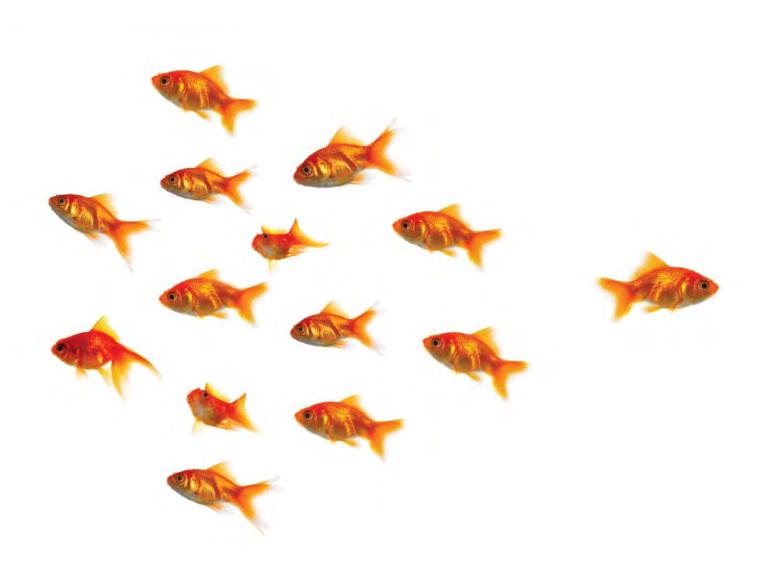


BOOKS: The Imperfectionists, The Killing of Crazy Horse,
Empire of the Summer Moon, The Insulted and Injured, Cross and Crescent,
Islam: A Short Guide, A Common Word, Eat This Book
MUSIC: Monsters of Folk

IUSIC: Monsters of Folk

ON BEING MISUNDERSTOOD



CRITIQUE



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ABOUT CRITIQUE

Critique is part of the work of Ransom Fellowship founded by Denis and Margie Haack in 1982. Together, they have created a ministry that includes lecturing, mentoring, writing, teaching, hospitality, feeding, and encouraging those who want to know more about what it means to be a Christian in the everyday life of the twenty-first century.

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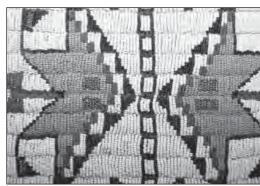
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FROM THE EDITOR: WINGS NOT WALLS

Bulwarks of safety

by Denis Haack



Walls have been in the news. At various places along America's southern border the U.S. government is erecting a border fence to try to stem the tide of drugs and undocumented workers from Mexico. Israel is building a wall around the West Bank, a 26-foot tall, 470-mile structure of concrete, steel and barbed wire when completed. For decades the Berlin wall symbolized the very worst of what humanity was capable of. On the ceiling of our living room in Toad Hall is a short length of rusty barbed wire, a remnant from the wall that during the Cold War divided Austria from Czechoslovakia along the bank of Danube outside the city of Bratislava.

Walls are an ancient invention. Many great cities were fortified with massive walls—Babylon, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Vienna, Warsaw—and history is replete with stories of sieges and battles ending when the walls of a city were breached. It is a poignant image that J. R. R. Tolkien used to good effect in his epic tales of The Fellowship of the Ring. Today in free societies those with money build gated communities, withdrawing into a circle of safety leaving less moneyed neighbors to deal with the less respectable problems of society.

Walls protect, keep marauders and the riffraff at bay, and shelter those who have the good fortune to be inside. For good reason did the Hebrew poet celebrate the walls of Jerusalem (Psalm 48). The metaphor is so strong in the biblical imagination that such walls can be used to picture salvation itself (Isaiah 26:1; 60:18).

There are two problems with walls: they can be breached and they isolate. The possibility of breaching provides the reason why walls must be built well and adequately defended. The fact that walls isolate is a reason why in some cases they should not be erected at all.

The trouble is that walls are usually thrown up when people feel threatened and insecure, which is not necessarily a good time for careful reflection. The menace is on the horizon, a warning has been sounded, and so the wall is erected. Only later do we recognize that our sense of heightened security has arrived with increased isolation—being inside the wall means we've left some outside.

Walls can be made of wood or stone, steel or electrified wire, earth or bricks. They can also be constructed from attitudes that exclude, language known only to insiders, activities that leave out outsiders, or spaces that feel unsafe for those who are different. These more ethereal walls may not seem as forbidding as the ones constructed of massive blocks of granite but they can be as effective. The ones erecting them may not even be fully aware of what they are doing, but the move to isolate themselves within a guarded circle of likeminded compatriots is still sustained. The sense of threat is lessened—to us, to the truth. and to our children—and what can be wrong with that?

What can be wrong is that it is antithetical to Christian faith. Even in the cause of safety we are called not to isolation but to follow our Lord into the world in his incarnation, to a place not of security but of the cross. And so our prayer should be:

Shelter us not with walls that exclude: but with your widespread wing.

It is actually the only truly safe place for the redeemed in a fallen world. ■

Source: Common Prayer by Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Enuma Okoro (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; 2010) Liturgy for October 18, p. 484.

DIALOGUE: READERS RESPOND



To the editor: Oh. Wisdom.

I thought last issue's editorial ["A Beautiful Woman," Critique 2011:5] was going to be about me, in spirit, you know.

Nice to see Trotter, Jones, Seel, and Grooms here again. I did have a question about Greg Groom's glowering author pic. Did he escape from *True Grit* or has he just been in Texas too long?

As always, your friend, M. L. Haack Toad Hall Rochester, MN To the editor:

Hi there. I wanted to say thank you, this Thanksgiving (I'm a Canadian, so it's Thanksgiving here today). I've appreciated many of the articles on the Ransom website, and also your workshops at L'Abri Conferences. I just finished university this spring and went on the job hunt without much

success. I'm working now, thankfully, as a cabinet-maker (and more often laborer on various construction sites). I was reading your article "The Work of Art" in the 2010:3 issue of Notes from Toad Hall, and it provided really, really valuable insight into my new situation.

I'm going to put a donation in the mail for you once I get my next paycheque—it won't be much but I hope it helps you out some.

Thanks again for your ministry! Martin Wightman

Margie Haack responds: Martin:

That's really, really kind of you to include us in your Thanksgiving. It is very encouraging to hear some articles have helped you. Congratulations on finishing university. I hope there is grace and reward for you in cabinet-building—probably not what you trained for? We know the discouragement people can face in being under-employed or in not finding employment. After four years of searching, our son-in-law has only this year found a position teaching art that at least brings a steady income to their family.

In so many ways, it has been our calling at Ransom to trust God to meet our needs—he has always been faithful. Not necessarily in the way we'd thought. And it is always humbling when those who don't have much, share with us. So thank you and we pray you would be blessed in return.

Thanks, too for taking the time for contact.

From the editor: A correction

In Critique 2011:4 Timothy Padgett wrote an insightful piece, "Media Bias and Nurturing Wisdom." It's one of those essays that shed light on an important yet ordinary slice of life while giving us good reasons to hope that by grace we can grow so as to show the watching world a better understanding of human flourishing.

