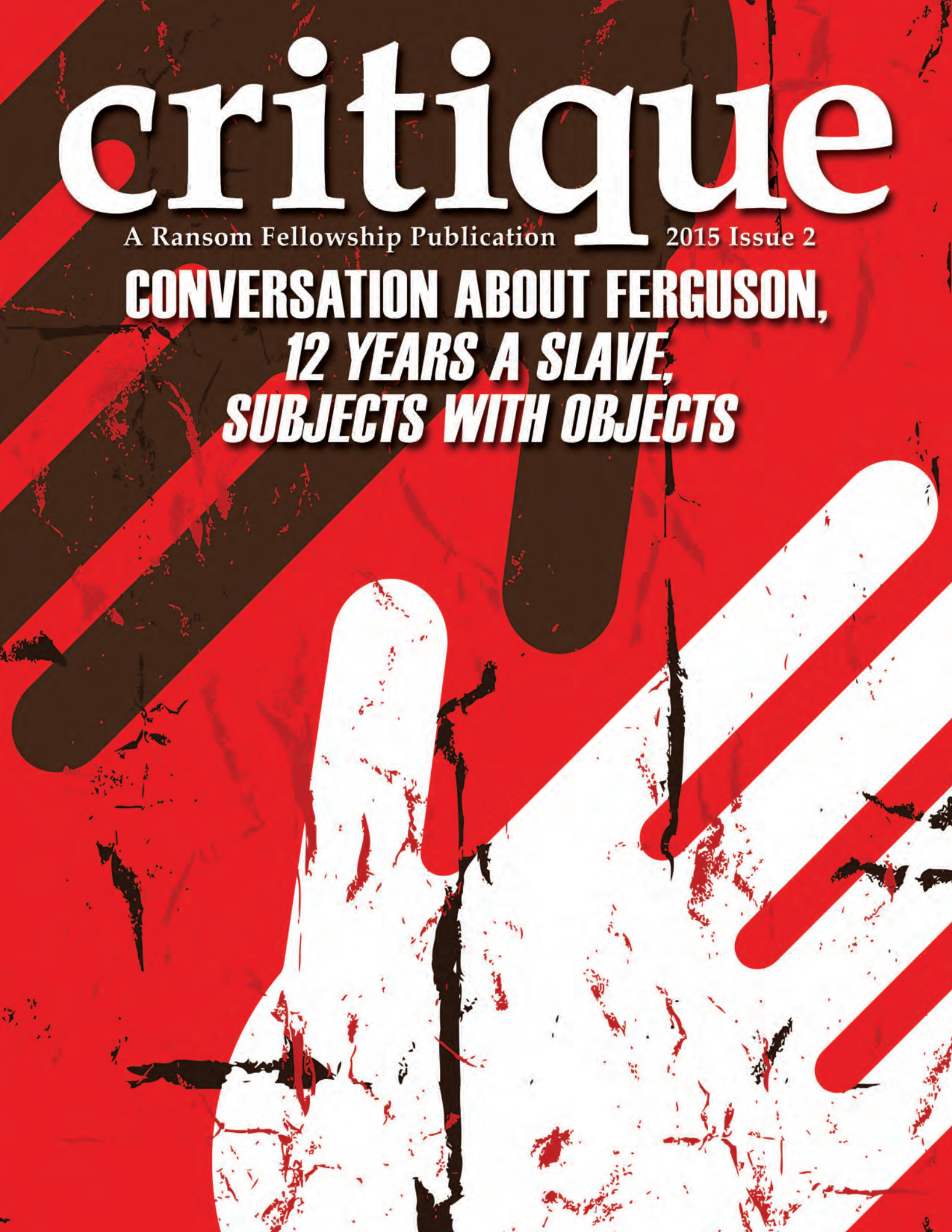


critique

A Ransom Fellowship Publication 2015 Issue 2

**CONVERSATION ABOUT FERGUSON,
12 YEARS A SLAVE,
*SUBJECTS WITH OBJECTS***



CRITIQUE



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Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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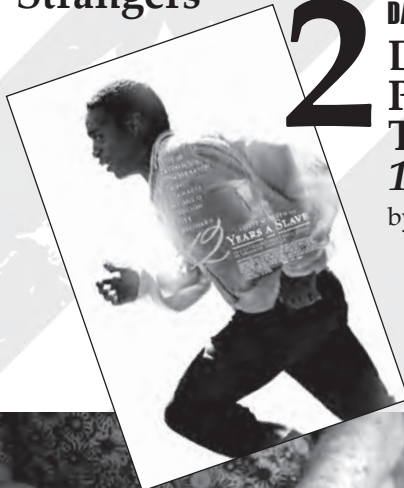
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Welcoming Strangers



"Cain went away," we are told in the opening pages of scripture, fracturing the human race into "us" and "strangers" (Genesis 4:16). The division involved both geography and belief, and so violence spread like a cancer across God's good earth (6:11). Thus a relentless pattern began and, ever since, there have been strangers in our world, worshipping strange gods or none, adopting strange lifestyles, holding incomprehensible values, and following strange customs. "We have to distrust each other," playwright Tennessee Williams observed. "It is our only defense against betrayal."

Woven through this long tapestry of distrust is a thread that came to be called hospitality, where people sit face to face, break bread, ask questions, listen, and converse. Mere mortals like me know we cannot bring peace to the world, but the grace of hospitality is within our reach. To despise it as too little given the global patterns of division, suspicion, and death is to mistake the significance of grace. Abram welcomed strangers with fresh bread, tender meat, and milk only to discover the Lord was actually present (Genesis 18).

As society has been atomized and urbanized, Christine Pohl notes, "hospitality as a term has diminished; it now chiefly refers to the entertainment of one's acquaintances at home and to the hospitality industry's provision of service through hotels and restaurants." This is not all bad, for reasons Pohl goes on to discuss, but she is correct to insist that Christians are responsible to show hospitality to strangers. John Calvin, she says, "warned that the increasing dependence on inns rather than on personal hospitality was an expression of human depravity."

Hospitality to those unlike us—to strangers, to those outside our tribe—always ratchets up our level of unease. When we meet over some outside agenda—work, say, or a neighborhood project, or a political caucus—that agenda helps deflect our discomfort. When it is just the stranger and myself in my home, however, there is greater chance of misunderstanding, of giving offense, of embarrassment, of betrayal. Good grief, it can be hard enough to converse with a fundamentalist Christian (or mainline, or Catholic, or Orthodox—pick your poison), so imagine if we were to welcome a Muslim, a Hindu, someone of a different race, or a secularist.

