

# Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

## In This Issue

### 04 Light through a glass darkly

Calvin College professor Roy Anker reflects on how the cinema is able to capture glimpses of truth and beauty as reflections of God's glory.

### 06 Life and Distractions

A college student honestly details the distractions in his life, and wonders about their impact. It's an exercise in discerning something so ordinary we rarely give it much thought.

### 08 Life, love, lust & Luck

Woody Allen's movie *Match Point* is worth seeing, along with his earlier *Crimes & Misdemeanors*—two well crafted films that are windows of insight into how our pluralistic world sees love, choice, guilt, and meaning.

### 10 Time to turn the tide

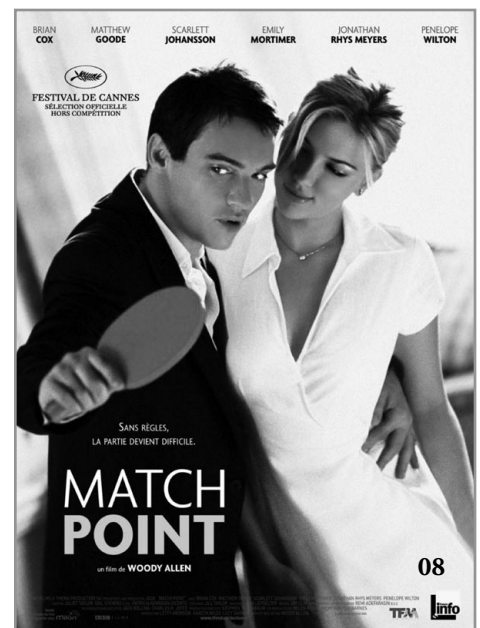
Greg Graffin of Bad Religion is a punk musician of intelligence and conviction. Their newest CD, *The Empire Strikes First* shows their first priority is not entertainment but truth.

### 02 Editor's Note

### 03 Dialogue

### 12 Books worth considering

Reviews of *A Profound Weakness: Christians & Kitsch*; *One Equall Light: An Anthology of the Writings of John Donne*; Robert Lewis Dabney: *A Southern Presbyterian Life*; *At Peace and Unafraid: Public Order, Security, and the Wisdom of the Cross*



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# Editor's Note



## Creation's voice

**O**n a recent speaking trip to Florida we stayed a day after the conference to be with Ed and Betsy Hague, the dear friends who had invited us. We drove south from Tallahassee to St Marks National Wildlife

Refuge, a 68,000 acre area of wetlands set aside in 1931 on the Gulf of Mexico as a place for migratory birds to winter. Alligators basked in the sun or swam lazily through the still water, except for two that met in a narrow channel where they rose up and roared. Nearby was Wakulla State Park, where a natural spring pumps 14,000 gallons of water per second to form a river so clear you can see 100 feet down to the bottom. We took a guided boat tour, and saw wood ducks in all their amazing color, turtles sunning on logs, nesting egrets, herons, and ospreys, lively families of water birds picking through floating mats of vegetation, a brown water snake curled up on the bank, anhingas, and quietly blending into the woods back from the river's edge, a white-tailed deer and her yearling fawn. Mysteriously, 120 feet beneath the water's surface divers have found and only partially explored a labyrinth of caves containing the skeletons of mastodons.

The day was a balm for our souls. One reason was that we spent it with kindred spirits, people with whom we share a common vision for God's kingdom, and relationships rooted in grace. Another reason was that it was filled with God's word. We didn't recite memory verses, nor did we take time to read together from Scripture. We were, however, immersed in a creation which sings out in glorious harmony the truth and glory of God. The day was more than merely rest after a busy weekend, though it was that. It was also more than merely seeing

new forms of wildlife in a setting dramatically different from the upper Midwest where we live, though it was that, too. It was a balm to our souls because God's word is redemptive, whether that word comes in Scripture or in creation.

A few years ago I attended a celebration honoring a missionary I have known for many years. One admirer lauded his single-minded spirituality by recalling a trip he had taken with the missionary on which they had a layover in Hawaii. The missionary never once stepped outside their room, he said, and never flagged in spending every moment engrossed in Bible study. The speaker confessed his lack of zeal and thanked the missionary for demonstrating what was, as he put it, "really important in life." I sat and listened with growing sadness to an example of how Christians can single-mindedly study the Bible and yet miss what the Scriptures teach. There are good reasons not to enjoy the beauty of creation on a rare trip to Hawaii—imagining that Bible study is "more spiritual," however, is not one of them.

Hans Rookmaaker always insisted that art needs no justification; neither does enjoying God's amazing creation. We share an intimate relationship with the creation because we too are creatures; as creatures made in God's image, we can revel in the riotous creativity of his forming and sustaining word. As Francis Schaeffer put it so well, God is there, and he is not silent—in either Scripture or creation. ■

~Denis Haack

# Dialogue

## re: Please review *Brokeback Mountain*

Send e-mail to:

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You are invited to take part in *Critique's* Dialogue. Address all correspondence to:

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Unfortunately, we are unable to respond personally to all correspondence received, but each one is greatly appreciated. We reserve the right to edit letters for length.

### To the Editor:

I was wondering if Ransom would mind publishing a review of *Brokeback Mountain*. I saw it last night and found it to be a poignant, tragic story.

I found in it, too, many things worth serious consideration by Christians—like the ‘sacrifice’ that the main character makes for the sake of his children (in refusing to run off, and in turn, affording his daughters a father, even if one separated from their mother); the quiet suffering of Ennis’s wife; the hurt over one’s isolation and loneliness. I felt like, after seeing it, that what is missing from the public square is a Christian’s eye on the film, minus the boycotting (most of my friends who are boycotting the film also criticize it, yet have never seen it, which strikes me as uncharitable—why criticize a person’s story if you won’t even humble yourself to hear it?), and the only group I know of who could do this is the people at Ransom. My response from seeing it was: this is a true story. It was truthful, through and through. It was the particular story of two men, and in giving us an honest telling of it, I felt like I experienced a range of life. It was, to me, truly great, but I long to hear other thoughts on it.

