

# ***GOD, GUTS, AND GALLANTRY***

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## **Commentary on The Major's Faith and More Viewpoints**

**This material supplements Appendix 5 in the book**

Throughout the book and especially in Appendix 5, we got a fairly detailed picture of the Major's faith, but there is more. In order to leave no stone unturned, here we consider four additional viewpoints on his faith from people who knew him. We will conclude with a synthesis that is consistent with the Major's own confessions of faith, and moves toward a harmonization of what appear to be diverse viewpoints.

The first two viewpoints are from J. W. Norwood, and Will Coker, who both interpreted the Major's faith as less than orthodox. After commenting on those, we will consider the perspectives Rev. and Mrs. E. V. Baldy, who affirmed his love for the Bible, and that of his granddaughter, Hannah Lide Coker, who recounts some of his skepticism regarding macroevolutionary theory.

**J. W. Norwood (1865-1945) , whose father was a lifelong friend of Major Coker.** In *Rambles in the Pee Dee Basin*, written by Furman University president Harvey Toliver Cook, Norwood is quoted as saying the following about Major Coker:

As far as I know, he never stressed religious doctrine. There was nothing in his surroundings to stimulate liberal thought, but I am confident that he questioned much of the doctrinal part of religion. Few men were as familiar as he was with the advance of science. He accepted as the most probable explanation of human development the Darwinian theory. He asked me on one occasion if I did not think the teaching of Darwin had more to do with causing people to question what is called orthodox religious opinion than anything else. Another time he mentioned that Dr. Osler had said that all of his scientific studies pointed to the idea that there is no future life, but he [the Major] believed it anyway... He once told me that he enjoyed going to church, not so much for the sermon, but that he went in a spirit of worship, and he enjoyed seeing and shaking hands with people from all the country round about whom he had known for years and many of whose parents were his friends.<sup>1</sup>

Norwood allowed that his assessment might be incomplete, prefacing it with “As far as I know....” Also, Norwood’s interactions with the Major were partly during his period of doubt, and he may have been referring to some of the Major’s comments during that period.

**The Major’s Son Will Coker (1872-1953).** Will came of age during his father’s period of doubt, before he founded his two Christian schools, and before he wrote his faith-affirming book on the Civil War. As recorded in *Recollections of the Major* (Hartsville Museum, 1997), p. 67), Will said that his father was “far from orthodox:”

I did not get this from Father, but Mother told me about it. She was very much distressed that he could not agree with her in all the doctrines of the church. I know now that he did not feel called upon to announce any change of thought but to remain in the church and be of the most help in a community like ours, where the church was a useful social institution at the time... Father himself never talked to us about religion. He was a member of the Baptist church but was far from orthodox.

Will prefaced his comment by admitting he never actually heard his father *say* he was “far from orthodox.” We do not know what the alleged doctrinal disagreements were that he thought existed between his father and mother. We know that the Major, though Baptist, often thought outside of the Baptist “box.” For example, He not only gave money to his Baptist denomination; he also generously gave to the local Methodist church, and gave land for the founding of Hartsville’s Episcopal church.<sup>ii</sup> Also, there were times when the Major reached out to Presbyterian ministers, and asked them to be on the board of Coker College.

Sue, on the other hand, was the daughter of a well-known Baptist minister and, understandably, may have been more reluctant to identify with the practices of other denominations. It’s probably safe to say that Sue was a devout Baptist, while the Major was a devout Protestant. James had a broader comfort zone, but all the while, remained under the banner of Christ and the Bible.

It’s almost certain that the Major was more flexible than his wife on secondary Christian practices. The “doctrinal” disagreements Will alleged could have been over secondary issues, such as the mode of baptism. Whereas Baptists teach immersion, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Methodists teach sprinkling. Another alleged “doctrinal” difference might have been over the role of women in church leadership, a subject where Baptists and Presbyterians tend to hold a more conservative view than Episcopalians and Methodists.

Furthermore, under the influences of English Pastor John Darby (1800-1882), English Theologian Sir Robert Anderson (1841-1918), and American minister C. I. Scofield (1843-1921), author of the notes in *The Scofield Reference Bible*, a detailed theology called dispensationalism had wide influence in churches, Baptist and otherwise, in the mid to late 1800’s up to today, but especially around the turn of the century. Dispensational theology<sup>iii</sup> contains certain specifics about the rapture of the church and the return of Christ that are not essential to Christian orthodoxy. It’s very possible that Major and Sue

Coker may have had differences over these finer points as well. Other possible differences between the Major and Sue could have been on such debatable things such as dancing or light social drinking.

Ultimately, of course, none of these secondary issues has anything to do with basic Christian orthodox beliefs. But these kinds of issues may have seemed too close to orthodoxy for Sue, and their son Will Coker, who was not a churchman, may have mistakenly interpreted their differences on some of these lesser issues as being differences over matters of essential orthodox Christian doctrine.