The apostolic word to us is unambiguous: "extend hospitality to strangers," St. Paul says (Romans 12:13) and, in case that is not clear enough, the writer of Hebrews warns, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers" (13:2). Discomfort and unease are good

motivators for learning, and even betrayal did not discourage our Lord from fulfilling his calling. Given the context of these biblical imperatives, apparently not having time means we are too busy with unnecessary things.

I do not know what will come of our obedience in welcoming the stranger. I do know we can begin simply, be willing to learn, to experiment and make mistakes, and when necessary laugh at ourselves. Most of all, we can trust that God would infuse our feeble hospitality with some faint echo of the welcome he extended to us when he welcomed us—outsiders and strangers that we were—into his family. Who knows what we will learn or what will come of it? ■

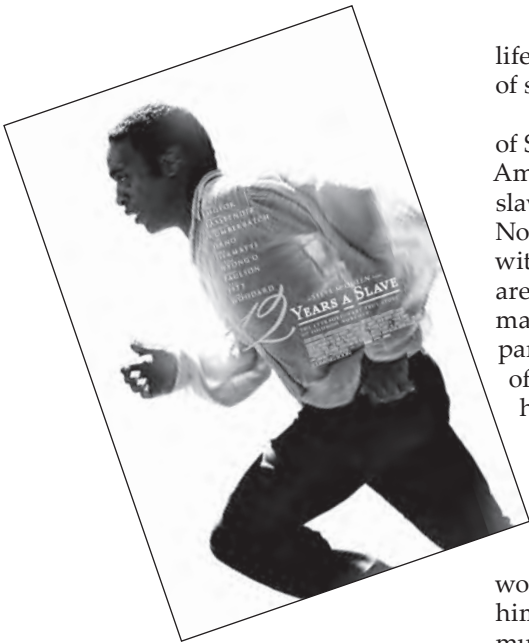
Sources: Tennessee Williams quote online (www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/t/tennesseew147303.html#gA5FD7xj9UfoiEmr.99); Christine Pohl in her excellent *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (p. 36-37).

Designer's note about the cover: There's a theme running through this issue's poetry, featured film, cover story, and reviewed book. All highlight the ways we successfully see—or fail to see—one another. Racism is a destructive result of no-longer-seeing. It depends upon our tendency to re-envision, to destroy and re-render until we're left with a flattened, false image that bears little resemblance to what is real. Do not deceive yourselves. Look in, and look out. Keep your eyes open. And watch the news.

— Karen Coulter Perkins

Denial, Desire, and the Proclamation Theological Reflections on *12 Years a Slave*

by Naaman Wood



Harriet Tubman, the former slave and leader of the Underground Railroad, once said, "I freed a thousand slaves and could have freed a thousand more if only they knew they were slaves." This last clause, "...if only they knew they were slaves," suggests that many slaves experienced a profound and damaging formation. That is, to convince a slave that she is not a slave would necessitate a host of subtle and powerful actions. These actions would need to shape human beings into thinking that they are something other than what they are, that their world is something other than it is. While Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* does not take up the problem of convincing a slave she is not a slave, it does put on display some of these subtle and powerful actions. In this film, these actions aim to convince slaves that atrocities are merely ordinary life. In chronicling some of these formative actions, the story offers important points of reflection on Christian

life, particularly our proclamation of scripture.

12 Years a Slave chronicles the story of Solomon Northrup, a free black American who was unlawfully sold into slavery. The opening of the film brings Northrup's free life into stark contrast with his slavery. The film's first images are of a sugar cane field, and a white man instructs a group of slaves on the particulars of the harvest. In the midst of this slavery, Northrup remembers his past life. As a working musician, he remembers that his playing delighted audiences. As a husband and father, he remembers the affections of his wife and children. As a free man, he remembers the would-be circus performers who lured him to Washington D.C. with promised musical performances. As a black man, Northrup arrives at the capital and white men capture him. He spends over a decade as a slave in Louisiana, many miles from home.

From Northrup's emotional point of view, the film plunges the audience into a world turned upside down. It is a world where white persons not only inflict abuse and denigration on black persons, but it is also a world where whites describe those horrors to blacks as though they were nothing of the sort. Whites *re-describe* atrocities as everyday life.

In some cases, the film presents these re-descriptions as intentional, thoughtful, and complex. For example, early in Northrup's detention, white men use fetters to force him into a submissive posture. Once in this posture, they beat his back with a large paddle. The beating tears Northrup's shirt and stains it with his blood. Subsequently, one of his captors gives him a new shirt in an apparent act

of graciousness, and in the exchange, the captor takes the torn, bloody one. Northrup protests, "No, no. That's from my wife—," but the white man interrupts, "Rags and tatters." He waves the bloody shirt at Northrup and exits the cell, "Rags and tatters." While the violence aimed to procure submission from Northrup, his captors wove into that violence an ingenious and powerful mode of re-description. His shirt is not a gift from his wife. It is not an object with history or attachments. The shirt is not a shirt. It is re-described to him as, "Rags and tatters." The implication is subtle but clear. Northrup is like the shirt. He has no wife, no history, no attachments. Northrup is not Northrup.

Other instances of re-description, however, are not intentional, but it is precisely their accidental character that makes them powerful. One key moment occurs early in Northrup's enslavement. A man named Master Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch) purchases Northrup and another slave, Eliza (Adepero Oduye). The slave salesman (Paul Giamatti) refuses to sell Eliza's children to Ford, and the separation affects Eliza. Upon arriving at Ford's plantation, Ford's wife, Mistress Ford (Liza J. Bennett) observes Eliza weeping. She says to her husband, "This one's crying. Why is this one crying?" Ford responds matter-of-factly, not even mustering complete sentences, "Separated from her children. Couldn't be helped." The Mistress seems genuinely moved and attempts to comfort Eliza. "Something to eat. And rest," she says, "Your children will soon be forgotten." Mistress Ford does not grasp the searing irony her words. Her comfort can only function as comfort if the atrocity of divided families is ordinary. To be comforted, Eliza must accept these atrocities as no longer atrocities.

Proclamation of Scripture: *Years a Slave*

While the film is filled with countless examples of re-description, there are three moments of implicit re-description that involve scripture, and it is these sermons that might teach us something about our own proclamation of God's word.

