

# critique

A full-page background image showing the lower half of a person standing on a paved road. The person is wearing blue denim jeans with visible rips and tears at the knees. On the left leg, they are wearing brown leather chukka boots. On the right leg, they are wearing white high-top sneakers with red stripes. The road stretches into the distance under a cloudy, overcast sky.

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## **PILGRIM STORIES: “EVANGELISM” IS A DIRTY WORD TO MILLENIALS**

## CRITIQUE



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Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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# In Praise of Inefficiency



One proof of capitalism's success can be seen in the unquestioned assumption that its values always contribute to human flourishing. Efficiency and productivity, for example, are not merely valued in the workplace but weasel their way into human interactions and relationships where they do not belong. Meetings of friends need to occur crisply, conversations need to be proficient, and time must not be wasted because we are busy.

The industrial revolution proved the value of efficiency and production, developing better ways of accomplishing laborious tasks and increasing the amount that can be accomplished in the same amount of time. The standard of living went up, the middle class expanded, and goods and services became cheaper. These are good things. Efficiency and productivity was also applied to management. The time spent in meetings was streamlined, needed information could be distributed proficiently with greater clarity, and workers could spend more time on task instead of getting ready to be on task. Again, these are good things.

What has been missed, however, is that what works brilliantly in the

marketplace can do serious damage to our humanity when inserted into realms of life in which it does not properly belong. We've all experienced it. People keep their phones on during conversations so their focus is always divided and talk is interrupted. People rush into life groups, and repeatedly check the time. People multitask in meetings, checking e-mail while taking notes. People are too busy to take true sabbaths and blame their job as if they have no choice. Each of these signals that the thing at hand is not worth their full attention, and that there isn't time for unhurried conversation because that simply isn't efficient or productive.

The Christian understanding of sin is when a good gift of God is misused. Words are good gifts but using them to subvert the truth to my neighbor's harm is sin (lying). Recognizing beauty is a good gift but undressing my neighbor's wife in my imagination is sin (lust). Both efficiency and productivity are good gifts to make the marketplace more satisfying and able to meet needs for the common good but, as standards for human relationships, they are sin (dehumanizing). Allowing them where they are not appropriate shows them to be the perverted ideals of an idolatry bent on reducing human relationships to commodities. Capitalism and modern management theory are helpful tools but, as ideologies, they seek our allegiance, and that we must beware.

The truth is that relationships cannot be hurried, conversations are fully authentic only to the extent they are unforced, life is messy, and being still to wait upon God requires a radically different set of values. If we are too busy, we can brutally review our commitments and begin to make changes that allow us to more fully embrace

kingdom values. If we are so shaped by efficiency and productivity that we are unable to relax into time when humanness, listening, and stillness prevail, we can repent and begin to develop the spiritual disciplines we lack. If we have the opportunity, we can even bring kingdom values into the marketplace so that people are not misused and underappreciated in the quest for efficiency and productivity.

Efficiency and productivity are such wonderful tools and result in so much that is good that they easily mask their cruelty. Since talking together is good, shouldn't talking about more in the same time be even better? (No. Sometimes just being together is what matters.) Since it takes so little to check e-mail during the meeting, is it all that important to focus on points I already understand? (Focus is not merely for comprehension.) Since our conversation continues even as my phone beeps, shouldn't I be available in case someone really needs me? (Our friendship needs you now, here.) And since a lot of this is not going to come cheaply, is it really as important as all that? (Kingdom values are worth the cost.)

So join me, if you will, in raising a cheer: In praise of efficiency and productivity in their rightful tiny slice of life, and in praise of inefficiency and unproductivity in the rest of life. ■

# PILGRIM STORIES: “EVANGELISM” IS A DIRTY WORD TO MILLENNIALS

by John Seel

**FAITH IS NOT THE CLINGING  
TO A SHRINE  
BUT AN ENDLESS  
PILGRIMAGE OF THE HEART.**

— *Abraham Joshua Heschel*

**T**he church has a significant communication problem with millennials. Not only do persons of faith tend to talk exclusively to themselves in coded religious language, they communicate with a tone and content that is perceived as offensive to many young people. Genuine disagreements do not need to be offensive. Effective communication can lead to the achievement of real disagreement. But the process need not be intrinsically offensive. Sadly, the way most evangelical churches frame evangelism is a nonstarter for most millennials. It is a communication problem needing urgent attention.

## FOUR SOCIAL IMAGINARIES

In contemporary American society, there are four operating social imaginaries. If we are to discuss our apprenticeship to Jesus effectively, particularly among spiritually oriented millennials, we will have to fundamentally rethink how we communicate the gospel in terms of these social imaginaries.

“Social imaginaries” is not a term many are familiar with outside of the

academy. Philosopher Charles Taylor says, “By social imaginaries, I mean something much broader and deeper than intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode [read worldviews]. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence.... This is often carried in images, stories, and legends.” They reflect unconscious assumptions about:

What is the good life?

Who is a good person?

How can I achieve both?

These are our assumptions about how we imagine the world to be. In contemporary American society there are four distinct orientations to reality, four competing social imaginaries: (1) closed transcendent, (2) closed immanent, (3) open immanent, and (4) open transcendent.

Dividing these four lens on reality are the two distinct approaches or attitudes: closed or open / settlers or explorers. Father Thomas Halik, Czech philosopher priest and 2014 Templeton Prize winner, stated in the *New York Times*, “I think the crucial difference in the church today is not between so-called believers and nonbelievers, but between dwellers and seekers.” Dwellers are those who are happy where they are, who feel they have found the truth, while seekers are still looking for answers. Halik believes that those in the community of seekers actually have more in common with each other than do seekers and settlers from within the same faith tradition.

This is the source of our communication problem: settlers talking to seekers. It also explains why the church is so ineffective connecting to millennials. Let’s look at these four views more closely.

## SETTLERS

**Closed Transcendents**—people who believe in the supernatural or unseen spiritual world and who hold to these beliefs with unwavering dogmatic confidence. This group represents most of the evangelical church.

**Closed Immanents**—people who do not believe in the supernatural or the unseen spiritual world and who hold to these beliefs with unwavering dogmatic confidence. This group represents those who have been called the New Atheists.

Most of the church’s efforts in evangelism and apologetics are framed as a debate or discussion between these two groups of settlers whether the topic is the existence of God or evolution: closed transcendents vs. closed immanents. Veritas Forums often feature debates between people representing these two positions. Debates framed in this manner are irrelevant sideshows to the discussions that are really needed.

It should be noted that these groups—particularly closed transcendents—have large and organized constituencies. Closed immanents have received huge press attention through their runaway bestsellers. Closed transcendents dominate the perspective of the middle of America and closed immanents are most commonly found within the academy.

What both of these groups are finding is that they are increasingly passé. In spite of their size and history, they no longer represent the cultural cutting edge. More and more they find themselves talking only to themselves. We live in a post-secular society where the old Enlightenment narrative of the secularization thesis is more and more challenged. Herein lies the missiological



challenge for the American evangelical church. It must learn to speak, connect, and walk along side those who no longer hold to these two passé social imaginaries. Our natural teachers in knowing how to effectively move forward are millennials. It is time for boomer church leaders to start listening to millennials.

