

critique

A RANSOM FELLOWSHIP PUBLICATION

ISSUE ONE 2009

Art & Faith **Making the Connection**

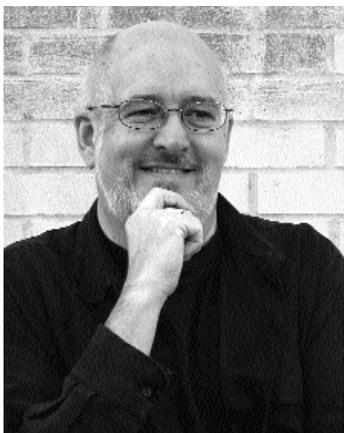


**Sinful Behavior,
A Hunger for Grace**

Where Have All The Heroes Gone?

Trust in a Financial Crisis

Understanding Scripture Correctly



Trust In A Financial Crisis

When the recession began in 2008 and huge, fabled institutions were shown to be less secure than most people had believed, the word "trust" started showing up in op-ed pieces on the economy. Too much trust had been placed in the proposition that housing prices would continue to rise indefinitely, many wondered if their pension funds could be trusted, citizens absorbing the cost of the recession learned to distrust firms that sucked up unbelievable amounts of tax funded bailouts while their executives continued to indulge in lifestyles of the rich and famous.

The failure of trust should not be surprising. "The very genius of our society," Stanley Hauerwas notes, "is to forge a political and social existence that does not have to depend on trusting others in matters important for our survival."

In a crisis of trust, a society should be able to look to those communities within it for which trust is a way of life for a model of what a restoration of trust would look like. The church, it should go without saying, should provide such a model.

Do we provide the needed model? Or are we as enamored with self-sufficiency as our post-Christian society? The early Christians formed a community in which they had to trust one another in matters important to their survival. That means there are at least two possible conclusions to be drawn. Society has so changed over the last two millennia that such trust is no longer necessary in a fallen world. Or, we have become so worldly that a Christian distinctive has been lost.

I find the issue more than a little threatening. Do I even want to forge a way of life that requires trusting my fellow Christians in matters important to my survival? If I do decide to live that... well, radically, what happens if my fellow Christians are unworthy of that trust?

There is an old Irish folk saying: "When mistrust comes in, love goes out." St Paul agreed: Love "always trusts," he wrote to the fractious Corinthian church--a community where it must have seemed suicidal to trust anyone with anything.

How to begin? I'll tell you what: let's simply begin trusting one another.

You start.

SOURCES

Hauerwas (*A Community of Character*) quoted in *The Relational Way* by M. Scott Boren (Touch Publications) p 74; Irish saying (<http://thinkexist.com/quotations/trust/2.html>); 1 Cor 13:7.

critique

ISSUE ONE 2009

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To the editor:

Thank you for another issue of *Critique*; I appreciate your work. You expand my horizons and help me connect with areas of culture outside of my little world.

I was surprised to see an only positive review of *All the People in the Bible* (*Critique* #4 2008). Admittedly, my sample is very small but my impression was this reference tool was mixed in orthodoxy (specifically in passing on without reserve some higher critical conclusions). I found the entry under "Judas Iscariot" less than confidence inspiring [in regards to] author Richard Losch's reliability. Perhaps my small sample misled me (I hope so), but you may want to look at this a little closer. By the way, I am not suggesting that you revisit your review, only that you may be even more careful in the future.

Happy holidays to you and Margie, dear brother. Let's visit the next time you come to Covenant Seminary.

Grace upon grace,
Robert Peterson
St Louis, MO.

To the editor:

Thank you for a very substantive issue of *Critique* (#4 2008). I lament the way the "New Atheists" are being approached via point-counterpoint debates. They just smile and cash the check. We need to think tactically about what kind of engagement actually furthers the debate or more importantly reframes the debate in a culture where the assumptions are no longer on the side of the theist. Give me a cup of coffee with Christopher any day versus these telegenic debates that do nothing to convince anyone. It's theater, not conversation.

John Seel
Cohasset, MA

To the editor:

Hurray for Michael Metzger! I'm sure you'll get lots of mail decrying Metzger's defense of Halloween (*Critique* #4 2008). But he expressed my feelings exactly. Ever since I was a child I have loved that night of black and gold because it is a chance to act as if the danger and wildness of my imagination were real. I knew then, as now, that evil is real, but that Satan has been defeated. So why not dress up and pretend to be scared when I'm safe in the knowledge that Christ is victorious? Thanks for that article!

Sincerely,
Camille Olcese
Pittsburgh, KS

To the editor:

So, speaking for all recovering perfectionists, I strongly related to the typo and out of control weed incident (*Critique* #4 2008). I am personally experiencing unreasonable grief because I did not succeed in raking up all the leaves on my street to dump on the garden bed before the street cleaners got them. Go figure.

Kathleen Wyllie
St Louis, MO.

To the editor:

So, loved the new *Critique* (#4 2008). Thought it would be great if the next time there are typos instead of grieving you could leave them and turn it into a game. First two people to find them gets a prize--like a CD, a book, or more appropriately a slap in the face. Hears too typos.

Sember LaRose
Chattanooga, TN.

To the editor:

After about 15 years as a reader of your publications, I'm still amazed at, encouraged by and above all grateful for your work. All God's best for you in 2009.

Christ's peace be with you,
Kristin Davis
Waco, TX.

To the editor:

Just finished the remarkable article, "A Few Like You," by Wes Hill in *Critique* #5 2008. I was so very moved by his story--the ache is palpable. I'm so grateful that you have included this in *Critique* and look forward to the dialogue it inspires. May God give us grace and wisdom as we consider how to love one another.

Peggy Tazelaar
Scottsdale, AZ

To the editor:

Thank you for your kind review of my book, *Holy Fools* (*Critique* #4 2008). Also, I wanted to thank you for printing the article by Wesley Hill entitled "A Few Like You" (*Critique* #5 2008). That was one of the finest short pieces I've ever read on homosexuality and the church. Splendid and stirring call for the church to act like the church.

Matt Woodley
Three Village Church
E. Setauket, NY

Denis Haack Responds

Robert. Thank you for your very kind note, Dr Peterson. One of the things I have come to appreciate ever more deeply as time passes is being part of a historic tradition where Christian community is a reality, not just a nice dream. Gracious correction like yours in such a setting is deeply affirming. Your reminder of my responsibility in calling attention to books in *Critique* is a good one. In this case, I looked over Losch's book, read various selections, and wrote my review. I should have read more. After receiving your email I read the entry under "Judas Iscariot." In it Losch notes a variety of ways to interpret the biblical data on Judas. That is not problematic, of course, since revisionist interpretations of Judas are widely discussed today. His assessment of these conflicting interpretations, however, was insufficient. I get the impression that Losch was concerned that readers not demonize Judas so greatly that they imagine themselves immune to Judas' sin. A worthwhile point, but one need not--and dare not--belittle Judas' sin to make it. I think *All the People in the Bible* is a helpful reference for beginning to sort through the myriad of names mentioned in Scripture, but would urge readers to use it with discernment.

John. I appreciate your encouraging note. The theist/new atheist debates are, it seems to me, simply the latest unfortunate tactic spawned by a culture war mentality. They not only convince no one; they foster the outrageous view that the cause of theism (and the gospel) is served by besting an opponent rhetorically. If that were the case, Jesus would not have had to waste so much time fulfilling the promise spoken by the prophet Isaiah (61:1-2).

