

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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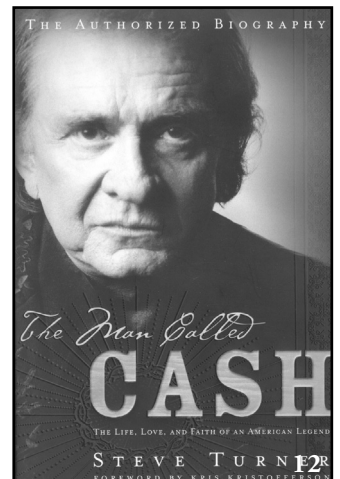
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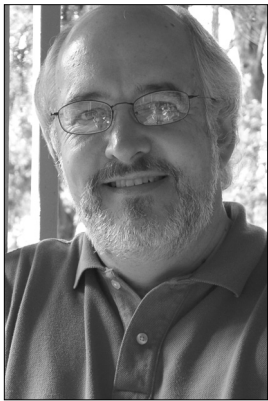
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Editor's Note



Knowing truth, knowing God.

I've been thinking about why so many non-Christians find evangelical Christianity unattractive. There are a number of reasons, but one that keeps being raised is that few Christians demonstrate much that could be called

"spirituality." That immediately raises the question of what "spirituality" includes, of course, which is a conversation well worth pursuing.

On the other hand, the complaint resonates enough within me to be troublesome. I find that for many believers the standard of Christian maturity is believing the right doctrines. It is intellectual, and is measured by a growing knowledge of the Bible and basic theology.

Without denigrating either a growing knowledge of the Bible or basic theology, we need to be reminded that this is an insufficient understanding of Christian faith. Growing in Christ is growing in our relationship with God, not merely increasing our knowledge.

"I find it most helpful," J. I. Packer writes, "to remind myself at the beginning of my devotional period who God is and what I am. That is to say, I remind myself that God is great, transcendent, that he loves me and he wants to speak to me right now. And I recall that I am the original sinner, the perverse and stupid oaf who misses God's way constantly. I have made any number of mistakes in my life up to this point and will make a lot more today if I don't keep in touch with God, and with Christ, my Lord and Savior, as I should.

"There is nothing like a sense of hunger to give one an appetite for a meal, and there is nothing like a sense of spiritual emptiness and need to give me an appetite for the word of God. Let that be the theme of our first minute or two

of prayer as we come to our devotional times, and then we will be tuned in right. God says, 'Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it' (Psalm 81:10).

"The quantity of theological notions in one's mind, even correct notions, doesn't say anything about one's relationship with God. The fact that one knows a lot of theology doesn't mean that one's relationship with God is right or is going to be right. The two things are quite distinct. As a professional theologian I find it both helpful and needful to focus this truth to myself by saying to myself over and over again, 'What a difference there is between knowing notions, even true notions, and knowing God.'"

Did you notice how radically Packer states that? *The quantity of theological notions in one's mind, even correct notions, doesn't say anything about one's relationship with God.*

Perhaps the non-Christians who think we show little spirituality are onto something. Perhaps we've slipped into the error that knowing about God is the same as knowing him.

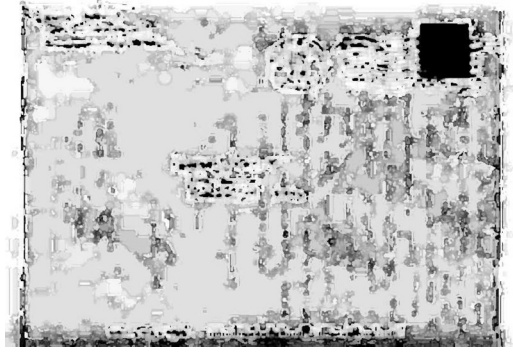
We need to know our Bibles, because Scripture is the only lens through which we can see life clearly enough to be discerning. We need to know truth because we follow The Truth. But we also need to know God, personally as our covenant Father, in an ever deepening relationship. ■

~Denis Haack

Source: *Honoring the Written Word of God: The Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer* (Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Press; 1999) p. 246.

Dialogue

re: Hip Hop 101



Send e-mail to:

letters@ransomfellowship.org

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.

Luke Bobo's thoughtful piece on Hip Hop 101 [*Critique* #9 - 2004] was refreshing. As those called to understand the world we live in, even as we pursue faithful Gospel witness, Christians need to come to grips with this genre of popular music. Yours was a refreshing example of exactly that! I was also happy that you did not (unsympathetically) condemn hip-hop to hell, nor (uncritically) praise it to heaven.

Is there any reason you did not discuss any hip-hop produced by Christians? I think, for example, of a group like Cross Movement (www.crossmovement.org). As you mention in your piece, hip-hop is often unique in its dense lyricism and poetic word play. Imagine wedding that to broadly orthodox, eloquent theological conviction—that's Cross Movement in a nutshell. Listening to this group can bring consummate delight (in the initiated) and cognitive dissonance (in the uninitiated). Is it possible that groups like Cross Movement are a case study in one difference the Gospel can make in our fallen world?

Granted, as we examine hip-hop, we need to think through the relationship between culture, common grace, and human works of creation (e.g. art, film, music). Granted, it's worth asking whether good "theological hip-hop" is theologically anemic, given its narrowly confessional thrust (although, in light of typically vulgar examples of hip-hop on display today, there may be something to be said for such imposed self-limitation). Granted, some (most?) of the hip-hop performed by Christians is just bad, musically and theologically. But I think there's still an interesting story to be told here. I would enjoy hearing your thoughts on this dimension of the conversation. Perhaps that's a project for Hip Hop 102?

Hans Madueme
Deerfield, IL

Luke Bobo responds:

Thank you for your encouraging words and thoughtful question. There are two reasons I didn't discuss rap produced by Christians. First, this was initially an hour-long talk and I had to scratch something. Second, while I have no objections with "holy" hip-hop, I think this sub-genre perpetuates the "us versus them" mindset. In other words, Christian hip-hop seems to suggest a retreat from mainstream culture and not engagement. While "holy" hip-hop has its place, we need Christian artists who will dare to infiltrate the mainstream culture to bring reformation; that is, to be light and salt. For this is where the action is! Young people (Christian, non-Christian, suburban, urban, rural) are listening to mainstream rap predominantly. And as Efreem Smith so aptly points out, Christian rap has had to battle the perception of originating in "hip-hop's farm league." In other words, Christian hip-hop is not ready for prime time and thus, unworthy of a listening ear by most rap enthusiasts (esp. unbelievers). For more on this, see Efreem Smith's article "'Holy' Hip Hop" in *Youth Worker Journal* (Sep/Oct 2004, pp. 18-19).