As readers know, we include a small thumbnail photo of each author near the end of their piece. The photo we appended to Timothy's piece, however, is not him. In fact, I have no idea who it is or where the photo came from. (Does anyone recognize this person?) The only thing that makes me feel a little better about our error is that Timothy didn't notice the errant pic until a friend of his asked about it.

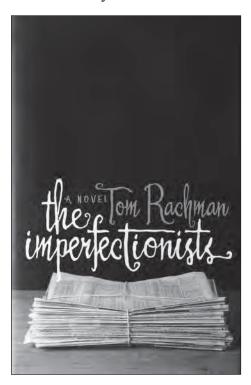
In any case, we apologize for the error, and include the real pic of the real Timothy Padgett, here. ■



PAPER & CANVAS: THE IMPERFECTIONISTS

Lives barely connected, unwinding

A review by **Denis Haack**



I doubt The Imperfectionists will be remembered as the defining novel of the early 21st century. It is, however, a good read, full of humor, surprise, and insight—insight into the human condition and our postmodern world. The plot centers on a once great newspaper now in decline, though noting that is misleading. The story is not really about that newspaper or about the changes occurring today as digital media challenges the dominance of print. It is about the very flawed people caught in this transition, people yearning for love and meaning and a sense of significance who are more like us than we probably would care to confess.

In *The Imperfectionists*, journalist Tom Rachman's debut novel, we enter the world of a dying newspaper, each character in the novel playing some role in its publication—from editor to financial officer to reporter to reader to obituary writer. The novel is divided into eleven chapters, one for each of eleven characters. Each character is different, considered singly so that each chapter almost seems to be a short story, yet each character's story intersects with the newspaper and thus with one another in both obvious and surprising ways. The *Imperfectionists* is the story of eleven flawed people who wonder where meaning can be found in a world so badly broken that even old certainties seem uncertain.

The Imperfectionists is a postmodern novel. It is postmodern in form: Rachman does not follow a single story line, but weaves together something of a larger narrative by the intertwining of the characters' stories. It is postmodern in meaning: it's the local individual stories that really count, not the larger narrative about the newspaper itself. And it is postmodern in its prose: Rachman brilliantly captures something of the irony, fragmentation, busyness, mobility, global diversity, and connected loneliness of our postmodern world.

Arthur's cubicle used to be near the watercooler, but the bosses tired of having to chat with him each time they got thirsty. So the watercooler stayed and he was moved. Now his desk is in a distant corner, as far from the locus of power as possible but nearer the cupboard of pens, which is a consolation.

He arrives at work, flops into his rolling chair, and remains still. This persists until inertia and continued employment cease to be mutually tenable, at which point he wriggles off his overcoat, flicks on the computer, and checks the latest news reports.

No one has died. Or, rather, 107 people have in the previous minute, 154,000 in the past day, and 1,078,000 in the past week. But no one who matters. That's good—it has been nine days since his last obit, and he hopes to extend the streak. His overarching goal at the paper is indolence, to publish as infrequently as possible, and to sneak away when no one is looking. He is realizing these professional ambitions spectacularly.

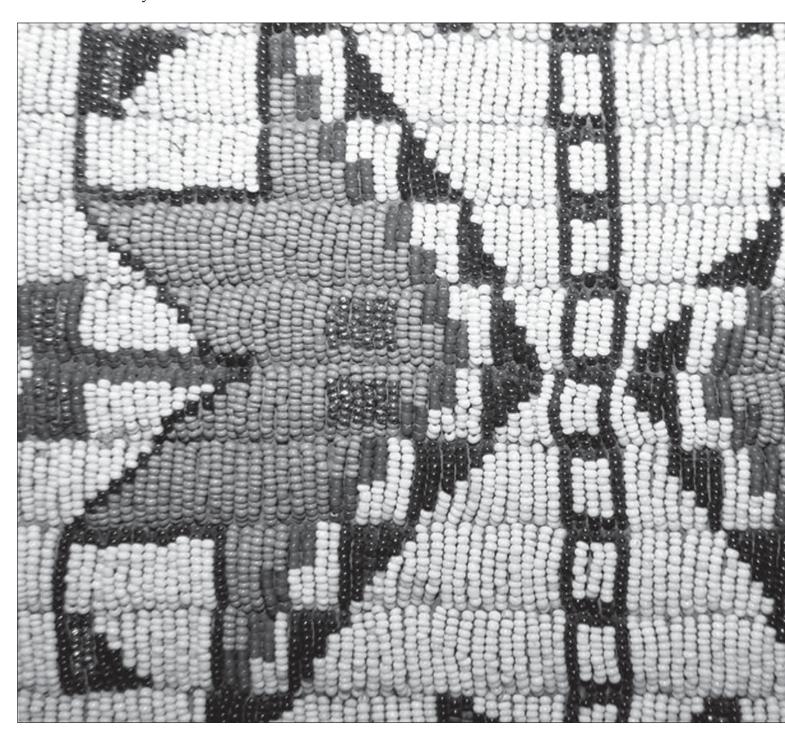
Arthur Gopal writes obituaries for a living, little summaries of lives after they have ceased living, about people he does not know and does not really care about except as a way to make a living in a way that seems petty, caught up in office politics over pieces of writing that do not seem to matter. It is a credit to Rachman's giftedness as a storyteller that I cared about Arthur, and about the other very imperfect characters that populate *The Imperfectionists.* ■

Novel recommended: The Imperfectionists by Tom Rachman (New York, NY: The Dial Press; 2010) 272 pp.

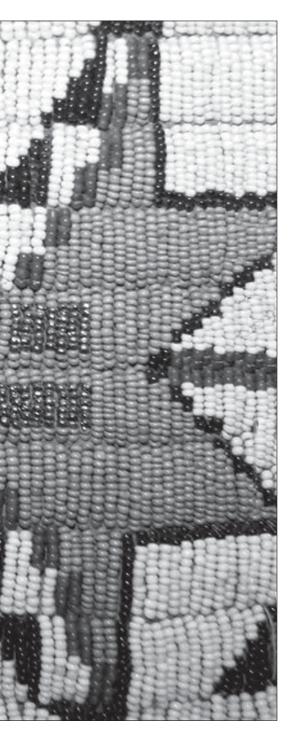
RESOURCES: TWO ON NATIVE AMERICANS

A deadly clash, an

Book reviews by **Denis Haack**



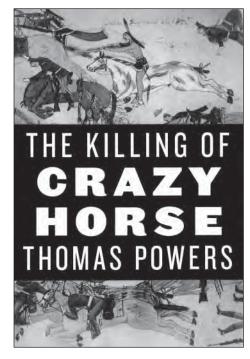
unfinished story

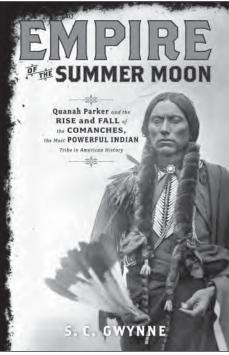


By the middle years of the 19th century white European immigrants had spread across the eastern half of what is today known as the continental United States. They had moved inland, westward, steadily, taking possession of what seemed in their eyes to be a vast wilderness that would be improved if owned and tamed by those who would cultivate and civilize it. The frontier at the western edge of this migration was inviting (for land could be had for the taking), but also dangerous (uncivilized tribes of natives existed who needed to be brought under control if law and order was to be preserved and extended).

