

critique

A Ransom Fellowship Publication 2013 Issue 3

Thoughts about consumerism, loneliness, temptation,
seeing storks, Christian America, resilient ministry,
and **PUNK PARENTING**

**THE
OTHER
FWORD**

CRITIQUE



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ABOUT CRITIQUE

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

Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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Quietly Neglected Texts



Whenever I reread a beloved book I discover details I had not noticed before. A description that changes how I imagine a scene, or a word choice that is particularly amusing or poignant. And sometimes I miss the details because I wasn't expecting them, certain that some other theme or idea would be presented instead. As Matthew Redmond points out, this happens when Christians read Scripture.

My whole life has been church-ed....I've been supported by pews in a multitude of cities, and I've preached and taught grace in some others. The number of sermons, good and bad, that I've heard must number on up into the thousands.

And my memory is pretty good.

But I have never heard a sermon calling me to live quietly.

Not one. At least that I can remember. I've heard heaps of sermons on what I should watch, listen to, whom I should date/marry, and how I should treat them. I've heard sermons on sex and alcohol and tobacco. I've heard sermons calling me to be bold about sharing the gospel... And I've heard sermons about not worrying what other people think when I witness to them...

But I've never heard a sermon asking me to have a quiet life. Or if I have, I've forgotten it and it's been lost over time under an avalanche of one hundred sermons on everything else.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:11 (ESV), Paul urges his hearers "to aspire to live quietly." And in 2 Thessalonians 3:12 he encourages them "in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly." But I've never heard a sermon on what he means by "quiet" or "quietly." Or what he means by "live" or "life." I've heard many how-to sermons but none on how to live quietly, and what it might look like in our culture, which is so loud about everything...

Paul isn't just suggesting this to the Thessalonians. He is urging them to live quietly. Wait a second—no, he wants these believers to aspire to live quietly. You could translate these words as "make it your ambition to live quietly." This is no small thing. [pages 33-34]

In case you are wondering, Redmond is not making these texts up. And whether you have heard anyone preach on them or not, he is certainly correct that the essential message you hear in most evangelical churches does *not* tend to be, "make it your ambition to live quietly."

Calvin says in his commentary that St Paul in this text is trying to correct the error that causes people to be "noisy bustlers in public." Instead, he says, people should be content to fulfill their calling and lead "tranquil" lives.

Living a quiet life is possible only for those who actually believe that faithfulness in the ordinary things of life is the essence of the Christian life. If you believe you should do something extraordinary for God's Kingdom the notion of a quiet existence will be anathema.

When the prophet Isaiah described the coming Messiah he said that he, "will not cry or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street" (42:2). Unlike earthly victorious kings, the Promised One would not include a lot of loud activity. And yet, Isaiah insists, he will bring "justice in the earth" to the farthest coastline (42:4). The quiet would not mean he was ineffective.

I wonder what would happen if we his followers made it our ambition to live quiet lives? ■

Source: The God of the Mundane: Reflections on Ordinary Life for Ordinary People by Matthew B. Redmond (Kalos Press; 2012)

Faithfulness in a Consumerist

As Christians we should be grateful for every aspect of society that allows human beings to flourish. Each is evidence of the common grace of God. Rain and sunshine continue to bless the land and the lives of farmers even if those farmers refuse to acknowledge the Creator's existence (Matthew 5:45). The goodness of God still helps them flourish as persons fulfilling their vocation, and that is a grace for which we can give praise.

Common grace is evident in more than in the gifts of nature, and can be glimpsed as well in the unfolding processes of human history and society. The industrial revolution, for example, launched in eighteenth century Europe and America, introduced industrial methods whereby a growing flood of products could be made available at a reasonable price. The average citizen today in America, Europe, and urban centers around the world is able to purchase a host of items that were unavailable a generation ago—and in some cases a few years ago. As I type this, there are products within easy reach of my desk that I use regularly that had not been invented when my grandfather was alive. I am grateful to be alive at this period in human history, and the choice presented to me when I go shopping reminds me that the vast majority of humankind knew nothing of the practical riches I so easily take for granted.

But as with all good things, we know that in a fallen world there is always a darker side. We live in the now/not yet of Christ's lordship, when his kingdom has been inaugurated but not yet brought to full consummation. Redemption has been secured after the Fall, but the final restoration has not yet occurred. So we live in a world that tends to vandalize the good shalom of God and spawns systems that align themselves against God's kingdom.

THE GAP IN OUR ECONOMY IS BETWEEN WHAT WE HAVE AND WHAT WE THINK WE OUGHT TO HAVE—AND THAT IS A MORAL PROBLEM, NOT AN ECONOMIC ONE.

—Paul Heyne

Which is why the correct posture for the believer is always gratefulness with discernment.

St. Paul warns us of three sources of temptation (Ephesians 2:2-3): the *flesh* (our inner fallen desires), the *devil* (outer seduction to sin), and the *world* (the cultural systems we live in that resist the rule of God). So I am grateful for the results of the industrial revolution but must beware my insatiable desire to want what I do not need, the whispers that assure me my life will be fuller if I just purchase some gadget, and the

network of propaganda that sweeps me into patterns of consumption that are shaped not by faithfulness but by the demands of the marketplace. The solution is not despair nor withdrawal nor assimilation, but a willingness to buttress our gratefulness with reflection that helps us discern the shape of faithfulness as consumers who wish to live as if Christ is really Lord of all.

One aspect of our world that invites reflection is the fact that as the industrial revolution has unfolded to produce so many readily available goods, something called *consumerism* has subtly grown as a hidden motivation to consume in ever increasing quantities. As more goods are produced, more consumption is needed to keep the system working. So, marketers seek to find new consumers or to induce consumers to consume more. Products can have obsolescence built into them, or they can work well but go out of style.