We also need to ask where Cross Movement's CDs are sold. In Christian bookstores? Will non-believers frequent a Christian bookstore? "Holy" hip-hop and hip-hop in popular culture can both be used to advance God's kingdom. The million dollar question is: aren't we called to transform culture? If the answer is yes, I believe we encourage artists like Cross Movement to bring transformation to this genre with full support of the Covenant community.

Gambling:

When we drive north from our home in southeastern Minnesota to visit our son who lives near the Canadian border, we take a state highway which winds through country towns and past lakes, where in summer we see people fishing from boats and in winter we look out on ice dotted by fish houses. We also pass several casinos, one so huge that it warrants its own stop-light on the highway. We always wonder at the crowded parking lot, the charter buses parked along the edge, and the line of cars maneuvering their way toward the front door. Because Minnesota has a state lottery, the state government sponsors commercials with a toll-free number to get help for problem gambling and commercials urging everyone to play the lottery. Gambling is part of our world, and thus a topic about which we need to be discerning if we are to be faithful.

When I was younger, gambling was-

n't a problem, it was a vice. One of the differences between Catholics and Protestants, I was told, was that Catholics gambled but we didn't because we knew it was a sin. For one thing, it was a slippery slope: play bingo in the fellowship hall at church and before long you'll be plunging your family into debt at a

Gambling is part of our world, and thus a topic about which we need to be discerning if we are to be faithful.

blackjack table in Vegas. Gambling involves covetousness, since if you didn't want your neighbor's money you wouldn't be trying to win it. Besides, the money won by gambling was illegitimate income, since it wasn't earned by work. "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of

outsiders" (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12; see also 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12). Playing cards may use your hands, but it isn't work and any outsider who respected you for winning at gambling wasn't the sort of person whose respect a Christian would want. Have you ever heard of a gambler who gave his winnings to missions? Case closed.

Is that all there is to say on the subject of gambling? Mark Dawson, a friend about to graduate from Covenant Seminary, doesn't think so.

Dawson argues we first must beware of two reactions to this topic, either of which will keep us from being discerning. The first is the easy assumption that since the Scriptures do not directly address gambling, it must therefore be acceptable, so there is no need to think further about it. The second is that since we don't like gambling, since it feels bad to us, it must therefore be unacceptable, so there is no need to think further about it. Christian discern-

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Do you agree with Dawson's three-part understanding of gambling? Why or why not?
2. Has gambling been a part of your life? How? Has it been positive or problematic?
3. What other common arguments have you heard against gambling? How compelling do you find them? Why?
4. The ads for institutional gambling are usually highly fanciful ("win big," "loosest slots in town") and casinos are designed to create a virtual fantasy world which tends to warp time and judgment. Does Proverbs 28:19 speak to this? "He who works his land will have abundant food, but the one who chases fantasies will have his fill of poverty." Why or why not?
5. Given that institutional gambling is a world of manipulation, deception, and rigged odds—can you innocently take part in this world without feeding a system that feeds on others, even if you happen to win?
6. Since lotteries are run by the state, one criticism of them is that they tend to be a hidden tax on the poor. Money flows into state coffers by taking advantage of the poor by raising false hopes for winning. How valid is this argument? Proverbs 14:31 says "He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God." Is this ethical problem sufficient to cause the Christian to oppose all state lotteries? Why or why not?

Questions continued on the next page...

Always a Sin?

ment, Dawson notes correctly, is far more robust and thorough than that.

Gambling can be defined as: when two or more people agree to allow chance, and in some cases skill, determine between them a winner and a loser. The loser agrees to give his property to the winner and the winner agrees to take it.

This means, among other things, that we can clearly distinguish at least three different types of gambling. First, there is *institutional gambling* where people gather at a place of business such as a casino for the purpose of gambling. The lighting is carefully designed to help patrons lose track of time, and the sights and noise that envelopes players are so dazzling that along with drinking,

the gambler's judgment can be easily impaired. Institutional gambling is rigged, so that on average each gambler who enters with \$100 will leave with \$95. That may not look bad, except that the result is designed to make one lose money, but at a pace that keeps people coming back—to lose more.

Second, there is *private gambling* where the individual is not in a social setting but alone, as with a lottery. Lotteries, often run by the state, involve odds designed to separate citizens from their money. One's chance of winning a lottery is usually about twice as remote as dying in a plane crash—on average, a person would have to buy a lottery ticket every day for 74,000 years before expecting to win.

And finally, there is *friendly betting* where friends play games together for which they put money on the line to be won. Examples are golfers playing for a dollar a hole or a poker game where each player begins with \$10 worth of chips. Usually, in such games, the odds are fairer, the amount of money is limited, and nothing is intentionally rigged so that participants are caused to consistently lose.

Now, with that in mind, we are ready to consider a number of questions which can help us be discerning, so we can determine the shape of faithfulness concerning gambling. ■

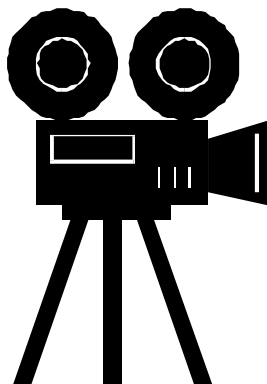
~Denis Haack and Mark Dawson

...QUESTIONS CONTINUED

7. Does the parable of the unwise steward in Matthew 25 apply to the topic of gambling? Why or why not? To what extent do 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 and 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12 speak to the issue? What other texts should be considered?
8. Is friendly betting always wrong? Why or why not? Let's say some friends put money they would normally spend going out to a movie into a pot for the winner of an evening of games. Is this wrong? Why or why not? Since they can talk and enjoy one another for the two hours they would spend in dark silence watching a film, could not an argument be made that the game is a more Christian way to spend an evening together?
9. Under what conditions might friendly betting be out of bounds for the Christian? Why?
10. According to the American Psychological Association people gamble for three main reasons: to win money, to escape (boredom, work, or the normal grind of daily life), or because they are addicted. Let's consider each of the three.
 - a) Some would argue that trying to win money always involves covetousness, and is therefore wrong (Exodus 20:17; Hebrews 13:5). Do you agree? Why or why not? How do we determine when covetousness is involved?
 - b) Is seeking some escape always wrong? Why or why not? If not, when does escape become problematic? If we find ourselves bored, what does that say about us? What is the solution? To what extent do you feel the need to escape from the pressures of life? To what extent do you find yourself bored? In this escape will you be running from your calling? Will you be avoiding the condition of your soul? How do you know?
 - c) What signs of addiction should we be aware of so that we can lovingly hold one another accountable in the Christian community?
11. In what ways are you tempted to covet? In what ways do you most struggle to be content? What plans should you make?
12. Is there anything else about gambling you need to know to be discerning about it? Can Christians who differ on the appropriateness of friendly betting remain in the same church? How? Should a church ever make any form of gambling an offense worthy of church discipline? Why or why not? If yes, under what conditions?