In the north as whites settled Minnesota and Nebraska they came up against the traditional lands of the Sioux, which stretched from The Black Hills in the Dakotas through Wyoming to the Big Horn and Yellowstone Rivers in Montana. In the south as whites settled eastern Texas they came up against the traditional lands of the Comanche, which included part of Oklahoma, all the Texas panhandle into New Mexico, and down to the border of Mexico. Both the Sioux and the Comanche were plains Indians. This meant they were expert horsemen, skilled nomads used to hunting game over the vast expanses of their land, and fierce fighters for whom courage in war was a coveted distinction in a warrior culture. By this time the whites had skipped past this frontier to occupy the west coast from Washington to California, so although their territory was massive, the Sioux and Comanche were essentially trapped, hemmed in by a population determined to settle a

Sioux beaded saddle blanket, circa 1910





continent they believed was rightfully theirs. If there were a way to turn back from the abyss that followed, no leader on either side would find how to institute it. Instead, warfare, duplicity, kidnapping, torture, hunger, and forced resettlement were unleashed, the results of which continue to haunt us today, as a people (we are still divided) and as a nation (which still operates on the basis of self-interest, so that greed for resources will cause us to break solemnly ratified treaties).

n The Killing of Crazy Horse, Thomas Powers, a Pulitzer winning journalist best known for his writing on the intelligence community, tells the story of the Sioux. Crazy Horse was the final chief to agree to Washington's demand that the Indians give up their horses, guns, land and settle in agencies where they would be supplied food by the government. By this time it was well known that the promise of food was tenuous at best. Rarely was there enough and, whenever officials in Washington wanted further concessions or a new treaty from the tribes, the supplies would cease altogether. By the time Crazy Horse gave himself up, the tension on both sides was at a breaking point. As soldiers and Fast Thunder, Crazy Horse's cousin, escorted him to the guardhouse at Camp Robinson, a scuffle broke out in the crowd surrounding them and Crazy Horse was stabbed. He died later that night.

n Empire of the Summer Moon, S. C. Gwynne, a journalist with the *Dallas Morning News* tells the story of the Comanche. Quanah Parker was the son of Cynthia Ann Parker, a woman who had been kidnapped by the Comanche during a raid of the family's home in Texas that lay in land long claimed by the Comanche. Rescue attempts failed, and her son, Quanah rose to become a respected and powerful warrior chief among her adopted people. The warfare between whites and the Comanche stretched on for four bloody decades, Quanah outliving the conflict to become a successful businessman and popular personality, living in Star House, a massive ten-room ranch-house he built on an

extensive piece of land he came to own in Oklahoma.

Both *Killing* and *Empire* are worth reading. Both tell a story within a wider story, the lives of Crazy Horse and Quanah Parker becoming the excuse to write a history of the Sioux and the Comanche within the historical and cultural context of their times. Unlike what I was told in school, all the tribes are *not* essentially indistinguishable, and learning about both tribes was a fascinating trip into the past. Gwynne's writing (in *Empire*) tilts a bit towards the exclamatory while Power's (in *Killing*) maintains the quiet voice of a careful historian, but both are easily accessible, well researched, and essentially read like good novels.

One of the things mandated by Christian faith is a refusal to accept uncritical or indulgent histories that hide aspects of the story we find embarrassing. The Bible tells the stories of heroes, but is unflinching in allowing us to see their clay-footedness. We honor David, second king of Israel as man after God's own heart without forgetting he was an adulterer and murderer. We accept Peter's writing as inspired and holding apostolic authority without ignoring the fact he denied Christ not just once but three times. We know the world is fallen, and so assume that the record of history will reflect something of both the glory and the brokenness of humankind. So it is here. The Sioux, the Comanche, the whites moving into their lands, and the officials in Washington overseeing the process all share responsibility for what transpired, and no party comes away from the encounter without guilt on their hands. And on both sides there were individuals who tried to rise above the fray and speak a word of reconciliation but their voices did not carry the day.

It is also true—and important to say clearly—that the treatment of both the Sioux and the Comanche by our government is a sad and regrettable episode in our nation's history. Washington broke treaties that they had written and insisted upon when Washington decided they wanted more from the Indians, and callously withheld food until the chiefs acquiesced. Stripped of their dignity, way of life, and livelihood, both tribes

endured slaughter and finally were herded onto land the whites found undesirable, land that could never sustain them, forcibly making them permanent wards of the government. The irony is that Washington claimed to be the civilized side, civilized by Christian faith. But they did not heed the word of the prophets. "Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own... Because you have plundered many nations, all the remnant of the peoples shall plunder you" (Habakkuk 2:6, 8). "Happier were the victims of the sword than the victims of hunger, who wasted away, pierced by lack of the fruits of the field" (Lamentations

I am deeply grateful for having read both The Killing of Crazy Horse and *Empire of the Summer Moon*. They provided stories that absorbed me for many happy hours with prose so good I occasionally read sections aloud to whoever was in earshot. They introduced me to people who lived remarkable lives in regions that are characterized by both great beauty and extreme weather. They informed me of a people who no longer exist, at least in the way they did in the 19th century, and whose culture and skills were finely tuned to living in regions so vast and demanding they swallowed up many wandering souls without a trace. They remind me of how important it is to listen, especially when someone believes and lives very differently than I do, remembering that for all their differentness they are fellow creatures of God, made in his image. And they help provide a bit of historical and cultural context to stories still in the news, as events that transpired so long ago continue to make ripples we feel today. And that helps shape both my prayer life and my understanding of what Christian faithfulness looks like in 21st century America. ■

Recommended books:

The Killing of Crazy Horse by Thomas Powers (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf; 2010) 467 pp. + notes + index

Empire of the Summer Moon: Quanah Parker and the Rise and Fall of the Comanches, the Most Powerful Indian Tribe in American History by S. C. Gwynne (New York, NY: Scribner; 2010) 319 pp. + notes + bibliography + index.

TUNED IN: CRITICS (IV)

When musicians raise questions about faith

A music review by Justin Sembler



In the fall of 2009, I found myself at a stalemate with my collection of music. Nothing in my nine gigs of iTunes was calling out to me and I was not making an effort to reach out to it. This wasn't junk pop, mind you, these were bands in which I had invested much time, money, and emotional energy, bands that spoke to my brokenness and the things that I was grieving as losses in my life. It's not even that they didn't still sound good. I had just explored the depths of the lyrics and music to most of these bands as far as I could go and I had nothing left.

To the best of my ability I seek to purchase music that I can pull out in 20 years and still be drawn into the message that is being conveyed. This is why I believe U2 is the greatest band over the last 30 years. Their music doesn't age.