The first utterance of scripture occurs shortly after Northrup arrives on Ford's plantation. Early in Northrup's time under Ford's ownership, an overseer named Tibeats (Paul Dano) inducts Northrup and a few other slaves into life under his authority. His first step is to sing a song called, "Run, Nigger, Run." Slaves originally composed the song to warn of various dangers in an escape, dangers like paddy rollers—patrols that search the countryside for runaway slaves. When Tibeats sings it, he transforms the song into a degrading taunt. He dares them, "Run, nigger, run; da paddy-roller get ya. Run, nigger, run, well you better get away." Throughout the day, the song accompanies Northrup's work, as though it haunts his memory. They chop trees, and Northrup still hears Tibeats' exaggerated squeals, "Some folks say a nigger don't steal. I caught three in my cornfield. One has a bushel. One has a peck. One has a rope, it was hung around his neck."

As their workday comes to a close, the images turn to Master Ford, but Tibeats' singing continues from the previous scene. Ford's body fills the screen. He stands before a white trellis covered in roses, and Tibeats' voice accompanies, "Run, nigger, run." Ford is dressed in clean clothes. They are a pale yellow and pink. Tibeats' whispers, "The paddy roller get ya." Ford calls, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Tibeats' responds, "Run, nigger, run, well you





better get away." In a wide shot, it becomes clear that Ford holds a Bible in his hand. His wife is seated to his left. An overseer sits to his right. Before him, slaves sit in rows that resemble pews. This is church. Ford, his wife, and his overseer are its leaders. The slaves are its congregation. Though Tibbeats is physically absent, he is present in spirit. His song overshadows the entire proceeding.

While scripture and song occur simultaneously on the soundtrack, Northrup experiences both as distinguishable and connected. Ford speaks in the present, Tibbeats in his immediate past. However, grounded in Northrup's emotional point of view, the film presents both utterances as deeply related. When Northrup hears the covenantal name of God, he also hears, "Run, nigger, run." When he hears the good news of Jesus, he also hears threats of violence. When he hears God's word of life, he also hears words of death.

Ford soon offers a second sermon. After some time on the plantation, Eliza has not forgotten her children, and her crying persists, this time on a Sunday morning. As Eliza weeps publicly, Ford says, "Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me." In response to Eliza's public display, Mistress Ford frowns. She leans to her house slave and whispers, "I cannot have that kind of depression about." Northrup overhears his mistress, and Ford continues as though Eliza is not crying. He preaches, "But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in

the depth of the sea.” In the next scene, Mistress Ford makes good on her whispers. A white man and a slave forcibly remove Eliza from the plantation.

Like the previous sermon, Northrup hears simultaneous sounds as distinguishable and interpenetrating. In the simultaneity of scripture, crying, and whispers, the film expresses a profound irony. The biblical passage underscores the need for Christians to care for the weak, but Ford denies the weakness in their midst—Eliza’s tears. Furthermore, when Northrup hears Jesus’ concern for the weakest, he also hears his mistress’ words, words that despise Eliza’s weakness. When Northrup hears the good news of Jesus, he also hears denial and disgust. When he hears the word of life, he also hears words of death.

The third sermon occurs when Northrup’s second master, Edwin Epps (Michael Fassbender), speaks for the first time. Having recently acquired a new group of slaves, Northrup included, Epps stands on his porch and delivers a short homily. He reads, “And that servant, which knew his lord’s will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes.” He then offers a brief commentary, “That nigger that don’t obey his lord—that’s his master—d’ya see? That there nigger, ‘shall be beaten with many stripes.’ Now ‘many’ signifies a great many: 40, 100, 150 lashes.” Epps then raises the Bible in the air and concludes: “That’s scripture.”

While Epps’ misinterpretation is clear to us, it is important to notice that he intertwines good practices of biblical interpretation with his own desires. For example, Epps makes reasonable historical connections between the first century and his own moment. In the first century, the “lord” often referred to

a man whose household included slaves. Therefore, translating “lord” as “master” is not without warrant. In addition, he aligns his reading with the assumptions of the passage in question. Because lords had the right to beat their slaves, masters have that same right. Epps then goes on to ponder ambiguities in the text, particularly the phrase “many stripes.” I count these three practices—drawing a connection between the Bible’s history and our present moment, assuming what scripture assumes, and attending to ambiguities of the text—as good practices Christians should perform. However, these practices do not rescue Epps from his own desires. He sees the truth of scripture as internal to his socio-economic vision of flourishing, a vision that needs chattel slavery. As in the previous sermons, Northrup hears a word of life, but he also hears words of death.

These three sermons suggest the profound impact denial and desire can have in any proclamation of scripture. Ford reminds me that any sermon can deny the world in which it lives. When Ford stands before his congregation, he speaks as though atrocities do not exist. He speaks as though Tibeats’ words have no bearing on reality. He speaks as though Eliza does not cry. He speaks as though his wife does not abhor Eliza’s weakness. Through Ford’s denial, the gospel becomes another means of re-describing atrocity as ordinary life. The same possibility holds true for us. If we ignore the atrocities around us, we might unintentionally re-describe those atrocities as ordinary life. Something similar is at play in Epps’ sermon. Epps uses scripture’s authority to buttress his own authority. In so doing, he re-describes the atrocity of violence as gospel. It is entirely possible that good

practices will not save us from our own misconstrued desires any more than they saved Epps.

The power of denial and desire suggests a strange but palpable theological reality about scripture and about Christ. The film suggests that words of scripture are vulnerable words. They are vulnerable to the denials and desires of those who preach them. Christians have often struggled with this reality, and we should not consider ourselves immune. But this reality points to deeper connection between scriptural vulnerability and the vulnerability of Jesus’ body. Humans coerced the Word, and the Word carried his own cross. Humans humiliated the Word, and the Word hung in shame upon a tree. Humans declared death over the Word, and the Word lay in a grave. If the Word’s flesh was this vulnerable, then it should be little surprise that scripture is also vulnerable. Scripture is so vulnerable that our denial and desires can make the word of life sound as though it is a word of death. This was certainly Northrup’s experience. I suspect Northrup is not alone.

Today, many of our churches may very well deny the atrocities that surround us, and in our denial, we may inadvertently use good biblical practices to support our own desires. In my church, I have observed something quite like this. I have never heard anyone in my church utter the word, “Ferguson.” Neither have I heard the names Michael Brown or Eric Garner spoken there. In a similar fashion, my church sits only a few miles from the murder of three persons in Chapel Hill, N.C., two of which were Muslim women. To my knowledge, my church has offered no prayer or no words of mourning. It is as if, in our denial, our

church might desire to see a world with little racial or religious atrocity, a world with little death and suffering. I suspect my church is not alone.