The Darkened Room

The Incredible Incredibles



A review of The Incredibles

by Drew Trotter

The *Incredibles*, Pixar's sixth, and best, of six superb movies, shows how much fun and how inspiring a movie can be, even though it unashamedly centers itself in secular values. The Christian rejoices because those values correspond regularly with the revealed values of Scripture. There is a priceless lesson in this film as we seek to live in a country which appears so divided on "values" issues. The lesson is that the Christian memory, which continues in America today, remains so deep and powerful that, though it appears almost gone in many sectors of our society, a powerful work of art can tap into it, bring it to the surface and create joy and hope under its influence for millions who do not call themselves Christians. Couple this cultural memory with the commanding presence of the natural truths and morals God has always instilled in humanity, and there is much fertile ground in American film for the Christian to plow, sow with Biblical seeds and reap a harvest of Christian thought that is greatly edifying.

The Incredibles begins with everything right in the world of superheroes. Mr. Incredible, a blended caricature of Superman, Batman and James Bond, displays his special gift of strength by saving a kitten from a tree, foiling a bank robbery, and keeping a super-villain from destroying a building, all just in time to get to church for his own wedding. Barrel-chested with a tiny waist and tree trunk legs and wearing a red suit in true superhero fashion, he teams up with Elastigirl (who has the abili-

ty to stretch around the block if necessary) and the two hours seem set to give us an adventurous, happy ride of alternating tense situations, all of which end with the good guys winning and the bad guys losing.

Soon, however, all is not well in superhero land, and thank goodness because Brad Bird, the writer/director, is after something else entirely other than a formulaic children's story of "happy endings from the beginning." Due to a media- and litigation-based crusade against the superheroes, the victims they rescue begin to sue them for damages. All superheroes are forced to take regular jobs and assume normal names as the government outlaws their activity and buries them in a relocation program. The *Incredibles* become, none too subtly, the Parrs. Bob Parr, a.k.a. Mr. Incredible, labors at a desk job in a cubicle he can barely fit in, reflecting wistfully on the good old days as he looks at the newspaper clippings of his heroic deeds. As the film progresses, an evil archenemy named Syndrome lures the family out of hiding with a plan to make himself the only "superhero" available, though he is himself normal and relies entirely on machines. The inevitable showdown occurs after a thrilling set of action and adventure sequences that are as much fun because of their echoes of old James Bond movies, as they are because of the remarkable artistry that the Pixar people demonstrate.

Most of the reviewers of this film, especially the ones who liked it, see the movie's main theme as the affirmation of special giftedness, with a heavy dose of argument against the penchant of American culture today to think of every person's gifts as equally valuable. This augurs a society in which, as Syndrome sneeringly describes it, "everybody will be super, which means no one will be." No doubt this idea ranks high in the focus of the movie. The plot shows

The Incredibles

Credits:

Starring:

Craig T. Nelson

(Bob Parr/
Mr. Incredible)

Holly Hunter

(Helen Parr/Elastigirl)

Samuel L. Jackson

(Lucius Best/Frozone)

Jason Lee

(Buddy Pine/
Syndrome)

Dominique Louis

(Bomb Voyage)

Spencer Fox

(Dashiell 'Dash' Parr)

Sarah Vowell

(Violet Parr)

Director:

Brad Bird

Screenwriter:

Brad Bird

Producers:

John Lasseter

Kori Rae

Katherine Sarafian

John Walker

Original Music:

Michael Giacchino

Cinematographers:

Andrew Jimenez

Patrick Lin

Janet Lucroy

Runtime: 121 min.

Rated PG for action violence.

the triumph of the superhero and the defeat of twisted “mediocrity,” and much of the middle part of the film sets up the despair many feel at the saluting of normality, when everyone knows it is nothing to commemorate. As Bob puts it, when he refuses to attend his son’s “graduation” from fourth grade to fifth, “They keep finding new ways to celebrate mediocrity.”

As important as this theme is to the film, though, *The Incredibles* receives its deepest uplifting punch from the main motivation behind its creation. Bird was quoted in a *New York Times* interview as saying that the film was inspired by his having children and the problems this caused him in his personal life. “I had this goofy movie idea about superheroes trying to balance family with their responsibilities to society...It’s about the danger of looking back to the exclusion of what’s in front of you...On the surface, it’s meant to be a blast, a pretty basic action movie, but below that it’s about some basic issues—getting older, getting married, being a teenager, what it’s like to be in a job you don’t like—all wrapped in superhero

clothing.”

Watching Bob Parr lose his temper when his car door won’t shut, after a long, frus-



The Incredibles blends basic family wit with poignant, real-life circumstances in an engaging, easy-going, comprehensible way.

trating day at the office; listening to the Parrs’ son Dash tease his older sister Violet, and to her tease him back; seeing the worry, then fear, then anger on the face of Helen, Bob’s wife, when she mistakenly thinks Bob may be seeing someone—all these situations bestow a strong dose of reality on this fantasy film that make it easily the most enjoyable “children’s movie” in many a year. The *Shrek* movies depend for much of their humor on slapstick, bathroom jokes, but *The Incredibles* blends basic family wit with poignant, real-life circumstances in an engaging, easy-going, comprehensible way.