Camille. If we get negative feedback, it won't be the first time, and reading your encouraging note makes me glad I took the risk. Thanks for taking the time to write. Several decades ago some sharp thinkers like C. S. Lewis, Harry Blamires, Francis Schaeffer, and James Sire reminded Christians that they need to develop a distinctly Christian mind. They were correct. Now we need the reminder that we also need to nurture a deeply Christian imagination. Rather than withdraw in defensiveness and fear, we need to live by the gospel where the wild things are--when we are walking with God, no place is safer.

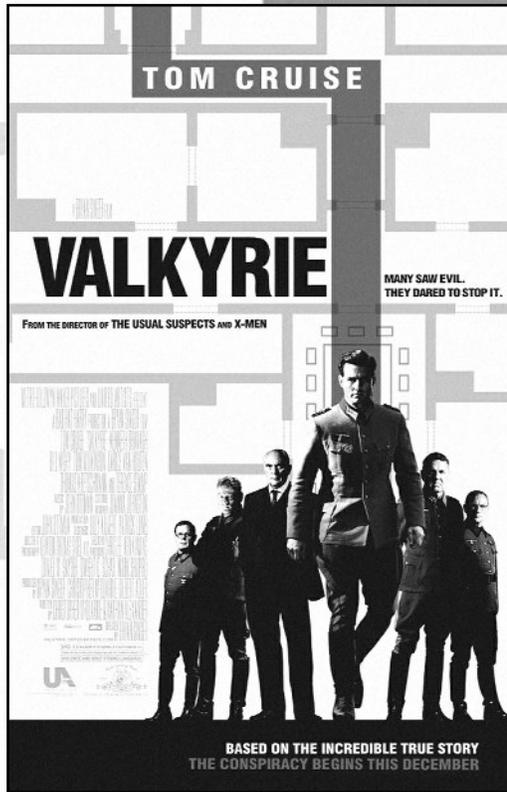
Kathleen. I'm a perfectionist? How dare you... oh that's right, you've known me for years. I confess. Mulch, typos and weeds: sounds like the name for a firm of lawyers.

Sember. Thanks for sharing my pain, sweet daughter of mine.

Kristin. I keep wondering if at some point Ransom will no longer be needed, but perhaps not yet. What is encouraging is the knowledge that there is a band of people who love the gospel and are committed to living faithfully--which is the group I want to be identified with. I'm so grateful for your taking the time to write.

Peggy. I agree. Wes helps me face the limits of my willingness to love as Christ loves--and that is, to use Sheldon Vanauken's wonderful phrase, a severe mercy.

Matt. Hope your book is widely read. I'm so pleased pastors like yourself are taking seriously what Wes wrote. Leading God's people to live as if we really believe what we say we believe--what could be more radical in our cynical age?



WHERE HAVE ALL THE HEROES GONE?

a review of
Valkyrie

by R. Greg Grooms

Last fall my friend Adam was discussing *The Counterfeiters* with a German grad student, who asked, "Why is it you're watching so many German movies?" While he paused searching for an answer, she continued, "But then, it's not as if American movies are about anything, are they?"

There's enough truth in her comment for it to sting a little. After all when was the last time you watched an American movie that dealt with an issue of substance? But like most generalizations, this one falls short, too. Once in a while American movies are about things, important things like German history for example. And when a hefty dose of morality, sacrifice and heroism, is added to one, the result is a film like *Valkyrie*.

In 1944 a group of German Army officers attempted to execute Adolph Hitler, replace him as head of state, and sue for peace with the Allies. Most of us may be aware that such attempts were made, but probably aren't aware of the details of the plan, nor of the character of those officers involved. *Valkyrie* fills in those blanks quite nicely.

At its heart *Valkyrie* is the story of a German hero: Claus von Stauffenberg. The movie's von Stauffenberg is a German aristocrat and Wehrmacht officer, appalled at the Nazi atrocities; the real von Stauffenberg was all this and a believer, too. (This is hinted at in the film, but never given any substance.) His faith not only motivated his participation in the conspiracy, it lifted him from minor player to lead role.

In perhaps it's most intriguing scene, *Valkyrie* imagines von Stauffenberg's introduction to the men who became his co-conspirators. He was a colonel, they were generals, and in the presence of generals, colonels are meant to be seen, not heard. But in the midst of their discussion of how to kill Hitler, von Stauffenberg raises an embarrassing, but important question: after you kill Hitler, what next? As they gape uncomprehendingly at him, he continues with what is in essence a lesson in Christian just war theory. In order for revolution to be just, it must do more than remove an unjust ruler. That ruler must be replaced by a just government. To fail in this is to embrace anarchy. While von Stauffenberg's argument carries the day, his fellows never wholeheartedly embrace it. In the end it is their indecision that cripples the execution of their plan. ▶

Starring:

Tom Cruise (Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg)
Kenneth Branagh (Major General Henning von Tresckow)
Bill Nighy (General Friedrich Olbricht)
Tom Wilkinson (General Friedrich Fromm)
Carice van Houten (Nina von Stauffenberg)

Director:

Bryan Singer

Writers:

Christopher McQuarrie & Nathan Alexander

Producers:

Tom Cruise, Ken Kamins, Chris Lee, Paula Wagner

Original Music:

John Ottman

Cinematographer:

Newton Thomas Sigel

Runtime: 120 min

Release: USA; 2008

MPAA Rating: PG-13

(for violence and brief strong language)



Sound interesting? Beware: *Valkyrie* is a deeply flawed film. Tom Cruise's von Stauffenberg never rises above, well, Tom Cruise. Worse than this, the film only flirts with the questions it raises; it never embraces them passionately. Despite its flaws I recommend *Valkyrie*; indeed, I cannot imagine a more timely film. As the United States considers how and when to remove its military forces from Iraq, I hope that watching and discussing it will teach us wisdom, even if it doesn't guarantee success.

One thought lingers in my mind here: why is it that films with strong moral and heroic themes are rarely if ever made about the post-World War II world? In their book *The Day America Told the Truth* James Patterson and Peter Kim offered this answer:

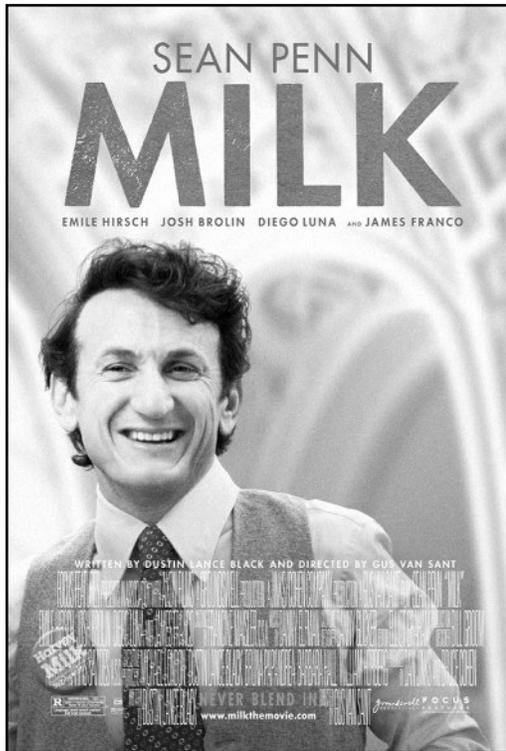
"70% of Americans now say that America has no more heroes. Why are there no more heroes today? There are no more heroes because we have ceased to believe anything strongly enough to be impressed by its attainment."