Scott Cunningham  
Athens, GA  
via email

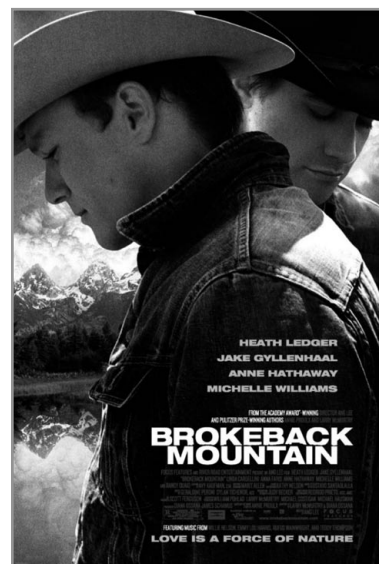
### Denis Haack responds:

Thanks for writing, Scott. I am very grateful for your confidence that we would view the film from a distinctly Christian perspective. That certainly is our goal. (And yes, I plan to review *Brokeback Mountain*.)

There are good reasons not to see a movie. If it contains scenes or themes that

touch on areas where we are weak and easily tempted, we should skip it. We are finite creatures, so must choose which films are worthy of our limited time. If I know my seeing a film would threaten a younger, weaker Christian’s faith, that is reason not to see it. And many films aren’t serious art, so may not be worth seeing.

Art is always made from some perspective, a creative echo of the world and life view of the artist. And in an increasingly pluralistic world, we should expect that the films of our culture will demonstrate and express that pluralism of values and beliefs. Paul did not protest or boycott the pagan shrines and religious writings of the Athenians when he was there (Acts 17). Quite the opposite, in fact. He studied them and then used them as a natural beginning point to engage the non-Christians of Athens in thoughtful conversation about the truth. Would a protest or boycott been as effective in Athens? I doubt it.



# Out of Their Minds

## Light through

From its very beginnings, not much more than a hundred years ago, one of cinema's great appeals has been its regular, and often compelling, attempt to throw some light on those 'big questions' about the way the world is. Synergistic medium that it is, cinema can do this with fullness, immediacy, and even dazzle.

The particular kind of light I wish to examine in this book is the attempt of cinematic light to catch Light—with a capital 'L'—specifically the display of divine Light. This is not as unlikely a subject for film as it may first seem. From the beginning, filmmakers have regularly tried to put some overt display of Light on the screen. Hollywood's first fullblown, feature-length spectacle, David Wark Griffith's infamous racist film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), ends with a portrait of its white protagonists ensconced in a resplendently white heaven. In Griffith's even bigger spectacle, *Intolerance* (1916), a film meant to repair his reputation, he went so far as to bring in Jesus himself and a host of what he thought to be 'flashes' of Light. Then and now, even though the makers of movies have usually taken up residence in a pretty thoroughly secular universe, a whole host of films, past and present, have tried to illuminate the inescapable big questions about the possibility of Light. And one does not have to go

very far back to find numerous starkly realistic wrestlings with those same big riddles of recent vintage: Robert Zemeckis's *Contact* (1997), Robert Duvall's *The Apostle* (1997), and M. Night Shyamalan's *Wide Awake* (1998) and *Signs* (2002). In addition to those are the fabulously successful mythmakers who push the same 'Light' question: Lucas's *Star Wars* saga (1977-2005), Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003), and even the Wachowski brothers' *Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003).

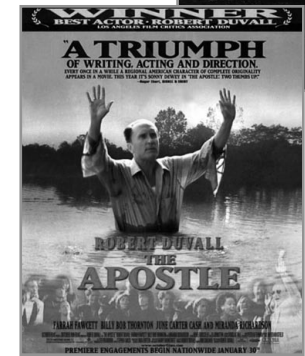
In short, despite its reputation as a mindless, soul-less diversion, even cinema regularly wrestles with the central deep mysteries about origins, meaning, purpose, intimacy, destiny, morality, and the possibility of God—those domains of human inquiry to which philosophy, theology, and the arts have traditionally

devoted themselves. On occasion, films have attended to these riddles directly. That engagement with the possibility of Light, or its absence, and the means by which Light shows itself has resulted in an array of compelling,

provocative, and affecting films, including some of the best and most popular ever made. Improbable as it may seem, light as Light does end up on our movie screens.

Catching Light, though, is in many ways a tricky business. Unfortunately, those most earnest about putting Light (or God) up there on the screen for all to see are very often

the ones who fail most miserably. Fervor does little to win either credulity or understanding from audiences,



and that is especially true when it comes to art: good intentions simply do not get the

would-be artist very far. The truth of that is readily apparent in the checkered history of movies that chronicle the life of Jesus, Moses, or even saints such as St. Francis of Assisi or Joan of Arc, two who have repeatedly received film treatments. Literal transcriptions of Scripture or holy

legend usually have a hard time being inspired or believable to filmgoers.

Another difficulty of catching Light in cinema lies in the nature of Light itself. In ordinary human circumstances, people do not

see even the physical light emitted by the sun; they see what it illuminates, but the light itself is invisible to the human eye.

***Despite its reputation as a mindless, soul-less diversion, cinema regularly wrestles with the central deep mysteries about origins, meaning, purpose, intimacy, destiny, morality, and the possibility of God.***



# a glass darkly

But, even though they do not see light itself, they readily believe it is real because they see what it illuminates. That is greatly compounded when it comes to seeing or creating divine Light, the transcendent entity that in most religious traditions—Eastern and Western alike—proclaims its very hiddenness, invisibility, and inaccessibility to human perception, no matter how much people yearn for clear indications of divine presence.

Thus the question for filmmakers is how to make the Invisible visible, the Transcendent immanent, the Impalpable manifest. Needless to say, questions about who or what Light (or God) is and how far that Light is removed from ordinary mundane experience have hounded humans through the millennia. When people look for tangible proof, divine mystery usually remains mysterious, shadowy, and distant, and we see at best ‘through a glass, darkly,’ as the Apostle Paul famously put it in his first letter to the fractious church in Corinth (1 Cor. 13:12).

Now and then, in some way or another, Light does flash inexplicably, sometimes blazing, as in Moses’ burning bush, or ‘like shining from shook foil’ (G. M. Hopkins). Most of the time, though, Light comes in flashes near the edges of vision, in a faint gleam, or in a tremor of color.