With dialogue that is crisp, witty and thoroughly clean, action sequences that rival any in the non-animated action/adventure genre today, and characters who face real challenges that most of us face, this children’s movie is much more than that. It is what a family film is supposed to be: good for the whole family. Enjoy. ■

~Drew Trotter

Dr. Andrew H. Trotter, Jr., is the president of the Center for Christian Study in Charlottesville, VA, where he teaches and writes on theology and culture, focusing on modern American film. Copyright © 2005 by Andrew H. Trotter, Jr.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

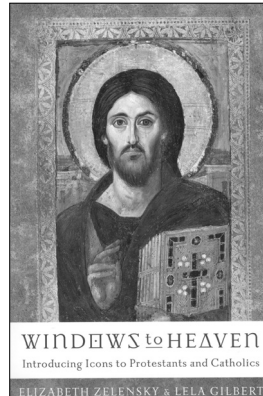
1. What was your favorite scene in the film and why?
2. How realistic are the characters in the movie, especially in light of their being animated and intentionally drawn as caricatures? With which character did you most resonate?
3. What do you think of the way Mr. Incredible treats Buddy at the beginning of the film? Does his not letting Buddy help him, instead brushing him off, contribute to Buddy’s revenge later? Is this OK?
4. There are numerous family situations in the film. Did any of them remind you of past events in your own life? Did you learn any thing new that can make you a better husband, wife, daughter, son?
5. What did you think of the way Bob and Helen relate to each other? What about their relationship was consistent with Christian understandings of marriage? What was inconsistent?
6. How does the film handle the problem of balancing family life with work responsibilities? What ideas can you glean from the movie that could help you balance these in real life?
7. What do you think of the theme of the movie that denies the validity of celebrating normalcy? Aren’t all people equally important? How do you think we should acknowledge the image of God in everyone, yet recognize talents or acts of special merit?

Icons &

It doesn't take much contact with Eastern Orthodox Christianity to realize that icons and their veneration is one thing which distinguishes this tradition from western Christianity. Icons often grace the homes of Orthodox believers, and can overwhelm the senses of someone unused to them in a visit to an Orthodox church. The interior space of Orthodox churches is divided by what is called the iconostasis, a screen of several rows of icons which separate the altar area from the nave, where worshipers gather. The icons are arranged on the iconostasis in a careful order, often in four rows extending from the floor to the high domed ceiling. The icon of a saint whose feast day is being celebrated will be on a stand in the nave. Icons will be kissed by worshipers, who place lit candles before them to symbolize the prayers of the faithful.

It is easy to be dismissive of and react against what we find strange and different. It is not unusual for western Christians to simply assume that Orthodox iconography is a form of idolatry without ever bothering to listen to an Orthodox explanation. That attitude, needless to say, is uncharitable at best, and at worst a practical denial that we cherish both truth and people made in God's image—even if we happen to disagree with them. Now, thanks to *Windows to Heaven*, there is a book which, as the subtitle puts it, was written with the purpose of *Introducing Icons to Protestants and Catholics*. Not only do the authors explain the Orthodox reasoning

behind the use and veneration of icons, they include six color illustrations of icons, walking us through their history and the intricate meaning of their symbols, colors, shapes, and images. In the process Zelensky and Gilbert also address some of the questions that western Christians tend to ask about



icons: Why are they so two-dimensional in perspective? Why are the figures depicted with fixed, rather emotionless facial expressions? Why do Orthodox believers say that icons are not painted but written? How is their veneration different from worship, which should be offered to God alone? And what in Scripture leads the

What does it mean to live out Christ's Lordship in the realm of architecture, interior design, and visual beauty?

Orthodox to believe that this is part of biblical faith?

"Icons are an acutely sensitive reaction to the reality of Christ's incarnation," Zelensky and Gilbert write. "Partly because of concerns about idolatry, and also because of centuries-old fractures in worldwide Christianity, the language of sacred iconography has been nearly lost in the West. The complex and enlightening symbolism, bearing witness to incarnation, to Christian doctrine, to beauty, and to truth, is overlooked. This is a sad loss, since icons and frescoes once served the universal church as 'Bibles without words,' as a means of accessing the transcendent realm through our limited senses. Icons have long been regarded in Eastern

Christianity as 'windows to heaven.'"

A reader doesn't need to find their explanation of icons compelling to be appreciative of *Windows to Heaven*. The chance to think the issue through biblically and historically is a good exercise in doctrinal discernment. The opportunity to learn what the Orthodox actually believe means we can speak about it with accuracy and fairness. And even if we finally disagree with the Orthodox veneration of icons, *Windows to Heaven* helps us gain an appreciation for the history, intricate symbolism, beauty, and thoughtfulness behind the making of icons.

Protestant evangelicals should also use *Windows to Heaven* as an opportunity to rethink our own tradition's approach to visual beauty. We should acknowledge that we have been far too quick to dismiss

considerations of beauty when, as the Orthodox remind us, the God of all truth is also the God of all beauty. Visual beauty is essential to the way creation reflects God's glory, and the architecture and interior design of our homes and churches

can not be considered neutral, as if they don't matter to our faith. To say a building is "practical," for example, is obviously insufficient in itself for the Christian, because utilitarianism is not the final standard for biblical faith. What we see, as well as what we hear as we gather together as God's people for word and sacrament speaks to our view of God. Sadly, sometimes our buildings say the opposite of what we confess to believe. The question *Windows to Heaven* challenges us to consider is: if Christ is Lord of all, what does it mean to live out his Lordship in the realm of architecture, interior design, and visual beauty? The Orthodox take this so seriously that every aspect of their church architecture is root-

Orthodoxy

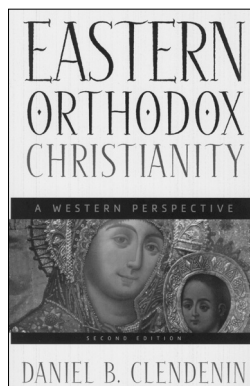
ed in a desire to portray some aspect of Christian truth. For example, Zelensky and Gilbert note that “Orthodox churches are oriented on an east-west axis, with the main entrance on the west and the altar facing east, since the sun, seen symbolically as Christ, the ‘Sun of Righteousness,’ rises in the east.” (Malachi 4:2.) On what basis do we decide about the architecture of our churches?

Eastern Orthodox iconography is also related to the need for quiet, unhurried meditation as a spiritual discipline in the life of a believer. “The Orthodox,” Zelensky and Gilbert say, “have long appreciated the deep value of contemplation and the balance it brings to everyday life. To sit with an icon silently, to allow it to speak its language to the soul and spirit, is to enter a place of retreat. It is to choose not only a visual image but an unspoken message about eternity. It is to glimpse, through a heavenly window, into a world where truth, beauty, and goodness shine like the sun, where the air is full of peace, and where the love of Christ reigns

over all.” All of us who name Christ as Lord will not share Eastern Orthodox convictions about icons, but we share the conviction of needing to wait in unhurried quiet before the Lord.