Valkyrie is a movie for those who believe--or want to believe--there are things worth dying for. Watch it and learn. ❖

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What were your thoughts and emotions as you finished watching *Valkyrie*? What images from the film linger most in your mind?
2. Films about World War II are often noteworthy for their moral clarity, i.e., it's easy to tell the good guys from the bad guys in them. Is this so in *Valkyrie*?
3. Do you identify with any of the characters in the film? If so, who and why? If not, why not?
4. Who are your heroes and why? If you have none, why not? What do your heroes or the lack of them reveal about who you are?
5. Do you see von Stauffenberg--the real one, not the movie version--as a hero? Why or why not?
6. In his book *True Heroism* Dick Keyes argues that heroism and cynicism cannot walk hand in hand. After all acknowledging an example as truly heroic pressures me to emulate it, while cynically demeaning it let me off the hook. Does admiring von Stauffenberg demand anything from you practically?
7. Although he is not a character in the film, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed for his ties to the plot depicted in *Valkyrie*. Ironically, Bonhoeffer was a pacifist, who allowed for exceptions to the rule. In your opinion was the attempt to kill Hitler morally justified?
8. The screen writers for *Valkyrie* were Christopher McQuarrie (*The Usual Suspects*) and Nathan Alexander. Why do you think they were drawn to this story?
9. According to an old Russian proverb, "Those who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them." What lessons should we learn from the *Valkyrie* conspirators?

Greg Grooms, a Contributing Editor for Critique, lives with his wife Mary Jane in a large home across the street from the University of Texas in Austin, where they welcome students to meals, to warm hospitality, to ask questions, and to seriously wrestle with the proposition that Jesus is actually Lord of all.



Sinful Behavior, A Hunger For Grace

A review of *Milk* by Wesley Hill

There's a scene in the middle of Gus Van Sant's *Milk* that, for me, captures the heart of the movie. The apartment Harvey Milk and his partner, Scott Smith, share is crammed with volunteers who are trying to get Milk elected to San Francisco's Board of Supervisors. It's late, after dark, and Harvey looks haggard as he talks loudly to a couple of volunteers above the din of everyone else's conversations. Scott takes a pot off the stove and looks for Harvey. "Harvey! Dinner": he barks it as a command, trying to make Harvey take a seat and relax for a few minutes. He doesn't have much success. Finally, exasperated and exhausted, Scott raises his voice, "Everyone: This apartment is now off limits! Good night!" In a few minutes, it's just he and Harvey sitting down at the table together. "Don't say anything," Scott orders. "Can I just tell you...?" Harvey asks meekly after tasting his first bite, a mischievous smile playing at the corners of his lips. Scott rounds on him: "If you say anything about politics or the campaign or what speech you have to give or anything, I swear to God I'm gonna stab you with this fork." Undeterred, Harvey keeps looking sweetly at his partner and finishes his sentence: "I just wanted to say... that this is the most wonderful dinner I have ever had." And with that, the tension dissolves. Harvey places a hand on Scott's shoulder, Scott can't suppress a smile, the two laugh. They're back to being a normal couple again, forgetting for a fleeting moment the rigors of the campaign and the opposition they're facing.

That's what the movie *Milk* is about. A biopic of the figure who became the first openly gay man elected to major political office in San Francisco and who galvanized a generation of gay rights advocates in the process--in the end, it's a love story. Andrew Sullivan, a writer for *The Atlantic*, put it like this: "The movie's brilliance is... that it begins and ends with Milk's love for another human being... This reach for intimacy--always vulnerable, ... never safe--endures past movements and rallies and elections. [The] manifestations of the political are the means to that merely human end." ▶



Starring:
Sean Penn (Harvey Milk)
Emile Hirsch (Cleve Jones)
Josh Brolin (Dan White)
Diego Luna (Jack Lira)
James Franco (Scott Smith)
Alison Pill (Anne Kronenberg)
Victor Garber (Mayor George Moscone)
Denis O'Hare (State Senator John Briggs)

Director:
Gus Van Sant

Writer:
Dustin Lance Black

Producers:
Dustin Lance Black, Barbara Hall,
William Horberg, Bruna Papandrea

Original Music:
Danny Elfman

Cinematographer:
Harris Savides

Runtime: 128 min

Release: USA;
Focus Features; 2008

MPAA Rating: R
(for language, sexual situations and
references, and brief violence)

Wesley Hill is a graduate of Wheaton College (B.A.) and the University of Durham, U.K. (M.A.), where he will soon return to pursue a doctorate. His interests include hiking, camping, coffee, novels, unhurried conversation with good friends, and lived theology. He is currently at work on a book on Christianity and homosexuality.



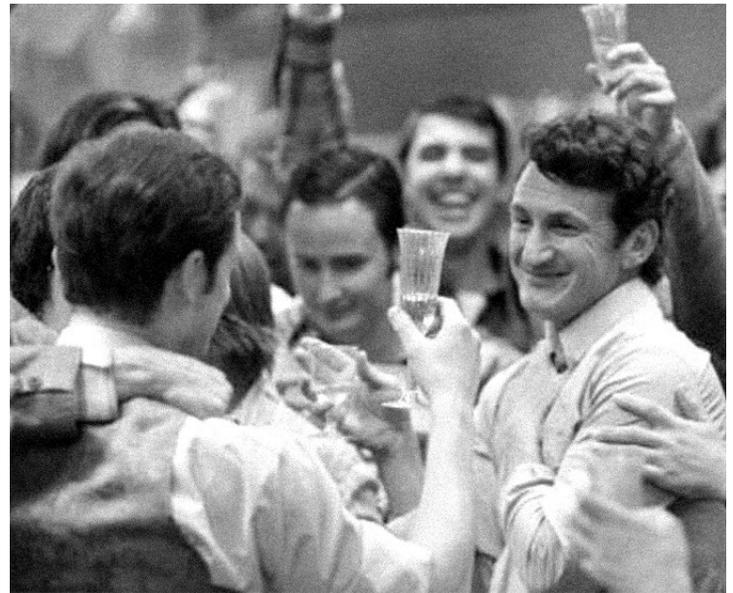
After withstanding one too many attacks from a hostile police force, Milk decides to run for a position on the Board of Supervisors, to advocate for the "us's," the embattled minorities, who bear the brunt of institutionalized bigotry. Winning doesn't come easy--it "isn't my strong suit," Milk confesses at one point with a wan smile--but eventually the hard work pays off, and he gains a seat on the Board. He uses his influence to campaign for equality, but shortly after his greatest victory--the defeat of Proposition 6, which would have prohibited gays and lesbians from teaching in California's public schools--Milk's life is cut short by a fellow Board member. Dan White (Josh Brolin), a conservative Roman Catholic (who, the film hints, may himself have been a closeted homosexual), assassinates Milk in his office. With Milk's death, San Francisco is deprived of one of its most powerful champions for social justice and, perhaps more poignantly, Scott Smith loses his lover and beloved.

SOURCES

Andrew Sullivan, "Milk" blog post, 27 November 2008, (http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the_daily_dish/2008/11/milk.html);

Henri Nouwen, as quoted in Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) p. 279.

The film opens in 1970 in New York City. Harvey Milk (played brilliantly by Sean Penn) is nearly middle-aged, eking out a living as an insurance salesman. "Forty years old, and I haven't done a thing I'm proud of," he complains. Randomly, Milk meets Scott Smith (James Franco), who would become his long-time lover, and persuades Smith to leave New York with him to begin a new life in "the Castro," a San Francisco neighborhood that, partly through Milk's activism, becomes widely known as a refuge for gays who come from every corner of the country looking for a fresh start.



For Christian viewers, *Milk* raises many questions. We Christians, after all, have in Scripture and in the teaching of the Church throughout the ages a moral judgment against same-sex eroticism. Homosexual behavior is sinful, according to the Christian grammar. And yet a film like *Milk* confronts us with a poignant, at times heartrendingly beautiful portrayal of loving, caring, loneliness--diminishing gay relationships. How should we respond?