Whatever the details—and they are both numerous and ingenious—the result has been a subtle but powerful view of life that revolves somehow around consumption. (If you doubt this, watch the superb television series, *Mad Men*.)

Please understand: I am not suggesting that consumption is wrong. Human beings, by their very nature, consume. It's impossible not to consume, and

Society

even those who drop off the grid still consume—their patterns of consumption are simply different. I am a consumer. But since I am also a Christian,

individual organizes his or her particular life to seek to give it meaning.” This means that consumerism is not merely a neutral factor in the economic functioning of the marketplace but something that helps shape human desires, decisions, and souls.

My claim is that consumerism is an existential stance in response to the existential threat of meaninglessness. As such, it represents a flawed working solution to a religious question that Christians believe can finally be answered only through Christ. Individuals

who live a consumeristic life seek to defend themselves against the existential threat of meaninglessness by displaying purchases that have meanings as signs that are intended to procure recognition from other persons. When successful, such recognition temporarily validates the subjective value that a person places on the meaning of his or her own individual life....

TO LOVE ANYTHING GOOD, AT ANY COST, IS A BARGAIN.

—Wendell Berry, *Jaber Crow*

I want my patterns of consumption to be shaped by the truth of God’s word in Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration, not merely the demands of a marketplace in a fallen world.

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines consumerism as “the theory that an increasing consumption of goods is economically desirable; also: a preoccupation with and an inclination toward the buying of consumer goods.” True enough, but I think this is too neutral, not quite capturing the reality that consumerism manages to achieve a power that helps to shape our desires, our view of things, and our lifestyle to some degree or another.

In a new work, *Shopping for Meaningful Lives*, author Bruce Rittenhouse argues that consumerism has tendrils of meaning that extend deeply into human consciousness. His research suggests that, “consumerism is not only a pattern of behavior that characterizes an individual life, but a way in which an

The implication of my claim that consumerism is a form of life rooted in an existential commitment is that it has the power to override or co-opt conscious moral ideals in determining individuals’ economic decisions. This accounts for the practical failure of earlier proposals to counteract consumerism. If it is an existential form of life, consumerism cannot be dislodged by rational arguments or moral exhortations towards moderation, benevolence, sustainability, or social justice that do not address the underlying existential threat of meaninglessness. If it is rooted in an existential commitment, consumerism can only be overcome by individual conversion to another existential commitment that offers the individual threatened by meaninglessness a more adequate ground of meaning. An individual cannot desire or choose a life that lacks a ground of meaning. Therefore a change of existential foundations for an individual life must be accomplished by means of a discrete transformation.
[p. 3-4]

It would be easy to dismiss Rittenhouse’s argument except for the fact that we’ve all experienced its reality. I am a grandparent but it felt good when young adults mentioned they like my fedora and wonder where I bought it. For a few moments I was noticed by people who help define what’s cool, and the attention was fun. We might claim we have no bouts of meaninglessness but that is doubtless untrue. We are finite creatures, as well as fallen, and finding a sense



of significance in our frantically changing world is an ongoing process that has both ups and downs. I feel deeply secure as a Christian, but admit that I saw my hat—and myself—in a new light as it was noticed and commented on.

I suspect I am not alone in this. Perhaps you've experienced feeling

underappreciated at work, only to purchase something that colleagues have mentioned over lunch, and suddenly you are the center of attention. The entire process might even have occurred at an unconscious level. Still, it occurred.

Whether we realize it or not, consumerism touches on issues of character, inspires personal feelings of significance and meaning, and helps shape our understanding of human flourishing. As such it is an ideology and should be seen as such. Thus, Christian faithfulness in a consumerist society will need to be discerning about this rival gospel, and demonstrate a way of life that is free from its demands and values.

Christian thinker and sociologist Os Guinness provides us with another avenue of insight in *A Free People's Suicide*.

Here he comes at the issue by concisely identifying the heart of the consumer revolution in a way that intersects with our daily lives in tangible ways:

Nothing symbolizes the magic power of the consumer revolution better than the birth of the credit card, introduced by the Bank of America in California in 1958 as the grand fulfillment of three Ds: debt, desire and democracy. What the credit card has done is transform our modern assessment of value. Value is no longer estimated by the ingenuity and sweat of the labor taken to produce something, but by the degree of satisfaction it promises its purchaser.

The result of the consumer revolution is fourfold: first, a decisive shift from needs to desires and an explosive intensification of desire ("taking the waiting out of wanting," as the early ad for the credit card said); second, a strong reinforcement of vanity and envy, as advertising makes luxuries into necessities and invites each person into a lifelong comparison with others; third, a vast extension of choices, not only in terms of products but also of lifestyles and possible futures; and fourth, of course, an astonishing accumulation of excess, junk and debt.

Do Americans not have the right to consume what they produce as a result of their greater ingenuity and entrepreneurship? Yes, of course, but if all the developed and rapidly developing countries did the same, the earth could no longer afford or sustain the consumption, and the inequities between the rich and the poor would be even starker than they are now. [p. 157-158]

Far more could be said, but these explorations of consumerism, though incomplete, give us a rich set of ideas that cry out for open-minded discernment. ■

Sources:

Merriam-Webster online dictionary (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/consumerism)

Shopping for Meaningful Lives: The Religious Motive of Consumerism by Bruce P. Rittenhouse (Eugene Oregon: Cascade Books, 2013)

A Free People's Suicide: Sustainable Freedom and the American Future by Os Guinness (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press; 2012)

RATS AND ROACHES LIVE BY COMPETITION UNDER THE LAWS OF SUPPLY AND DEMAND; IT IS THE PRIVILEGE OF HUMAN BEINGS TO LIVE UNDER THE LAWS OF JUSTICE AND MERCY.