There is something bracing in having a chance to think through what we believe and why. Of finding that we disagree over something yet still learn from the one with whom we disagree. Of having one’s own convictions not only deepened as a result, but of discovering that there are areas of weakness in our position that need to be addressed. Of learning that there is beauty and a rich complexity of creativity and meaning in Orthodox icons which I now appreciate. *Windows to Heaven* prompted all that, and more in me—and I recommend it to you.

While we are considering Eastern Orthodoxy, the name of Daniel Clendenin is worth remembering. He is on staff with



InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and previously was professor of Christian studies in Moscow. As an evangelical, Clendenin is a superb guide for Protestants who desire to gain an understanding of Orthodox Christianity. He has two books on the topic that have recently been reissued. In *Eastern Orthodox Christianity* he introduces, chapter by chapter, the main motifs of Orthodox history, belief, and practice. And in *Eastern*

Orthodox Theology Clendenin gathers 14 essays by Orthodox thinkers on the primary aspects of Orthodox doctrine, plus one chapter by an evangelical who reflects on the conversion in recent years of numerous evangelicals to Orthodoxy. (For those who own the first edition of these two books, Clendenin has updated demographic data and added an epilogue in *Christianity* and two new readings to *Theology*.) ■

~Denis Haack

Briefly Noted: Orni-Theology



John Stott is a beloved Bible teacher, rector, and theologian who has long loved bird watching. His world-wide speaking ministry has afforded him a chance to study and photograph birds in all corners of the globe, which he has pursued with a quiet passion. “Look at the birds of the air,” Jesus told his hearers in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:26), and then taught some of what we could learn from them. In *The Birds Our Teachers*, illustrated with over 150 of his photos, Stott takes Jesus seriously and continues the theological meditation which Jesus began. “Many Christians have a good doctrine of redemption,” Stott notes, “but need a better doctrine of creation. We ought to pursue at least one aspect of natural history.” If this simple devotional book convinces you to begin such a pursuit, good. But even if it doesn’t, Stott’s love of birds and reflections on God’s glory reflected in his creation will make reading it well worth your while. A great volume to leave on a coffee table or next to the bed in your guest room. ■

Book recommended: *The Birds Our Teachers: Biblical Lessons from a Lifelong Bird-Watcher* by John Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker; 1999) 96 pages.

Book reviewed: *Windows to Heaven: Introducing Icons to Protestants and Catholics* by Elizabeth Zelensky and Lela Gilbert (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press; 2005) 142 pages + 6 pp color illustrations.

Books mentioned: *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective* (2nd edition) by Daniel B. Clendenin (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker; 1994, 2003) 177 pp. + bibliography + indices; and *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader* (2nd edition) edited by Daniel B. Clendenin (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker; 1995, 2003) 272 pp. + bibliography + indices.

Fugitive Pieces

Sadly, much theological writing is dry, ponderous, scholastic, and chock-full of jargon. Yet solid theological writing *can* be bracing, accessible, life-affirming, clear, thought-provoking, and awe-inspiring. If you have no idea what I'm talking about, you haven't read the work of James I. Packer.

Best known for his classic, *Knowing God*, Packer has long taught theology at Regent College in Vancouver. Several things have made me love his writing. He has an unswerving commitment to the Scriptures as the word of God and to historic Christian orthodoxy. He thinks and communicates clearly so that though his scholarship is rigorous, his writing is accessible to the ordinary believer. And lastly, Packer applies his theological reasoning to daily life so that not only are our intellects challenged, but our hearts moved to both worship and obedience.

For many years, Packer has written numerous shorter pieces that have appeared in a wide variety of publications. He refers to them as "fugitive pieces," and now they have been published in *The Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer*, which has four volumes.

Let me give you a taste of Packer's prose. This is from "The Christian and God's World" in the second volume:

"How should the Bible-believers of the secularized West respond to the pressures under which the world puts them? How should they position themselves in relation to politics, economics, poverty,

the arts, conservation, education and the many other spheres of human concern in which sub- and anti-Christian attitudes have become dominant?

"Let me clear the ground by dismissing at once three inadequate responses to

such pressures, all of which were embodied in persons whom we meet in the gospel story and none of which was endorsed by Jesus himself. Palestine was enemy-occupied territory, just as this world is, the Romans being the enemy in the one case and Satan in the other, and different Jews responded to the dominance of the Romans in different ways.

"The Zealots embraced the way of confrontation: they sought the

"Thus, the Zealots never made common cause with the world, the Sadducees never challenged the world, and the Pharisees never got involved with the world. All three attitudes have their counterpart today, as you know.

"But Jesus and the apostles saw none of these paths as proper for Christians in this fallen world. Rather they set before us in essence the original cultural mandate... Discern what is good and what is bad about the world... Understand Christian liberty and responsibility in the world... Distinguish the use from the misuse of the world... Value the people as distinct from the ways of the world."

The latter four points are discussed by Packer in some detail, but including all that here was not possible.

One of the nice things about this set of four books is that they are

Theological writing can be bracing, accessible, life-affirming, clear, thought-provoking, and awe-inspiring.

overthrow of Rome in holy war and the replacing of Rome's rule by a kingdom of saints, in which only loyal Jews would find a place. They showed no interest in the non-political kingdom of God that Jesus preached.

"The Sadducees took the way of compromise: they reasoned that since they could not bear the Romans, they had better join them. So they greedily grasped and hung onto such crumbs of power as the Romans threw them and cynically settled for liquidating Jesus, lest he so disturb things that their little bit of power would be forfeit.

"Finally, the Pharisees followed the path of separation: they withdrew from all associations that they thought defiled them and would not touch any sphere of life in which the Romans were publicly in control.

valuable as additions to our libraries to consult as questions arise. But even nicer is that they consist of 91 pieces short enough to be read in the brief snatches of quiet available to us. Though gathered from a variety of sources where they originally appeared, together they form a nice overview of the theology that should inform our minds, fire our imaginations, and shape our lives.

Packer is always worth reading. Get all four volumes, and watch for more to appear because, thankfully, Dr Packer continues to write. ■

~Denis Haack

Books reviewed: *Celebrating the Saving Work of God* (1998) 235 pp.; *Serving the People of God* (1998) 392 pp.; *Honoring the Written Word of God* (1999) 336 pp.; *Honoring the People of God* (Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Press; 1999) 338 pp.

Blogging Our Hearts Out

An excerpt from Jeremy Huggins on the what|why|how of blogs.