Most often Light comes not as people would like—such as pure light spread sky-wide in bright neon dazzle—but refracted through

an altogether different prism, one simultaneously more ambiguous and more personal,

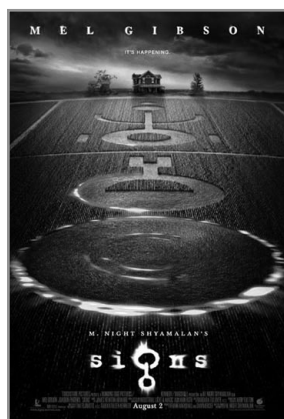
by means of touch or embrace, image or sign, glimpse or gaze, sound or music, beauty or horror, words or song, meeting or coincidence, forgiveness or blessing. The means are endless and always as new and unique as people themselves. In other words, when the divine does appear, it proves endlessly inventive and astonishing in the instruments of its showing. It is certain only that, by stealth and surprise, the entity people label ‘divine’ or

‘Light’ or ‘God’ tips its hand, manifesting in untold ways a holy presence among people. The stubbornly opaque ‘dark glass’ through which people strain to spy God goes translucent, and the Other becomes more clear, like a crash or a whisper, or a crash within a whisper, the ‘still small voice’ in the self, or even, in rare instances, something startling and undeniable, like that burning bush in the wilderness.

In short, the forms of disclosure are countless, unfathomable, and almost always unexpected. Then and maybe ever thereafter, in some measure at least, because of the ‘showing’ of the divine that has trans-

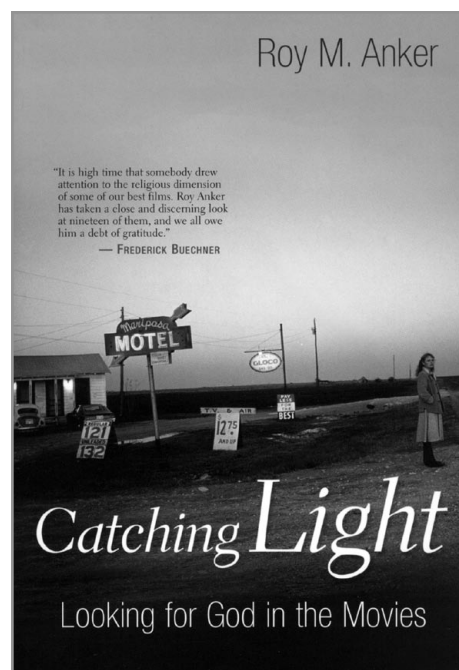
pired—the academic term for this is *hierophany*—people of all kinds come to see and act differently. Transcending mundane limits and perception, either briefly or lastingly, the soul itself

encounters and is often infused, engulfed, or cheered by a presence from beyond human agency, and the Invisible becomes known.



A transcendent Other imparts to individual people, and sometimes whole communities, the light they require to travel their arduous path of love, fortitude, and even—amid the most dire circumstances—exultant gladness. Generally, though, when people think they’ve got that holiness cased, contained, and controlled, they’ve very likely lost it. ■

~Roy Anker



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Excerpted from *Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies* by Roy Anker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2004) pp. 5-7.

## Life and Distractions

*The only thing that consoles us for our miseries is distraction, yet that is the greatest of our wretchednesses. Because that is what mainly prevents us from thinking about ourselves and leads us imperceptibly to damnation.*

[Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*]

Every weekday afternoon, I go through the same daily routine. I walk across the campus to my dorm, toss my backpack on the ground, and turn on my computer. It is at this point that an intense internal conflict begins to rage inside of me. I tell myself that the only reason that I turned on my computer is to check my e-mail, but deep down inside I know better. I know perfectly well that if given the chance, I will leap at the opportunity to spend the next hour on some random website doing absolutely nothing. On the rare day when I find the inner strength of will to just say “no” to the internet, I regard this as a profound personal victory. To celebrate this victory I usually wander to the other side of the room and turn on the television.

Television, when given some thought, is really a depressing concept. What more wretched a way to spend my time than sprawled out on a couch and blankly staring at a whole universe of complete strangers that do not affect my life in any way. Most days I’m able to muster enough self-awareness to be able to ask myself some frank questions, such as, “Do I really care about some guy on the Discovery channel that studies sub-species of jellyfish in the Mediterranean

Sea?” “Does the fact that the Pittsburgh Penguins put their back-up goalie on the injured list really matter to my life?” The answer to these, of course, is a resounding no. But I keep watching. I seem to be paralyzed by the soft glow of the television screen.

There are so many other things that I could spend this free time doing. I could finish my homework.

I could read a book. I could go for a walk. I could take a nap. A myriad of activities would be more constructive than flipping aimlessly through the channels, and finally settling on a sit-com rerun that I’ve already seen twice. But I keep watching. Why? Maybe it’s because television is such a good way to relax. It’s the perfect way to escape from the world. Reality requires me to do such hassles as think, communicate, and deal with complex problems. Television simply requires me to watch absent-mindedly. Reality requires me to get up, move around, and put effort into things. The only movement that television requires is the hitting of a button on the remote control. Reality always has the possibility of failure, whether it’s in academics, or relationships. It’s rather difficult to fail at

watching television.

So in short, television is less work than reality is.

But is laziness the only reason for my addiction to

television? Is my daily struggle against distractions unique to myself? The answer to both of these questions is no. Everybody struggles with the problem of distraction. People want to lose themselves in their own little reality

***I seem to be paralyzed by the soft glow of the television screen.***

and disconnect from the real world. The truth of this can be attested to by simply walking the halls of any college dorm. Some people surf the internet. Others watch television. Others play video games. All of them are distracting themselves. It seems to be a trait fundamental to human nature. They forget about themselves and everything around them. But why is this?

Could it be that we are afraid that we are insufficient in reality? Blaise Pascal offered the solution that, “It [one’s self] wants to be great and sees that it is small. It wants to be happy and sees that it is wretched. It wants to be perfect and sees that it is full of imperfections.” This perception of one’s self is the reason why a person would rather play a football video game in his dorm room instead of playing real football with a group of friends. In reality, he is just another athlete. In the video game, he is a world class athlete who can overwhelm the competition with his skill and strategy. He is the master of his own little world. He does not have to consider his own smallness, imperfections, or even wretchedness.

This raises a more fundamental question about people. Is the condition of most people “wretched” as Pascal suggests? While I believe that few lives are truly as wretched as Pascal implies, his points about self-knowledge make a great deal of sense. It is the common nature of people to wish for themselves to be great. The overwhelming majority of people, of course, are not considered great. It is upon this realization that most people make a crucial mistake. They assume that since they are not perfect, their life in reality is somehow not worth examining. So they lose themselves in some

***People want to lose themselves in their own little reality and disconnect from the real world.***

frivolous distraction. It could be music, tv, video games, newspapers, or virtually anything else. This is a great tragedy played out in most people's lives. If people would only learn to deal with their imperfections and continue to live their lives, they would avoid the state of wretchedness that they end up in. Hopefully I'll remember some of this reflection the next time I find myself on the couch staring at the television. ■

~Matthew Mellema

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Matthew Mellema is a freshman at John Brown University. He wrote this essay for a class taught by Preston Jones, a Contributing Editor to *Critique*.



