. By contrast, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has embraced the Protestant label, in that it is anti-liturgical, deemphasizes the sacraments, is less faithful to the scriptures, and allows politics and the latest social causes and cultural trends to “push it off the track.” Catholic Lutherans, like Grant, are more liturgical and sacramental, and embrace the idea that Luther never intended to start a new church, but sought to reform the Roman Church from within. Modern ecumenical organizations like the “United Faith Council” (read National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA) have hijacked the holy gospel and turned it into a social gospel by skewing the Christian message into liberal advocacy on extraneous social and cultural issues. So Pastor Grant sees the churches in need of a “new ecumenism,” like the one Pope Augustine is advocating, which would apply a united Christian “traditional” voice to the latest social and cultural issues of the day.

Pastor Grant sees the importance of uniting “traditional Christians from across denominations” in order to exert a “traditional” voice on those critical social and cultural challenges currently confronting Christianity. The first on the pope’s agenda is “relativism,” defined as the idea that there is no absolute truth, and therefore the exact opposite of what Christians should believe and teach about Jesus Christ. The second is the assertion that the churches should not speak out on any issues in the public arena. The third, Islamic radicalism, is definitely a threat since it involves the well-being not only of Christians throughout the world but of all Americans. Addressing the latter threat, Pastor Grant believes it can be alleviated only when Islamic leaders become willing to “excommunicate” the radical fringe and undertake a deeper reformation than what Christianity experienced.

Of course, Pastor Grant’s criticism of the ELCA and the “United Faith Council” for involvement in social and cultural issues advocacy should not deter conservative traditionalist Christians, whoever they may be, from addressing social and cultural issues. Dealing with terrorism has become a priority, one that demands not only public witness but also preemptive action rather than weak policies that tie governmental hands.

So the book spends a chapter on defending enhanced interrogation techniques on the part of US investigators, and gives the reader a ringside seat at an actual waterboarding session as carried out by government “specialists.” Pastor Grant defends such acts of torture by insisting that they cause known public enemies to “cough up” information they would otherwise not give and that, once given, would lead to the prevention of greater terrorist destruction. To the comment by one observer that perhaps waterboarding is a measure the Vatican might object to in order to protect the pope, an agent coolly replies, “I leave the saving souls business to them. They should leave the fighting terrorism and national security work to us.”

#### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

What are we to make of this novel? Is it a joke? Is the image of a macho-dude, kick-butt pastor a comic parody of what would excite a good many American Christians? (One figure in the book reconnects with his Catholic parish after Pastor Grant tells him to “get his ass to church on Sunday.”) Is the book offering a cynical caricature of the mindset of the conservative right? Is our “warrior monk” a tongue-in-cheek fantasy about an evangelical Rev. James Bond, complete with righteous wrath, self-exacting justice, and a license to kill? The subtitle of the book “A Pastor Stephen Grant Novel” suggests there is more to come (and there is), perhaps to parallel the *Left Behind* series in less dopey but equally apocalyptic dress.

The author, Raymond J. Keating, is a conservative columnist and prolific writer, a journalist trained and specializing in economics. His articles have appeared in major newspapers in the east and Midwest, and he teaches as an adjunct professor of economics at Dowling College (Long Island, New York). But there is

little trace of his economic expertise in this book, other than how lobbyist crooks raise and launder their money. He is, however, quite steeped in the ethos of Missouri Synod Lutheranism and the iconic names dear to a certain segment of the LCMS occur in the narrative: Augustine, Piepkorn, Valparaiso University, Bronxville's Concordia, and the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau's *For All the Saints*.

Such iconic references may indicate another interest on the part of the author, namely to insist that the LCMS is not as monolithic as its present leadership would maintain. Pastor Grant does not object to ecumenism. He believes in Christian unity, but of the right kind, advocating for the right causes. He will pray with others outside his church, and will engage in activity that promotes "traditional Christianity." He projects the image of a pastor with *cojones*, but that is not so surprising for the LCMS, which rejects the ordination of women anyway. Perhaps that is the clue to the author's definition of "traditional Christianity," namely, those churches that do not ordain women. Those churches that do ordain women would be the aberration, that is, those that have drifted away from biblical and traditional principles and thereby have become "divisive."

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Pastor Grant makes his basic confession about his own belief to Cardinal Santos. "I believe the Bible is inspired and is the foundation of Christian faith," he says. Of course, that would distinguish him from apostolic Christianity of the earliest Christian generations, when there was yet no biblical canon as we now know it. The author misses a key theological opportunity, namely, to provide a historical vantage point that distinguishes Lutherans from evangelical fundamentalism, even to remind Cardinal Santos that it is the gospel that is the foundation of Christian faith, as Luther did in his own evaluation of the biblical canon. Unlike Luther, Pastor Grant takes his cue from the New Testament Letter of James in order to justify his own violent actions: "faith without works is dead."