Let's turn then to the front line for the soul of America, where we need to be refocusing and rethinking our communication efforts. This shift between settlers and explorers indicates a huge rupture in the American consciousness. It is an entirely new world that will require an entirely new style and approach to evangelism. James K.A. Smith adds, "Too much of our evangelism has been informed by picturing human beings as 'thinking things'.... [P]eople aren't looking for answers to questions. They're not looking to solve an intellectual puzzle. They want to love. They're looking for love, and they're looking to love." A hug is not the same thing as a syllogism.

## EXPLORERS

**Open Immanent**—people who adopt a secular frame of reference on reality in their day-to-day lives, but who are at the same time haunted by and open to the possibility of a larger transcendent order, a world of meaning beyond themselves. This is the premise of Elizabeth Gilbert's new book, *Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear*. For these folks James K. A. Smith observes, "faith" is the doubt of their secularity. They operate with a spiritual FOMO attitude, the "fear of missing out." These are those who are uncomfortable with the dogma of "religion," but who talk easily about their own spiritual journeys and long for fellow sojourners. This is the fastest

growing social imaginary in American society and one that dominates millennials and storytelling cultural creatives that run Hollywood. Because storytelling cultural creatives curate the public social imaginary for society at large, they should be the focus in the church's efforts to communicate to a post-Christian culture.

**Open Transcendent**—people who believe in a transcendent spiritual reality but who at the same time hold to these beliefs with an openness to new ideas and continuing exploration—they do not have the sense that they have arrived or that they have a corner on truth. We could say that they have "humble convictions," as they recognize that there is more to know than they will ever know, and that they could be wrong about what they currently claim to know. Therefore, they maintain a learner's attitude and one that is genuinely open to learn from anyone. They are not relativist or skeptics—all truth is the same or no truth can be known—but they affirm the limits of human knowledge, particularly their own.

Nor does an open transcendent perspective commit one to Christianity or even theism. The Dalai Lama has an open transcendent perspective though there are some who would claim that his pantheism doesn't get him far beyond an open immanent viewpoint. The late philanthropist Sir John Templeton captured this open transcendent view in his notion of "humility-in-theology." This same kind of attitude is seen in Pope Francis. This in part explains his resonance with millennials, and why he graced the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine.

The most pressing evangelistic task for the contemporary church is

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**I AM PULLED TOWARD THE BELIEF THAT GOD IS FAR BIGGER THAN ANY OF US CAN CONTAIN OR UNDERSTAND OR DESCRIBE. I AM PULLED TOWARD A HUMILITY THAT REFUSES TO HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS AT ANY GIVEN MOMENT. I AM PULLED TOWARD A RESPECT FOR HUMANITY THAT ACKNOWLEDGES THE INHERENT VALUE AND BELOVEDNESS OF ALL PEOPLE INDIVIDUALLY. I AM PULLED TOWARD FAITH IN A GOD WHO CAN SPEAK ANYWHERE AND TO ANYONE WITHOUT NEEDING A MIDDLEMAN—AND WITHOUT NEEDING ME.**

— **John Pavlovitz**

to learn how to connect with people who are open immanent and begin to move them toward a Christian open transcendent perspective. For this task, the evangelical church is

woefully unprepared.

What was once uncommon, when an Enlightenment perspective held unquestioned cultural sway, is now becoming far more common. Many today are following in the footsteps of C. S. Lewis' intellectual path. Lewis traces his faith journey this way; "On the intellectual side my own progress has been from 'popular realism' [materialism] to Philosophical Idealism; from Idealism to Pantheism; from Pantheism to Theism; and from Theism to Christianity." Put differently, the arch of Lewis' spiritual journey was from closed transcendence to closed immanent to open immanent to open transcendent. It is a spiritual path many are now following.

David Kinnaman sees evangelical young people moving from the faith of their fathers to atheism (prodigal) to some form of spirituality (exile) and only rarely to open transcendence. Usually, individuals are so beaten up by the process by their parents, churches, and other Christians that they abandon church-based religion all together. Such is the spiritual biography of Rachel Held Evans and Franky Schaeffer. Such was the experience of Peter Enns.<sup>1</sup>

Today there is a huge opportunity to assist people on their spiritual journeys from an open immanent perspective to an open transcendent one, from the pop Americanized pantheism of Oprah to a vibrant open Christianity of real presence of C. S. Lewis.

Even the word "evangelism" is a stumbling block for many. The immediate reaction is "What are you trying to sell me or do to me that I don't want?" This is a fair reaction in light of the church's typical approach to evangelism. While there is not a set recipe for effective evangelism to open immanent persons, of which millennials dominate,

there are eight common ingredients that one needs to have on hand in each relationship.

### 1. Connection

Effective evangelism today requires genuine human connection. This means creating a judgment-free environment. The church does not start its engagement with contemporary culture on a level playing field. Scandals, hypocrisy, and right wing politicized coercion are the operative assumptions of most nonbelievers. Many would instinctively agree with Henry Drummond, "As long as a prerequisite for that shining paradise is bigotry, ignorance, and hate, I say to hell with it." To be effective the church must adopt a new tone. Pope Francis has been most effective in demonstrating how this is done. The shift in tone from Pope Benedict to Pope Francis has been marked. Actress, lesbian political activist, Maria Bello, acknowledges returning to the Catholic Church because of this Pope's change in tone. He has not changed the lyrics, but he has changed the music. This is an essential starting point. So the initial step is to reorient the relationship so that there is a genuine human connection in a safe, affirming place. There is no effective evangelism that doesn't start in a judgment free zone. Since the church is presumed to be judgmental, it will have to lean over backwards not to be so.

Hospitality is an essential part of this process. When the Celtic missionaries encountered the pagan Druids, the pagans were invited into their community and treated like royalty. Their guesthouse was the finest lodging facility in the entire village. The Celtic assumption was not that one believes in order to belong, but that "belonging

comes before believing." They simply made you want to belong. Dinners with strangers and guestrooms prepared for the alien are not the normal practice of modern believers. We need to establish the priority in our churches of open homes and exuberant hospitality. The relational power of the films *Chocolat* and *Babbett's Feast* comes to mind. To be effective the gospel in the contemporary world needs to celebrate the goodness of God's creation and the glory of human creativity. We must work toward a genuine human connection that celebrates the other with joy, beauty, and love.

### 2. Experience and Imagination

The contemporary millennial does not start with abstract principles, but lived experience. The gospel will become real not via reasoned argument, but through deep human experiences, particularly those that engage the imagination. Lewis' conversion was greatly enhanced when he failed to secure a teaching position in philosophy and turned instead to English. In A. N. Wilson's skeptical biography of Lewis he writes, "Without [the change to English], Lewis would not have been the man he became.... English was to restore to him with inescapable force the message, which he had been hearing.... This was the knowledge that human life is best understood by the exercise of not only the wit, but also of the imagination." Modern millennials reject the assumptions of the Enlightenment, its left-brain bias toward the rational and abstract, as well as its conceptual authoritarianism. They respond instead to story, music, and film. As American evangelicalism has a heady bias toward the Enlightenment, this will require an entire reversal

of priorities. Theologian Peter Enns captures this shift in his important book, *The Sin of Certainty*. Enns suggests that God is more interested in our trust than our “correct” beliefs. A relationship with Jesus does not start with acing a multiple-choice theology exam. To be effective the gospel in the contemporary world needs to prioritize shared experiences that capture the imagination. It does better with cut flowers, flowing wine, and a gourmet meal.