Clearly, there are discussions to be had here, and questions to ask. Blogs can, indeed, provide a voice for the voiceless, provide opportunity for the oppressed, but the fact remains that the opportunity is available only to those with internet access. Will the abuse of blogging lead the church back into a gnostic, a disembodied, spirituality? To an entirely virtual worship-sphere, where the disk tray opens and the wafer and wine pop out? Is there a place for church discipline? For baptism? Tithing through PayPal or other online banking services? Despite its intentions, could this lead to an exclusive, rather than inclusive, kind of worship? We're tired of sappy, nostalgic worship, of ugly chapels with American flags hanging in them and "Christian nation" language, but will these blog communities then exclude those fellow Christians who aren't tired of those things? These are issues that the emergent church is dealing with, and they're using blogs, to a large degree, to do that, and they need to be taken seriously.

In some sense, "Christian" bloggers see themselves as modern Luthers, using technology to place the priesthood back in the laity's hands, and the church, regardless of its position on these issues, needs to recognize the truth in these reactions and statements and handle them lovingly and respectfully—it's not a question of whether this is going to happen, but that it is happening, and how will the "traditional" church respond?

In my experience with younger generations, at least, when we meet people, in order to identify them, we don't care so much about "what you do," but we do want to know who your favorite bands are, what your favorite movies are, and what you're reading. We can now form community based on choices and commonality rather than geography alone.

We can now co-author, create together, rather than simply consume in isolation. With blogs, we can be found, even if no one has any idea where we are. Someone is available at all times.

If I spend 90% of my free time blog-surfing, commenting on blogs, and writing on my blog, as I'm sometimes tempted, and if all my friends are those I know only through the blog, and if I get the majority of my information from blogs, am I a blogger or a human? Or is it possible to be both? This is not to deny the real power of blog communities and blog information, but to affirm the real presence of the body, and the real power of media.

With blogs, we can be found, even if no one has any idea where we are.

In short, the internet is primed itself to become a tool of media. Bloggers are primed, especially, to mediate rather than to live. ... "That's what show business is for," wrote Andy Warhol, "to prove that it's not what you are that counts, it's what they think you are," and blogs, by their format, provide this sort of self-projection, of self-re-creation.

Increasingly, due to media technology, we are beginning to see our lives, our selves, as entertainment, and internet technology is only increasing our potential for this kind of self-creation. Through my blog, I can craft my daily events, edit my image, produce an identity that will appeal to my blog readers. I can put as many photos of myself, even videos of myself, as I want on my blog, but the fact remains that you get what I want you to get, and unless you live next door, you can't challenge me on the veracity of my presentation. An added appeal is that, like the movies, through my blog you can enter into my victo-

ries and defeats and beautiful life moments and anxiety without having to endure them with me, because in the end, you can always turn the webpage or turn the monitor off.

Excepting a computer virus, the blog gives us this very sense of control, facilitates the idea our real selves, our real identities, having more to do with what we can make them rather than what they are. With the blog, we can escape our familial roots, our socio-economic roots, our physically limiting roots and re-create ourselves.

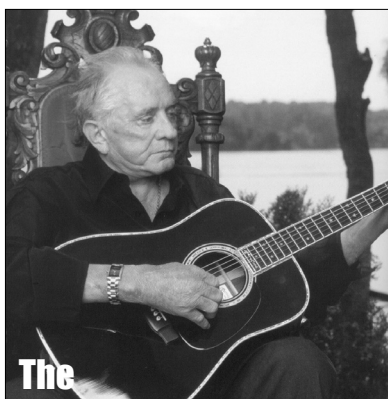
Be it a voice, an image, or a sense of identity, blogs are enabling people to find what they're looking for. I believe that blogs have the potential for beautiful use and awful abuse, and I believe that the questions bloggers are asking, the connections they're trying to make, and the cries they're putting out on the internet all come from the heart. There are some six million bloggers out there, and whether they're representing themselves as honestly as they know how, or whether they're blogging anonymously or pseudonymously, behind the screens and blog templates and html codes are real human beings with real joys and fears and hopes and questions, and we need to listen. ■

~Jeremy Huggins

Intrigued? Still a little confused about the phenomenon of blogging? Read the full article on our website (www.ransomfellowship.org/Article_Blogging.html).

Jeremy Huggins, 30, needs a job, preferably in Portland, preferably related to writing, editing, or publishing, before he graduates with an MFA Creative Nonfiction come June, which is the same month, coincidentally, that he's spent the most time drinking chocolate milk, low-fat and on ice, on the Haacks' back porch. He has mastered the comma-full, cumulative sentence. Copyright © 2005 by Huggins.

Heartbreak



The Life and Songs of Johnny Cash

"I love songs about horses, railroads, land, judgment day, family, hard times, whiskey, courtship, marriage, adultery, separation, murder, war, prison, rambling, damnation, home, salvation, death, pride, humor, piety, rebellion, patriotism, larceny, determination, tragedy, rowdiness, heart-break and love. And Mother. And God."

There is something fine about grace. Just when I think I have it figured out, I am shown that

I can no more capture it than I can hold in my hands a breeze moving through a stand of aspens. I especially like the way it punctures my cynicism, revealing how little I actually believe in the power of grace even though I loudly profess otherwise. Just when I think our culture is so deeply celebrity-drunk that no person of substance can make a difference without being eaten alive, the rich legacy of Johnny Cash reveals otherwise.

Johnny Cash's life and work reveals grace not primarily because he was fond of gospel music, but because his life, revealed in his work, was a testimony to grace. Not because one of his final albums was *My Mother's Hymn Book*, but because he can be explained in no other way. Cash understood pain, addiction, the breakup of marriage, failure, and great loss. His brother Jack's death (for which their father blamed Johnny) when Johnny was 12, was a blow that went to the depths of his soul. He never hid these sorrows but faced them, and with his beloved wife, June Carter, had the grace to face them down.

*There were nights I don't remember
And there's pain that I've forgotten
Other things I choose not to recall
There are faces that come to me
In my darkest secret memory
Faces that I wish would not come back at all*

*In my dreams parade of lovers
From the other times and places*

*There's not one that matters now, no matter who
I'm just thankful for the journey
And that I've survived the battles
And that my spoils of victory are you*

Johnny Cash was born in 1932, but was named J. R. by his parents because they couldn't agree whether to name him John or Ray. When he was 12, as the congregation sang the old hymn "Just as I Am," he went forward in the First Baptist Church of Dryness, Arkansas, to pray to receive Christ as his Savior. When he entered the Air Force at age 18, more than initials were required for military paperwork, so he signed himself John Ray Cash. In 1955, after his stint in the service, he recorded "You're Gonna Cry, Cry, Cry," deciding "Johnny Cash" looked better on the label. Two years later he was introduced to amphetamines by physicians who were happy to prescribe the new miracle drugs to truck drivers and artists who needed to stay awake on the road. In 1959 Cash gave a concert at San Quentin prison, where Merle Haggard was in the audience. "He captured the entire prison," Haggard recalls. "I don't think there was a guy in the entire joint who didn't like Johnny Cash when that show was over." A decade later Cash returned to San Quentin and recorded one of the finest albums of his career.