Enter Monsters of Folk. Their music doesn't just grab your attention—it demands that you pay close attention. The music matches the message as well as any band I have ever listened to. "His Master's Voice" is one of those songs (track 15 on Monsters of Folk, 2009). Sung with a melancholy that holds true to the message, the listener cannot help but be transfixed.

Mohammed rolling dice with Christ at twilight

And they hear their master's voice... they run to do their chores At Master's calling *Their job tonight: rewrite the Bible* For a whole new generation of non-believers

The pastor screams out to the crowd: "There's evil that must be put down!" And it touches the soldier boy... he heeds his master's voice... His life is calling.

Sweet soldier boy... the speaker is bleeding... He hears his master's voice... do you hear your master's voice? Calling...like the lady siren's call.

Sweet soldier quiet, just staring at the ceiling...

And he hears his master's voice... he hears the call to war... The siren's singing

Out on the line, there's something that strikes his side

And he sees his inner child... he hears his mother's voice... Softly calling.

Spirit soldier's mother hovers... she holds up a paper cup... And the sound of life and love fills her ear.

You're only gonna hear what you want to hear...

Do you hear your master's voice now?

Mohammed and Christ speak twice as nice...

But the one that I like best, he sings inside my chest...

I hear my master calling... Calling out...Calling out...Calling out...Calling out...

The message is one of conflicting truth claims. Is it Islam or Christianity that has the truth? If it is Christianity, which brand of Christianity? Is it the kind of Christianity that drives nonbelievers away, or does it "call" out to them and "touch" them in a way that gives them a desire for change and action.

Perhaps the major issue is raised in the first verse. "Their job tonight: Rewrite the Bible / For a whole new generation of non-believers." The question being asked is this: Is the Bible relevant to generations of unchurched and those who are on the fringes of our churches? Is the Bible irrelevant, or the way that the Bible is perceived or being taught, in circles that are described in this song?

For sure, disillusionment is being communicated. The contrast between the screaming pastor's influence on the boy and that of his mother's is glaring. At the end of the day, when death comes to our door, as it does to this boy, will we hold on to our anger and the anger of others or will we long to be with the one that loves us best? The mother here is "softy calling," the way the gospel calls to us, not with anger and resentment, but with gentleness and respect for our dignity and the love of the one whose image we bear, God our Father.

As Christians, when we listen to "His Master's Voice," we should be willing to point out truth where it is communicated. We should also be willing to think critically and admit that the church bears some of the responsibility for the way in which she is viewed today. For as often as we have been the salt of earth, we have nonetheless managed to be acidic in our approach to who is right and who is wrong. ■

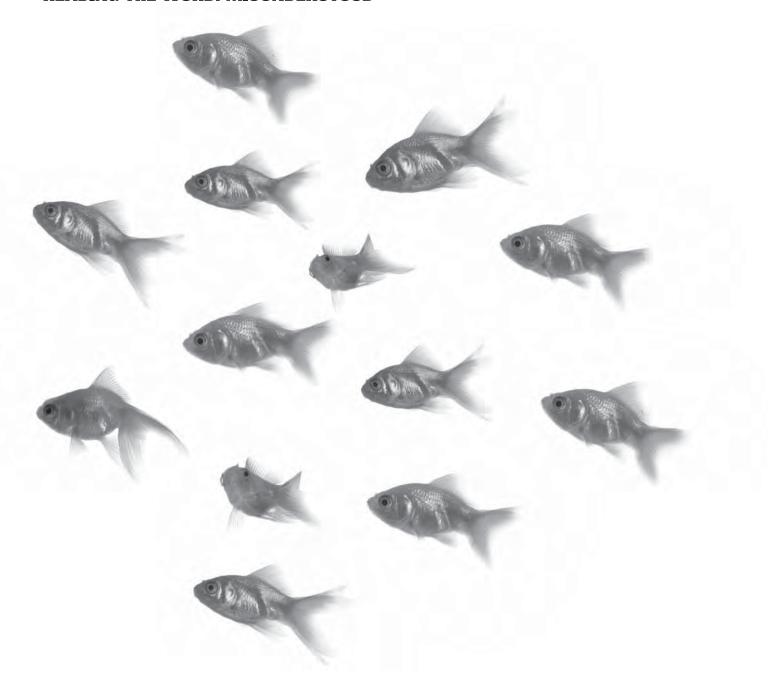
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Justin Sembler is pastor of 1st Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Cedar Grove, Wisconsin, and a graduate of Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis. He

and his wife, Wendy, enjoy discussing music and movies when they are not too tired from chasing their three active boys, Riley, Elijah, and Lukas. Justin's first concert experience was an ELO (Electric Light Orchestra) show with his dad when he was 2 years old.

READING THE WORD: MISUNDERSTOOD





SINIFRSTAN

By Denis Haack

Being misunderstood, especially by somebody you care about, can be very frustrating. I remember that the first time I asked Margie to go out resulted in a huge misunderstanding.

It happened like this—at least this is how I remember it. We were both students at the University of Minnesota, and though the U is a huge school, we ended up in a few of the same first year classes together, and discovered we were both Christians. So, one day I asked Margie if she'd like to go the college group at my church next Sunday night. Now she thought I was asking her on a date, and though it turns out she wanted to go out with me, she didn't want to appear too eager, so she told me she'd have to think about it. Which was fine—I said she could tell me the next day in class. Here's where the misunderstanding came in. What she

didn't know, because I neglected to mention it because it seemed unimportant at the time, was that though I was sort of interested in her, too, what was really going on was that I had been elected vice-president of the college group, and the vice-president's job was to invite new people to attend. The next day Margie told me she'd be happy to come, and I said, great, I'd arrange for someone to give her a ride. She got huffy, told me not to bother, and walked away. I was clueless—embarrassing to admit, but true—totally clueless.

Let's just say it took a while to get that sorted out, but thankfully we managed it.

Sometimes misunderstandings, even simple ones over ordinary things can fracture even close relationships, and sadly, they can show up even when we've taken care to speak and act as carefully as we possibly can. Sometimes misunderstandings even arise around the very things we hold most dear and believe most deeply. Which according to the Scriptures is what happened to St. Paul when he spent some time discussing the Christian gospel and the biggest questions of life with some non-Christians during a visit to the Greek city of Athens.