One way is to refuse to accept the film on its own terms. Where the movie urges us to see a community of loving, caring people beleaguered by an ignorant majority culture wielding restrictive power, we may instead offer an alternative, suspicious interpretation: Far from being loving and caring, the gay men depicted in the movie are perverted and promiscuous, deceiving themselves about the true nature of their destructive behavior. What the movie names as love, we may choose to see as self-gratifying lust. ▶



Another way to respond to *Milk* is, of course, to do the opposite--the take it at face value, to affirm its outlook, approve its politics, and abandon the traditional Christian view of the wrongness of homosexual practice as a vestige of an outmoded worldview that will only lead to violence and oppression if we continue to promote it today.

Either of these approaches is possible--and one doesn't have to look very far to find viewers who have already embraced one or the other of them. But I wonder if there isn't another way. Might we glimpse in *Milk* a portrait of genuine human love and courage, which, however cracked and marred, nevertheless gestures toward what we Christians believe is embodied fully and ultimately in Jesus Christ? Or, to put it more provocatively: Can sinful behavior, in some paradoxical way, when it is a groping for intimacy and an effort to stave off loneliness, be seen as a hunger for grace?

After visiting an AIDS ward once in San Francisco, the late Henri Nouwen reportedly said of the gay men he met there: "They want love so bad, it's literally killing them." Maybe we should watch *Milk* from the same vantage point. When we see Harvey and Scott touch each other tenderly over a shared meal, we may catch a glimpse of what it looks like to reach for love and the end of loneliness. And we may also see a challenge for ourselves--to so embody the holy love of Jesus that men like Harvey and Scott might be moved to consider it more than just a ploy to perpetuate their isolation and legislate their oppression. ❖



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What did you notice about the artistry and technical aspects of the film? As a piece of cinematic art, how would you rate it? Did you find it complex or moralistic, dramatically sophisticated or cliché, interesting or banal? Why?

2. The Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas has written an essay with the provocative title "Why Gays (as a Group) are Morally Superior to Christians (as a Group)." This title might be taken as a good description of several scenes from *Milk*. In what ways do Harvey Milk and the other gay activists in the Castro demonstrate the sort of character we Christians ought to emulate? What can we learn from them?

3. Whom do you identify more with in the film--the conservative Christians (Senator Briggs, Anita Bryant) or the sexually promiscuous gay characters? Why? Did you feel torn between wanting to disagree with one or the other's political positions while at the same time wanting to affirm their longings, hopes, fears, worries? If so, describe.

4. W. H. Auden once suggested a game: Pick two people who are known to be arch-enemies and imagine what would have to happen for them to come to terms, understand, and maybe even start to love each other. Try playing this game with characters from the film. For example, what would Cleve Jones and Anita Bryant, or Harvey Milk and Dan White, need to do or say in order to move towards reconciliation, forgiveness, mutual respect, understanding, and love?

5. Given the recent passage of Proposition 8 in California in November 2008 and the resignation of Rich Cizik from his position as president of the National Association of Evangelicals in the wake of his controversial comments on "gay civil unions," the issue of "gay marriage" will probably lie just beneath the surface of any evangelical Christian discussion of this film. Are Christians who hold to the traditional viewpoint on the immorality of homosexual behavior necessarily committed to opposing the legalization of gay marriage in a secular, pluralistic democracy? Why or why not? Does a film like *Milk* shed any light on this discussion?

6. Imagine yourself in a conversation with one of the movie's gay characters. Assuming they are unfamiliar with Christianity and the contents of the Bible, how would you try to explain to them the historic, orthodox Christian views of (homo)sexuality, marriage, bodily desire, fidelity, and "purity"? Try to do this exercise without using any Christian jargon and force yourself to confront the "But why?" question at every turn. What is the logic of the Christian viewpoint? Is it credible? Is it compelling? Why or why not?





Making the Connection

Engaging the Arts

Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan has begun an effort to help Christians think about their engagement with the arts. It's an issue that is far too important to be left to the people of God who happen to live in New York City.

The arts, contrary to liberal ideology, cannot solve the deepest problems of the human race, nor, contrary to conservative ideology, are the arts luxuries unnecessary to existence. Made in the image of the Creator, human beings are inescapably creative. In the arts we explore our deepest fears and hopes, we find stories and metaphors that bring meaning to the ordinary details of life, we touch beauty in which God's glory can be glimpsed. Human culture is not a surprise to God, it is his intention and he called it very good. Creativity will flourish in the new earth.

In our postmodern world, the arts assume an added importance for the Christian. Artists have always tended to have a finger on the pulse of their culture, so understanding what they produce helps us see where we are and where things are headed. And now, at a time when people have doubts about the possibility of truth, they eagerly yearn for a Story that will bring direction and significance to the stories they find themselves living. It is in the arts that this searching is most clearly expressed.

Which means that the questions posed by the good folk at Redeemer Presbyterian are worth some careful reflection by discerning Christians. So, here first, is "Are You a Patron?" excerpted from Redeemer's web site, and second, some questions for reflection and discussion. ❖

Are You A Patron?

SOURCE: www.faihandwork.org/quiz

Have you attended an arts event or venue in the last six months? (live music, museum or gallery, play, dance performance, independent film, etc.)

Do you have a favorite art form that you particularly enjoy experiencing and learning about?

Do you occasionally attend different types of arts events or frequent other venues besides your favorite?

Do you have a favorite artist or arts organization whose work you follow closely?

Do you ever spread the word about a particular arts event or artist?

Do you ever look through the "Arts and Culture" section of newspapers or magazines?

Have you financially supported an arts organization or artist (outside of purchasing tickets) in the last year?

Do you know an artist? Are you involved in his/her life? Are you actively supporting his/her career?

SCORING

If you answered "yes" to 7 or 8 of these questions, you rock! You're definitely the kind of arts patron we want to see everyone at becoming! Keep up the great work!

If you answered "yes" to 5 or 6 of the questions, you're also a patron, actively supporting the arts. Maybe think about the questions you responded "no" to, and consider how you might bring that into your arts and culture experience. And let us help you become even more engaged in the arts...

If you answered "yes" to fewer than 5, well, we have lots of opportunities for you to learn and grow as a patron! ...

Defining Patronage

SOURCE: www.faihandwork.org/quiz

The word "patron" comes from the Latin *patronus*, meaning "advocate," which in turn came from *pater*, meaning "father." Patrons can simply be customers (when you give a store your patronage), or they can be protectors (patron saints). In the arts, we use the word "patron" to describe anything from a casual observer (buying a ticket but not engaging any further) to the strongest supporter (providing significant financial and other support).

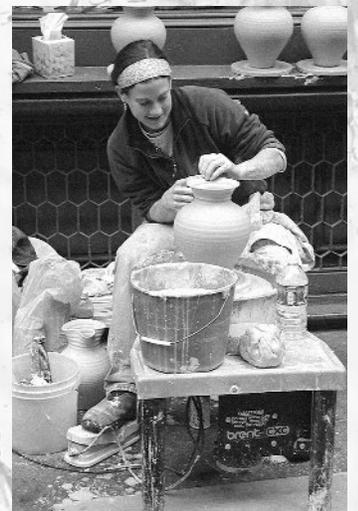
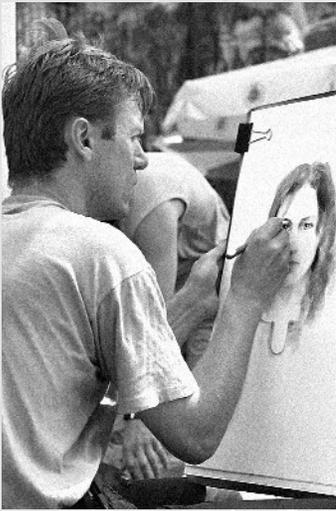
The arts need real patrons—customers, yes, but also protectors, advocates, and "fathers." Why? The benefits of the arts are intangible, and are therefore not easily measured or defended. The arts don't tend to be financially profitable, and can sometimes challenge audiences in uncomfortable-but-necessary-ways. Artists don't tend to advocate well for themselves—we need those whose lives have been influenced by the arts to communicate the value of what we do to others. But the effort is worth the price. In a recent fundraising letter, Dance Theater Workshop, a NYC dance advocacy and performance non-profit, wrote:

In times of uncertainty, what we choose to stand behind can be brought into question. Is it wise to invest precious financial resources in art and the people who create it when each new day can seem more tumultuous than the last? The answer is simply, yes. It is in times such as these that art can have its greatest impact. Art has the power to change our world view, to open up and re-invigorate our perspective, and now, more than ever, the work of art-making deserves the ferocity of our attention.