This observation requires massive qualifications. I do not mean to diminish God's sovereignty or providence. Just the opposite—I know of no present church that affirms slavery as internal to Christian life. I count this reality as evidence of God's providence to heal and correct the church. I also do not mean to insinuate that churches that have chosen to not talk about matters like Ferguson are somehow incapable of loving Jesus or believing in scripture. They are not, on my account, excluded from God's healing work. Rather, I only mean to suggest that the church is not immune to sin. Like our mothers and fathers in the faith, we are also tempted to confuse the injustice of humanity for the justice of God, to mistake the City of Man for the City of God, to misunderstand words of death for the word of life.

In the midst of these temptations, I can think of no hope besides Jesus' body. Though Jesus' flesh was vulnerable unto death, beyond death stood resurrection. *12 Years a Slave* has convinced me that resurrection is the church's only hope. It is only by the power of Spirit—the Lord and giver of life—that our proclamation of the word of life can be for us words of life. ■

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Naaman Wood has received degrees in rhetoric and cinema from Regent University and in theology and New Testament from Duke Divinity School. He

loves strange theater, arty films, challenging television, bold music, and a good drink.

Film credits for *12 Years a Slave*

Directed by Steve McQueen

Written by John Ridley (screenplay), Solomon Northrup (book)

Cinematography by Sean Bobbitt

Music by Hans Zimmer

Produced by John Ridley, Steve McQueen, more

Starring:

Chiwetel Ejiofor (Solomon Northrup)

Dwight Henry (Uncle Abram)

Dickie Gravois (Overseer)

Kelsey Scott (Anne Northrup)

Quvenzhané Wallis (Margaret Northrup)

Paul Giamatti (Freeman)

Benedict Cumberbatch (Ford)

Liza Bennett (Mistress Ford)

Paul Dano (Tibeats)

U.S., 134 minutes, 2013

Rated R (violence, cruelty, some nudity, sexuality)



FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial or immediate reaction to the film? Why do you think you reacted that way? What was it in the film that prompted that reaction?
2. *Questions on Violence*
 - a. How would you define or describe violence? Feel free to reflect on your own experience, those close to you, and/or biblical accounts.
 - b. Did any scenes of violence stick out to you? How did you react to those scenes? In those scenes, what did the filmmakers choose to show and not show?
 - c. In scenes of violence, is there anything else besides violence? If so, what?
 - d. Given those scenes and your reaction, what might the film be saying about violence?
 - e. Does the film's presentation of violence affirm or challenge your own? Would you judge it to be more or less biblical than your own view? Why?
3. *Questions on Hope*
 - a. How would you define or describe hope? Feel free to reflect on your own experience, those close to you, and/or biblical accounts.
 - b. Did any scenes of hope stick out to you? How did you react to those scenes?
 - c. In scenes of hope, is there anything else besides hope? If so, what?
 - d. Given those scenes and your reaction, what might the film be saying about hope?
 - e. Does the film's presentation of hope affirm or challenge your own? Would you judge it to be more or less biblical than your own view? Why?
4. *Questions on denial and desire*
 - a. How would you define or describe injustices or atrocities? Feel free to reflect on your own experience, those close to you, and/or biblical accounts.
 - b. Has your church ignored any injustices or atrocities? In your own church? City? State? Country? World? What were they? How did you respond? Does this denial reveal anything about what your church's desires? Could your church have done better? Why or why not?
 - c. Has your church acknowledged (or under-acknowledged) any injustices or atrocities? In your own church? City? State? Country? World? What were they? How did you respond? Does this acknowledgment (or under-acknowledgement) reveal anything about what your church's desires? Could your church have done better? Why or why not?



POETRY

OLD WOMAN

Sitting alone, old,
a woman in her living room,
the drained, blue-gray wash of her eyes
staring down deep into a memory,
the curtains closed...
filtering in soft, amber warmth
in a glowing patch
over part of the carpet and her forearm,
transforming several hairs over her cracked skin
into fine, fiery filaments,
a warmth she resisted
from somewhere deep within
her enclosed, shrinking world—
insisting...mutely insisting to herself
that all was dark and cold.

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Scott Schuleit received the MA in Christianity and culture from Knox Theological Seminary. His poems have appeared in the Mars Hill Review, The Penwood Review, Spring Hill Review, Christianity and Literature, and Sehnsucht: The C.S. Lewis Journal. His non-fiction has been published in several print and non-print publications including Tabletalk, Reformed Perspectives Magazine, Monergism.com, The Gospel Coalition, and Modern Reformation. Scott is the youth ministry leader at Lake Worth Christian Reformed Church and enjoys walking, observing, reflecting, and spending time with his dear wife Christina.



CONVERSATION ABOUT FERGUSON

with Luke Bobo and Greg Pitchford

INTRODUCTION

Meet Greg Pitchford and Luke Bobo. Luke is a 55 year-old African-American male and Greg is a 51 year-old white-American male. Luke lives in Shawnee, Kansas; and Greg makes his home in Chillicothe, Missouri. Both men are husbands and fathers. Greg grew up in south St. Louis County and Luke lived in St. Louis for 25 years before relocating to Shawnee, Kansas, in June 2014.

Greg: People always ask me how I became involved with the Francis Schaeffer Institute [FSI] at Covenant Seminary and how you and I became friends. Do you remember the day we met? (This sounds awkwardly like a date!)

Luke: I do. You were experiencing a real existential crisis. Trying to figure out what you believed, why you believed it, and whether it made any difference in the world. I was the executive director at the Francis Schaeffer Institute. If I remember correctly, you googled "Francis Schaeffer," found our Web site, and visited the institute one day.

Greg: I really can't explain all the good things that have happened since that day. I can only say that meeting you and Jerram Barrs (FSI resident scholar) was providential. When people ask how we met, I like to tell them that I stalked you guys on the Internet. It's fun to watch their reactions. I had no idea that we would be friends over 12 years later, and having conversations about one of the most sensitive issues in our country. Let me lay it out on the table. When we first met, I knew you and I were different and that color was going to be an important issue we would eventually need to address. It was going to require us to cross boundaries and deal with cultural differences and years of hurt

and mistrust. God made this University of Missouri (MU) fan that bleeds black and gold painfully aware that he also loved Kansas University (KU) fans like you who wear red and blue. There...I said it.

Luke: I am so proud of you! So, how is MU's basketball team doing this year?

Greg: Let's move on. I fully believe in the restoration of all things, including the MU/KU divide. Let's start with baby steps and tackle the issue of race in our country.