### 3. Non-instrumental Relationships

It is also imperative that we enter into these relationships without an agenda—particularly an evangelistic one. We know what happens to a friendship when a friend becomes associated with a direct sales organization. In time you will be asked to buy a product or become a distributor. To be a successful salesman every friendship is eventually commodified. And if you feel “used,” you’d be right. So too are the friends of many Christians.

Millennials are highly sensitive to being “sold.” Their relational radars can immediately sense that there is an ulterior motive to the friendship. People are ends, not means. If our love is genuine, then we cannot enter our relationships with our nonbelieving friends with a secondary motive, even if it is a noble one. The goal of our friendship is friendship. Since evangelicals have violated these terms so frequently, we should assume a hermeneutic of suspicion on the part of our nonbelieving friends. We must lean against this and allow conversations to develop naturally. We can never violate the self-determining integrity of the other person, by pushing our own views on points where we might disagree: politics, religion, or sexuality. Just being a good

friend through hell and high water is enough. This is why there is a problem with the term “friendship evangelism.” What is needed is “friendship friendship.” Sadly, church types need to be reminded of this more frequently than nonbelievers. Authentic friendships do not have an agenda.

### 4. Shared Pilgrimage

We can overcome this need to “do evangelism,” what is pejoratively perceived by the typical nonbeliever as “doing proselytizing,” by picturing in our minds a shared pilgrimage rather than Hyde Park’s Speakers Corner. It is not that followers of Jesus have arrived and we are calling others to our settled destination—which is the typical framing of evangelism. That is *not* the picture to have if we are to be effective in connecting with the contemporary nonbeliever. We must hold in our minds the picture of being together on a shared spiritual pilgrimage to a yet undeclared destination. It is less important that we are conceptually heading in the same direction or going the same speed, but that we are on a shared trail together and that our paths have for this moment meaningfully crossed. What is important is to make this path crossing, however long or short, deeply meaningful and hopefully memorable.

By using this metaphor of shared sacred pilgrimage, I am not suggesting “all spiritual paths lead magically to the same place.” I am simply suggesting that what is as important as an imagined destination is the quality of our encounter on the path. It is the journey that will change us. The problem with the traditional view of evangelism is that it falsely bifurcates destination and journey, placing almost exclusive emphasis on the destination with no

reference or regard for the necessity, beauty, and meaning of the journey. Creating meaningful moments along the journey is just as important as delivering the friend to the destination... if that ever happens. We share together the mythic hero’s journey, the Greek epic, and the pilgrim’s progress. It is in this shared experience of spiritual companionship on an open-ended spiritual adventure that God works in the pilgrim’s life.

Pilgrimage is not a common experience today. Wiki defines “pilgrimage” as “a journey or search for moral or spiritual significance. Typically, it is a journey to a shrine or other location of importance to a person’s beliefs and faith, although sometimes it can be a metaphorical journey into someone’s own beliefs.” Like the various stories told in *The Canterbury Tales*, there is much to be learned from each person’s story.

To view life as a pilgrimage is to understand journey as a liminal space. The word “liminality” comes from the Latin, *limen*, meaning “a threshold.” The pilgrimage is a transformational space between a “real” known world and an unknown imaginary world of risk and possibility. Consider four films that make a pilgrimage a metaphor for life: *Into the Wild* (2007), *Eat, Pray, Love* (2010), *Wild* (2014), and *A Walk in the Woods* (2015). In these films, which character is the most beneficial companion on the journey? What were his or her characteristics? What was it about the encounter that made it meaningful? What can we learn from them? Most of us need to get off our self-righteous soapbox and stop preaching. We need to join others on the damp and cold trail and simply listen to the stories of others. There we will find wisdom for our own

journey. We need to stop trying to be the guru, shaman, or “spiritual-know-it-all” to others. Rather we need to get down in the muck with others, who with us are trying to muddle through life with some measure of personal integrity and open search for meaning. As one friend said to me, “I’ll love you to heaven or I’ll love you to hell. You can count on me loving you either way the whole way.”

### 5. Haunted On-ramps

The modern nonbeliever is haunted by the possibility of an unseen spiritual world. We live in a post-secular society, where openness to other worlds is taken-for-granted.

We must learn to appreciate this spiritual openness, the restlessness of a haunted longing for enchantment.

We need to be careful about dismissing others’ search for enchantment as New Age pap or ecological mysticism. Such dismissals do not help. We must

learn to expect and respect the “nova effect,” the explosion of different options for belief and meaning in a post-secular age. The common enemy is a world without windows—of the older Enlightenment and closed immanent perspective. With others we should be looking for the light beyond. Like the children in Lewis’ tales, there is a longing for Narnia, and a perpetual search for the right wardrobe, the door to another world away.

This sense of hauntedness has four

distinct onramps to spiritual pilgrimage depending on one’s life experiences, calling, and personality. Four common onramps through which modern seekers explore their spiritual longing are the search for justice, the embrace of love, the rapture of beauty, and the still small voice of the spirit. Whether one is a social justice activist, a lonely single living on the edge of the hook-up scene, a romantic artist or climate change ecologist enraptured by the grandeur of Nature, or simply a spiritual seeker back from Red Rock and a spiritual cleansing with a Tsachila Shaman, we will each be following the dim lights of

our own experience with the perpetual signals of transcendence. As apprentices of Jesus, we would do well to learn the languages of these onramps, not so that we can do apologetics more effectively, but so that we can ask the insightful question in a manner that is both respectful

of where they are and helpful for encouraging them to take the next step in their journey.

Hal Holbrook, playing the widower Ron Franz, in the film *Into the Wild*, comments with insight to Chris McCandless, “When you forgive, you love. And when you love, God’s light shines upon you.” It was a comment aimed at the point of Chris’ spiritual metaphysical blockage. Chris did not have ears to hear until the moment before his death in the Alaska wilderness when he scrawls in his notebook,

“Happiness is only real when it is shared.” How far will we have to run? How many layers will we peel away before we acknowledge that the search for truth leads to the reality of love? Will we be prepared to ask the perceptive question? Are we willing to be asked the same?

What is the role of the Bible in these shared pilgrimages? Its role is significant, but in a manner that is markedly different from the past. The first emphasis needs to be the story of the Bible, rather than the Bible as a book. We must learn to recapture the narrative arch of the Bible in a manner that captures the imagination rather than using the Bible as a source of modernistic proof texts. Theologian David Williams writes,

*Before the Bible is anything else, it is story. The dynamic tension and drama and adventure of that story need to be recovered by storytellers for a generation that is hungry for stories. Culture has become immune to the drama of this particular story, perhaps because other forms of knowing have obscured its preposterous character. If we don’t tell the story well, we will not engage the culture in the way the story deserves and demands.*

The New Zealand based online gaming company, Scarlet City Studios, has captured this well in their Narnia-like game, “The Aetherlight: Chronicles of the Resistance.” For many, the Bible as a book of doctrine is a nonstarter. As one millennial said at a religious retreat, “I don’t read the Book as it would mess up my relationship with Jesus.” There is both ignorance and insight in this statement. The Bible is a love letter from Jesus and as such can only serve to enhance one’s relationship with him.