## **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

1. How would you define the difference between a distraction and an activity which offers an occasional—and much needed—legitimate, healthy break from stress, busyness, or the monotony of routine?
2. What distractions seem to appeal most to your peers? To the older/younger generation? How easy is it for someone to have a healthy distraction which we deem, for whatever reason, to be unhealthy? What does this suggest for our relationships?
3. What distractions are most tempting to you? Which ones have become unhealthy in some respect? How do you know? How did they evolve from being innocent activities into troubling distractions?
4. What “miseries” afflict your life that distractions help to alleviate? Mellema asks “Could it be that we are afraid that we are insufficient in reality?” To what extent is this true?
5. Reflect on the addictive qualities of distractions, whether they be video games, solving crossword puzzles, surfing the Net, or physical exercise. At what point do they become addictive? Why is it easier to see how the distractions of others are forms of addiction than to see our own as an addictive?
6. “Is the condition of most people,” Mellema asks, “‘wretched’ as Pascal suggests?” He then answers by saying, “While I believe that few lives are truly as wretched as Pascal implies, his points about self-knowledge make a great deal of sense.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

**Questions continued on page 16 (back cover)...**

# The Darkened Room

## Life, Love,



### A review of Woody Allen's *Match Point*

by Denis Haack

#### Credits:

##### *Crimes & Misdemeanors*

###### Starring:

Martin Landau (Judah Rosenthal)  
Angelica Houston (Dolores Paley)  
Woody Allen (Cliff Stern)  
Alan Alda (Lester)  
Mia Farrow (Halley Reed)  
Jerry Orbach (Jack Rosenthal)  
Sam Waterston (Ben)  
Martin Bergmann (Prof. Louis Levy)

Writer & Director: Woody Allen

###### Producers:

Robert Greenhut  
Charles H. Joffe  
Jack Rollins

Cinematographer: Sven Nykvist

Runtime: 107 min.

Release: U.S.A., 1989

Rated: PG-13 for language and some sexuality.

##### *Match Point*

###### Starring:

Jonathan Rhys-Meyer (Chris Wilton)  
Scarlett Johansson (Nola Rice)  
Matthew Goode (Tom Hewett)  
Brian Cox (Alec Hewett)  
Emily Mortimer (Chloe Hewett Wilton)  
Penelope Wilton (Eleanor Hewett)

Writer & Director: Woody Allen

###### Producers:

Stephen Tenenbaum  
Jack Rollins  
Charles Joffe

Cinematographer: Remi Adefarasin

Runtime: 124 min.

Release: U.S.A., 2005

Rated: R for some sexuality.

Someone recently asked me why so many movies had to be about relationships, love, and sex. For the same reason, I said, that so many of the stories in Scripture are about relationships, love, and sex. They get to the very heart of what it means to be human. We were made not to be alone, but in relationship. We are created in the image of the One who reveals himself to us not just as a God who loves but as the God who is love. And the sexual union is the only relationship intimate enough to be an adequate picture of our union with Christ. The biblical telling of the Story of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation makes no sense if relationships, love and sex are ignored in either life or in the pages of Scripture. G. K. Chesterton, as usual, addressed the issue in a way designed to get our attention: "A man knocking on the door of a brothel," he said, "is looking for God."

This is why the age-old narrative of David and Bathsheba never grows stale. A powerful man sees a beautiful woman naked in circumstances that are, shall we say, somewhat enigmatic, and discovers, oh joy! she is interested too. So they say yes to the deliciousness of the moment, the sex no doubt made all the more breathtaking by the illicit nature of their tryst. Then when their private passion threatens to undo them, the plot thickens, conflict erupts and hard choices must be made. The choices

are made, and the inevitable consequences work themselves out.

Sometimes power isn't an issue, but passion always is; even those who have only walked this path in their imagination should be able to identify. Good storytellers keep circling back to this basic story line, because it resonates so deeply with every generation in a fallen world. This is what one of the more thoughtful storytellers of our culture, Woody Allen, has done in two of his best films.

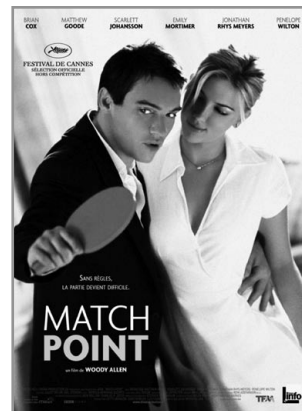
Not everyone likes Woody Allen's films—as with many things, they are an acquired taste. But even if you don't like them I would urge you to see the two which explore these deeply

human and perennial themes: *Crimes & Misdemeanors* (1989) and *Match Point* (2005). They are a sharp window of insight into our world as we move from the 20th into the 21st century.

Woody Allen has always fascinated me, partly because his career has coincided with my lifetime interest in the cinema. There's something rich in being able to follow the growing body of work produced by a director. From the beginning he has taken ideas and culture seriously. As with any influential artist, his films have reflected something of his culture and served to shape that culture.

*Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *Match Point* are worth watching as a double feature. Both revolve around the same plot line, but are different in significant ways. Our world has changed in the decade and a half separating them. These changes impact us, whether we realize it or not. If they didn't, the Scriptures would not place such importance on discerning what it means to live in the world while not being conformed to it.

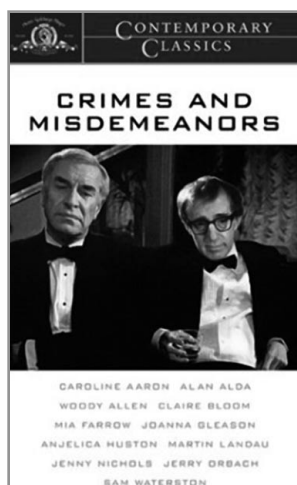
*Match Point* is so much better than the rest of Allen's recent films that some critics have





# Lust & Luck

cynically wondered whether he was actually the writer and director. This is a film that exhibits superb craftsmanship and the ability to draw us into a story for which we can not guess the ending. We see choices made, for blessing and for curse, are made to think about those choices, and then watch as the consequences unfold, with twists I won't reveal here. Our yearning for love and fulfillment is lived out on the knife edge which separates love and lust, commitment and obsession, faithfulness and desire. What Allen really has us consider is whether we live in a world where any of this makes any final difference—and the difference that makes for questions of guilt, meaning, and redemption. “Dark humor,” *Rolling Stone* says about *Match Point*, “with a sting that leaves welts.”