Christians, and the Church, have a mixed history of arts patronage. Some of the greatest works of visual art and music ever created were commissioned to the glory of God by churches and individual Christians. But, particularly in recent times and with some art forms, the Church's message has sometimes been less positive about the value of the arts in the world, and in Christians' lives.

Redeemer's mission is to "renew the city socially, spiritually, and culturally." In a talk, Tim Keller said, "The best way to help the world is through the arts." Redeemerite and author, Ted Scofield, writes:

Christians cannot abdicate the arts to secular society. We must consume, study, and participate in the arts if we are to have a seat at the table. Whether it has a religious theme or strikes us as irreligious, we must be patrons if we are to have an impact on how the world interprets and responds to the arts. We cannot be wary, we cannot be afraid, we cannot be self-righteous. Christians must look, listen, read, and experience the arts if we are to lead our culture to renewal.



Questions For Reflection and Discussion

1. How did you score on Redeemer's quiz? Are you content with your score?
2. Was anything surprising to you about the questions posed (or the scoring) in Redeemer's quiz?
3. What is your reaction to the notion of being a patron of the arts? Why do you think you react as you do?
4. Some Christians say they simply don't enjoy the arts, so though they have no objection to others becoming patrons, they'd rather put their limited time, energy and money in some other endeavor. How would you respond?
5. Some Christians might object that Redeemer's emphasis seems "elitist." How would you respond?
6. The leadership of Redeemer Presbyterian seems to want every member to engage the arts through patronage. Is this a strange quirk of living in Manhattan, or is it equally valid for Christians everywhere?
7. If your church began a similar emphasis, how would you respond? Why?
8. What might Rev Keller mean when he says, "The best way to help the world is through the arts"? Do you agree? Why or why not?
9. "The benefits of the arts are intangible, and are therefore not easily measured or defended." What are those benefits? How should Christians prioritize those benefits when it comes to shaping the ministry of the church? To what extent does the financial crisis change that set of priority?
10. Raising the arts in the Christian community immediately poses a series of questions about which people tend to react strongly. What about the "art" often displayed in "Christian book stores"? Should Christians patronize institutions, for example, art galleries that display art that is antagonistic to the Christian faith? Since our lives (and culture) are already far too busy, will not an added emphasis on the arts merely decrease our ability to stay in control of our time, energy, budgets, and schedules?
11. To what extent have you intentionally nurtured an appreciation of and understanding of the arts? Why? If yes, how did you accomplish this?
12. When you think of growing towards spiritual maturity as a Christian, what does this process include? Does such maturity include growing in an appreciation for, understanding of, and engagement with the arts? Why or why not?
13. What texts of Scripture specifically address the arts? How have they shaped your thinking, feeling, and living? How do the arts fit into the unfolding Story of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Restoration?
14. What book(s) have you read in the past year that help the reader develop a distinctly biblical perspective and understanding of the arts? If you have read none, when did you last read such a book? What plans should you make?

Sources

"Are You a Patron?" part of Redeemer Presbyterian Church's emphasis on art is online (<http://www.faithandwork.org/quiz>);

Information about New York's Dance Theater Workshop is online (<http://www.dancetheaterworkshop.org/>);

Rev Keller's talk, "Engaging The Renewed Imagination," can be ordered at Redeemer Sermon Store online (<http://sermons.redeemer.com/store/index.cfm>).

Understanding Scripture Correctly (I)

I must never assume that an interpretation is obviously correct merely because it is obvious to me.

HOLY BIBLE

It is a dangerous conceit to imagine that when we read the text of Scripture we do so from an entirely neutral vantage point. I must never assume that an interpretation is obviously correct merely because it is obvious to me. In fact, it may not be a valid understanding of the text at all. The truth is that whenever we seek to make sense of anything--an event, a poem, a relationship, a song, a text of Scripture, whatever--our beliefs, assumptions, experiences, and prejudices act like a lens through which our understanding is shaped.

As a result some have argued that since this is true, the meaning of the text is relative to each reader. I find my meaning in Scripture, you find yours, and that's the end of it. But that can't be correct--life would be impossible if we lived that way. If I am driving down a street and blow an elderly pedestrian out of the crosswalk, even a relativist will be unimpressed if my defense is that everyone's interpretation of red lights is equally valid, and that my personal interpretation of them happens to be taking aim at pedestrians. We expect everyone to interpret red lights correctly; my personal interpretation, no matter how sincerely held, would be seen as not just incorrect but criminal.

Such issues are part of what is involved in hermeneutics--the science of interpretation--and can get quite involved. That's because those of us reading the text of Scripture are both finite and fallen, which means we are both limited and broken in our attempt to understand the text. So there is a lot for careful scholars to sort out, so that the rest of us can have confidence that our understanding of Scripture actually resonates with the truth of God for life, culture, and reality.

Thankfully, there are some practical steps ordinary Christians can take to help us keep our understanding of Scripture within the great stream of biblical orthodoxy. I will mention three here--two that provide boundaries on our understanding of the text so we don't go off track, and one that provides a biblical lens to intentionally adopt for understanding the text which helps us discern the correct meaning. ▶