**IF YOU DON’T GO THROUGH  
LIFE WITH AN OPEN MIND,  
YOU WILL FIND A LOT OF  
CLOSED DOORS.**

— **Mark W. Perrett**

But it is also true that any love relationship cannot be captured in the left-brain propositional ways that the church has tended to read the Bible. Relationships thrive on poetry not prose.

There is a great deal of openness to the spiritual discipline of “Mindfulness,” a kind of secular meditative practice based loosely on Buddhism. Though fundamentally different in its spiritual origins and orientation, one might rightly propose that reading the Bible meditatively is a portal to a wider spiritual reality. Bible reading is a “thin place”—to use the language of Celtic spirituality. Meditating quietly on Psalm 23 or Romans 8 has a way of allowing the Holy Spirit to work existentially in one’s life often in ways that are even beyond our conscious mind. Thirty days of daily thirty-minutes of meditative Scripture reading will change the reader and will appreciably enhance their awareness of a wider spiritual reality. This is not typically how the Bible has been brought into the discussion of evangelism. This is not the “Roman Road” of evangelism, but the Holy Spirit’s open road.

### **6. Authenticity and vulnerability**

Perhaps the most important feature of genuine connection with a contemporary millennial is one’s willingness to be authentic, which requires a combination of integrity and vulnerability. Most of us have two résumés: one we use to outline our career choices and one that maps the hidden trajectory of our heart. Jean-Paul Sartre knew that the latter is what is most determinative in our life. “The order of the past is the order of the heart. We must not believe that the present event, after it has gone, becomes the most immediate of our memories. The shift of time can submerge it at the

bottom of memory or leave it on the surface. Only its own intrinsic value and its relevance to our lives can determine its level.” Wounds and triumphs of the past at the heart level are what define us as persons. Personal integrity demands the willingness to face these painful events and memories. This is the kind of honesty seen in an AA meeting.

We must be able to express our doubts, struggles, and failures with candor. Such humility is a key to human connection. Under the conditions of what Charles Taylor describes as secularity<sup>3</sup>, faith and doubt are mutual expressions of belief. James Smith explains, “‘Living within’ this frame doesn’t simply tip you in one direction, but allows you to feel pulled two ways.” The existential experience is one of feeling “cross-pressured.” Christians need the honesty to admit these feelings. Too often the church has celebrated the confident certainty of the closed frame as a measure of faithfulness, when in fact it is often the mark of self-righteous hubris. We struggle to accept the spiritual normality of Mother Teresa’s doubts. Again Smith clarifies, “The picture of knowledge bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment is a forthright denial of our dependence.” This is the thesis of Enns’ book, *The Sin of Certainty*. The crying need for the Christian is to embrace our humanness again with all of its limitations. Smith concludes, “True epistemic humility would be more a matter of recognizing the contingency, dependence, and contestability of our claims while also unapologetically proclaiming them and seeking to convince others to see the world our way, precisely because we take them as true.” For this reason, we don’t have to have all the answers, be an apologetic encyclopedia, or even have it all pulled

together in our lives. None of this has anything to do with being an authentic person—to one self or to others.

It is our inability to be genuinely human that is the biggest barrier to nonbelievers. Instead we hide behind pious clichés and hypocritical smiles. We need to cut the God talk, the incessant insider psycho-spiritual babble of evangelicals, and start talking like normal people. Such talk is not spiritual. It’s a form of hiding. It reeks of cult-like insularity, too-pious-by-half self-deception, and the unconscious conformity to the evangelical subculture. It is a linguist cul-de-sac and a conversation nonstarter.

The irony is that the process of apprenticing oneself to Jesus should make one *more* human not less, more humble not more self-righteous, more comfortable being a creature in God’s world not asserting God-like confidence and knowledge. Dutch art critic and L’Abri worker Hans Rookmaaker stated, “Jesus didn’t come to make us Christian. Jesus came to make us fully human.” Then this should be our starting point and we should stop hiding behind an artificial Christian persona. Cut the pious crap and start being real.

### **7. Wi-Fi Hotspot**

Our lives, however broken and our knowledge however limited and contested, if in a personal relationship with Jesus should exude the kingdom of God, the reality of Christ’s indwelling presence, and the reality of God’s cosmic love. The central message of Jesus is that the “kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15). He meant by this that all around us is God’s presence and power and that his spiritual presence and power is available to us as we acknowledge him in all that we do.



This is not super-spiritual nonsense, but it is consistent with all other aspects of reality. Philosopher Dallas Willard states, "Every kind of life, from cabbage to the water buffalo, lives from a certain world that is suited to it. It is called to that world by what it is. There alone is where its wellbeing lies. Cut off from its special world it languishes and eventually dies.... We ought to be spiritual in every aspect of our lives because our world is the spiritual one." We were made to thrive as humans only by being fully connected to this spiritual reality. As Teilhard de Chardin notes, "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience." If this is the case, then as we are connected to God's presence, the source of our natural spiritual reality, acknowledge God's presence, and cooperation with God's presence in all that we do, we should expect there to be a movement in our lives that is more than you and me. Though the metaphor is a bit impersonal and pantheistic—but not fundamentally different from Jesus' vine and branch metaphor—we should become a Wi-Fi Hotspot for the kingdom of God for all those with whom we encounter. Writer Madeleine L'Engle reminds us of the obvious, "We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it." By God's grace and because of our humble reliance on him, God's presence, God's love, God's forgiveness, and God's reality should be evident in who we are, if we have entered into a personal relationship with Jesus and have apprenticed our lives to him. It is for this reason, that our "being" is more important than our "talking."

## 8. Bumpers

As we enter into the spiritual pilgrimages of others, we don't have to have the posture of knowing all the answers, we can genuinely listen to their stories and learn from their own search for meaning, we can express our failures and weaknesses, and at the same time rely on and expect the presence of Christ to be the silent partner in our shared journey. More important than our persuasive ability is the authenticity of our presence and our daily reliance on Christ in all things, which enables us to channel the reality of Christ to others.

From our perspective it may seem that we are simply muddling through together. It may sometimes seem like the blind leading the blind. But this is not so. To use a bowling analogy, there are internal and external bumpers to this joint pilgrimage. Novice bowlers can have bumpers put up on both sides of the alley to serve as a guide for the ball. God does the same for novice spiritual pilgrims.

The Holy Spirit is invisibly working in all the lives we encounter. He is the one who knows best how to address heart issues. We do not need to nor should we want to take the place of the Holy Spirit. He is the one who will finally guide us home. Our confidence in his presence means that we can abandon all forms of coercion. We may talk of "man's search for God," which C. S. Lewis describes as misguided as a mouse's search for the cat. God is the Good Shepherd and he is in the business of finding lost sheep. He is the active agent in our sacred journeys. The circumstances of our pilgrimage are finally under the dictates of his loving providence.