—Wendell Berry



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Do you find that Christians are generally eager and willing to civilly discuss issues of economics, the market and consumerism? Why do you think this is?
2. Rittenhouse's definition of consumerism identifies it as a "rival gospel," a form of idolatry. Like the pagan idolatries that surrounded the Old Testament people of God, this one too seems to work at times. Just as the gods of the Israelite's enemies seemed to give them military victories (which is why they placed the captured treasures of the Temple in the house of their gods—see, for example 1 Samuel 5:1-2 and Daniel 1:1-3), so the values of consumerism can help us feel more meaningful after a purchase. How does this give us insight into the existence and working of idolatry in our postmodern world?
3. If you are willing, identify a time in which a purchase gave you a deepened sense of significance and meaning (even if momentary). How have you noticed the quest for significance reflected in advertising?
4. Guinness claims that the credit card has tended to "transform our modern assessment of value." To what extent is your estimation of a good's value found in "the degree of satisfaction it promises" you as the purchaser? To what extent do you find this problematic? Theoretically, would it be better to instead see something's value as in "the ingenuity and sweat of the labor taken to produce" it? Why or why not? Are they mutually exclusive?
5. Guinness claims there are four results of the consumer revolution. To what extent do you see these four in our world? To what extent do you see them in yourself?
6. Would you agree that Americans have the right to consume whatever they produce? Why or why not?
7. To what extent is being able to afford something an adequate justification for purchasing or owning it? What ethical issues are involved in this issue?
8. Much of the time, discussions of this topic tend to dissolve into political debates about economic agendas of the left and the right. Why is this? Should it be this way among Christians? Why or why not? What would need to change to allow the conversation to continue?
9. Some would argue that two of the potential effects mentioned by Guinness—a greater accumulation of junk and excess, and starker inequities between rich and poor—are merely a factor of normal economic exchange and need not be of great concern. How would you respond?
10. Some would argue that the possibility "the earth could no longer afford or sustain the consumption" in the future is something that should be left to the market. Any attempt to legislate or regulate such things must be resisted as ineffective, misguided and perhaps a step on the road to socialism or at least greater control by the State. How would you respond?
11. What ideas and values found in Scripture and taught in historic orthodox Christianity are relevant to these questions? How can we arrive at helpful answers without lapsing into a form of legalism or elitism?

Loneliness

an essay by **Scott Schuleit**

Opening the door and walking out into the warm night, I step out onto the suburban streets of my neighborhood, their grainy texture partially lit by hazy pools of radiance cast by slightly buzzing arc lights. It was a nice, long walk that I craved, desiring the turbulence of my thoughts to be sifted and fall into their proper places. The solitude of the quiet night world offered an atmosphere conducive towards reflection and relaxation, and thus, with purpose, I move out into its richness.

I walk past homes with curtained windows aglow with the spell of electric luminescence, wherein one might find eyes mesmerized, flickering with images, intoxicated by colorful diversions.

The streets were virtually empty, except for an occasional passerby, often a neighbor walking their dog. With one neighbor, pleasantries were passed, a token acknowledgment to the fact that a light brotherhood existed between us, induced by the simple reality that we lived in close proximity to one another. If it were not for this circumstance, perhaps only a single indifferent glance would have transpired between us. Beneath the surface of our greetings, there seemed to reside a resistance to move beyond mere acquaintance. And perhaps this was appropriate, for it is impossible to truly know a large number of people throughout one's life. The polite civility of fostering various acquaintances in our lives has its necessary place and purposes. With regards to this, it would seem obvious

that there has been a serious decline in the desire and capacity for people to engage in even this kind of a common, meager relationship, a circumstance symptomatic of deeper issues in our lonely, broken society. Perhaps we live in what might be regarded as among the loneliest societies to have ever existed.

Tilting my head upwards, I look up at the stars, at shimmering specks scattered throughout the dark immensities of space. We live in a gorgeous world, but it's also a fallen world and as long as we live in it, loneliness, in varying degrees, will afflict us.

As a Christian, I would think that my experience of loneliness would differ from that of a non-Christian because God—by his grace—has reconciled me to himself. The non-Christian either has no hope or hopes in that which cannot save (for only Christ can save), and often, if not always, can sense the reality of his separation, his estrangement from God. In light of this, perhaps the unregenerate man feels a more intense sense of loneliness than that of a Christian; having said that, I've known Christians, including myself, who have experienced seasons of severe loneliness. Besides one's state before God, many variables, including neuro-chemical imbalances, genetics, personality, upbringing, and circumstances, could be named as factors holding profound influence regarding the experience, in kind and intensity, of loneliness.

My eyes move from the stars to the road that I walk, a posture I sometimes find myself in when deep in thought. My pastor, who lives in the same neighborhood, has, with affectionate humor, made mention of this fact.

From somewhere out in the vast vacancies of night, disturbing my thoughts, the single sharp cry of some

nocturnal creature reaches my ears, echoing faintly before dissipating, gone. The phenomenon of an echo, by its very nature, sounds lonely because it needs a hollow space, room to resonate, and the voice it sends is the answer it receives.

With regard to my particular situation, when I'm lonely, it often feels kind of like hunger, which is actually a form of pain, only deeper than a mere physical craving. It really does feel like that. There's a kind of hollowness to loneliness, an inner crying out like the rumbling of an empty stomach.

For most of us there is a capacity and desire for community, a hunger to love others and be loved in return, to be known, respected, appreciated and involved within a community; there's also a desire to profoundly love and give of oneself, to unite with another in marriage, to know one particular person deeply, intimately. When this desire is not fulfilled or the experience of it broken in some way, sometimes loneliness can be the result, and even depression.