Roger Ebert writes that in *Match Point* “the underlying philosophical issues” come down to a series of questions: “To what degree are we prepared to set aside our moral qualms in order to indulge in greed and selfishness? Greed, or lust? How tiresome to have to choose. Without saying why, let me say that fear also enters into the equation. In a moral universe, it would be joined by guilt, but not here. The fear is that in trying to satisfy both greed and lust, a character may have to lose both, which would be a great inconvenience.” Ebert’s choice of words here is important, and full of insight for understanding the film: *In a moral universe...*

Watch *Crimes & Misdemeanors* and then *Match Point*. They are both fine examples of



cinematic art, and the contrasts and continuities between them worth reflecting on in light of our changing pluralistic world. In *Crimes & Misdemeanors* a character argues for a moral universe and real meaning, but by the end of the film he has gone blind. There is no such character in *Match Point* where in the end it is luck rather than morality that makes the difference. “The man who said ‘I’d rather be lucky than good,’” the narrator says, “saw deeply into life. People are often afraid to realize how much of an impact luck plays. There are moments in a tennis match where the ball hits the top of the net, and for a split second, remains in mid-air. With a little luck, the ball goes over, and you win. Or maybe it doesn’t, and you lose.” ■

~Denis Haack

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your first impression or immediate response to *Crimes & Misdemeanors*? To *Match Point*? Why did you respond the way you did?
2. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (casting, direction, lighting, script, music, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film’s message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused?
3. In *Match Point*, none of the main characters are good people. Discuss each character in turn and trace their development in the story. In contrast, some of the characters in *Crimes & Misdemeanors* are people of principle. Compare and contrast the two films in this regard and reflect on the role this plays in the unfolding of each film. Explore how in some characters their niceness covers up their lack of goodness.
4. With whom did you identify in each film? Why? With whom were we meant to identify?
5. What is the message(s) of *Match Point*? Of *Crimes & Misdemeanors*? Consider how they address themes such as: the nature of reality or what is really real; the fragmentation of life in our busy, pluralistic world; the significance of relationships and love; the significance and meaning of being human; whether there is right, wrong, and justice and how we determine it and what happens at death. How are the answers similar/different in the two films?
6. If a non-Christian friend says they agree that it’s more important in life to be lucky than to be good, how would you respond? What winsome, intriguing questions might you raise to help them reconsider their position and prompt further discussion?

## Time to turn the tide



### A review of Bad Religion's *The Empire Strikes First*



**T**he *Empire Strikes First* is intelligent punk; Bad Religion is a band whose music makes clear they aren't merely interested in entertaining their fans. They want to convince us to settle for nothing less than the truth.

Our consumer society absorbs every trend into the mainstream, so that even punk fashion ends up being transformed into something fashionable. On the other hand, serious punkers still tend to be marginalized by the middle-class. Their preferred music, loud, aggressive and anti-traditional makes polite society nervous. We don't know what to expect, or what to say, and may fear that violence is probably close at hand. And if my reading of middle-class attitudes is at all accurate, it is usually assumed that punk rockers can't be all that intelligent or well educated or serious about the deepest questions of human existence.

Bad Religion not only breaks those stereotypes, it breaks them with a vengeance. For one thing, their music consistently raises in-your-face challenges about the things that matter most.

*Striking at mental apparitions  
Like a drunk on a vacant street  
Silently beset by the hands of time  
Indelicate in its fury  
An aberrant crack as skeletons yield  
To unrelenting gravity  
While viruses prowl for helpless victims  
Who succumb rapidly*

*(Tell me!) Tell me;  
Where is the love?  
In a careless creation  
When there's no "above"  
There's no justice  
Just a cause and a cure  
And a bounty of suffering  
It seems we all endure  
And what I'm frightened of  
Is that they call it "God's love"*

*Twisted torment, make-believe  
There's a truth and we all submit  
"Believe my eyes," my brain replies*

*To all that they interpret  
I know there's no reason for alarm  
But who needs perspective when it comes to pain  
and harm  
We can change our minds; there's a better prize*

*They call it God's love  
My pain is God's love*

*["God's Love"]*

In "A Punk Manifesto," an essay available on Bad Religion's web site that I commend to you, front man, singer, and biologist Greg Graffin (he has a PhD from Cornell) explains what he believes is the essence of punk. As you read, reflect on how this fits with your perception of the punk rock movement.



"Punk is: the personal expression of uniqueness that comes from the experiences of growing up in touch with our human ability to reason and ask questions.

"Punk is: a movement that serves to refute social attitudes that have been perpetuated through willful ignorance of human nature.

"Punk is: a process of questioning and commitment to understanding that results in self-progress, and through repetition, flowers into social evolution.

"Punk is: a belief that this world is what we make of it, truth comes from our understanding of the way things are, not from the blind adherence to prescriptions

about the way things should be.  
 “Punk is: the constant struggle against fear of  
 social repercussions.”

On *The Empire Strikes First*, the musical creativity of the arrangements and performance help drive home the intensity of the lyrics. “The music has the furious beat and driving buzz saw guitars of classic punk rock,” it is noted on their web site, “but when a vocal chorus cuts in, it is surprisingly harmonious and emotionally evocative, reminiscent of The Beatles or The Everly Brothers.”

This is not the music of quiet reassurance that all is well. Bad Religion provides no lullaby to drown out the cries of the lost. In “Los Angeles is Burning,” the wildfires raging in the hills near the city become metaphors for the unexpected yet certain destruction that threatens every life. The cynical apathy of a generation that feels caught in the unstoppable wheels of a world impossible to control is brought up cold in “Social Suicide.” “Shadows entertain the unwashed masses / Scholars explain their numb reactions / I don’t know if I can find Truth / But I’m sure it won’t come from following you / But it’s time to turn the tide / It’s social suicide.” And the brutal cost of the war in Iraq which is carried disproportionately by those who can least afford it is decried in “Let Them Eat War.” “Seize a few dollars from the people who sweat / Because it’s freedom or Debt and they won’t question it.”