The other bumper is reality itself.

If reality has a design—because made by a Creator—then engaging reality in life will guide us by trial and error to what serves human flourishing and what does not. The more we resist the dictates of reality, the more tension we will feel in life, a kind of ontological dissonance. The existential rub is not in the argument but in the living. While the dictates of reality can be resisted, those who are genuine seekers are in a better position to learn from it. God's claim is that "you will find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13). This is why we must celebrate all who are seeking, all who are muddling through their pilgrimage. There is no human thriving without being on a spiritual journey. This is also why our spiritual pilgrimage is best done in the company of others. Our friends can challenge our blind spots; encourage us when weary; and pass on the wisdom they have learned along the way. Marketing guru Seth Godin observes that when people submit short bios and are given the opportunity to update their bios after seeing the others' bios in their class, the bios always get better. He concludes, "It's not because people didn't try the first time. It's because being surrounded by people on the same journey as you causes you to level up. Your path forward is pretty simple: Decide on your journey and find some people who will cause you to level up."<sup>2</sup> This is the value of having the right people with us on our spiritual pilgrimage.

**T**his is a very different picture of evangelism than is typically communicated within the church: one of confidently giving answers to someone without them. Does this new

approach elicit a different reaction among nonbelievers? Would they be willing to join us on our spiritual journeys? Can we quest together?

Here is a picture of a shared sacred pilgrimage engaged in the context of humble seeking, authentic humanness, shared storytelling, and mutual respect. And who knows, the believer may find Christ anew in the face of their non-believing friend. Such is the mysterious way God works in the lives of pilgrims who walk together in a spirit of humble seeking. ■

### Footnotes

1. Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Nelson, 2015); Frank Schaeffer, *Why I Am an Atheist Who Believes in God: How to Give Love, Create Beauty, and Find Peace* (Regina, 2014); Peter Enns, *The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our "Correct" Beliefs* (Harper One, 2016).
2. Seth Godin, Blog, April 26, 2016.

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**John Seel** is a business consultant and cultural renewal entrepreneur working with people and projects to promote human flourishing and the common good. He has done extensive research on millennials and their potential contribution to society. He is the former director of cultural engagement at the John Templeton Foundation. He and his wife, Kathryn, and four-legged child, Malibu, live in Lafayette Hill, Pennsylvania, in a 450-acre working farm started in 1765.

# How Committed is Too Committed?

In a report published in *Harper's* (January 2016, p. 53–62), “The Ultimate Terrorist Factory: Are French prisons incubating extremism?” journalist Scott Sayare tells how Islamic extremists spread extremism while imprisoned. The article is worth reading and raises important questions the West needs to

face about how prisoners who espouse dangerous ideologies should be treated within the justice system. It is not a problem with easy solutions.

But that is for another time. As I read Sayare's article, a sentence stood out to me, a sentence in which he tried to capture the notion that these

individuals are deeply committed. So committed, in fact, they are willing to give their lives for the cause. Sayare wrote of them having “an attraction to the stark aesthetic of uncompromising devotion” (p. 53).

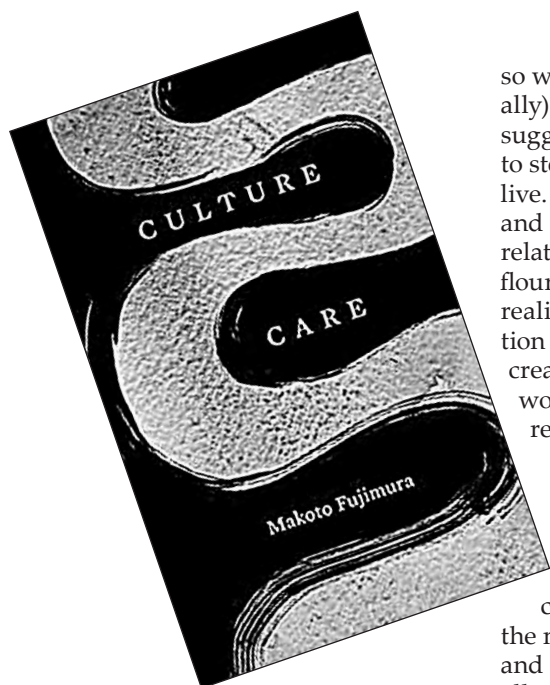
I pondered Sayare's prose and, as I did, questions came to mind. ■

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## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. Is uncompromising devotion found only in Islamic extremists? Is it found in Christians? Should it be found in Christians? Why or why not? Should it be found in serious secularists? Is it possible to be too committed to something, even if it's good and true?
2. Are you attracted to the stark aesthetic of uncompromising devotion? What is stark about it? Why are you attracted, or not attracted, to it?
3. If someone says they are definitely attracted to the stark aesthetic of uncompromising devotion, what would you immediately feel they are like? If someone says they are definitely not attracted to the stark aesthetic of uncompromising devotion, what would you immediately feel they are like?
4. Is there an aesthetic to uncompromising devotion? Though this description might be new to us, it is not without some merit. In an age when people walk away from contracts, marriages, jobs, promises, and churches simply because they have found something better, uncompromising devotion has a certain beauty and attractiveness to it worth considering.
5. A prayer of commitment and devotion much beloved by Christians was found in missionary Betty Stam's Bible after she was martyred for her faith:  
*Sovereign Lord.  
I give up all my own plans and purposes,  
all my own desires and hopes and accept  
Thy will for my life.  
I give myself, my life, my all, utterly to  
Thee to be Thine forever.  
Fill me with Thy Holy Spirit, use me  
as Thou wilt, send me where Thou wilt,  
work out Thy whole will in my life at  
any cost, now and forever.  
Amen.*  
Might a non-Christian be concerned about this prayer? What would you say to them when they raise their concerns? Since, to name only a few examples, the Crusades, Southern slavery, and the slaughter and forced migration of Native Americans were all done with the eager approval of Christian leaders and theologians, why are Christians beyond suspicion in what their devotion to their faith might include? Since the Bible is full of God-approved violence, is it not as potentially dangerous as the Qur'an?
6. How should Christians speak of their commitment to Christ, to the kingdom of God, and to the scriptures in an increasingly pluralistic culture in which many people find Christian faith to be unattractive and implausible?
7. Should we admire Islamic extremists for their uncompromising devotion while being critical of that to which they are committed? How can we express our position on this so we can be clearly understood—by fellow Christians, by Muslims, by secularists?
8. The argument can be made that nominal religion can be a social good—providing inspiration, a sense of community, and the encouragement of virtue—while uncompromising devotion to a faith is dangerous because it discourages the free exploration of ideas, encourages blind acceptance of things on the basis of authority, and permits believers to adopt positions that a more open mind would find objectionable. Discuss. ■

# Beauty in Life



An important word for artist Makoto Fujimura is *generative*, by which he means anything that brings beauty into life to bring forth hope and human thriving. It can be as simple as fresh flowers during a hard time, as ordinary as reading a poem aloud to friends on a dreary evening, as complex as a series of artwork that takes months to execute, or as surprising as finding ways to brighten the lunch hours of workers who eat in solitude at their desks. We must be about more than mere survival, Fujimura argues, and seek to flourish.