It happened like this. About 20 years after the resurrection of Jesus, the apostle Paul spent some weeks traveling with some friends in Greece. It was not, as trips to Greece go, exactly what you'd call uneventful. One of the first places they visited, in Macedonia, which is a province

in the northern part of the Grecian peninsula, was the city of Philippi. In Philippi, there was a remarkable young woman, a slave girl, who had the ability to tell fortunes, and whose masters were making a great deal of money by exploiting her gift. She followed Paul and his friends around, shouting, "These men are servants of he Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved" (Acts 16:17). Which was true, as far as that goes, but was probably annoying, too. And she didn't just do this a few times, Luke says, but in a marvelous understatement, writes, "She kept this up for many days" (Acts 16:18). So Paul turned and in the name of Jesus commanded the evil spirits who were holding her in bondage to leave her, which they did. Not surprisingly, when they left they took with them her ability to tell fortunes, which made her masters

mad, so they whipped up a crowd in the marketplace claiming that Paul and his friends were disturbing the peace, and so to restore calm the city magistrate threw them into jail. Which really didn't work since that night, right around midnight, an earthquake hit Philippi, tearing the doors off the hinges in the prison, and loosening the chains that had been fastened to the walls. Which led to the jailor becoming a Christian, his whole family being baptized, and the next morning the magistrate asked Paul and Silas to please get out of town (Acts 16:16-40).

So Paul and his friends traveled about 60 miles south down the coast of Greece to a place called Thessalonica, where Paul led discussions in the Jewish synagogue, until after three weeks a few people became persuaded that Jesus was Lord and Savior and were converted. Which some of the Jews did not appreciate, so

"I'M JUS WHOSE INTENT OH LORD, PLEAS BE MISUND (FIVIS C

they "rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace," Luke records, and got them all to shouting, "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here" (Acts 17:5-6). Which was, as a matter of fact, true. "They are all defying Caesar's decrees," the mob yelled, "saying that there is another king, one called Jesus" (Acts 17:7). Which was only partially true, but it worked and before long a riot broke out. Paul and Silas were staying at the house of a man named Jason, who was forced to post a bond by the city officials, and as soon as night fell the Christians sent Paul and Silas away under cover of darkness to a neighboring town, about ten miles away, named Berea (Acts 17:1-9).

And it started all over again. St. Paul led discussions in the synagogue each week, a number of people, both Jews and Greeks became Christians,

but before long word got back to Thessalonica what was happening in Berea, so representatives from Thessalonica arrived to cause trouble, and so as soon as that started the believers escorted Paul down the coast to the city of Athens, where he waited for his companions, Silas and Timothy to join him (Acts 17:10-15).

Once again Paul followed the same pattern he had set in Berea, in Thessalonica, and in Philippi. "While Paul was waiting for them in Athens," Luke tells us, "he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there" (Acts 17:16-17). And once again things did not proceed exactly as smoothly as the apostle might have wished. This time, however, the problem was that his audience

misunderstood what he was trying to say.

MISUNDERSTOOD IN ATHENS

We're told about the misunderstanding in Acts 17:18 by Luke who recorded the story.

A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him [Paul]. Some of them asked, 'What is this babbler trying to say?' Others remarked, 'He seems to be advocating foreign gods.' They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

The Athenians misunderstood St. Paul's message, and reacted in two

The first reaction was an ad homi*nem* attack, calling Paul a "babbler." The word in the original is actually a Greek word that means "seed-picker,"

and was used to describe birds that scavenge for food by picking up bits of seed from the vegetation that litters the ground. The Greek playwright Aristophanes, for example, used it to describe the rook in his comedy, *The Birds.* The Greeks also applied the term to beggars—to those we might call the homeless—who lived off whatever they could scavenge from the trash. And in Athens, a city devoted to learning, discussion, and ideas, it was used as a slang-word, the ultimate put-down for a teacher who had nothing original to offer, but who picked up bits and pieces of knowledge from others and then tried to pass the conglomeration off as their own philosophy. Calling Paul a "babbler," a "seed-picker," was an insult of utter disdain, dismissing him as a being little more than an intellectual parrot, a lite-weight thinker recycling second rate and worn out ideas.

In the face of that ad hominem attack, St. Paul graciously acted as if he hadn't heard it at all. He must have heard it, however, since he was alone at the time, and so in all probability was the one who told Luke what they had said about him.

The second way the Athenians reacted to what Paul was saying was to conclude he was trying to introduce new gods for them to worship. "They said this," Luke tells us, "because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection" (Acts 17:18).

To see how this misunderstanding could occur—how Paul's talking about Jesus and the resurrection could be misunderstood as discussing new gods—we need help understanding the Greek in which the discussion occurred. The fourth century John Chrysostom preached on this text, and pointed out that in the Greek, the word for resurrection, anastasin, is feminine. It's where we get the woman's name, Anastasia—like in the animated movie. Apparently the Athenians misunderstood Paul to be talking about a male god, Jesus, and his female consort, Anastasia. After all, the Greek gods and goddesses came in pairs—such as Zeus and Hera, or Hades, the god of the underworld, and his consort, Persephone. Given that cultural and religious context, it's easy to see how easily they could misunderstand what Paul was saying.

There is something else worth noting. John Stott points out that both times Paul spent time among non-Christians who were pagans—in Lystra in Acts 14 and in Athens in Acts 17—a similar thing happened.

It is interesting that both Paul's speeches to pagans in the [book of] Acts seem to have been occasioned by a misunderstanding. The Athenians imagine two new gods, while the Lystrans think they are seeing two old ones! Could *Luke be warning his readers of ways in* which pagans misunderstand?

That's possible, but one thing is certain: as we live among people who do not share our deepest convictions and values, and as more of them are attracted to neo-pagan beliefs and practices, we should not be surprised if we are misunderstood as well.

A POSTMODERN MISUNDERSTANDING

I would argue that the Christian gospel is being misunderstood today by our unbelieving neighbors and colleagues, and misunderstood rather badly. Like the pagans in Athens and Lystra, those among whom we live and work have heard and seen something of what we stand for, but the conclusion they've drawn is a misunderstanding of what the Scriptures actually teach. This misunderstanding is widespread and a formidable barrier to people's willingness to seriously consider the Christian gospel. This misunderstanding is relatively simple to identify and can be summarized like this: To a remarkable degree the postmodern generation sees Christianity, particularly evangelical Christianity, as a markedly inferior moral system.

Many, if not most evangelicals are convinced that our postmodern world is, by and large, relativistic. Thus, we expect most of our neighbors and coworkers to be relativists, and so we often try to talk to them about how relativism is not a sufficient basis for morality and ethics. We defend the notion of moral absolutes, pointing out that relativism is self-defeating, since if everything is relative, so is the statement that everything is relative, which means relativism undercuts its own argument. The trouble with this line of reasoning is that in most instances it is entirely ineffective. The

argument that sounds so powerful in church seems to fall on deaf ears in the public square.

There are several reasons for this, but I'll mention one important one here. It is usually not helpful to approach our postmodern friends simply as relativists, for the simple reason that the vast majority of them hold very strong moral notions. Consider the movie *The Matrix* (1999) for example: few movies better capture a postmodern consciousness, yet the plot is finely absolute—Cypher is a traitor without debate, end of discussion. If we listen with care to our postmodern world, the objection they have to our faith is that it represents such an inferior moral system. Please understand: I am not saying that relativism is an issue the church can ignore. I am arguing it is a mistake for Christians to imagine that most of the non-Christians we speak to are morally ambiguous, for they are not. Many are convinced we are morally inferior.