Cash proposed to June Carter on stage in London, and they were married in 1968, a month before Martin Luther King was assassinated. They were deeply in love, a love that never wavered in commitment even in the dark days of addiction, recovery, and failure that were yet to come. In subsequent years Cash had a weekly television show, starred in (largely forgettable) movies, and befriended Billy and Ruth Graham, appearing as a guest at several of Graham's crusades. In 1980 Cash was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame, and a year later was attacked by an ostrich on his ranch, which broke several ribs and tore open his abdomen. In 1983 his family intervened, taking him to the Betty Ford Center to deal with his continuing struggles with addiction.

& Grace

In 1993 he recorded "The Wanderer," in Dublin with U2, which was released on their album, *Zooropa*. In 1997 he published *Cash: The Autobiography*, which is worth reading for its honesty, plain speech, and heart-felt celebration of grace in the midst of a broken, pain-filled life. It is a story told simply and with deep gratitude. In 2003, June Carter Cash was hospitalized, and then died. On May 18, family, musicians, and a multitude of friends and admirers gathered for her funeral, and on September 12, 2003, Johnny followed her to the promised land they had often sung about together. A few weeks before his death, Cash was awarded an MTV award for his video "Hurt," a song originally by Nine-Inch Nails, but made his own in the way only Johnny Cash could accomplish. Bono says "it's perhaps the best video ever made." Emmylou Harris says the video "puts all those bare-navel, soft-porn videos to shame. It shows videos can actually have a profound effect on us, and it took Johnny Cash to once again show that. It's come full circle, because when he first came on the scene with that power, he was all that rock & roll could be."

*I will let you down
I will make you hurt
If I could start again
A million miles away
I would keep myself
I would find a way*

When I hear that someone famous has died, I receive the news more as a sound bite than as something which moves me. But when I heard that Johnny Cash had died, I grieved, and considered wearing a black armband. The music world had lost a legend, America had lost a great man, and the church had lost a saint.

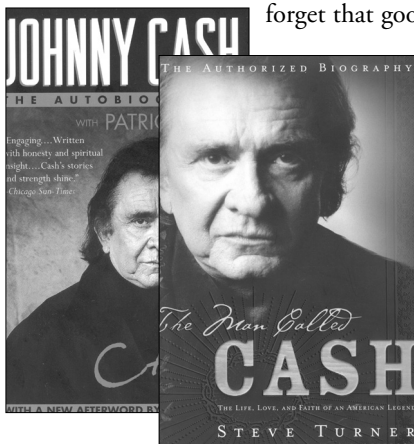
I am not capable of adequately summarizing Cash's legacy, but to my mind, at least, it includes a number of lessons we forget to our peril:

The effects of gifts can exceed what we ordinarily expect. "As with many legends in popular music," Steve Turner writes in *The Man Called Cash*, "it's not easy to say exactly what made Cash great. He never became a great guitarist, his voice had a limited range, and his lyrics veered between poetry and doggerel. But the combination of that voice, those words, and that guitar far exceeded the greatness of any one element. He was a presence, a form of energy, a vehicle for truth."

I wonder why it is so easy to forget how a true gift, faithfully used, can transcend what we would imagine or expect. Perhaps we're so programmed to equate success with extraordinary things we forget that good can come from simple things.

When we love someone enough, for example, to give them the gift of unhurried time. Or what happens when we simply listen to someone, and walk beside them after they have disappointed themselves, and us. We forget that greatness has less to do with the spectacular than it does with compassionately and faithfully using whatever gifts we have, no matter how ordinary they seem to be.

Johnny Cash can be criticized as a musician on all sorts of grounds, but those insights, no matter how learned, are meaningless if they dismiss him. "I think we can have recollections of him," Bob Dylan says of Cash, "but we can't define him any more than we can define a fountain of truth, light, and beauty. If we want to know what it means to be mortal, we need look no further than the Man in Black. Blessed with a profound imagination, he used the gift to express all the various lost causes of the human soul. This is a miraculous and humbling thing."



by
**Denis
Haack**

Tuned In cont.

Authenticity matters. Johnny Cash was simply himself, clay feet and all, and had such a deep confidence in grace that he felt no need to hide. “He wrote of sin, not as it affected other people, but as something with which he’d become intimately acquainted,” Turner notes. “Cash was fond of saying that the only reason he didn’t carry a burden of guilt for his errors was because he figured that, if God had forgiven him, the least he could do was to forgive himself.”

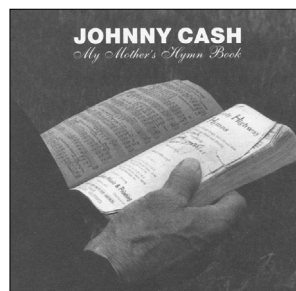
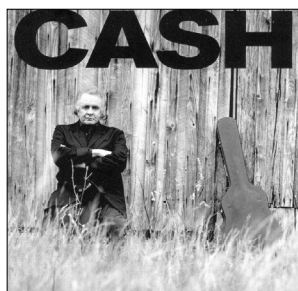
It is true that he was an imposing man physically, but the authenticity with which he lived his life had a far greater impact than his size or famous growl when someone crossed him. Bono recalls a time when he visited the Cash home, and June Carter prepared dinner. They sat down, and Cash asked them all to bow their heads, and then “said the most beautiful, poetic grace.” After saying amen, Cash said to Bono, “Sure miss the drugs, though.” The moment impressed Bono. “He just couldn’t be self-righteous,” Bono says. “I think he was a very godly man, but you had the sense that he had spent his time in the desert. And that just made you like him more.”

Christianity is not made more attractive by being sentimentalized. Nor does a life of faith mean that problems will evaporate, doubts will vanish, and that all our kids will grow up in ways we prefer. Authenticity is attractive because it is real, and because grace is meaningless unless it heals what is truly broken.