Luke: That sounds easier.

Greg: We have talked about racial issues quite a bit over the last several years. I can't help but think that those conversations have been providential as well. We are getting past the polite formality part of our friendship. Recently, the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson, Missouri, has reignited the national conversation on race. Unfortunately, everyone seems to be having their conversations with people who see the Ferguson incident like they do. Our various tribes (black, white, various Christian tribes, secular, liberal, conservative, etc.) seem to be looking for confirmation of their opinions rather than understanding. Can you help this white guy think more clearly about what happened in Ferguson? What was your initial reaction to the fatal shooting of Michael Brown?

Luke: Honestly, my initial raw reaction was hollering, helplessly and angrily, "not again!" My white brothers and sisters must understand that most African-Americans do not see this as an isolated incident. Brown and countless others are part of a larger narrative that is played out repeatedly in our racialized culture². This oft repeated narrative

involves two characters: an armed white policeman and a black male. In most cases, the outcome is the same: the black male is criminalized and fatally shot to death and the police officer is exonerated³. The reoccurrence of this narrative has driven many African-Americans to conclude that there are actually not one America but two Americas. There is an America where whites enjoy certain privileges and are treated differently and respectfully; and then there is an America where blacks are often presumed criminals just because of their skin color. Or as one criminal justice colleague has put it: black males are regarded as the symbolic assailant.

Several questions began to flood my mind including: (1) Was this Wilson's assigned area to patrol? (2) Who initiated this chain of events? In other words, there had to be a prime mover or instigator. (3) How could an altercation escalate so quickly? (4) Why didn't Officer Wilson wait for back up? And (5) Why not just disable the young man? Why shoot to kill?

What was your reaction?

Greg: I would love to tell you that I had my finger on the pulse of race relations in this country. That is simply not the case. I'm one of those guys who likes to watch *The Daily Show* on the Comedy Channel. Last summer, the cast did a great job of highlighting the tension between the police and minority communities. They validated some of the conversations we have had in the past. I was especially troubled by Eric Garner's death in New York City three weeks earlier. When I heard of Michael Brown's death, I thought, here we go again. I was surprised at the violence that erupted, but not that surprised. Given the context, I guess

I was surprised it took this long. Even then, my initial reactions were more as a detached observer. If I didn't have a daughter going to school in the area, I probably would not have been that emotionally invested.

The raw emotion for me came a couple days later when I viewed the security video of Michael Brown robbing a convenience store. I don't know anything about Michael Brown. Some described him as a gentle giant. I will assume that was true. However, observing him in that video reminded me that 18 year-old males of all races make very stupid decisions. I know—I was one. If he carried that attitude out onto the street, it set the stage for multiple tragedies. Criminal behavior gets young men killed—either by scared or angry business owners, other criminals, or the police. What can I say?—I hate bullies. As I watched Michael Brown use his size as a weapon against a store owner, I got angry and my sympathy diminished. As I learned more about the actions of Officer Wilson, I got confused.

Luke: I so appreciate your honesty, Greg. However, I must say that any time a black male is killed by a white police officer I instantly think about my only son, Caleb Bobo, an academically astute and gregarious junior at the University of Kansas and I pray, "Lord, protect him, please."

Greg: You have told me before about having The Talk with your son. In the white community, that means talking about sex. For you and Caleb, that meant advice about what to do if you are pulled over. I was reminded of those conversations the other day when I listened to an interview with the chairman of the Black Police Officers

Association. This is the advice he gave for those of us who are approached by the police:

I say that any situation can be quelled by the person who's being approached if you would do just eight things. And that is keep your hands where the police can see them and don't run and God forbid, don't touch any police officer, him or his weapon. Do not resist, do not complain too strongly. Ask for a lawyer, record the officer's name and badge number or his card number and try to find any witnesses. If you follow those things, your interaction with the police, your time to battle any wrongdoing that you think may have occurred will come after that interaction.⁴

I have never felt the need to have that conversation with my daughters. I can't imagine trying to remember a list of eight things during a stressful encounter. If I did have that conversation with my daughters, I would simply say, "keep your hands where the officer can see them and treat him or her with respect." Did you feel the obligation to have The Talk with Briana?

Luke: Sure, I have conversed with Briana about the police and to be careful; however, she does not seem to be a target.

Greg: I am sympathetic to the frustrations in the black community. But I feel the police in these situations are also the victims. In 2014, the year Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and Andy Lopez were killed, 49 officers were killed by gunfire [odmp.org]. Two of those shootings were accidental. I don't know the racial make-up of the shooters or the details behind the accidental shootings. If I am going to assume that Michael Brown was a gentle giant

that acted foolishly, I am also going to assume that the majority of these officers were good men and women, dedicated to protecting their communities. Regardless of the circumstances, when violence occurs in the community, the police are on the front lines, protecting citizens, cleaning up the mess, collecting the evidence, contacting the families, and educating youth of all backgrounds about how to survive to adulthood. I am sympathetic to those officers and the difficult position they are in.

Luke: Indeed.

INITIAL REACTIONS TO THE GRAND JURY'S DECISION

Greg: I guess I was surprised that people were surprised at the Grand Jury verdict. I didn't think that Officer Wilson would be charged. The expectations we have for the police should be very high. But so should the bar for prosecuting them. After viewing the security video of Michael Brown and his friend robbing the store, my sympathies went in the direction of Officer Wilson. I guess I was willing to trust 12 people who were picked before this event ever occurred to examine the evidence and make a decision. I feel the system worked. I am glad all the evidence was made public. I don't know what else a free society can do. I know that we give lip service to the ideal *innocent until proven guilty*. It appeared to me that, prior to the verdict, there were a lot of people who wanted to deny that right to Officer Wilson.

Luke: Did you review any of the evidence after the verdict?

Greg: I didn't and don't intend to. Nothing is more worthless than



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scientific data at changing hearts and minds. Without careful thinking, it will simply reinforce our preconceptions. You didn't want to talk to me for a few days after that. What was up with that?

Luke: What was up with that? I was still processing. You see my initial reaction to the Grand Jury's decision was an incredulous and cynical "I am not surprised." Because of these oft played narratives involving a white police man killing a black male and the white officer not being brought to trial, I have a deep seated distrust in our criminal justice system. However, this distrust is rooted in the history of the United States from the Civil Rights Movement and Jim Crow days to the present day.

RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE, POST BROWN SHOOTING AND GRAND JURY DECISION

Greg: How did you respond to the violence that occurred after the Michael Brown shooting and Grand Jury decision? Not the protests, but the looting and burning of businesses that occurred. I have been all over the map on this one. I don't condone the violence at all. I do realize that when people believe they are living in a context that is unfair, it doesn't take much to spark violence. White colonists were so fed up with being taxed without representation that a tea tax ended up causing a riot and the destruction of property and businesses. For the most part, I was analytical. I simply watched and listened. I was sympathetic as elected officials and police worked to stop the violence. In several of the conversations I was a part of, I didn't see much differentiation between the protesters and the looters. I appreciate the police working hard to distinguish between the two groups. I am concerned that Michael

Brown's actions prior to the shooting and the actions of the looters steered the conversation away from root causes to the symptoms.

Not gonna lie, friend. Black people rioting in the streets scared the heck out of my community. While your community headed to the streets, several white people headed to gun stores. Did the black community feel the same pressure to buy guns that the white community did?

Luke: I honestly don't know; I suspect many did.

PRESSURES FROM WITHIN OUR RESPECTIVE COMMUNITIES

Greg: One of the assumptions that I had about publishing this conversation was that it would be a risky exercise for you, but it would be relatively risk free for me. I quickly found out that this was not the case. When people from my community (mostly white and many evangelical) found out that we were having this conversation, quite a bit of air was sucked out of the room. Several people wanted to remind me of Michael Brown's sins, tell me jokes about how the looters didn't steal any work boots, and asked me to define social justice. You could see the wheels spinning as they were trying to decide if I was a liberal, or worse...a Democrat! The lines were pretty quickly drawn. I was either on the side of the police or the looters. The idea that there might be a larger context in which these actions were playing out seemed irrelevant. The pressure to side with the white officer was pretty strong.

Luke: As a card carrying member of the African-American community, on one hand, I am expected to side

automatically with the majority of African Americans across this country who decry this fatal shooting. And I do. However, on the other hand, another part of me asks, what was Brown's home life like? Crap, why do these events keep on playing out? Was he taught an individual will never win in an altercation between them and a white police officer (history is stacked against you)? Was he taught right from wrong? Please don't hear what I am not saying: I am not saying Brown deserved this; I simply ask, why is this ugly song repeatedly played?

Greg: So, we have a white guy who is skeptical of Michael Brown's innocence and sympathetic to the police and a black guy who is offended by an injustice. What biblical principles should guide our thinking?

SORTING IT OUT: THINKING CHRISTIANLY

1. Imago Dei: Respect and Dignity a Must

Luke: God has made every person including Eric Garner, Darren Wilson, Michael Brown, Jeffery Dahmer, Bonnie and Clyde, in his image (Genesis 1:26-27). Theologians call it the *imago dei*. Being made in the image of God is what separates us from the rest of God's creation. Only human beings are said to be crowned with glory and honor (Psalm 8:5). We all must pray that God helps us to see every human person adorned with a crown! Because of our common imago dei DNA⁵, we are truly brothers and sisters of one human race. Because of our common imago dei DNA, all Christians are thus called to treat *every person* with dignity and respect. Failing to do this makes one guilty of the sin of partiality (James 2:1-13). Is a

white life more valuable than a black life? In his book, *Ultimate Punishment: A Lawyer's Reflections on Dealing with the Death Penalty*, Scott Turow suggests that in the criminal justice system this certainly is the reality. However, as Christians we know that, because of our common imago dei DNA, all persons from womb to tomb have intrinsic worth and value regardless of creed, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or nationality. As Christians, then, we must seek to guard that imago dei; as Christians, we must be courageous enough to demand that our authorities treat all suspects, criminals, U.S. citizens, etc. with the utmost dignity and respect as well.

Greg: I agree with you. Unfortunately, in many of the conversations I listened to, that principle flew out the window pretty fast. Tribalism and demonization of "the other" seemed to be the order of the day. If anything, social networks have made this easier. Today, it is really easy to get our news from sources that reinforce rather than challenge our thinking. It seems to provide certainty during uncertain times and make us feel a little better than the other groups.

2. We are All Fallen

Greg: While we are all made in the image of God, sin has infected us. We are all sons of Adam and daughters of Eve and have inherited their sinfulness (Romans 5:12-21). Even our best efforts at standing up against evil will be corrupted by sin. I guess we can't be surprised when our governing authorities and our protests go wrong. Richard Rothstein does a good job examining the public policies that helped segregate St. Louis and other cities⁶. We can see a history of sin throughout the public

policies and attitudes outlined in his narrative.

3. God Loves Justice

Luke: God, our heavenly father, is good, right, and just. This is precisely why God loves justice and righteousness (Psalm 33:5). Simply, justice is seeking to right wrongs. So, if God loves justice, the opposite must be true: he hates injustice or the miscarriage of justice. We image God when we love the things that he loves and hate the things he hates. Our police are called to serve and protect—so we must applaud those who carry out this task honorably and likewise expose the bad apples that do not. This is our moral duty to defend the cause of the marginalized, the oppressed, the widow, the orphan or better, "the other." Justice means boldly, promptly and unapologetically correcting a brother or sister in Christ who uses pejorative terms (e.g., thug or N-word) directed to an African-American human person. Justice means standing up for the dignity of all human beings.

Greg: Some of my friends really bristled when I mentioned there was a social justice component to the aftermath of the Michael Brown shooting. Twice I was asked to define social justice. For me it is more than righting wrongs. It is about creating a society where everyone can flourish. I heard Bill O'Reilly recently interviewed on *The Daily Show*. (I know—I'm such an academic!) He admitted that white privilege had occurred in the past, but was no longer an issue. I have to respectfully disagree. Societal decisions from the past can stack the deck in the favor of one person over another. I own land because of government homesteading practices in

the 1800s. I grew up in neighborhoods surrounded by families who benefitted from Veteran's Administration and GI Loans given to mostly white soldiers after WWII. No neighborhoods wrote restrictive covenants to keep my family out. I don't feel any responsibility as an individual for the sins of the past, but I have benefitted greatly when affirmative action policies have targeted the white community. For me, justice means not only correcting wrongs but also ensuring that my black brothers have the same opportunities to flourish. Or, as N.T. Wright states it, "justice is the intention of God from Genesis to Revelation to set the whole world right."⁷

Luke: I love that quote from Wright.