Think of it from their perspective. What system of morality would forbid two men or two women who truly love one another from expressing their love physically? Answer: an inferior one. What religion forbids one gender from serving its highest sacrament simply because they were born a woman? Answer: a misogynist one. What God would open the ground under the tents of entire families and swallow them up—including infants, mind you—merely because the fathers of those families had raised questions about the competency of the nation's leadership, and then do it in such a way that his holy book records that everyone heard their screams as they were crushed when the ground closed back over them (Numbers 16)? What sort of environmental responsibility can a religion have if its God is on record ordering his people to hamstring the horses of their defeated enemies (Joshua 11)? What system of morality breeds a people that tend to be, by and large, rather negative and disapproving, and usually more quick to disagree than to agree? What system of morality insists that a moral Buddhist who is faithful to his wife is damned and utterly without hope, while Christian celebrities who leave their spouses for someone else can go on selling books or CDs in Christian

bookstores?

As Christians we live among people who do not share our deepest convictions and values. Many of our postmodern friends object to Christian faith and morality, however, not simply because they are committed to relativism, but because they see Christian morality as inferior to their own. This misunderstanding must be addressed if we wish to be faithful in commending the gospel to our non-Christian neighbors and friends.

So, we are being misunderstood and St. Paul was misunderstood. That being the case, seeing how Paul responded—I'll identify four things from the text of Acts 17—will provide insight into what Christian faithfulness looks like in such a situation.

RESPONDING FAITHFULLY WHEN MISUNDERSTOOD

Take comfort. After all, if even the apostle Paul was misunderstood by the unbelievers he talked with in Athens and in Lystra, we shouldn't necessarily expect to fare any better. St. Paul was an extraordinarily thoughtful man, well educated, and from what we can tell, an eloquent speaker. It is a wonderful grace that this story is recorded in the Scriptures.

This is especially important because we aren't just dealing with minor misunderstandings here, but about the most important issues of life and death. It's one thing to be misunderstood about where or when to meet someone for lunch, it's quite another to discover that our neighbor thinks we worship two gods, named Jesus and Anastasia. Or that they think our morality is so markedly inferior as to not be worth serious consideration. "There is no worse lie," William James wrote in his Varieties of Religious Experience, "than a truth misunderstood by those who hear it."

So we can take comfort that we are not alone, and that part of the reality of living in this broken world is that sometimes we'll be misunderstood no matter how hard we try to be clear in what we say. What's more, we can take even more comfort from the fact that God is at work in this sad world calling out a people to himself, and even when the misunderstanding turns out to be our fault, his gracious purposes

in history will not be thwarted. That doesn't mean we aren't responsible to communicate clearly, for we are called to be faithful. It does mean we can learn to laugh at ourselves, and to wonder at the fact that God chooses, in his infinite grace, to use the likes of

See misunderstandings as opportunities. Rather than withdrawing from or reacting to the Athenians, Paul engaged them thoughtfully. If we were to read with care what he said to them in Athens after the misunderstanding arose, we would discover he carefully sorted out the misunderstanding (Acts 17:31), while winsomely raising issues that prompted questions and further discussion (Acts 17:32).

That may not seem like much, but it is. To be honest, I find it far easier to simply react. For one thing, I don't respond well to people who don't listen, and I usually figure they're not really trying very hard, so why should I? I am busy—busy enough that I resent having to figure out an answer to the notion that Christianity represents an inferior system of morality. The whole criticism is slightly offensive.

For Christians, such a reaction may seem natural and even appealing, but it is wicked. We are called to be faithful, not reactionary. Faithful to engage those who misunderstand us; faithful to do the hard work of finding honest answers to honest questions; and faithful to see how being misunderstood can be, by God's grace, transformed into an opportunity for further discussion.

Listen. And then listen some more. Francis Schaeffer was fond of saying that if he had an hour to talk with someone, he'd spend 55 minutes asking questions and listening, and five minutes trying to say one creative, intriguing thing that might touch them. That's what Paul did in Athens, too. Luke reports he walked around examining their idols and religious shrines (Acts 17:16, 22-23), he read their religious books well enough to understand and quote them (17:28), and day by day he engaged them in conversation (17:17).

It is hard to listen. It is far harder to listen than to talk. To be honest I always prefer what I say to what you say—even before you say it. Once again for the Christian, what feels so natural is simply wicked. We will not even be aware of the misunderstandings our unbelieving friends hold about Christianity unless we are willing to be quiet, to ask questions, to listen, and then to listen some more.

Be people of grace. What is amazing as we read this entire text (Acts 17) is that Paul never seemed to be put off by the reactions of unbelievers to his faith. If they started a riot, he kept on discussing with whoever would discuss. If they threw him in jail, he kept on discussing with whoever would discuss. If they asked him to leave town, he kept on discussing with whoever would discuss. If they misunderstood, he kept on discussing with whoever would discuss. And when they launched an *ad hominem* attack—which is always a cheap tactic—he graciously acted as if he hadn't even heard it. What they said, that he was a mere seed-picker, an unoriginal thinker, wasn't true and it sullied his public reputation in a town where being a thinker meant a great deal. Still, he demonstrated grace, granting forgiveness to people who had not asked for it. No wonder that wherever he went, Paul found plenty of people who were willing to sit and talk with him. Like his Lord, Paul treated every person as deeply significant and therefore worth listening to. He did not regurgitate memorized presentations but always tried to address issues his listeners were concerned about with a winsome creativity that prompted questions and discussion. Such gracious conversation is always deeply attractive in our impersonal, busy, and deeply broken world.

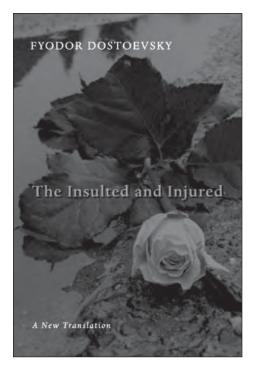
It was attractive in Athens when St. Paul visited so many centuries ago, and it remains attractive in our postmodern world. And it's precisely the sort of conversation that is required if misunderstandings are to be discussed, examined, and resolved. ■

Sources: James quoted in The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Quotations; information on the meaning of "babbler," and the misunderstanding about "foreign gods" from John Stott in The Spirit, The Church and the World (InterVarsity Press; 1990) p. 282.

RESOURCES: A NEW DOSTOEVSKY

A world of wicked

A book review by **Denis Haack**



Book recommended: The Insulted and Injured by Fyodor Dostoevsky, a new translation by Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 1861, 2011) 338 pp.

Good stories—really good stories touch on the deepest questions and yearnings of the human condition. The story may be set long ago, told in a style utterly unlike our generation's preferences, and peopled with characters that speak and act in ways foreign to us, but if it is a truly good story we recognize our selves in it. The limited horizon of the space and time that we inhabit is mysteriously transcended by what unfolds in the novel, and suddenly a glimpse of something far more rooted shines through. The shadows that cover this broken world are pushed back just a bit and the possibility of truth, beauty and righteousness is made clearer.