Fujimura lays out his vision in *Culture Care*, a short, rich book addressed to artists and anyone who is creative because they are created in God's image even if they think they aren't creative in any way that warrants the term. Over the past few years most of us have heard about creation care (stewarding God's good earth) and soul care (stewarding our inner resources

so we grow spiritually and emotionally). Culture care is similar, Fujimura suggests, and provides a way for us to steward the culture in which we live. The goal in each instance is living and working so that God is glorified, relationships are life giving, and human flourishing is enhanced. It is a vision of reality that takes serious the implication of the biblical story. Beauty and creativity are redemptive in a fallen world, providing a glimpse of the restoration that is to come.

Fujimura provides a fresh way to see and be involved in culture that rescues us from the shortsighted alternatives we usually hear about. He rejects the narrow conservative vs. liberal arguments, the misguided culture war mentality, and the "Christian art" movement, all of which are rooted in ideological, political, and survival agendas rather than a robust scriptural perspective. "Culture is not a territory to be won or lost," Fujimura argues, "but a resource we are called to steward with care. Culture is a garden to be cultivated" (p. 22). This notion does two things simultaneously. First, it provides a perspective that is directly related to biblical categories. And second, it provides a perspective that allows us to see how each of us might be able to be part of the greater whole. I am not the gardener, but I can infuse my little corner of the garden with my creativity and so make culture for the common good. I can bring touches of beauty to whatever slice of life I inhabit and pray they bring glimpses of hope to those who feel overwhelmed by the brokenness. Your corner may be much bigger than mine, but that only makes it different, not more significant. The boy's lunch of fish and bread wasn't large,

but Jesus' blessing multiplied it beyond his imagining.

Another reason to read—and reread—*Culture Care* is that it is replete with sentences, paragraphs, and sections that simply beg—even demand—to be reflected on and discussed. Rather than a book that presents a single idea, *Culture Care* unfolds a way of seeing and living that is rich and suggestive. Fujimura has indwelt that perspective deeply enough that his writing brims with ideas and insights that are like treasures waiting to be unpacked, explored, and then fleshed out. This process itself is life giving and challenging because the church has not tended to think of creativity, the arts, and culture in these terms.

*A Christian understanding of beauty begins with the recognition that God does not need us, or the creation. Beauty is a gratuitous gift of the creator God; it finds its source and its purpose in God's character. God, out of his gratuitous love, created a world he did not need because he is an Artist.*

*Beauty itself is not, in this sense, necessary...*

*But even if we would agree that beauty is not necessary to our daily survival, it is still necessary for our flourishing. Our sense of beauty and our creativity are central to what it means to be made in the image of a creative God. The satisfaction in beauty we feel is connected deeply with our reflection of God's character to create and value gratuity. It is part of our human nature. This is why our soul hungers for beauty.*

*Because it is gratuitous, beauty points beyond itself, beyond survival to satisfaction. We think of it in opposition to narrowness, scarcity, drudgery and constraint. We think instead of*

*what is expansive, generous, abundant, connected, and expressive. Beauty also connects us with the why of living. It points to discoveries waiting to be made about the creation. It points toward questions of right relationships, of ultimate meaning, and even of eternity. It points backward and outward and forward to our ultimate Source and Sustainer. (p. 33)*

*Effective stewardship leads to generative work and a generative culture. We turn wheat to bread—and bread into community. We turn grapes to wine—and wine into occasions for joyful camaraderie, conviviality, conversation, and creativity. We turn minerals into paints—and paints to works that lift the heart or stir the spirit. We turn ideas and experiences into imaginative worlds for sheer enjoyment and to expand the scope of our empathy. (p. 34)*

*A healthy community is one that is secure, anchored in tradition and faith, but also allowing for a dynamic movement outward, sending forth artists and missionaries, caregivers and entrepreneurs. It is centered and confident in its identity as a flock because it knows the purpose for which the Good Shepherd has gathered it: to serve and bless and transform the wider world.*

*Where are such healthy communities? Do any exist today? (p. 70–71)*

In 1970, somehow I stumbled on a copy of Hans Rookmaaker's *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*. Instead of dismissing contemporary art as hopelessly decadent and mindlessly irrelevant, Rookmaaker demonstrated a love for culture and helped me see that, in art, the deepest questions of human existence are posed and investigated in terms of form, metaphor, line, and

color. Art is part of an ongoing cultural dialogue, for blessing and for curse, and participating in the conversation is part of the Christian's calling. The fact that much art in recent decades has tended to dwell on the brokenness is no reason to turn away, because the scriptures explore the same brokenness, if we only have ears to hear. Fujimura argues that the modern tendency in artistic circles to resist the idea of beauty is an opportunity for the people of God. By stewarding beauty, whether we are artists or not, we can point to something beyond ourselves that can be satisfied only in the promise of the gospel. This beauty will not be sentimental or easy, for grace is neither, but will be robustly healing because it takes into account the full story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. In *Culture Care*, Makoto Fujimura shows us how to bring this vision into daily life, whether we are artists or not, so that perhaps by God's grace, we and our neighbors might find ways to flourish a least a little in this fragmented world. ■

**Recommended book:** *Culture Care: Reconnecting with Beauty for our Common Life* by Makoto Fujimura (New York, NY: Fujimura Institute and International Arts Movement; 2014, 2015) 105 pages.

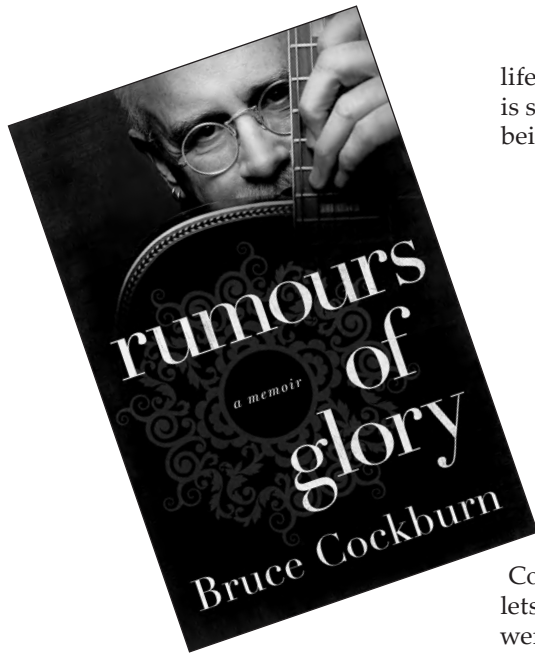
## RESOURCE

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**Resource:** Hearts and Minds bookstore, [www.heartsandmindsbooks.com](http://www.heartsandmindsbooks.com)



# “Sometimes a Wind Comes Out of Nowhere”



In Minnesota we are used, each winter, to the jet stream bringing great stretches of cold arctic air south out of Canada and across the flat farming country we call home. The wind from the north brings an icy grip that traces delicate frosty designs on windows and seems to sweep the air of dust so that in the bright sunlight we feel we can see forever.