I think there's also a kind of fear in loneliness, born out of doubt, hopelessness, or at least the slow erosion of hope in one's mind. Buried fears often rise to the surface amidst times of loneliness. Certain hopes and pains repressed under protective layers break through, giving voice to their existence.

Also, there's a subtle warping of perspective that loneliness can engender, emotionally casting the world in bleak hues and gray colors of despair. If continuously indulged in, it will become more and more difficult to discern between truth and fantasy. Perhaps this kind of situation could be more accurately described as when loneliness moves over, at least partially, into the

realm of self-pity.

Moving around my block, I pass by homes, here and there, occupied by friends from church. (A large number of people in our neighborhood attend the same church.) A couple of them, both talented writers, I would regard as close friends. A brief sound of casual, hearty laughter emerges from a window glowing in orange-yellow relief against the dark silhouette of a home.

Some of us might think that friendship or marriage will banish loneliness, but in reality, even if one is a Christian, the loneliness will probably, to some degree, persist; it may even occur at a deeper level than before. One thinks of the loneliness of Christ. Despite his perfect intimacy with the Father, Christ must have felt while he walked on earth deeply lonely at times. He was misunderstood, maligned, mocked and rejected; even his closest friends deserted him when he needed them. Even the Father, though not failing him, in some real sense forsook him at the point of his greatest need—at the very moment when his suffering and loneliness seemed to have reached its apex. We indeed have a savior who can sympathize with our limitations, our frailties, our weakness, our pain, our loneliness, the various difficulties associated with living in a dark, fallen, fractured world.

Against a vast, starry backdrop, the shadow-touched moon is out tonight, adrift in a sea of darkness, glowing in profound isolation, cold and alone.

Most of us, to some extent, have probably felt during moments and different times in our lives the way the

moon is described here. There may have been a time, perhaps as a child, when you were happier, felt more at home, but now at times feel lonely. I don't know your situation, whether or not you struggle strenuously with loneliness, but I do know that the present state of earth isn't meant to be our home. There was a time when mankind was at home in this world, a particular garden comes to mind, and for Christians, there will be a time when we will be at home on earth again. ■

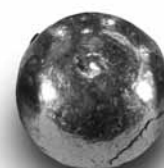
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PAPER AND CANVAS



THE FORBIDDEN **played**

a short story by **Scott Schuleit**

Far beneath the gaze of perfect clouds drifting through a peerless twilight sky, there ran two children down a winding forest path. They leaped and darted amidst shadows and spots of copper sunlight, breathing the cool mint air, relishing the musky scents as they listened to the wind and the soft rushing sounds of leaves beating their wings like a million emerald butterflies.

The sun was falling asleep, dipping low to sink into a bed of earth, to dream for a while before waking with livid fire in its veins to warm a drowsy earth. With its retreat, the shimmering of golden fire, which rested on the western side of every tree trunk and leaf, began to dissipate and move back into the air where light was gathered in a great blush of lavender, orange and magenta against a dusty blue face of sky.

The children moved through the gathering darkness, releasing all of their pent up energy with screams and shouts and laughter that went echoing down through the pristine forest. Evelyn moved swiftly, passing Aaron with a burst of speed, her black ponytail bouncing behind her, sapphire eyes flashing excited innocence as she turned for a brief peek behind her shoulder. Aaron was running against a vast backdrop of forest, smiling with his air-rifle in hand, pumping his arms to catch up. The forest grew dense about them, crowding in with a sweet suffocation, an atmosphere lent kinder with the spice of ferns wafting in the air and the smattering of fiery red and deep violet wildflowers brushed at the base of great oak trees.

"Slow down," shouted Aaron.

With more than a hint of victory flushing her face she slowed to a walk and together they continued through the forest. The trail grew narrow, twisting about until it hugged the side of a stream where it grew difficult to tread upon due to its slanting towards the water and the snaking of roots over its surface. With their nimble feet they managed to make it through and onto a strip of forested land that extended out and parallel to the forest for some distance before ending in a lush grove.

The little island held a few bushes with berries growing in thick, rich clusters, ripe and red. Wildflowers painted the ground, one of which Aaron plucked and gave to her as they sat down beneath a tree to observe the beautiful sights surrounding them. While they talked and gazed, the soft singing sounds of night creatures began to awaken in the air.

"This is my favorite place in the whole world," remarked Evelyn with her lilting, melodic voice.

"It's mine too," replied Aaron.

"It reminds me of a garden, our own private garden which no one knows about."

Aaron thought about her words for a moment then declared, "It's our secret place."

Evelyn smiled and reached for his hand, which he tenderly took as they talked about their dreams and all the fun they would have this summer playing about the garden, exploring the stream and running about the forest...

After a while, Aaron noticed his air-rifle and seeing that the light was fading, made haste to practice his shooting skills. Little round bronze pellets went threading through the air, ticking off of trees and slapping off leaves and plunking into chosen areas of water, all followed with applause from Evelyn. After shooting for several minutes, Aaron noticed something moving nearby in a tree just across the stream. It was a bird, and not only was it a bird, but it appeared to be a rare one, this seemed evident in light of its bright red wings and royal gold and green breast. It was resting in a majestic fruit-bearing tree. The bird itself appeared as a bright globe of some exotic fruit.

"Look," he cried.

"What?"

"There," he said, pointing a finger.

"Oh look at that," she said, "it's beautiful," while staring with amazement.

The bird ruffled its feathers and then turned its head towards the stream that reflected the shadows and the suns receding light.

Aaron raised his gun, trying to place the bird in its sights.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to shoot the bird."

"No, don't do that."

"Why not?" he said, lifting his eyes from the gun.