In 1861 a Russian writer named Fyodor Dostoevsky, who would go on to write Crime and Punishment and The Brothers Karamazov, published a story, The Insulted and Injured, after a period of exile in Siberia. It appeared first as a serial in a magazine, and later in book form. Central to *The Insulted and Injured* is a prince, Pyotr Aleksandrovich Valkovsky, who believes the only rational meaning in life is found in personal self-interest. That in this tenuous existence the only thing we can be certain of is our self, which means that maximizing personal gain in our choices, actions, and relationships is the only standard by which to live. The thing we can know that really exists, he argues, that is not "nonsense... is personality—myself. All is for me—the whole world is created for me." Anything and everyone that does not result in personal gain can be set aside, should be set aside without guilt and without hesitation, because there is only one life to live, and it will be over before we know it. Dostoevsky has nothing but disdain for such egoism, and The *Insulted and Injured* reveals it as not

merely misguided or misinformed, but deeply evil.

The Insulted and Injured is not a frivolous novel, but a serious one, full of convoluted plot, numerous characters with numerous names, long dialogues and lengthy descriptions, and a sense of passion throughout. It is, after all, a classic Russian novel. And it is about more than refuting egoism, since Dostoevsky is concerned to not just reveal the wickedness of self-interest in a fallen world but to point to the possibility of true humanness and hope.

I crossed the street, went up to the house, and read the inscription on the iron plate over the gate: "The house of Bubnova, a woman of the middle class."

But I had scarcely deciphered the inscription when suddenly I heard a piercing female scream in the courtyard, followed by shouts of abuse. I peered through the gate. On the wooden steps of the house stood a fat rough-looking woman, dressed like a lower-class person, with a kerchief at her head, and wearing a green shawl. Her face was a revolting purplish color. Her small, puffy, bloodshot eyes were gleaming with spite. It was obvious she wasn't sober, though it was early in the day. She was shrieking at poor Elena, who stood petrified before her with the cup in her hands. A disheveled female creature, painted and rouged, peered from behind the purple-faced woman on the stairs. A little later, a door opened onto a staircase leading down from the ground floor to the basement, and a poorly dressed, middle-aged woman of decent and modest appearance came out, probably attracted by the shouting. The other inhabitants of the basement, a decrepit-looking old man and a girl, peered out from

self-interest

the half-opened door. A big, hulking peasant, probably the porter, stood in the middle of the yard with a broom in his hand and looked lazily at the whole scene.

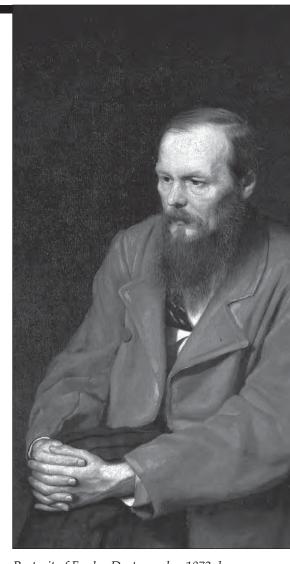
"You damned snake, you bloodsucker, you louse!" squealed the woman, emitting in one breath all her store of abuse, for the most part without commas or periods, but with a sort of gasp. "So this is how you repay me for my care of you, you ragged bitch! All I did was send her for cucumbers, and she slinks off! My heart felt she'd slink off when I was sending her! My heart was aching, aching! Only yesterday evening I all but pulled her hair out for it, and here she runs off again today! And where is it you go, you slut? Where do you go? Who do you go to, you damned mummy, you goggle-eyed viper, you poisonous vermin, who—who is it? Speak, you filthy scum, or I'll strangle you where you stand!" And the frenzied shrew threw herself at the poor girl, but seeing that the woman of decent appearance was looking at her, she suddenly checked herself and, addressing her, squealed more shrilly than ever, waving her arms as if calling her to witness the monstrous crime of her poor victim.

"Her mother croaked! You all know, good people, that she was left all alone, like a pimple on the earth. I saw she was on your hands, poor folks as you are, though you yourselves had nothing to eat. 'There,' thought I, 'for St. Nicholas's sake I'll put myself out and take in the orphan.' So I took her in. And, what do you think? Here I've been keeping her these two months, and she's drunk up all my blood and eaten my white flesh! This leech! This rattlesnake! This obstinate satan! She just remains silent. You can beat her, you can throw her down the

stairs—she just remains silent! It's as if she's filled her mouth with water, the way she remains silent! She rends my heart the way she remains silent! What do you take yourself for, you saucy slut, you green monkey? If it hadn't been for me, you'd have dropped dead of hunger in the street. You should wash my feet and drink the water, you monster, you black French sword! You'd have dropped dead like a dog if not for me!"

I am aware that some scholars have questioned the reality of Dostoevsky's faith while others have celebrated it. I have no expertise in his life and work that could possibly enable me to comment knowledgably on that debate, to say nothing of settling the issue. For what it is worth his novels have always seemed to evoke a deep Christian consciousness in my mind and imagination, shaped of course by the Eastern Orthodox tradition. I would argue that Dostoevsky's careful development of characters in his stories who hold differing and even opposing worldviews prove him to be a keen and careful observer who was a skilled craftsman in making his characters come to life. The rich complexity of ideas, the nature of belief, disbelief, and doubt, and the inescapable way the consequences of what we believe shapes our life for blessing or for curse comes through in his novels with all the profundity of the reality within which we live and move and have our being. This reality is questioned in our postmodern world, and Dostoevsky's work as a result continues to speak with prophetic urgency.

This new translation is by Boris lakim, a man who has translated numerous books from Russian into English, including *Notes from the Underground*, also by Dostoevsky, and several works of Eastern Orthodox theology and devotion. \blacksquare



Portrait of Feodor Dostoyevsky, 1872, by Vasily Perov, Vasily (Russian, 1834-1882)

RESOURCE

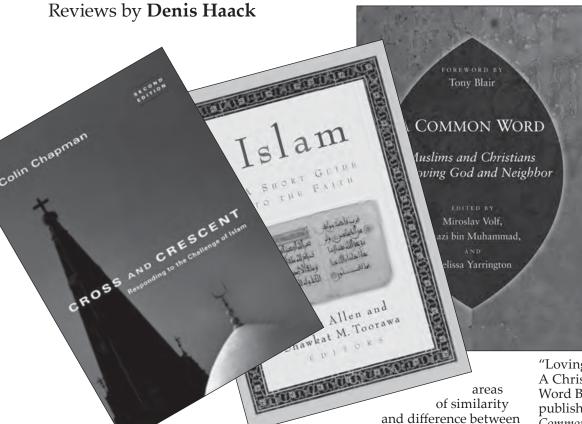
Hearts and Minds bookstore is a wellstocked haven for serious, reflective readers. When ordering resources, mention Ransom Fellowship and they will contribute 10 per cent of the total back to us. ■

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RESOURCES: THREE ON ISLAM

Islam: Christians seeking understanding



If you haven't done much reading on Islam it might be time to begin given its importance as a religion on the world scene and its noticeable growth within the West in general and within the U.S. in particular. If you have done some reading, I encourage you to continue. Three books that I am glad to have in my library might be ones you should consider:

Cross and Crescent by Colin
Chapman is the one book to read if
you have time to read only one book.
Chapman is an evangelical who
teaches Islamic studies at the Near
East School of Theology in Beirut
after living and working for over a
decade in Egypt and Lebanon. He is
a thoughtful, knowledgeable scholar
yet accessible to the lay Christian. He
explains how to build meaningful
relationships with Muslims, gives a
careful overview of Islam's history, beliefs and practices, explores important

Islam and Christianity, and discusses how the Christian might effectively speak and live in ways that commends the gospel to Muslim neighbors. Basic, clearly organized, accurate, and deeply committed to the gospel of Christ, *Cross and Crescent* (2nd edition) should be in every Christian's library.