4. The Authority of the State

Greg: Romans 13:1-2 states that government has a legitimate, God ordained role. When Paul wrote these words, he was living under the Roman Empire. The Romans were not the most benevolent government to have arisen. Despite this, Paul recognizes the God-given role that government has to enforce the law, even using lethal force if necessary (Romans 13:4). Many in the white community have rallied around the police in light of the rioting and looting that took place after the Michael Brown shooting and Grand Jury verdict. This is legitimate. The government must protect its citizens and their property. The police have a right to use lethal force if necessary to stop crime.

It is tempting for those of us in the white community to reduce this issue to a mathematical equation. The thinking runs something like this: most violence in the black community is black on black. Therefore, if over 95 percent

of the police are conscientious and are doing all they can to protect our communities, then the black community should accept an occasional accidental death as collateral damage, especially in light of the violence that occurs daily in minority neighborhoods. As I try to view this issue from your perspective, two issues come to mind. The first is the unique role that government has. Like the family and the church, the government is one of the three institutions ordained by God. When people are hurt by family members or the church, we recoil. As a God ordained institution, government institutions causing hurt is especially troubling.

The second temptation when viewing this issue is to examine it separately from the larger context of historical racism in our society. Again, I suggest any skeptic either read Rothstein's history of St. Louis public policy or an American history book. While Romans 13 talks about the enforcement side of the state, this passage and others also talk about its role in providing for social justice (Deuteronomy 15:12-15, Jeremiah 22:1-5). I guess in light of the history of race relations in our country and the role government has played, I'm not surprised that people have been rioting in the street. I'm surprised that there hasn't been more and I'm humbled by the patience shown by the black community. God is truly restraining the chaos!

5. Individual vs. Corporate Responsibility

Greg: In the United States, we are so focused on the individual that we forget about the community surrounding them. There is the American myth that intelligence combined with hard work

equals success. I don't want to take anything away from successful people, those qualities are critical. Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers* does a good job of highlighting the influence of family, culture, and even birth date on the a person's chance of being successful. For example, if Bill Gates had not lived in a community where mothers got together and raised funds to buy a mainframe computer terminal, this brilliant, hard-working young man may not have been able to take advantage of the computer revolution that was about to take place. As Christians, none of that should be a surprise. Throughout scripture, there are examples of the influence of the community on the individual and vice versa. Those influences can be positive, as in the case of the community caring for the poor (Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:19-22) or negative when a community becomes so corrupt that God punishes the entire society (Joshua 10:40-42; Amos 3:1-2).

Scripture also holds out examples of the power of one, and the impact for good or bad they can have on an entire people group. The most graphic example is Adam. His sin resulted in misery for all of humanity and the rest of creation (Romans 5:12-14). Then there is Jesus (Romans 5:18-21; 1 Corinthians 15:21) who came to rescue the world from that sin. On a less cosmic level, individuals like Job prayed for his family (Job 1:1-5) and Nehemiah prayed for his nation (Nehemiah 1:4-11). I guess this is the long way around to my point. It shouldn't be a surprise to the white community that the efforts of the overwhelming majority of hardworking police officers and officials can quickly be sabotaged by a few bad apples. On the other hand, a community that has historically been set up to favor one

people group over another is set up to crush the hopes and dreams of those who aren't in power. When your hopes and dreams are crushed, I think that sets people up for all kinds of social problems. Members of both the black and white communities recognize that we have come a long way in providing equal rights to everyone. That is true. Hopefully we are overcoming the years of institutional preferences that stifled all but the strongest personalities. Who knows...everything else is changing rapidly, hopefully this part of society is as well. God holds individuals responsible for their actions. Scripture also is clear that God punishes societies that are overtly or subtly unjust.

6. Making All Things New

Luke: Jesus' resurrection was the "first fruit," which means that his bodily resurrection serves as a prototype and guarantee that the future resurrections of those who die in Christ would indeed occur (1 Corinthians 15:20-23). However, Jesus' resurrection is significant for another reason: his bodily resurrection also promises the restoration of all things. Both Cone⁸ and Wright⁹ argue that the redemption and renewal of the entire cosmos is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus. And that redemption and renewal is underway! This means, of course, that we have the privilege of participating in making all things new. So, we need to ask, what needs restoring? And then we need to ask, how can I use my privileges—race, reputation, connections, money, access, etc.—to advance this great renewal project? It does not take a rocket scientist to see that there are two institutions desperately in need of restoration: the human family and our criminal justice system.

Greg: I'm not very hopeful that much change is going to come from the Michael Brown shooting. It seems weird to be writing this article this late in the game. I guess for me, the hope of the gospel is where I hang my hat. We have both mentioned N.T. Wright. I love this quote from him. It makes me feel like our conversations are not in vain.

You are—strange though it may seem, almost as hard to believe as the resurrection itself—accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God's new world. Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one's fellow human beings and for that matter one's fellow nonhuman creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world—all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make. That is the logic of the mission of God. God's recreation of his wonderful world, which began with the resurrection of Jesus and continues mysteriously as God's people live in the risen Christ and in the power of his Spirit, means that what we do in Christ and by the Spirit in the present is not wasted. It will last all the way into God's new world. In fact, it will be enhanced there.¹⁰

I don't know how to proceed and make change happen. I just know that the past hasn't been just. It does feel like our conversations over meals together

are small acts of rebellion, pointing toward a new kingdom that is being constructed. Prior to Ferguson, I described myself as more of a detached observer to the issues around race. As our conversations have progressed since Thanksgiving, the issue has become more visceral. I will never get what it's like to be black in our country. But our conversations and friendship have definitely sensitized me to the frustrations that you feel. Maybe that's one more step in the right direction. Speaking of one more step, can I just hear you say once...MIZZOU-RAH!!!

Luke: Nope, not from these lips!

A FINAL NOTE

Our most recent conversations have taken place over meals at a deli in downtown Kansas City and a Mexican restaurant in Chillicothe. And we plan to continue our dialogue. Can we encourage you to reach across the aisle and have meaningful conversations, too? ■

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FOOTNOTES

¹ See the Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation and Culture Web site: www.washingtoninst.org/8635/makes-me-wanna-holler.

² This is a phrase borrowed from Michael Emerson's book, "Divided By Faith."

³ See www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/16/melissa-harris-perry-black-men-killed-by-police_n_5684588.html for a retelling of this narrative.

⁴ (<http://wvpublic.org/post/police-other-communities-are-consumed-ferguson>)

⁵ Borrowed from Allan Dayhoff's soon to be released book, *Listening to Hear: Church in a Blues Bar*.

⁶ (www.epi.org/publication/making-ferguson)

⁷ Wright, p. 422 in iBooks.

⁸ James Cone (2005). *The Spirituals and the Blues*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.