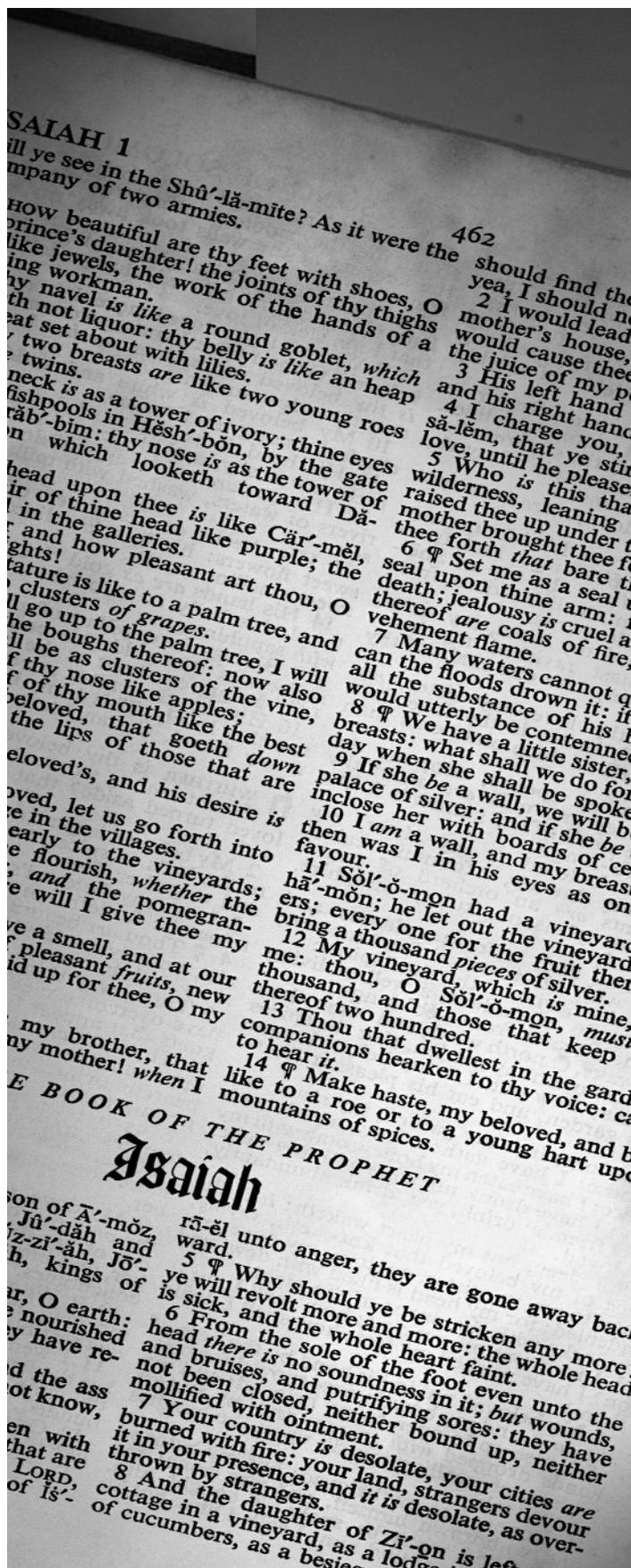
Boundary #1: Reading Dead Theologians

Since we all come to the text of Scripture with our beliefs, prejudices, assumptions, and experiences, it can be helpful to listen to commentators who approach the text with a different set of personal and cultural baggage. So, I pay attention to theologians and commentators from very different settings and backgrounds that lived in widely different periods of time. I read the best teachers and commentators working today, interspersed with enduring works that were produced as God's Spirit raised up teachers over the long history of the church.

So, the Patristic writers, St Augustine, the Reformers, and the Puritans (to name just four), have all provided me with rich insight into the Scriptures. They all have their biases and societal quirks, of course, but they are usually easier to spot since they tend to be different from my own. Often they challenge my understanding of the text as far too deeply shaped by my middle class, Western, consumerist cultural assumptions.

C. S. Lewis summed it up this way:

Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books. All contemporary writers share to some extent the contemporary outlook—even those, like myself, who seem most opposed to it... The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books. Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes. They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing; and their own errors, being now open and palpable, will not endanger us. Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction. To be sure, the books of the future would be just as good a corrective as the books of the past, but unfortunately we cannot get at them.



Boundary #2: Swimming in the Stream

It is helpful to imagine Christian orthodoxy as a great river streaming down through the ages. Reading church history reveals that shooting off from that main river are all sorts of little rivulets and creeks. These are not heresies or cults, because they remain connected to the main river. Still, they are not in the mainstream, but have veered off to some extent for one reason or other. Sometimes they major in minor issues--remaining basically orthodox, but unbalanced. Sometimes they remain true to Christian orthodoxy in many central issues but adopt novel doctrines or interpretations unknown in the history of the church. Sometimes they begin as a helpful corrective but then take on a life of their own, as if the corrective were the primary thing for all of life and faith. Sometimes they are the result of orthodoxy being shaped by the almost subconscious assumptions of a cultural moment--like fundamentalism and modernism, both of which were birthed by the Enlightenment. Whatever the cause, the possibilities and permutations are almost endless.

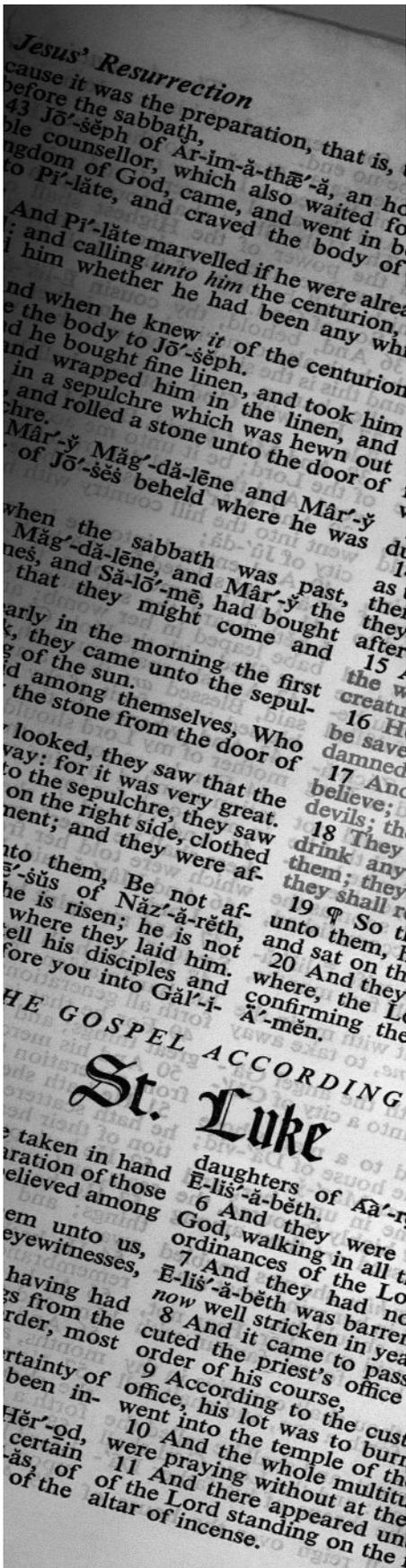
So, one way to position oneself within the mainstream of Christian orthodoxy is to live within the understanding of Scripture set out in the great Creeds and Confessions of the church. For me, this means that I affirm the Ecumenical Creeds of Christian history (the Apostles', Athanasian, Nicene, & Chalcedonian Creeds), and the Reformed Creeds and Confessions (especially the Heidelberg Catechism & the Westminster Confession and Catechisms).

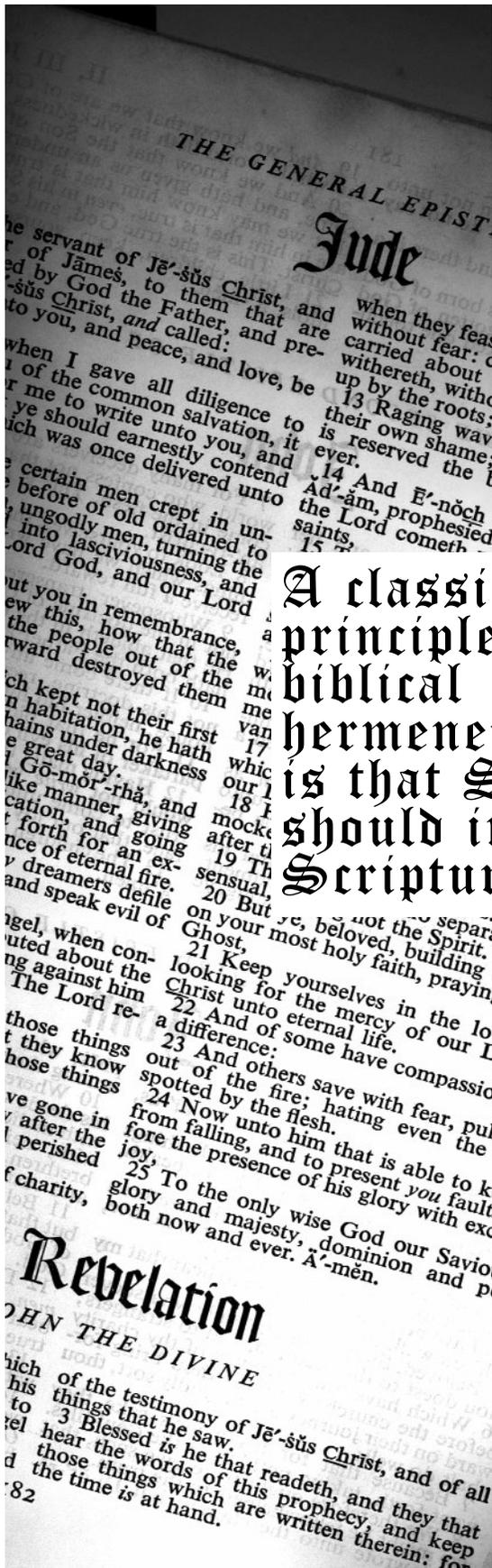
When I say I affirm them, I mean I am convinced they best express and summarize the teaching of Scripture as to what is included in orthodox Christian belief and practice. So, as I seek to understand the text of Scripture, if my interpretation runs counter to what these classic Standards say, I assume my interpretation is probably incorrect. More study, reflection, and research are needed. What I want is not what seems "obvious" to me, but what is biblically orthodox, so I seek to read and understand the Bible within the community of Christ's church.