"Because your father told you to never shoot a creature."

"But all my friends shoot birds, and can you imagine their faces when they see this one!"

"Please don't do it, Aaron."

Aaron thought about it for a moment, looking out over the snakelike winding of the stream. He then peered down into

pierced its eye, sending it fluttering down to the earth and spinning in the dust, its shrill cries shattering the darkening air. It flopped about for a few more seconds, before it lay silent with one glassy eye gazing into the heavens. Aaron felt a flush of dark pleasure fill

his soul. Evelyn stood in shock with trembling legs and wide eyes before bursting into deep sobs that shuddered the whole of her form.

"How could you," she cried, barely making the words come out, and with that she darted into the woods as a deep rumbling reverberated through the air.

"Evelyn—wait," he cried.

"Evelyn, I'm sorry," he shouted into the forest, but she was gone.

A whirling wind began to rush through the trees.

He looked over at the bird and then at his hands holding the air rifle, and with a violent toss he threw the rifle into the stream. His mind jumped with images of the bird and then of Evelyn and then of his father. He looked up into the sky, its twilight now obscured by roiling

thunderheads. The storm seemed so sudden to him, he hadn't even noticed it coming on. Amidst a bellowing volley of thunder, an angry streak of lightning flashed in the air, and the ripping sound that followed seemed to tear the earth asunder. The dark clouds burst, and a heavy rain began to fall, and in an attempt to escape its wrath, he ran to hide himself among the trees. ■

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**I DON'T NEED A FRIEND WHO
CHANGES WHEN I CHANGE AND WHO
NODS WHEN I NOD; MY SHADOW
DOES THAT MUCH BETTER.**

—Plutarch

its dark whispering flow and immediately an image came to his mind; it was a vision of himself holding up the bright bird before the amazed eyes of his friends. He raised the rifle and sighted it. It would be a difficult shot, but he could do it; he could shoot better than any of his friends, he thought to himself.

"Aaron—stop."

The bird was in his sights.

"Aaron—please."

He hesitated for a moment, and then the image of his friends came again.

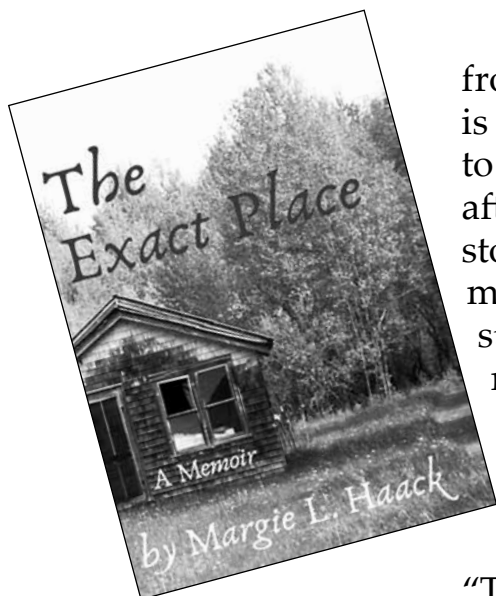
She reached for the gun just before it spit out a shiny copper pellet. The bird glanced his way just as the pellet



Seeing a Stork:

Margie Haack's Childhood in Northern Minnesota

a review by Wesley Hill



The memoirist Isak Dinesen recounts a story she heard from a child when she lived in Africa. One night a man is startled awake by a strange noise. He gets out of bed to investigate and encounters all sorts of trouble. Mishap after mishap befalls him—ditches intrude on his path, stones cause him to trip, a dam leaks, and other obstacles make his way crooked. As the child told Dinesen the story of the man's nighttime journey, she mapped the man's progress by drawing lines in the dirt. Slowly, as the story concluded, Dinesen found that the map of the man's path was in the shape of a stork. The apparently random circuit the man traveled wasn't as random as he supposed. And Dinesen draws comfort from that: "The tight place, the dark pit in which I am now lying, of what bird is it the talon? When the design of my life is completed, shall I, shall other people see a stork?"

This story came to mind as I read Margie Haack's memoir *The Exact Place*, the narrative of her childhood in a three-room house with no running water in a small town in northern Minnesota. Like Dinesen's nighttime wanderer, Margie's growing up years were filled with unexpected turns and obstacles. And yet, also like the man in Dinesen's story, Margie finds herself confessing, in the words of Amy Carmichael, "when my spirit was overwhelmed within me, thou knewest my path." The "thou" there is a reference to God, since, at the end of her book, Margie makes clear that its title is a confession of faith. God knew her winding trail and had an end in view: "He determined the times set for mankind and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him

and find him, though he is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:26-27).

Anyone who thinks that such a trust in divine Providence could never produce a rip-roarin' good yarn, however, had better think again. There's no heavy-handed theologizing here, no morose, ponderous platitudes about the intricacies of God's ways. Rather, it's as though Margie's faith in divine watchfulness frees her to express the humorous and hilarious in ways that might otherwise elude her. This narrative reads more like Garrison Keillor than David Brainerd. It lilts and sashays from anecdote to anecdote, like an eager storyteller regaling her hearers around the campfire. Part-Leif Enger, part-Laura Ingalls Wilder, it's the sort of book you'd hand with equal confidence to your eight-year-old niece or your eighty-year-old grandfather.