Clarity of sight is precious, essential if we are ever to move past mere knowledge into wisdom. For this we need poets, though few of us take the unhurried time to read poetry. This is one reason I love the bitterly cold evenings of winter where a book, a glass of wine, and a fire are the only reasonable option. One poet who has fulfilled this necessary task for me is a Canadian, Bruce Cockburn, whose lyrics have helped untangle the snarled threads of our times to allow me a clearer glimpse of where we are in a deeper sense of time. Reflecting on the glorious ruin of

life in a fallen world, Cockburn's music is shaped by a Christian vision without being narrowly religious.

*Little round planet  
In a big universe  
Sometimes it looks blessed  
Sometimes it looks cursed  
Depends on what you look at, obviously  
But even more it depends on the way  
that you see*  
[“Child of the Wind” (1989)]

Those who are familiar with Cockburn's music will be interested in *Rumours of Glory*—the correct spelling, he is Canadian, after all. *Rumours* is a memoir in which Cockburn not only tells his story but lets us in on how and when his songs were conceived and composed. Deeply sensitive to oppression, violence, injustice, and the voices of the powerless on the margins, his music continues the noble folk tradition in which conscience speaks truth to power.

*The village idiot takes the throne  
His the wind in which all must sway  
All sane people, die now  
Be lifted up and carried away  
You've got no home in this world of  
sorrows*  
[“All Our Dark Tomorrows” (2001)]

Like many young adults who love Jesus but are alienated from the church, Cockburn's experience of faith is illustrative of a spiritual pilgrimage that is rather common. “Along the way I found Jesus Christ,” he says. “I have attempted to live my life somewhat in line with his Word, without necessarily taking it as, well, gospel.” What's interesting is how strongly the vision of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration echoes through Cockburn's lyrics while in his

memoir he sees doctrine as divisive and largely unnecessary.

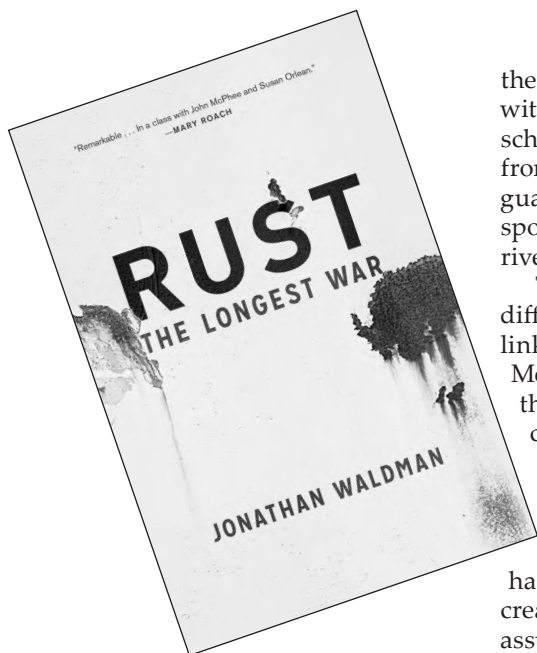
*Rumours* is also interesting for Christians who are proud to be Americans and wonder why freedom loving people in the rest of the world see the United States with, shall we say, a jaundiced eye. The American narrative of history places us as the great beacon of democracy and prosperity, a force for good in a world where true freedom is relatively rare. There is truth in that, of course, but it is not the full story. Reality is messy and life is gritty in a broken world, and no matter how hard we try to be objective, we always only see as through a glass darkly. Which is why the ancient proverb says, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend” (ESV, Proverbs 27:6). In this, too, I think Cockburn is worth listening to—even where we think him mistaken, we'll be better for having thought it through.

“Many of us believe,” Cockburn writes, “that there's a lot more going on right in front of us, within us, and in the cosmos than our rational minds can grasp. To access this reality requires surrender—the death, or at least the substantial reduction, of ego.” The sadness of our age is that even those who believe this seem to forget it because things move too fast. That means we need to be still and listen to the poets who bring clarity. ■

**Book reviewed:** *Rumours of Glory: A Memoir* by Bruce Cockburn and Greg King (New York, NY: HarperCollins; 2014) 526 pages + discography.

**Source:** Title from “The Whole Night Sky” (1994) by Bruce Cockburn on The Charity of Night (1996).

# A Beautiful, Unrelenting Foe



In the late sixties we moved from Minnesota to New Mexico. Perhaps because we were used to the rich black soil of the Plains, the bright red soil of the Southwest was a source of wonder. At times it felt like we had walked into a painting of Vincent Van Gogh where the use of bright colors expressed meaning that lay deeper than the surface experience of reality. The green of the sagebrush and cottonwood trees and the blue of the sky and turquoise jewelry allowed the red to stand out more sharply in landscapes of subtle beauty.

On August 1, 2007, a bridge spanning the Mississippi River in Minneapolis, about 25 minutes from where I am writing, suddenly collapsed during the evening rush hour. The bridge, identified as Bridge 9340 in official records, was rated as the second busiest in the entire state, with 140,000 vehicles crossing it every day. One hundred eleven vehicles rode the surface of the bridge down as much as 115 feet to

the surface of the water and riverbank, with 13 people killed and 145 injured. A school bus with 63 children returning from a field trip ended up resting on a guardrail at the bottom. We knew the spot because we had often crossed the river on that bridge.

The two stories may seem very different but they include a common link. Both the lovely red soil of New Mexico and the collapsed bridge over the Mississippi share the identical cause: oxidation. Iron (in the soil and the bridge gussets) reacts chemically with oxygen and the result is a reddish product we call rust.

Christians believe the world has fallen from the pristine state created by God, and so it is easy to assume that corrosion is a product of that fall. Perhaps that is true, but a world without corrosion would be a world without metals or oxygen or both—and then we have to imagine a world so different from ours that fallenness seems unable to account for it. Perhaps corrosion was part of the original plan, intended as a challenge for the sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, a challenge we have tended to ignore in our dash to simply use resources without much thought for the consequences. “Rust represents the disordering of the modern,” Jonathan Waldman says in *Rust: The Longest War*, “and it reveals many of our vices: greed, pride, arrogance, impatience, and sloth” (p. 10). The Christian vision for God’s future kingdom is one “where neither moth nor rust destroys” (Matthew 6:19). Note it doesn’t say that neither moths nor rust will exist, but that they won’t be destructive. It’ll be interesting to discover how oxidation and red soil fits into the fulfillment of all things.

We’ve all experienced corrosion as a

plague, finding it eating away at things we had hoped would last. Our grandfather’s hammer, kept both because we need one and because we remember him with fondness, is forgotten outside and a week later is stained with rust. We find corrosion bubbling paint along the seams on the doors of a used car. It’s everywhere, it’s relentless, and though it yields surprising moments of beauty, it destroys everything it touches.