It is not that these extra-biblical Standards are infallible--they aren't, and don't need to be. Only the Scriptures are infallible, but since my analysis of the text is always fraught with my limited and broken perspective, these Standards help keep me within the mainstream of Christian orthodoxy.

John Piper says it this way:

We need faithful expressions of the Bible--both those written for our generation and those preserved from other generations... you can use biblical texts to justify false things. How do you avoid doing that? One way to avoid that is to have the community of faith come together, argue through to what the Bible really means--not what a heretic says it means--and then crystallize it in a few statements so that people can tell where you actually stand. A person who considers himself a "Bible only" person could believe anything. Therefore we need creeds (affirmations of faith) to see clearly how people are reading the Bible. Are they reading error into the Bible? Or are they drawing truth out of the Bible? To suggest that we get rid of all creeds and just have the Bible is simply to allow people to think loosely about what the Bible says and not require that we come to terms with what it really means.





St Paul tells us that God graciously provides faithful teachers to instruct his people (see, for example, Romans 12:6-8 and Ephesians 4:11). To be dismissive of their office is to be dismissive of the Spirit who called and equipped them. So, in the sermons, commentaries, Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms they wrote down through the centuries, one grace they bring us is to be a sort of boundary for our Bible study helping us correctly understand the text of Scripture as we read.

Lens to Adopt: A Storied Perspective

The third way we can help insure that our understanding of the text is correct is to intentionally adopt a biblical way of seeing it—a lens which can shape our understanding of its meaning. I was taught one by Francis Schaeffer that I am convinced is biblical, Christ-centered, and deeply rooted in the history of Christian faith. And though it's simple enough for ordinary Christians with busy schedules, it's also profound enough that scholars can use it to plumb the depths of God's revelation in his word.

A classic principle of biblical hermeneutics is that Scripture should interpret Scripture.

First, let me set the context for you.

A classic principle of biblical hermeneutics is that Scripture should interpret Scripture. If that sounds daunting or esoteric, it isn't. It's actually quite natural. Here is an example of what I mean. Let's say you read a letter of mine addressed to my wife, Margie. (We'll ignore why you are reading my private letters—it's irrelevant to my example though not to your ethics, but that's another topic.) In any case, in my letter to Margie you read this

sentence: "I've fallen in love with Ruth." Now, whenever we read something we naturally try to make sense of it. So, you might interpret this as bad news for my marriage. In fact, this interpretation might seem so completely obvious to you that you may have trouble even considering whether another interpretation is possible. On the other hand, you might read that sentence, "I've fallen in love with Ruth," in the light of the rest of the letters I've written to Margie. And there you might discover that I have been reflecting on the wonderful Old Testament book of Ruth. That the story of Ruth and Boaz has moved me deeply, causing me to consider anew the meaning of marriage and the beauty of the covenant it represents. And that in the process I have reaffirmed the solemn wedding vow I took to love and cherish Margie until death parts us. All of which means that my falling "in love with Ruth," contrary to how you first understood it, has actually deepened and strengthened the faithfulness of my relationship with Margie. The point is, the best way to understand what I wrote to my wife is to allow the rest of what I've written to her to provide the correct interpretation. So it is when we read the Bible: we must allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. ▶

Because this is a natural way of making sense of things, you don't need to be a scholar to develop skill in allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture. By God's grace, we can over time grow, bit by bit, in an ability to read the Bible so that God's word sheds light on its own meaning. We can learn to analyze each text by its immediate context, by other things the same author wrote, by texts addressing the same topic, etc., in other words, a growing set of concentric circles which help us understand what the text means. (For some practical help in getting started developing this skill, see my *A Practical Method of Bible Study for Ordinary Christians* published as an eBook on Ransom's web site-especially the section on "Correlation.")

Here, though, I want to develop the idea of Scripture interpreting Scripture in a slightly different direction. It goes like this: if we want to correctly understand the Bible, we should use the Story of Scripture as the lens through which we read and understand it.

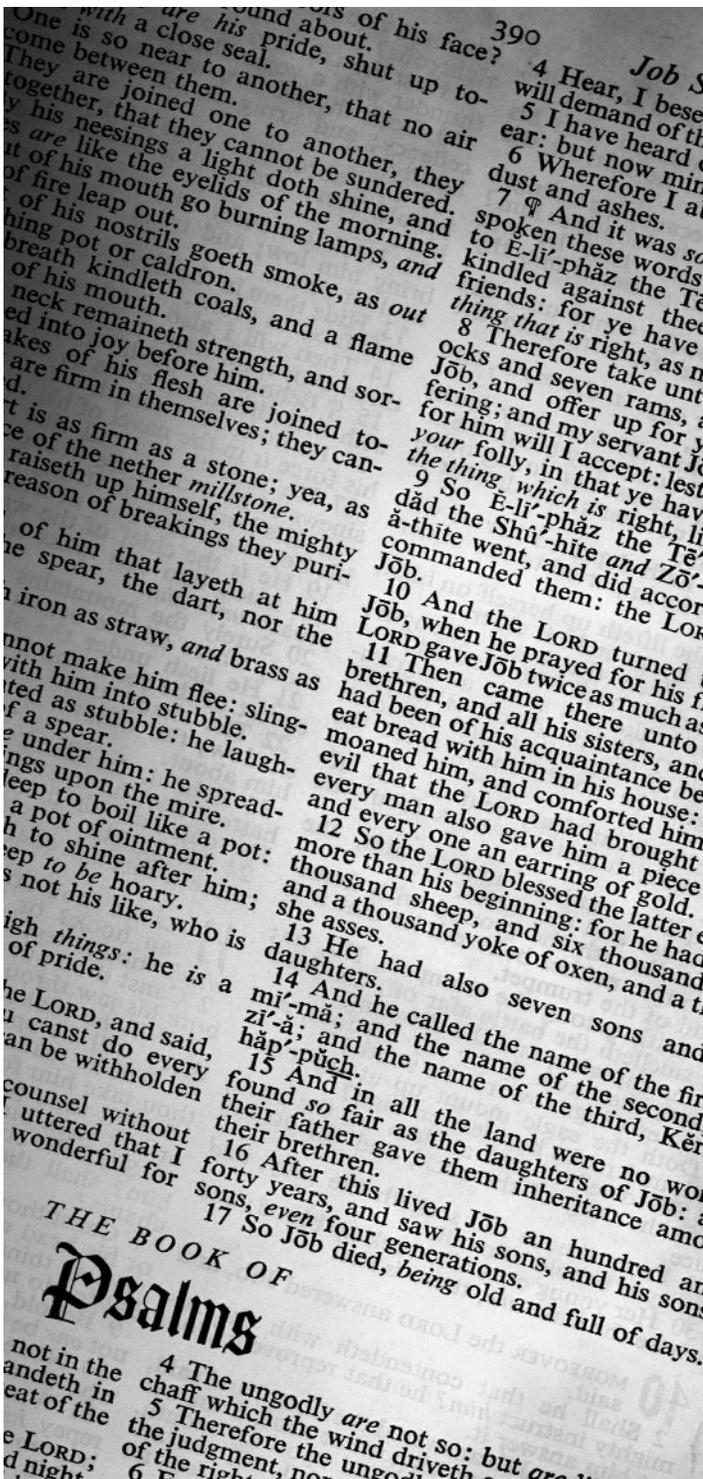
The overarching Story of Scripture unfolds in four parts or stanzas: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration (C, F, R & R). What I am suggesting is that we intentionally learn to make this 4-part Story the lens through which we read and understand all of Scripture and every text of Scripture.