Keating sees current ecumenism itself as a lobbying movement, dominated by leftists and consistently pursuing liberal causes. The leaders of the mainstream churches have fallen prey to ecumenism's pressures and have become locked into a weak-kneed Protestantism that has betrayed the Reformation. Therefore a "new ecumenism" is necessary, led by the Vatican and to be supported by "traditional Christianity," the components of which are never defined, so that a comprehensive Christian voice, obviously championing the concerns of the right, can join in the lobbying.

No appreciation is given for the major advances in Christian unity that modern ecumenism has produced, even though Jesus' prayer for the unity of his followers in John 17 is mentioned more than once in the book. Even though "traditional" Christianity's emphasis on the sacraments is mentioned in contrast to an alleged neglect of the sacraments among mainline Protestants, there is no mention of the full communion agreements that officially have opened the Lord's Table to Christians across denominational lines and have clearly placed renewed emphasis on that sacrament. Of course, such a development is of little interest to "traditional" bodies like the LCMS that hold Christian unity captive to closed dogmatic systems. Nor can there be any rejoicing in the exchange of ministries now made possible by the various bilateral dialogues held over immediate past decades by ecumenical church bodies. The old saw is repeated in the book that those who have withdrawn from such ecumenical activity are not the divisive ones in Christendom. It is the mainstream church bodies engaged in that activity that are divisive, in that they have drifted away from scripture and church tradition. All that is to be trumped by a papal invitation from a native Nigerian pope whose inspiration is found in heroes such as C. S. Lewis and Martin Luther.

The book is obviously an exercise in wishful thinking. It is Rome asking for the aid of the LCMS to carry out a program addressing the ills of human society. It is an LCMS pastor telling the high-level Roman Catholic delegation that the ELCA has "descended" into liberal Protestantism and that his brand of Lutheranism is comprised of Catholic Lutherans, or evangelical Catholics, who are the "real Catholics." It is an apocalyptic death wish on Soviet agents, Muslim radicals, greedy lobbyists, arrogant college professors, pushy environmentalists, liberal news reporters, and, finally, on the pope himself. But in spite of the starkly described carnage throughout the book, this 442-page novel has a happy ending. Pastor Grant and the conveniently just-divorced chorister in his parish will be comparing bullet scars for the rest of their lives, evidently beginning immediately. Still a warrior, but a monk no more.

Now that the author has had his fun, what are readers to make of the book? It may have a wide following and it may not. That a major publisher has not picked up the book will certainly inhibit circulation, but its populist message will reinforce political prejudices and may impel more cynicism toward recent ecumenical advances. It confirms simplistic notions of justice, has nothing to say about peace movements in historic, that is, "traditional" Christianity, and writes off mainstream Protestantism as a lost cause. It also reflects current and widespread lack of knowledge about genuine interchurch and interfaith conversation, thereby unconsciously unveiling the need for more reasoned education about political, pastoral, and theological ethics in church and society.

But just in case we take this book as only wishful fantasy, or simply as the author having his fun, out comes a *Discussion Guide for Warrior Monk* (2011), beginning with the author's hope that his readers find it "a fun read as well." Clergy



known to the author of this review have recommended it for use in adult discussion groups. The controversial issues in the original book are reviewed for discussion: ecumenism, sex and marriage, guns, war, and terrorism, and church architecture—oh yes, and Grant’s praying with his other-denominational clergy buddies—complete with biblical references for group reflection.

#### THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL?

And just as we think that, no, there really won’t be a sequel, there is a sequel. It’s *The Root of All Evil?* (2012), which treats us to much the same thing as the original book. Now, however, our wonderful Pastor Grant is married to his beautiful and wealthy chorister, joins her in a well-to-do lifestyle, and therefore offers to carry on his pastoral duties without salary—in other words, every church member’s ultimate dream. But all that tranquil domesticity might just get us bored, so the author lets us get back to real life. Already by page eleven someone has his brains blown out and another has his head hacked off by a homemade guillotine. This time, as the plot develops, it is another pastor who turns out to be a bad guy, who, along with a pathetically compromised FBI agent, is in on a plan to divert US federal aid dollars to recidivist communists in Belarus. The bad-guy pastor is on the staff of a megachurch founded by Pastor Grant’s closest seminary classmate (at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana), who has gone astray into happy-clappy worship and “ka-ching Christianity” prosperity preaching. Admonished by Pastor Grant, his old classmate is caught in a web of violence and fatally victimized. Again, bad guy versus good guy prevails throughout the book, with more carnage, more gratuitous gore, more ammo action, and finally a heroic sniper’s solution to it all. The best ending is always to “take out” the bad guys—justifiably so, of course. More than frequently throughout the narrative English grammar is a casualty too.