In *Rust*, Waldman takes us, chapter by chapter, into the world of oxidation by introducing us to the problems it produces and the people who fight back. He tells the story of how America almost lost the Statue of Liberty to corrosion; of the stunning photography of Alyssa Eve Csuk who roams the abandoned hulk of Bethlehem Steel Works to find high art on rusted steel girders and surfaces; of the constant struggle needed to maintain oil pipelines; of the development of stainless steel and rust resistant paint; of how aluminum cans are treated to deter oxidation; and of the enormous cost and effort needed to beat back rust in the military—especially the Navy—and the nation’s infrastructure and how we do not seem to have the leadership and will to meet the challenge. He writes with clarity (even on technical issues), with wit (he keeps track of the number of engineers working on corrosion who sport mustaches), and with passion (he’s interested in the problem of rust and wants us to be as well). ■

**Book recommended:** *Rust: The Longest War* by Jonathan Waldman (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster; 2015) 285 pages.

# The Power of Money and Greed



On September 15, 2008, the Wall Street bank Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy. It was the beginning of a massive economic collapse that rippled through first American society and then the rest of the global markets. Even those of us who could not identify specifically how we were effected by the events that followed, were. In 2010, financial journalist Michael Lewis, who has a degree in economics from the London School of Economics and worked briefly for Salomon Brothers in New York, published *The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine*. It told the story of the collapse from the perspective of a small group of eccentric financial insiders who saw it coming. They profited from the downturn but, in the process, exposed the deeply rooted amoral cynicism motivating the wealthy movers and shakers on Wall Street and the inability or unwillingness of the government to hold them accountable. In 2015, *The Big Short* was made into a movie, which won an Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay and was nominated for four others, including Best Picture and Best Director.

One more fact is worth noting—though the book is a serious piece of journalism, the film is a comedy. The story is sobering, but director Adam McKay found a way to tell it that is funny, with numerous scenes that are hilarious. If you need a demonstration of how humor can be used to teach complicated issues and to tell a serious story, look no further than *The Big Short*.

If you fear being overwhelmed by the complex and confusing jargon of Wall Street high finance—e.g., credit default swaps, subprime loans, housing bubble, collateralized debt obligations—don't be. One of the things *The*

*Big Short* does well is explain it all in terms a layperson can grasp. Sometimes an actor looks right into the camera and explains what's going on while the action continues in the background.

*The Big Short* can be a difficult film to discuss with friends because of the assumptions we bring to it. Some may feel the bankers of Wall Street are given short shrift, some may feel the government is let off the hook, some may feel that since no high level bankers were indicted on criminal charges their actions must be legal, some may wonder whether the story is actually true since it is a movie, and others may feel an extremely complicated event within a complex globalized economic system is oversimplified. Besides, the economy has been so politicized that discussions of economic matters tend to devolve quickly into debates about democracy, the size of government, and socialism.

*The Big Short* does not tell the entire sorry story of course, but it provides an admirable introduction to a dark episode in American history that we need to know. Andrew Trotter, director of the Consortium of Christian Study Centers, notes correctly that the film explores issues essential to a Christian worldview in a fallen world. "The unrelenting greed," he says, "that the bankers of Wall Street played in this scandalous blot on American business history comes in for some much-needed direct approbation, and any Christian should be glad of that. If nothing else, it is a wonderful study in idol-making (from a number of different perspectives) and explores the sins of both materialism and acquisitiveness at deep levels."

This should be an opportunity for the church. As citizens of the kingdom of God, we need not fear exploring

economic issues in terms of biblical standards of virtue, generosity, gratitude, and stewardship. We need not be shocked to discover that players in the marketplace are motivated by greed or that the market is very imperfect because it is a system of a rebellious world run by finite sinners. We can be prepared to conclude that no political party or agenda is adequate for the sort of technological, global economic system that now connects Wall Street with traders, bankers, and governments

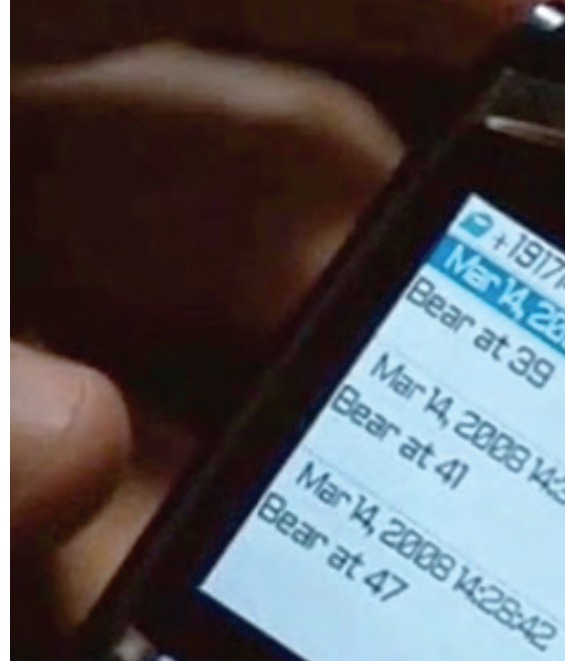
around the world. And, since we can enter the discussion free of previous ideological commitments, we can begin with scripture and wrestle with its view of economic matters in order to try to make sense of our world, including the crash of 2008. ■

**Source:** Andrew Trotter online (<https://studycentersonline.org/blog-2>).

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial or immediate reaction to *The Big Short*? Why do you think you reacted that way?
2. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (casting, direction, lighting, script, music, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film's message(s) across, or to make the message plausible, understandable, or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused?
3. In some films, nudity and profanity seem to be gratuitous, written into the screenplay to pander to audience tastes or to add boldness to a weak plot. Is this the case in *The Big Short*? Why or why not? If a Christian were directing the film, should they include these scenes unchanged?
4. How was humor used in *The Big Short*? Did it add to or detract from the seriousness of the film's message?
5. With whom did you identify in the film? Why? With whom were we meant to identify? Discuss the main characters in the film and their significance to the story.
6. When Americans think about economic greed and corruption, they tend to think not of America but of other nations. Why is this? What story about the American economy is dominant in our society? To what extent are Christians complicit in believing and telling a mistaken story?
7. Some people might be hesitant to consider the implications of *The Big Short* because they fear it might lead to bigger government or socialism. How would you respond to their fears?
8. Should a Christian be shocked to discover that Wall Street bankers might be motivated by greed? Should we be surprised that what is legal might not be virtuous or admirable, and might even do great harm to others?
9. Did watching *The Big Short* make you realize you need to do some reading about how to think Christianly about economics? What plans should you make?





#### Film Credits: *The Big Short*

Director: Adam McKay

Writers: Charles Randolph, Adam McKay,  
Michael Lewis

Producers: Kevin Messick, Brad Pitt, Louise  
Rosner and others

Cinematography: Barry Ackroyd

Starring:

Ryan Gosling (Jared Vennett)

Rudy Eisenzopf (Lewis Ranieri)

Christian Bale (Michael Burry)

Steve Carell (Mark Baum)

Marisa Tomei (Cynthia Baum)

Brad Pitt (Ben Rickert)

USA, 2015, 130 minutes

Rated R (pervasive language and some  
sexuality/nudity)