It only makes sense that we do so. If C, F, R, & R is the grand theme that unfolds from Genesis to Revelation, then each part of Scripture fits into it. Each text is an essential part of that Story, and so the meaning of each text can be best captured when we read it in light of the whole.

It's a simple idea, but one that permits us to reflect on the meaning of each text in a way that helps guide us to a correct biblical or orthodox understanding of that text. ❖

NOTE

In "Understanding Scripture Correctly (II)," I will explore in practical terms what it looks like to read a text of Scripture through this storied lens.

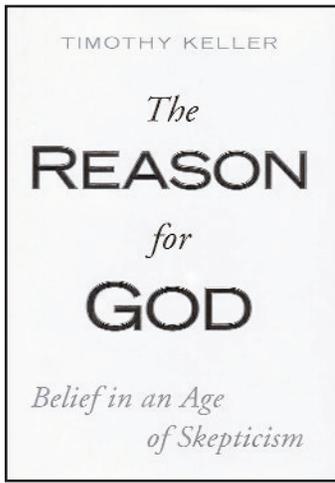


SOURCES

- C. S. Lewis from his *Introduction to Athanasius: On the Incarnation* online (www.spurgeon.org/~phil/history/ath-inc.htm).
- Piper from "Ask Pastor John" online (www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/AskPastorJohn/ByTopic/38/2529_Is_there_a_place_for_creds_in_the_church/).

Engaging the New Atheists (III): Resources

For those who would like a few resources to help think through the claims of the New Atheists, I will suggest three:



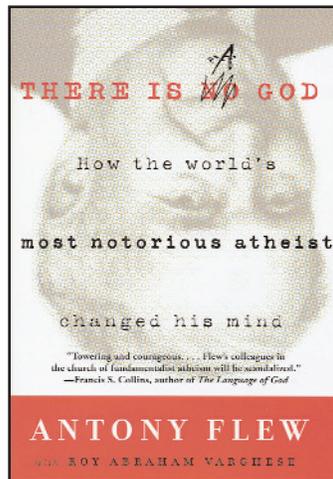
The first is Tim Keller's *The Reason for God*. It was not written to respond to the books published by the New Atheists, rather it was written to make a case for Christian theism in a skeptical age. Still, that means it directly addresses the basic issues and challenges raised by authors such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens.

But don't just read it for the ideas and arguments that Keller develops. Read it also for the posture that Keller displays, the tone of his presentation, and the winsomeness of his approach. This is a man who cares about the gospel, not winning; who actually lives as if he really believes that hostile skeptics are made in God's image.

The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism by Timothy Keller (New York, NY: Dutton; 2008) 240 pp. + notes + index.

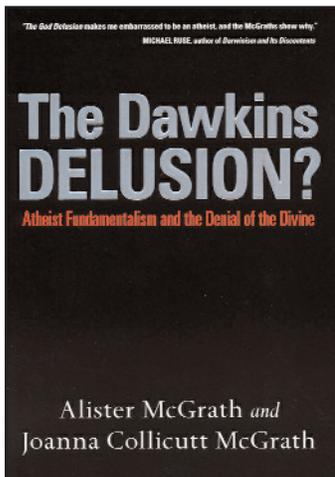
The second book I'd recommend is *There is a God*. Back when C. S. Lewis hosted a weekly discussion group, the Socratic Club, at Oxford, a student named Anthony Flew attended regularly. He found Lewis' arguments for theism unconvincing and after graduating became the philosopher who carefully advanced a rigorously scholarly case for atheism in numerous articles and books. In recent years, however, Flew has changed his mind and now believes in a Creator God. In *There is a God* Flew both gives the reason for his conversion to theism, and in the process refutes the central arguments of the New Atheists.

There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed his Mind by Antony Flew with Roy Abraham Varghese (New York, NY: HarperCollins; 2007) 158 pp. + appendices + notes.

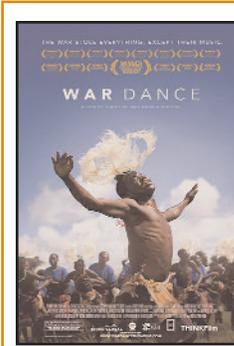


Alister McGrath, like Antony Flew, was once a convinced atheist. Like Richard Dawkins, he studied science at Oxford. Then he became a Christian, went back to school, and became a theologian, specializing in the history of the Christian thought and the intersection of science and religion. In *The Dawkins Delusion?* he and his wife Joanna "challenge [Dawkins] at representative points and let readers draw their own conclusions about the overall reliability of his evidence and judgment."

The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine by Alister E. McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2007) 97 pp. + notes + suggested reading.

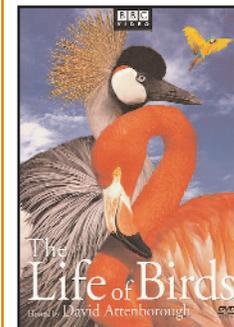


All right, one more suggestion--actually an anti-suggestion, of sorts--skip the debates. The idea that Christian faith is demonstrated by rhetorically besting an opponent is simply false. It could be that at some time in the past such debates served a positive purpose. I have trouble believing they do so today. What we need are not debates but conversations.



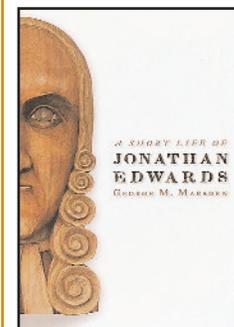
A documentary on an isolated primary school in northern Uganda that serves the children, many orphaned, living in a massive refugee camp. In an area soaked in blood from seemingly endless, brutal warfare, the children take part in a national music competition. The film reveals with simple wonder the humanity of the children, the ongoing horror of the fighting, and the essential place art plays in the lives of those who are created in God's image.

War Dance (Directed by Sean Fine & Andrea Nix; 2007).



Few of us take the time to sit quietly and enjoy the glory of God that is revealed in and through his Creation. Though a video series will not fully suffice as a substitute, learning from naturalist David Attenborough has its own advantages. The *Life of Birds* opens hidden worlds to us, and proves once again that caring for God's earth is a necessary part of Christian faithfulness.

The Life of Birds (Hosted by David Attenborough, BBC; 2002).



In 2004 Dr Marsden published a definitive biography, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, which weighed in at 640 pages. Now, Marsden has produced *A Short Life*, not as a summary of the larger book, but as a "fresh retelling" of the life of "one of the most remarkable figures in American history." An important story for Christians who care about engaging their fast-changing world with an unchanging gospel.

A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards by George M. Marsden (Eerdmans; 2008) 142 pp. + suggested reading + index.