*“Drop dead, it doesn’t matter,” she said  
 “It only hurts when I laugh,” she said  
 “Sometimes it’s never a crime  
 “To spend the day in bed”  
 She made certain that the curtains were red  
 To dream better by the light they would shed  
 She leaned back, tilted her head  
 And this is what she said...*

*“You can’t win; think it over again  
 “I can’t win; look at the trouble I’m in  
 “We can’t win and we’re stuck here together  
 “Yeah, I hope it will last forever.”  
 “Don’t ever dare to hope,” he said  
 “So I’m never let down too bad*

*“I know there’s nowhere to go  
 “So I’ll just stay here, instead”  
 He knew better than to pull at  
 a thread*

*They unravel like the thoughts in his head  
 He looked out; it filled him with dread  
 And this is what he said...  
 “You can’t win...”*

*[“Boot Stamping on a Human Face Forever”]*

For Bad Religion, Christianity is not seen as a viable option. In “Sinister Rouge” the sad reality of violence in the Church’s past is held up for review. And “Live Again (The Fall of Man)” casts doubt that a good life results from the hope of eternal life in another world. “The road is narrow, the horizon wide / And they say what’s waiting on the other side is so rewarding and the ultimate prize / But what good is something if you can’t have it until you die? / Despite tenacious clinging like a grain of sand watching its foundation wash away / Drunk with the assertions they know they can’t defend / Confident that they might live again.”

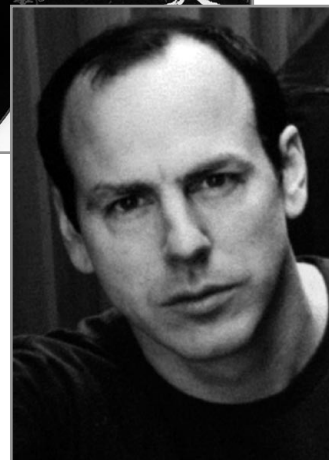
This is not the shrill voice of spoiled adolescents mindlessly pushing against the traditions of their parents. It is the impassioned cry of a band whose well-read, intelligent, and thoughtful lyricist believes he has seen something of Christian faith and finds it lacking. Lacking real authenticity, lacking compassion for the marginalized, lacking a deep commitment to social justice, lacking a reasoned foundation for belief. Lacks which by God’s grace must be met with a holy spirited commitment to follow Christ into the world with grace, even at cost. ■

~Denis Haack

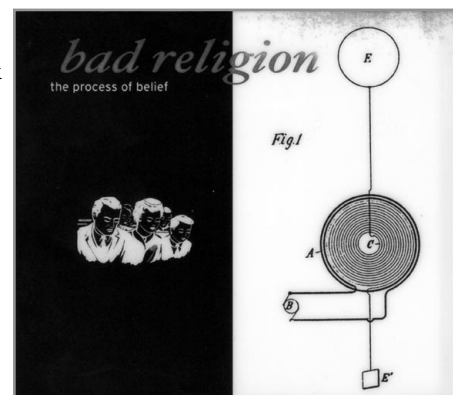
#### Recommended CDs:

*The Process of Belief* (Epitaph; 2002).  
*The Empire Strikes First* (Epitaph; 2004).

**Source:** “A Punk Manifesto” by Greg Graffin can be read online (<http://www.badreligion.com>); click on Essays, then “A Punk Manifesto.”



by  
**Denis  
 Haack**



## An artist ruminates on Kitch

*An artist approached me after a lecture I had given at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Oaxaca in Mexico. In a near whisper, she 'confessed': 'I used to use a lot of religious kitsch in my work. One of the objects was a glow-in-the-dark praying hands with the words "Remember to Pray" on it. 'Well,' she continued, 'I used to keep it in my bedroom and of course when I turned the lights off...I... Well, I....' She hesitated and blushed. 'You'd pray?' I asked. 'Yes,' she exclaimed in an embarrassed voice.*

[*A Profound Weakness*, p. 20]

**A**t best, publishing in the age of cyberspace could be considered a vestigial Renaissance art; at worst, it is an occupational hazard. Those given the vision to found independent publishing houses that issue books on the arts targeted at Christian audiences initiate the most quixotic type of occupation possible in the Western world.

Nevertheless, Pieter and Elria Kwant incorporated Piquant Editions after Pieter spearheaded several stellar projects for

Britain's Paternoster/Solway Press on the arts, including the very useful *Art and Soul: Signposts for Christians in the Arts* by Hilary Brand and Adrienne Chaplin (now a Piquant imprint). Piquant supports its predilection for complicated, ostensibly non-lucrative projects—such as the six-volume series on the complete writings of Hans Rookmaaker—with smaller devotionals illustrated by the Dutch abstract artist Anneke Kaii *et al*, and missions-related resources for captive audiences.

In 2005, Piquant sponsored Canadian *avant-gardiste* artist Betty Spackman's vast, visually gorgeous tome on the troublesome, yet scintillating topic of kitsch. Spackman, who cut her artistic teeth on Rookmaaker's teachings in the 1970s, established herself in several countries as a bracing multi-media artist, professor of art, and as it turns out, the collector of an unseemly cabinet full of religious kitsch. But for the first time, it seems, she has parsed the entire cultural activity surrounding kitsch, that somewhat ubiquitous German

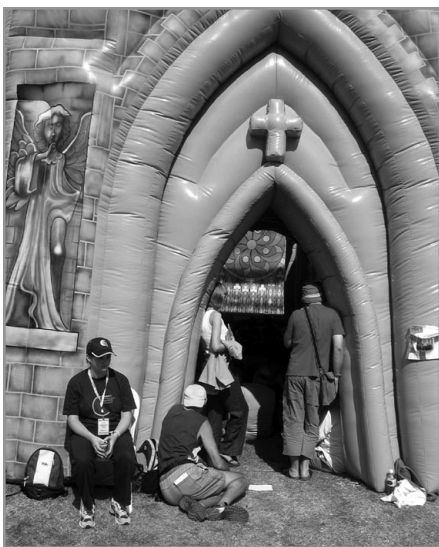
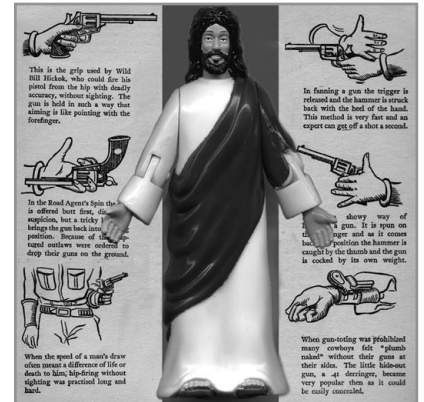
term for 'garbage' or 'useless decorative items,' into more than a dozen illustrated meditations on the rampant sentimental impact and meaning of this form of art—certainly as deserving of its own category as

***Kitsch supplies an unbeatable paradox as an incontestable carrier of biblical truth as well as a trashy, junky vestige of culture on the margins.***

peripheral vision caught a blinking, bleeding Christ who I momentarily thought was trying to get my attention. Spackman mines this disconnect between superficial and deep meaning with short, pithy conversations and excerpts that often end with a question for the reader.