Comments from Will Coker and J. W. Norwood notwithstanding, the evidence is abundant that the Major affirmed the main doctrines of orthodox Christianity in his farm journal of 1859, which he never retracted, and in previous and later writings. The main orthodox doctrines, followed by, in parentheses, where the Major affirmed them, are:

1. God is above, beyond, and separate from the created world, and is holy and unique beyond comprehension (farm journal).
2. God is man's personal Creator (farm journal).
3. Adam's disobedience brought Man under the curse of sin (farm journal).
4. Christ is fully human and fully divine (the farm journal where James described "The most comprehensive merits of Christ").
5. Salvation (reconciliation to God) is by the new birth which occurs through faith in the sinless Son of God, who took our punishment on the cross. Salvation includes repentance from sin and belief in Christ's death and resurrection (James's own account of his own Citadel conversion, farm journal, his Civil War book, and Coker College documents).
6. The Christian lives a Christlike life by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit (whom the Major called "grace sufficient" in a letter to his mother after Charles's death).
7. The teachings of Holy Scripture are the final authority for faith and practice (farm journal).
8. The Christian has the "blessed hope" (Titus 2:13), which is the expectation of Christ's return (implied in his Sunday School teachings).

So in his writings and Sunday School, the Major touched on all eight orthodox doctrines, positively affirming each. The only doctrine for which we have no direct record of James affirming is #8, the return of Christ. But one of his Sunday School students, a niece in the Major's church, wrote that, as a girl, she believed when Christ returned, Major Coker would be with her to welcome Jesus back, hinting that the Major taught on the second coming of Christ in his Sunday School. Her exact words were: "Don't you wish He [Christ] would come. The flowers would bloom all around Him. And Uncle Jimmie [Major Coker] would be there."<sup>iv</sup>

We now turn to the comments of Pastor and Mrs. E.V. Baldy and Hannah Lide Coker.

**Rev. and Mrs. E.V. Baldy.** Rev. Baldy was the first president of Coker College, and Major Coker's pastor from 1907-1918. As distinct from the two viewpoints above, Rev. Baldy said the Major's faith continued to grow throughout his life. At James's funeral, Baldy said: "He also delighted in the law of the Lord and so was 'like a tree planted by the rivers of water that bringeth forth his fruit in his season' [Psalm 1: 2-3]. For on this spiritual tree might be seen the ever-ripening fruits of the Spirit of God."<sup>v</sup>

Mrs. E.V. Baldy added that the Major gladly heard God's word: "I recall, so gratefully, that one of Dr. Baldy's sermons so impressed him that he had it printed in pamphlet form. "Saul" was the subject. Appreciating his fine mind and excellent judgment, Dr. Baldy was very happy to have this done."<sup>vi</sup>

**The Major's granddaughter, Hannah Lide Coker.** Furman University Professor Dr. Carolyn Coker Joslin Watson recalls a conversation she had about the Major's faith with James's granddaughter through D. R. (of his mother's namesake), Hannah Lide Coker. Hannah, who was seventeen when the Major died, told Carolyn she heard the Major say he was not comfortable with the idea of the evolution of one species into another and was not at all sure of its actuality.<sup>vii</sup>

### Summary of the Major's Beliefs

We do not completely dismiss the observations of Will Coker and J. W. Norwood, who suggested the agnosticism of his day had some effect on the Major's faith. However, as mentioned previously, we can pretty much reconcile seemingly conflicting viewpoints when we consider that Major Coker went through a period of doubt from c. 1879 to 1994.

Many thinking saints before and after the Major have gone through and emerged from periods of doubt. The Major demonstrated and documented his emergence by reaffirming his devotion to the faith in the founding documents of the Welsh Neck High School (1894-1908) and Coker College (1908f.). And for 24 straight years, from the day he opened the high school in 1894, to the day he died in 1918, he made sure his students heard the gospel in chapel each week. He not only wanted them to build their lives on the moral and ethical foundations of Christianity, but also hoped they too could receive the "living hope" of Christ that he found as a student at the Citadel in 1857. And in the Coker College catalogs, when describing the comparative religion class, the Major made sure the description said: "the superior merits of Christianity will be pointed out."<sup>viii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Harvey Toliver Cook, *Rambles in the Pee Dee Basin, South Carolina*, (The State Company, Columbia, SC), 1926, Volume I, pp. 435-436.

<sup>ii</sup> Mrs. William Eggleston, *Recollections of the Major*, (Hartsville Museum: Hartsville, SC), 1997, p. 63.

<sup>iii</sup> Thomas Ice of Liberty University has written "A Short History of Dispensationalism" for the Scholars Crossing, which may be found at [https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1036&context=pretrib\\_arch](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1036&context=pretrib_arch). Today, some dispensational theologians such as Dr. Craig Blaising and Dr. Darrell Bock of Dallas Theological Seminary have tempered the dispensational position, naming the modified system "progressive dispensationalism." This tempered version tends to be less controversial and has helped conservative theologians work together for better unity. The same author, Thomas Ice has an article on progressive dispensationalism at [https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1118&context=pretrib\\_arch](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1118&context=pretrib_arch).

<sup>iv</sup> Mrs. Robert Lide, niece of James Lide Coker, *Recollections*, *ibid.*, p. 66.

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<sup>v</sup> Pastor E. V. Baldy, bulletin for “Funeral Service of James Lide Coker” (First Baptist Church: Hartsville, South Carolina), June 26, 1918, p. 8. Courtesy of Coker College archives.

<sup>vi</sup> Mrs. E. V. Baldy, *Recollections*, p. 64.

<sup>vii</sup> Miss Hannah Lide Coker, quoted in an interview with Furman University Art History professor Dr. Carolyn Coker Joslin Watson in November of 2018, as she recalled this earlier conversation with her Aunt Hannah.

<sup>viii</sup> Elma Stith, editor in chief, Coker College’s magazine, *Euterpean*, Series Two, Number Two, June 1912, (Hartsville: Coker College), 1912. p. 50.