There are stories here, for instance, of Margie's learning to fish. When she caught her first northern walleyed pike, reeling in the wet line handful by handful after throwing down her quivering rod, she struggled "to hold the fish up to my chin, and still, his tail dragged the ground." In addition to spunk, there's also mischief: Feigning sickness to avoid going to school, Margie grabs the thermometer her mother put into her mouth and holds it up to the lamp on her bed stand. "When [Mom] returned, I watched through half-closed eyes as she checked it. A puzzled expression came over her face as her eyes move to the top of the glass column. The mercury had traveled to the end and burst." There's suspense—when a creepy neighbor comes to visit while Margie and her siblings are home alone, whispering their fear to one another, huddled under the bed, and when Margie's younger brother is kicked by a horse and lands unconscious in the dirt, blood trickling out of his mouth. And, not least, there's sensuous, infectious, wide-eyed delight—over finding a patch of morel mushrooms, over hearing the falsetto of loons ("It is filled with such mournful beauty that, for a moment, your heart dreads and involuntarily thinks of eternity"), over the baking and eating of pies, and much else.

And all of that is nothing compared to her equestrian adventures:

It suddenly occurred to me that bringing [Thunder, the family horse] into the house might offer some new diversion.... Although the floor proved hazardous as he slipped on the smooth linoleum, he merely regained his balance and continued his inspection of this new space. We already knew he loved people food. He ate anything he could persuade us to give up: watermelon, cake, cookies. He'd never tried Mom's dill pickles so we got them out of the refrigerator to see if he liked them. To our delight, he crunched down half a jar of cucumbers and left a huge puddle of drool on the floor before we led him back outside.

In the midst of all this happiness, though, is heartache. It would have been easy in a book like this to tell folksy, nostalgic stories of rural life and never bother to mention the ways in which, as the Argentinian proverb has it, "a small town is a vast hell." But Margie doesn't do that. Visible throughout her narrative, like an embedded splinter working its way to the surface, is her painful relationship with her stepfather (her biological father died just before she was born). "I knew him as Dad," she writes, "but he never became my father." And she never discerned the reason for his disapproval—was it jealousy? insecurity? bitterness?—but it became a defining feature of her childhood. "Over the years," she says, "the knowledge of his dislike slowly crept in like the northern twilight." Readers of *The Exact Place* will find encouragement in Margie's trust in divine Providence, but they'll also be reminded that tracing the ways of the divine Author doesn't

mean papering over unresolved pain or easily assimilating that pain into some overarching scheme of divine sovereignty that dispenses with contradiction and confusion.

This attention to pain—mingled together with so much joy and good humor—allows Margie her deepest insights into her family and their neighbors. "[N]one [of us] are one-dimensional, cartoon villains," she concludes. "[W]e, all of us, carry traces of God's divine image, however faint they might be." Remarkably, those sentences are about her stepfather. Acknowledging the ways he wounded her becomes, mysteriously, the means by which she comes to see the ways he himself was in need of mercy, of grace.


I picture Margie reading this book aloud, drawing, like Dinesen's African friend, a line after each chapter closes. By the end of the night, the lines have assembled to form a stork in the dirt by the back porch. At first you might fixate on the lovely feathers, and then you notice the threatening curve of the talons. And then, last of all, you think, *The picture wouldn't be true without both.* And then you smile, and sigh. ■

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Book reviewed: *The Exact Place: A Memoir by Margie L. Haack* (Kalos Press; 2012) 226 pages + recipes.



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IT IS ONLY WHEN ONE LOVES LIFE AND THE EARTH SO MUCH THAT WITHOUT THEM EVERYTHING SEEMS TO BE OVER THAT ONE MAY BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION AND A NEW WORLD.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

RESOURCE

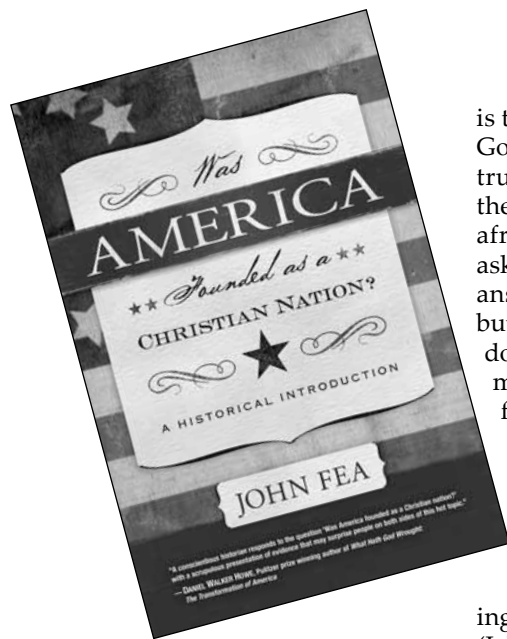
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RESOURCE: CHRISTIAN AMERICA?

We the People



It is difficult to get Americans to agree on how Christian America was at its founding. It's not just that Christians disagree on this with secularists; Christians disagree with one another about it as well. Specific lines from the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and letters and pamphlets written by early thinkers and leaders are all used as evidence of one conclusion or another. The diaries of various founders and the stories of their lives and the content of their speeches are also part of the argument. And so the debates continue with no end in sight and little promise that resolution is possible. An added difficulty is the lack of civility—my sense is that many of the debaters are not really searching for the truth but are rather seeking to score political points.

One of the reasons I am a Christian is the conviction that since all truth is God's truth, I need never fear pursuing truth. I may not know what conclusion the evidence leads to, but I need not be afraid of what it will reveal. I may be asked questions for which I have no answer and must take time to explore, but I do not need to hesitate to say, I don't know, but I'll try to find out. I may even discover that the facts, when fully explored, shatter assumptions that I've lovingly held for a long time and that once shattered, require me to rethink a whole set of values and beliefs. The reconsideration might be painful (I never enjoy admitting I was wrong), but my understanding that my Lord is truth incarnate (John 14:6) provides sufficient reason to keep pursuing truth wherever it might lead. This basic conviction of orthodox historic Christianity applies to truth in every sphere of life, because Christ is Lord of all—including the question of just how Christian America was at its founding.