She introduces her visual essays with a stunningly original consideration of the Bible itself as an icon, used (for example) in images and portraits from previous centuries to show the subject's devotion in visual shorthand. Somehow, there is no disparity in the way Spackman applies excerpts from cultural mavens like Colleen McDannell, John Cage, Roland Barthes, Jean

Baudrillard, alongside the Old Testament prophets and gospel writers, to illuminate her logic, occasionally interjecting a delightful dose of her own formidable brand of wry wit. She began compiling *A Profound Weakness* just before the events of 9/11, compelling her to gather the imagery of impromptu memorials from her colleagues around the States, and to add a rumination of kitsch as the conveyor of deep loss and sincere remembrance.



Quite simply, there is nothing quite like this book on the market—secular or Christian—and as such, it represents everything that a work by a Christian ought to incorporate—originality, creativity, wisdom and profound perspectives on the nature of real meaning. The price of the book is as hefty as the book itself, in a large-format, coffee table size loaded with color images, but assuredly, it is worth it, providing a cultural signpost that belongs in any savvy contemporary library. ■

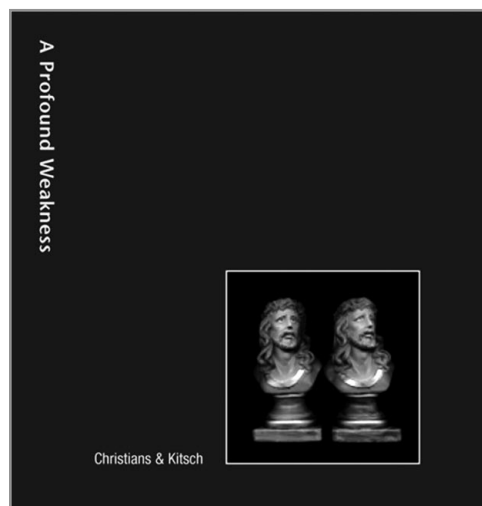
—Karen Mulder

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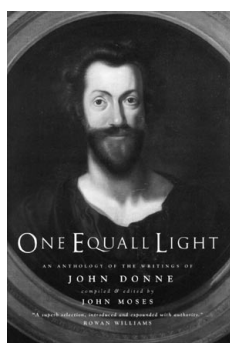
Karen Mulder is an art and architectural historian, and arts commentator, with L'Abri Fellowship roots, currently finishing off a doctoral dissertation on German glass designs for medieval cathedral renovations bombed during World War II at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Since 1981, she has networked, written and spoken internationally about the liable viabilities of the contemporary arts and faith.

**Book recommended:** *A Profound Weakness: Christians & Kitsch* by Betty Spackman (Carlisle, UK: Piquant Editions, 2005); 440 pages; ([www.piquanteditions.com](http://www.piquanteditions.com)); <http://www.piquant.net>)



## Briefly Noted: Poet and preacher

by Denis Haack



John Donne (1572-1631), was an Anglican priest who is perhaps best remembered for his exquisite poetry. His thoughtfulness and obvious love of words means that in his poems, letters, essays, and sermons are a host of quotations that reflect both a depth of Christian conviction and a beauty of expression. In *One Equall Light*, John Moses, the Dean of St Paul's Cathedral writes a brief biography of Donne, and compiles hundreds of quotations under a series of topics for easy reference. The book can be read simply for the joy of reading Donne, or used to deepen our thinking when reflecting on one of the topics addressed by him.

A few samples, out of many I would have liked to choose, just to increase your interest:

"It is a divine saying to thy soule, O what a savor of life, unto life, is the death of a beloved sin!" (p. 195).

"Let not thy prayer be lucrative, nor vindicative, pray not for temporall superfluities, pray not for the confusion of them that differ from thee in opinion, or in manners, but condition thy prayer, inanimate thy prayer with the glory of God, and thine own everlasting happinesse, and the edification of others" (p. 249).

"Originall sinne, that ever smoakes up, and creates a soote in the soule" (p. 171).

I cannot name a time, when Gods love began, it is eternal, I cannot imagine a time, when his mercy will end, it is perpetual" (p. 159).

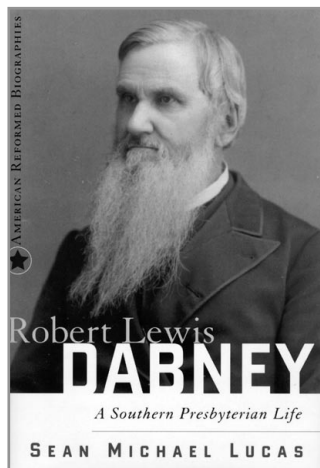
"A Christian in profession, that is not a Christian in life, is so intestable, hee discredits Christ, and hardens others against him" (p. 270).

*One Equall Light* is a good book for bed-side or coffee tables. ■

**Book recommended:** *One Equall Light: An Anthology of the Writings of John Donne* compiled and edited by John Moses (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2003) 316 pp. + notes.

## A model biography

### Briefly Noted: A southern hero with clay feet



by Denis Haack

When I was growing up, missionary biographies were one of the few genres of literature that were deemed worth reading in my church. The ones I had access to always left me both discouraged and gladdened. Discouraged because the picture they painted of their subject was so resplendent of goodness and godliness that I would begin to doubt my own faith; gladdened because though I had no idea what I wished to do in life I knew most definitely I didn't want to be a missionary, and so was relieved to learn that I was definitely not qualified to receive such a calling.