Stories are worth hearing. Not many of us will write a biography, and

that is as it should be. Every one has a story worth telling, however, if for no other reason than it is only in telling it that we see how it relates to The Story of what God is doing in history.

Cash: The Autobiography is a lovely book, and a story we need to read. It’s



This is a man who does not simply sing about grace, he believes in grace and has been shaped by it.

simply told, and as I read I had the impression Cash was sitting beside me, talking. It’s the sort of book I’d happily give to either Christians or non-Christians.

Steve Turner, author of *Amazing Grace: The Story of America’s Most Beloved Song*, was given permission by Johnny Cash to write an authorized biography. Sadly, Cash died just before they were to begin working on it together. Cash’s family and friends cooperated with Turner, and *The Man Called Cash: The Life, Love, and Faith of an American Legend* is a wonderful book. It is especially significant that Turner shares Cash’s faith, and like Cash, is able to speak of it in a fresh, natural way without being “religious.”

Little things count. One of the tributes to him included in the book

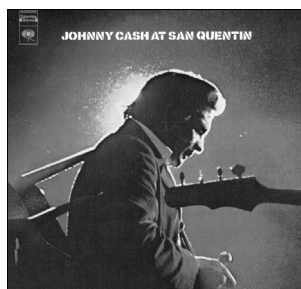
published by the editors of *Rolling Stone* is by Mark Romanek. He worked as director on the video “Hurt” which Cash made just prior to his death. Romanek mentions that Cash was moved by the song because he had lost friends to addiction and had struggled with it himself.

He notes how obviously in love Johnny and June Carter were, since they were both in the studio as the video was being filmed. And then he mentions a small detail. “Johnny was also extremely generous,” Romanek says, “he autographed about thirty-five vinyl copies of *The Man Comes Around* as a parting gift to the crew, who were in awe. That had never been done by any of the forty artists I’ve worked with.”

Great music is powerful. I cannot imagine what it is like being an inmate in a prison like San Quentin, but listening to *Johnny Cash at San Quentin* still transports me out of the narrow horizons of my life. Cash’s song, “A Boy Named Sue,” always struck me as rather silly, but when he sings it here to the cheers of the inmates, the lyrics suddenly take on added significance. And when he includes the old hymn “There’ll be Peace in the Valley,” he doesn’t have to preach to make it clear that he believes hope in such a place is found in Jesus Christ. “He brought Jesus Christ into the picture,” Merle Haggard says, “and he introduced Him in a way that the tough, hardened, hard-core convict wasn’t embarrassed to listen. He didn’t point no fingers; he knew just how to do it.”

Some of the hymns on *My Mother’s Hymn Book* aren’t favorites of mine. A few are too sentimental for my taste, shaped by revivalist and pietist tendencies in American evangelical Christianity.

Still, I like them when Johnny Cash sings them. They fit his life and his faith, and he sings them in a voice grown old, but with an unmistakable authenticity. This is a man who does not simply sing about grace, he believes in grace and has been shaped by it.



to be compassionate, and to search for truth," Turner concludes. "The realm Johnny Cash lived in was clouded by pain and colored by grace. He had the ability to transform the rough and commonplace into objects fit for heaven, just as he had been transformed."

We will not understand Christian faith, nor engage our postmodern world with the gospel unless we embrace beauty with the same passion with which we embrace truth. Music is not just entertainment, but essential to life. Even if you don't like the music of Johnny Cash, listening to it with ears that hear will help you get just how essential it is.

*We walked troubles brooding wind
swept hills
And we loved and we laughed the
pain away
At the end of the journey
When our last song is sung
Will you meet me in heaven someday? ■*

"Cash encouraged people to be honest, to have integrity, to fearlessly explore within,

~Denis Haack

Books recommended:

The Man Called Cash: The Life, Love, and Faith of an American Legend (the authorized biography) by Steve Turner (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, Thomas Nelson; 2004) 247 pp. + chronology, discography, bibliography, notes, index.

Cash: The Autobiography by Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr (New York, NY: Harper; 1997) 404 pp. + discography.

CDs recommended:

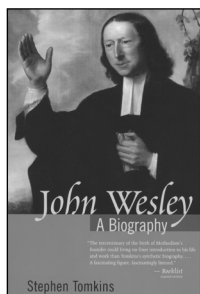
Johnny Cash at San Quentin: The Complete 1969 Concert (Columbia; 1969, 2000).

Johnny Cash: Unchained (American; 1996).

Johnny Cash: My Mother's Hymn Book (American; 2004).

Briefly Noted: John Wesley

by Denis Haack



I have long appreciated the zeal with which John Wesley traveled and preached, and am grateful that God used him. I respect his ability to organize newly converted Christians into small groups, where they could grow in an accountable community of fellowship. There are, on the other hand, aspects of his theology (perfectionism) which I find deeply troubling and for which I find no biblical support. So, when a new biography appeared, I read it eagerly, hoping to find my appreciation for the man deepened. That was not to be, but it is also the main reason why I am glad I read it. The book reminded me how God uses flawed servants to accomplish his will, which is a grace that causes me to be very grateful. The reason is that because of this grace, God might be pleased to use the likes of me. *John Wesley: A Biography* is well written, with brisk prose and a lively sense of story-telling. The author does not sentimentalize Wesley, but tells us of his life, warts and all. ■

Book recommended: *John Wesley: A Biography* by Stephen Tomkins (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2003) 200 pp. + notes + index

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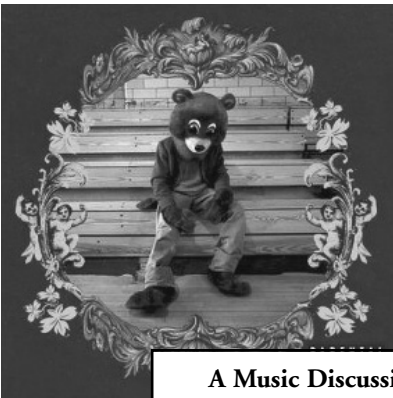
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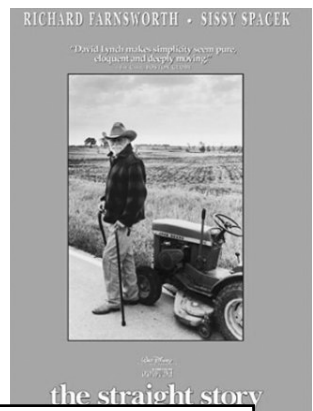
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2. To model Christian discernment.
3. To stimulate believers to think biblically about all of life.

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