So, it is my pleasure to commend to you, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?* by John Fea. A carefully researched book by a professional historian, the book is accessible to lay readers who are interested in finding a truthful answer to the question in the title. Fea is Associate Professor of American History and Chair of the History Department at Messiah College (Grantham, PA). "This book," Fea writes in a Preface, "should be viewed as a historical primer for students, churchgoers, and anyone who wants to make sense of the American past and its relationship to Christianity. I hope it might be read and discussed in schools and congregations where people

are serious about considering how the history of the American founding era might help them to become more informed citizens in the present" [p. xv].

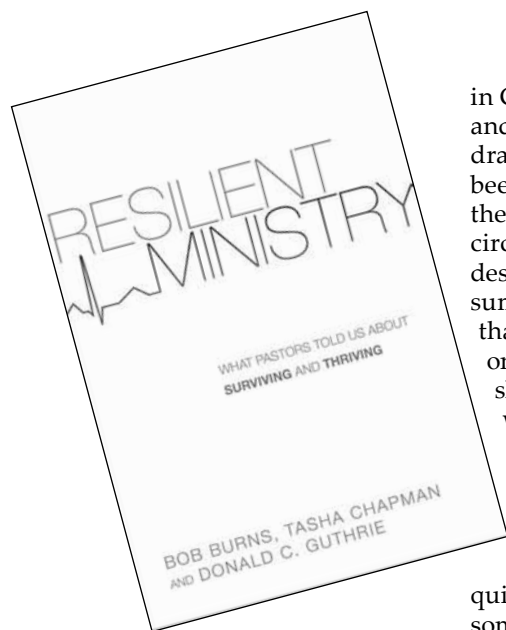
Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? opens with a chapter on what thinking historically looks like. Fea is concerned, he says, "to get Christians to see the danger of cherry-picking from the past as a means of promoting a political or cultural agenda in the present." He follows this Introduction on historical thinking with four chapters on the long history of the idea that the U. S. is a "Christian nation." Then six chapters explore to what extent the Revolution was a "Christian event." Then, before a final brief Conclusion, the book includes chapters on specific founders: George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Witherspoon, John Jay, and Samuel Adams.

Fea is a good storyteller, a careful historian, and a scholar who loves the truth too much to indulge in simplistic answers. *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?* taught me a great deal, revealed wrong ideas I must eschew, and reminded me that human history is always far richer than we imagine. It also made me realize once again that the American experiment with freedom is both precious and fragile—and that this fragility is threatened when citizens prefer slogans to truth. ■

Book recommended: *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?* by John Fea (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press; 2011) 246 pp. + notes + index.

RESOURCE: NURTURING INSTEAD OF DEPLETING

The Church Must Not Consume Its Own



One of the most striking metaphors in all of Holy Scripture describes the sworn enemy of our souls. St Peter likens the devil to a “roaring lion” constantly on the prowl, “looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). It is an apt description, and should bring to mind the horror of unseen, encircling beasts that stalk their prey in the darkest hours between midnight and dawn.

There is another danger we face, just as fearsome but since it involves a very slow death it often goes largely unnoticed. Here we are sucked dry from within, so appreciated for our gifts and so surrounded by need that we simply use ourselves up in an insatiable attempt to do what needs to be done.

If we have eyes to see, this broken world is awash with emptied-out human beings, burnt out by being used up. And sadly, far too many are leaders that have been consumed by the demands and expectations of the church.

I am not pointing fingers here. I have at times misused people made

in God’s image, drawing on their life and presence with no regard to how draining my demands might be. I’ve been willing to use them, to call upon them to perform regardless of their circumstances because it is in their job description. I have made unspoken assumptions about their time and energy that immediately becomes a weight on their ability to choose what they should do. I’ve wondered why they weren’t at the meeting I called (never imagining other meetings might be of higher priority) and not honored their times of rest (since my issues are always important enough to warrant an interruption). I’ve been quick to say something positive about something they have done but far more rarely have inquired about whether they have adequate opportunity to rest, to learn, to be refreshed, to be away, to be alone.

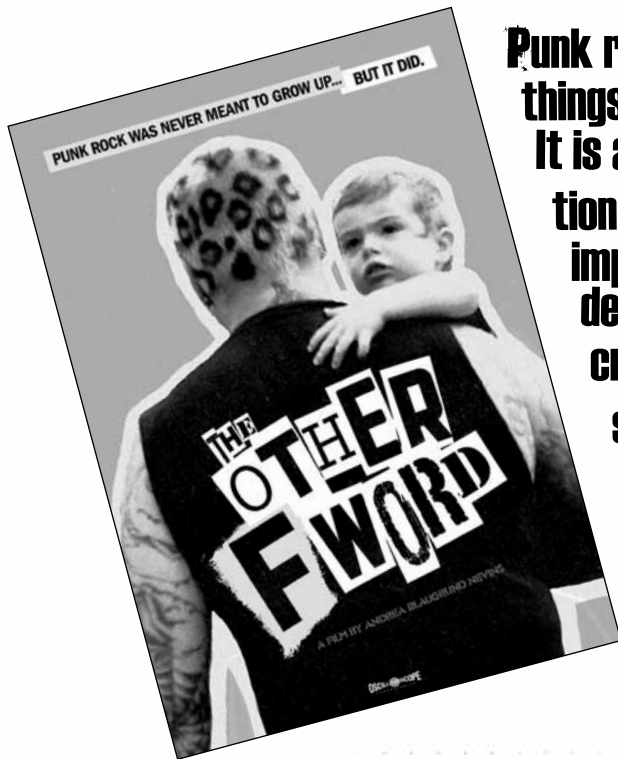
Here is the essence of the issue: the demands on the church in the twenty-first century will suck pastor/teachers dry unless very intentional and practical steps are taken to assure it doesn’t happen. Few churches are taking such steps and fewer still know what steps to take. Thankfully, help is now available.