The term for such books, of course, is not really "biography," but "hagiography," which refers to a story which idealizes its subject instead of telling the real truth. In a fallen world all heroes have clay feet, which should be obvious to all who take the Scriptures seriously.

Sean Lucas' biography of Robert Lewis Dabney (1820-1898), a southern Presbyterian theologian, shows appreciation for the grace that was evident in Dabney's life and ministry while refusing to whitewash his faults. As such the book is both a fine introduction to an influential southern Calvinist theologian and a model for Christian biographies. It is also a glimpse into the mind and world view of a Christian, who like so many of his southern contemporaries could not see their racism for the wickedness that it was. As I read, I gave thanks I could by grace see more clearly concerning the horror of southern slavery, while praying that those sins I am culturally blinded to might be made plain. Lucas puts it this way in his concluding chapter:

"While Dabney and other Southern Presbyterians undoubtedly sought to preserve the gospel in its purity, yet by investing their identities in a particular region, by identifying their public positions as God-ordained, and by allowing their thought to be shaped by the contours of their age, they were bereft of resources to arrest the tides of modernity that swept over the churches in the generations that followed. Instead, if they had recognized that the form of this present age is passing away and that God's kingdom is not to be identified with any nation in this present age but with the work of Christ's church, then leaders such as Dabney could have equipped believers to order their understanding of life in this world correctly—the Christian's highest priority is what he or she does on the Lord's Day in the worship of the church. That is where redemption ultimately happens in Word and sacrament; that is where Christ rules as King; and that is where the Christian pilgrim can find a foretaste of rest from all the jazz and noise and excitement of this weary world. In the eyes of the world, it may not be much. But to the Christian, that is the house of God and the gate of heaven. If Dabney's example can teach Christians this lesson, then we can be grateful for every remembrance of him. And perhaps Dabney himself would be pleased—as a firm believer in the didactic use of history, he would urge us to 'harken to the striking instruction of these instances' of his own life story, even if it meant that the result would be less than flattering to his reputation. After all, he continues to urge those who visit his Hampden-Sydney grave site, 'Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.'"

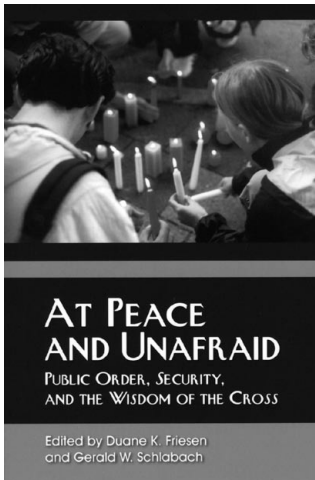
*Robert Lewis Dabney* is the first in a series of American Reformed Biographies, edited by Lucas (Covenant Seminary) and D. G. Hart (Westminster Seminary). ■

**Book recommended:** *Robert Lewis Dabney: A Southern Presbyterian Life* by Sean Michael Lucas (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing; 2005) 245 pp. + notes + index.

# Political faithfulness

## Briefly Noted: Peacemaking in a violent world

by Denis Haack



“Christ-like love,” Robert and Judy Herr write in the Foreword, “must yearn for neighbor, stranger, and enemy alike to live in safety, ‘at peace and unafraid.’” If this sounds like an utopian dream, a vision so impossible that no rational person would adopt it seriously, we are not taking the gospel with sufficient seriousness. There will be wars and rumors of violence until the King of Peace returns to consummate his kingdom, but in the meantime his people must witness to his reign by being peacemakers in a broken world.

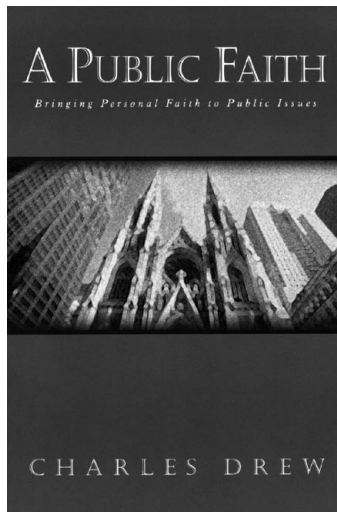
The Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has consistently understood peacemaking to be an essential part of their obedience to Christ. Although there is much in this theological tradition that I find unconvincing biblically, there is much I can learn from their faithfulness in seeking to act as peacemakers. “Questions about the role of Christians in shaping society will never go away,” the Herrs acknowledge. “Christians who resolve to live as peacemakers will continue to struggle with the need for order, wondering whether we can envision structures for order and security that do not rely on violence.”

*At Peace and Unafraid* is a compilation of papers on a variety of practical issues, each author seeking to explore what it means for Christians to work for peace, order and safety in contexts where violence is the norm. The result of a series of consultations and studies launched by the Mennonite Central Committee, this book does not convince me to change my theology, but it reminds me of an important part of Christian faithfulness that I am too easily tempted to ignore.

“Blessed are the peacemakers,” our Lord taught, and if I wish to be called a son of God, I had better take notice (Matthew 5:9). ■

**Book reviewed:** *At Peace and Unafraid: Public Order, Security, and the Wisdom of the Cross* edited by Duane K. Friesen and Gerald W. Schlabach (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press; 2005) 450 pp.

To begin thinking about political faithfulness:



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## **...QUESTIONS CONTINUED (FROM PAGE 7)**

7. "If people would only learn to deal with their imperfections and continue to live their lives," Mellema says, "they would avoid the state of wretchedness that they end up in." Do you agree? Why or why not?
8. One characteristic of our age is the profusion of possible distractions available to us, and the ease with which we can engage them. We no longer need to wait for a newspaper or the next trip to a bookstore for the next crossword puzzle, since we have an unlimited supply a click away on the InterNet. What does this suggest for Christian faithfulness? For accountability in Christian community?
9. How can the concern for Christian faithfulness in the face of so many potential distractions become problematic as a legalism? How can we guard against this danger? Some might argue that the best solution is to assert that distractions aren't that big of a deal, so stop making mountains out of mole-hills in the name of faithfulness and the need to be discerning. How would you respond? How does grace respond to this problem?
10. What other problems arise because of distractions? When do they become legitimately problematic?

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*Critique* is a newsletter (published nine times each year, funds permitting) designed to accomplish, by God's grace, three things:

1. To call attention to resources of interest to thinking Christians.
2. To model Christian discernment.
3. To stimulate believers to think biblically about all of life.

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