Islam: A Short Guide is a collection of 15 succinct essays of interest to American Christians wanting to gain an understanding of Islam by scholars whose expertise allows them to summarize without too much oversimplifying. The topics include: Islam; Qur'an; Muhammad; Hadith and Sunna; Shari'a; Islamic Philosophy; Sufism; Shi'ites, Shi'ism; Sunnis, Sunnism; Mosque; Islamic Government; Women and Islam; Islam and Judaism; Islam and Christianity; Islam in America. A helpful resource rather than a unified study, Islam: A Short Guide can serve to sharpen our comprehension of specific details—and in that light the glossary is worth the price of the book.

On October 13, 2007 an open letter, "A Common Word Between Us and You," signed by 138 Muslim leaders was addressed to Christian leaders around the world. "In essence." Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan says, "it proposed, based on verses from the Holy Qur'an and the Holy Bible, that Islam and Christianity share, at their core, the twin 'golden' commandments of the paramount importance of loving God and loving one's neighbor." On November 18, 2007 an open letter,

"Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to 'A Common Word Between Us and You'" was published in the New York Times. A Common Word reproduces both letters and includes a series of essays and commentaries on them by leaders of both faiths. The exchange of letters is an event we should know about, the letters are worth careful reading and reflection, and the book gives readers a chance to listen in on a serious dialogue between Muslim and Christian scholars, political leaders, and theologians.

Recommended books:

Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenges of Islam, second edition by Colin Chapman (InterVarsity Press; 1995, 2003, 2007) 376 pp.

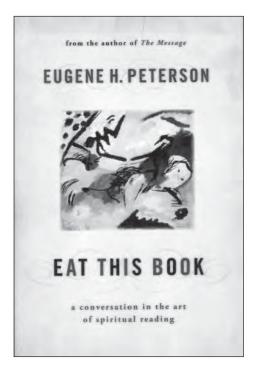
Islam: A Short Guide to the Faith *edited* by Roger Allen and Shawkat M. Toorawa (Eerdmans; 2011) 139 pp.

A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor *edited by Miroslav Volf, et al* (*Eerdmans*; 2011) 139 pp.

THE DISCERNING LIFE: THE SCRIPTURES

Internalizing the Scriptures

By Denis Haack



The Christian tradition has always stressed the importance of Scripture, for knowing God, for attaining salvation, for a penetratingly realistic view of life, and for spirituality. In Eat This *Book*, Eugene Peterson helps us reflect on what the Scriptures mean for us as Christians. Here are a few brief excerpts from Eat This Book, in the hope they will prompt some thoughtful discussion and reflection (thus the questions).

Excerpt #1: "There is only one way of reading that is congruent with our Holy Scriptures, writing that trusts in the power of words to penetrate our lives and create truth and beauty and goodness, writing that requires a reader who, in the words of Rainer Maria Rilke, 'does not always remain bent over his pages; he often leans back and closes his eyes over a line he has been reading again, and its meaning spreads through his blood" [p. 4].

1. Peterson, via Rilke, is here

- describing the process of meditation. To what extent is meditation on Scripture a realistic suggestion given that meditation must be unhurried and our lives are so busy?
- 2. What is your personal experience of meditation? What plans might you want to make?

Excerpt #2: "We live today in a world impoverished of story; so it is not surprising that many of us have picked up the bad habit of extracting 'truths' from the stories we read: we summarize 'principles' that we can use in a variety of settings at our discretion; we distill a 'moral' that we use as a slogan on a poster or as a motto on our desk. We are taught to do this in our schools so that we can pass examinations on novels and plays. It is no wonder that we continue this abstracting, story-mutilating practice when we read our Bibles. 'Story' is not serious; 'story' is for children and campfires. So we continuously convert our stories into the 'serious' speech of information and motivation. We hardly notice that we have lost the form, the form that is provided to shape our lives largely and coherently. Our spirituality-shaping text is reduced to disembodied fragments of 'truth' and 'insight,' dismembered bones of information and motivation" [p. 48].

- 1. To what extent do you find Peterson's analysis to be accurate?
- 2. Peterson speaks of this approach to be a "bad habit" and an "abstracting, story-mutilating practice." Is it really that bad?

Excerpt #3: "Because we speak our language so casually, it is easy to fall into the habit of treating it casually. But language is persistently difficult to understand. We spend our early lives learning the language, and just when

we think we have it mastered our spouse says, 'You don't understand a thing I'm saying, do you?' We teach our children to talk, and just about the time we think they might be getting it, they quit talking to us; and when we overhear them talking to their friends, we find we can't understand more than one out of every eight or nine words they say. A close relationship doesn't guarantee understanding. A long affection doesn't guarantee understanding. In fact, the closer we are to another and the more intimate our relations, the more care we must exercise to hear accurately, to understand thoroughly, to answer appropriately. "Which is to say, the more 'spiritual' we become, the more care we must give to exegesis [a careful, studied, analysis and interpretation of the text]. The more mature we become in the Christian faith, the more exegetically rigorous we must become. This is not a task from which we graduate. These words given to us in our Scriptures are constantly getting overlaid with personal preferences, cultural assumptions, sin distortions, and ignorant guesses that pollute the text. The pollutants are always in the air, gathering dust on our Bibles, corroding our use of the language, especially the language of faith. Exegesis is a dust cloth, a scrub brush, or even a Q-tip for keeping the words clean" [p. 53].

- 1. What time are you able to give to rigorous Bible study?
- 2. How have you been maturing and deepening your Bible study skills? ■

Source: All selections are from Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading by Eugene H. Peterson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2006).

BACK PAGE (RESOURCES, CONTINUED)



Left: Quanah Parker, last chief of the Quahadi Comanche Indians, 1895, possibly by E. M. Roff or William E. Irwin, published by H. H. Clarke (National Museum of the American Indian photo archives P13190)

Below: Death of the Sioux Chief Crazy Horse, at Sydney, September 5th: The funeral procession passing through Camp Sheridan on the way to the grave (Western History/Genealogy Department, Denver Public Library)

Bottom: The life of William Garnett, son of a Confederate general, overlapped considerably with the Sioux. Standing behind him in this photograph taken about 1905, are his third wife, Fillie, half-Oglala daughter of the trader Nick Janis, and four of Garnett's children. (Denver Public Library, Western History Collection)