The authors of *Resilient Ministry* undertook a seven-year study to answer a single question: “What does it take for pastors not only to survive but to thrive in fruitful ministry over the long haul?” All three authors are educators who are passionately committed to the church; two teach at Covenant Theological Seminary and the third is at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. They are friends who I respect deeply, who have used their gifts well in doing this important work.

Resilient Ministry focuses on five themes that are essential factors impinging on the life, time, energy, and flourishing of pastors: spiritual formation, self-care, emotional and cultural intelligence, marriage and family, and leadership and management. Each is carefully defined and rooted in wise biblical reflection, with practical suggestions given that churches can use to bring needed grace into the lives and ministry of pastoral leaders. This book is accessible to both church leaders and lay Christians, and is must-reading for every believer who is willing to faithfully care for the pastors God has called to shepherd them. One of the book’s strengths is the stories and quotes from pastors who participated in the seven-years of research. They not only make the ideas come alive, they remind us that all who minister the word and sacraments are human beings who need the grace of the gospel just like the rest of us do. ■

Book recommended: *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told us about Surviving and Thriving* by Bob Burns, Tasha D. Chapman and Donald C. Guthrie (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2013) 264 pages + appendices + notes.

WHEN PUNKERS MEET



Punk rock is no longer a novel phenomenon and, like most things in our consumerist society, has gone mainstream. It is a musical phenomenon born, I think, out of frustration with the insignificance of life, a revolt against order imposed but never convincingly explained or justified, a desperate desire to feel alive in a society that seems increasingly designed to make one feel numb. Like a primal scream, punk rock provided space for young people to feel they are not alone when they feel lost in the cosmos—if the lyrics seem anarchic and the music angry, it is because they were meant to be.

FATHERHOOD

In 1988, when the movement was first growing on the fringes of popular culture, a band named Pennywise was formed in Hermosa Beach, Calif. On their 1991 album, *Pennywise*, they sang “Rules:”

*I’ve come to realize that
life is but a game
and it doesn’t matter
how you score but how you play
and although the masses play
the host make all the rules
the only rules you should live by...
rules made up by you
the only rules you should live by*

In case anyone missed the point, they made things even more explicit on their 2001 CD, *The Land of the Free*? A song that seemed to strike a chord in many of their fans, the simple title screamed into the microphone by Jim Lindberg could be understood even by those who found most punk rock indecipherable: “Fuck Authority.”

Then something happened to Lindberg—and to Art Alexakis (of Everclear), and Lars Frederiksen (of Rancid), and Ron Reyes (of Black Flag), and Flea (of Red Hot Chili Peppers) and a number of other punk rockers. What happened is that they became an authority figure. They became fathers—the “other F-word”—that suddenly made life look and feel very different. Now they had responsibility for children that could be lovingly fulfilled only if they exercised authority. Their story as fathers, complete with interviews and scenes with their families, is told in a documentary named *The Other F Word* (2011).

As a Christian I would argue that the punk movement is only partially mistaken. It is right in asserting that something is wrong, but it has failed



to find a sufficient solution. It is right to give voice to a generation for which fragmentation has been made normative, and for which meaninglessness is endemic. Simply throwing off authority is insufficient, however, because the problem is deeper than that, running through all hearts, whether of the oppressor or the oppressed. What’s needed instead is a freedom so luminously transcendent that all the dark forces of hurt and dehumanization wither before it.

In becoming fathers, these musicians happened upon a strange truth. This truth was known by the ancients but is rarely demonstrated, even by those who claim to believe in it. The truth is that when the authority figure truly loves us unto death, we find their word to be not restrictive but freeing.

I recommend *The Other F Word* to you. Some will find it raw; I find it an eloquent testimony to God’s common grace. ■

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your first impression of *The Other F Word*? Why do you think you reacted the way you did?
2. What has been your personal relationship to punk rock? If you do not particularly like it, do you get it?
3. Some Christians or social conservatives would find this documentary offensive because of its frequent use of the other F word. How would you respond? Others would be dismissive of the film saying that such men are probably not going to be good fathers in any case. How would you respond?
4. Identify some specific ways that your ideas and values have been changed or challenged or transformed not by something in Scripture but by something of God’s common grace.
5. What, if anything, did you find most poignant in the film? What did you find most surprising?
6. How would you define “common grace”? To what extent is God’s common grace a significant part of your view of life and reality? What Scripture texts help us understand it?
7. If you are a parent (especially a father), describe the way(s) this experience changed your life, your values, and your outlook.
8. If you are single or childless, what did you see and hear in *The Other F Word* that helps you better comprehend the meaning and significance of fatherhood?
9. It seems significant that many of the punk musicians interviewed in the film came from badly broken homes. What are the ripple effects that you see in the lives of friends who have deep wounds from their childhood?



Film Credits: *The Other F Word*

Directed and written by:

Andrea Blaugrund Nevins

Featuring, as themselves:

Tony Adolescent, Art Alexakis, Rob Chaos,

Joe Escalante, Josh Freese, Fat Mike, Flea,

Lars Frederiksen, Matt Freeman, Jack

Grisham, Brett Gurewitz, Tony Hawk,

Greg Hetson, Mark Hoppus, Jim Lindberg,

Mike McDermott, Tim McIlrath, Mark

Mothersbaugh, Duane Peters, Joe Sib, Ron

Reyes, Rick Thorne

Director of Photography: Geoffrey Franklin

USA, 2011; 98 minutes

Not rated