#### AN ADVENT FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

And then to top it off—well, temporarily, no doubt—a third Grant saga appears: *An Advent for Religious Liberty* (2012). In New York, that “lefty city,” a new mayor has just been elected, one beloved by unions and the Democratic Party, and one advocating strict separation between church and state. In fact, not just separation, but he wants the churches to be silent in the public arena and to keep their issues within the walls of their churches. He doesn’t need any church aid for public projects and looks to nonreligious organizations to take up the slack, providing the majority of funding for “Atheists for a Caring World,” which has classified the Roman Catholic Church as a hate group. Grant’s ecumenical breakfast club, including his two Anglican and Roman Catholic colleagues, sees religious liberty under attack, as exemplified in the redefinition of marriage and the propensities of the broadcast and print media (like the *New York Times*), “aggressively pushing an agenda that undermines Judeo-Christian values.” To counter such things, an “Ad-



vent for Religious Liberty” event is planned, led by the Roman Catholic Cardinal of New York and joined by Pastor Grant and his colleagues, in which each evening during the Advent season the churches would lead a prayer vigil in the area of the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree, with the widest possible involvement of all Christian churches.

The long and the short of it was that this prayer vigil plan brought about a violent reaction, with a shoot-out initiated by organized “terrorists” on the streets of New York, with the counter-involvement of FBI agents and Grant’s former CIA paramour providing sniper power to zap the enemies of religious liberty in the moment of greatest peril for the crowds. The mayor himself, along with the cardinal, is saved by Pastor Grant from hostile fire, with the pastor taking a bullet in the process. When the dust settles, the mayor has a change of heart and declines inauguration into office, intending to spend the rest of his life trying to “make up for what cannot be made up for.” That could have been a redemptive ending, but no, we’re not done with the gore yet and the get-even revenge. The mayor-elect’s chief policy advisor and fellow atheist, now out of a job, meets the mayor-elect on the street and puts a bullet in his head before turning the handgun on himself. The policy advisor, by the way, had been educated at Berkeley and Harvard.

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#### WHAT’S MISSING?

At least the books are consistent. In vain we look for some indication of humility in the positions advocated, some self-introspection about the gun-toting violence foisted on the reader, some willingness to reflect on the “love your enemies” perspective many Christians have gained from their Lord. The attitude portrayed is that if Jesus had played his cards right he wouldn’t have wound up on that cross. The notion prevails that if well-armed people like Pastor Grant had been on hand, tragedies like Newtown and Aurora and Tucson could have been prevented. The liberalism that has infested society and its churches has paralyzed them into uselessness. The National Rifle Association is right after all: a Glock in every church office and a sniper rifle in every parsonage. The seminaries should build target practice into their curricula and train seminarians in the joys of shooting to kill.

Finally, what are we to make of the hero, Pastor Stephen Grant, the author’s image of the perfect pastor? First of all, he is a firm believer in the *lex talionis*. Bad guys should get what they deserve, ten times over, and we good guys get to mete it out, no matter what Jesus says about retaliation. If Jesus lived in today’s world, he

would agree with Pastor Grant, enough so to make him a right-wing, gun-slingin', conservative Savior. The hot-button social issues to be opposed are so boringly predictable for this mindset: abortion, same-sex marriage, activist environmentalism. Nothing is said about the widening gap between rich and poor (after all, Pastor Grant is now admirably upper-middle class), about health care for those who are unable to afford it on their own, about world and domestic hunger, about society's addictions to drugs, guns, and money. When Pastor Grant encounters the home arsenal of the paid assassin who is a member of his church, Pastor Grant "knew better than to press" him about it. So much for being "strong."

But then again, often church members rejoice that their parish has just called a "strong" pastor, only six months later to lament, "Well, we didn't want someone *that* strong. After all, these pastors do work for us, don't they?" Keating's books lead to the ambiguous conclusion: maybe they do and maybe they do not. ⊕

*RICHARD JESKE, an ELCA pastor, is now serving two Episcopal parishes in Rockland County, New York, thanks to Called to Common Mission, an agreement between the Episcopal Church and the ELCA that establishes full communion between the denominations. He was recently elected Dean of the Rockland County Clericus.*