⁹ N. T. Wright (2008). *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

¹⁰ Wright, p. 414 in iBooks.

SUGGESTED MEDIA

Books

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Emerson, Michael, and Smith, Christian (2000). *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Emerson, Michael, and DeYoung, Curtiss (2003). *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation As an Answer to the Problem of Race*. New York, NY: Oxford Press.

McWhorter, John (2000). *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

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Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "The Case for Reparations." www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/05/the-case-for-reparations/361631

McIntosh, Peggy (1988). "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." *Independent School* magazine, 49(2), 31-35. www.amptoons.com/blog/files/mcintosh.html

Rothstein, Richard. "The Making of Ferguson: How Decades of Hostile Policy Created a Powder Keg." www.prospect.org/article/making-ferguson-how-decades-hostile-policy-created-powder-keg

Films (should be viewed in a racially diverse context)

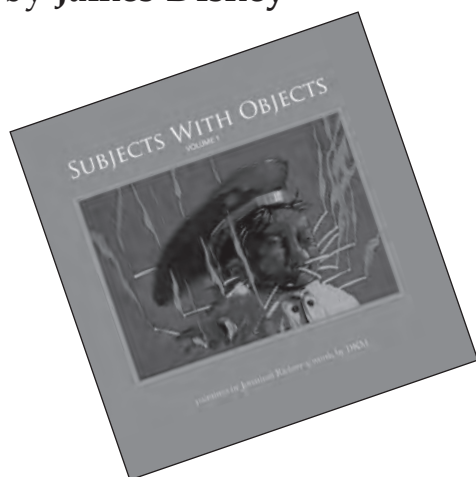
Guess Who Is Coming to Dinner (1967)
Crash (2005), *Ray* (2004)
The Help (2011)
The Grace Card (2010)
The Butler (2013)
42 (2013)
A Family Thing (1996)
Watermelon Man (1970), *Mississippi Burning* (1988)
Red Tails (2012)
Selma (2014)
Birth of a Nation (1915)

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial reaction to the events of Ferguson? The Grand Jury decision? The looting, destroying of property in Ferguson? The ongoing protests around the world?
2. Did you have an "a ha" moment while reading this conversation between Luke and Greg? If yes, what was it?
3. What bothered you about reading this conversation between Luke and Greg?
4. Did you discuss the Ferguson events and the subsequent events (e.g., looting, protesting, etc.) with a white person? An African American person? Why or why not?
5. How has your church addressed this situation, this topic?
6. Should Christians live any differently now because of Ferguson? Why or why not?
7. Are you concerned that secular sources such as the Comedy Channel were important sources of information for this conversation?

People Watching with Insight

by James Disney



Jonathan Richter tells us that each of his paintings in *Subjects With Objects* began with a good beer. With all the heavy agendas weighing down the artist today, is it any wonder that a man with a creative impulse would eventually say, "O well, I guess I will just have a beer and make something." Hoping for simplicity of vision, many an artist has entered a bar. The painter Jan Steen, who apparently owned a tavern, seems to invite us into this world in nearly every picture. Steen may have lived in a simpler time than our own, the golden age of Dutch painting in the seventeenth century. He certainly seems to be having a lot of fun making his pictures. In his "Self Portrait as a Lutenist," he is telling us that life is a grand party so grab a tankard and join in. Richter takes a similar stance in his corner booth. As he sips his ale, the circus of the human drama unfolds before him.

Jesus tells us that he is most at home among sinners and scoundrels. The more I absorb from the events of the Gospels, the more I imagine that Jesus used a lighthearted humor to introduce a redemptive element into the shady places he would enter. Comedy may be one of the only remaining artistic

devices still relatively untinged by irony. But doesn't the jester require more than a colorful stage set? Enter stage left: the playwright walks into the bar. As Richter paints, the mysterious figure DKM sits down in the booth and whispers his take on the farce. Whole acts unfold as we read his short lines and gaze at Richter's characters.

It is striking, in the supposedly visual age in which we live, how often words come as a blessed relief. Have you been helplessly stranded, staring at a perky screen of optimistic colors, with no clue how to proceed? Words bring transformation. Below one ambiguous face DKM tells us, "After that, I watched as much TV as I could." We know this figure and the deep theological insight of the boy holding his scruffy dog who says, "You figure out pretty young that something's gone wrong and the world hurts more than it should."

Many a man has felt clever when he first sits down in a bar. But two beers later the hard questions require answers. To salvage the evening, one might grasp at some consolation for not really knowing or understanding anything. The magic of art is that it illustrates the possibility of understanding without knowing or possessing. A middle-aged woman tells us, "We will always remember ourselves as beautiful." The great thing about painting is that it can pack eternity into a single moment, almost as if God had finally been captured on canvas. In their collaboration, Richter and DKM seem giddy to have discovered this. With one image of a young man holding a piece of fruit, the caption reads, "I am trying to get at something eternal." This is at once a subtle nod to the history of portrait and still life painting, and at the same time a celebration of innocent insight.

Indeed the eternal is among us. At an image of a boy who is kissing a fish, first I laughed at "When I do this, I feel for a moment like everything will be okay." Then I wondered if perhaps I am allowed to see the fish as the secret IXTHUS. Because *Subjects With Objects* is a book of art, I can choose and so can you, making the secret even more cherished. ■

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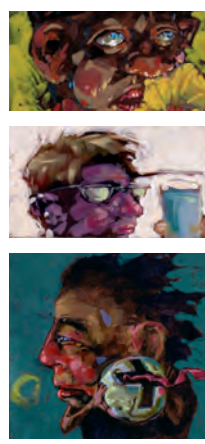


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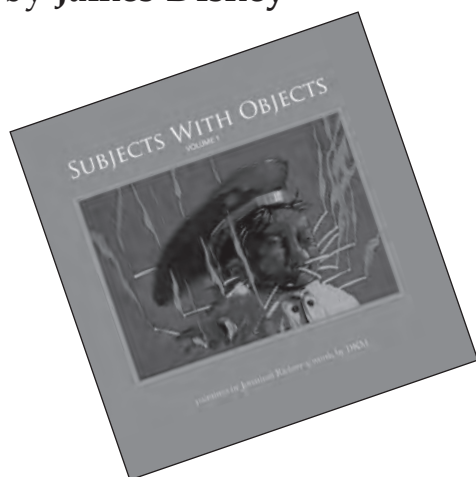
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SUBJECTS WITH OBJECTS
VOLUME 1



paintings by Jonathan Richter & words by DKM

