

# Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

## Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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# Editor's Note



## Bird feeders

A few months back a young couple spent a weekend with us at Toad Hall. Scott had graciously come to help us plaster and paint, and his wife Alison and little son, Brady, came with him. Ali sent a

very sweet email to Margie after they returned home to St Louis. "I just wanted to let you know how much I appreciated getting to spend time with you," she wrote. "It's rare to meet people who seem to let life pause just to sit and talk with you... it means more than you know and has changed how I spend time with people."

It's hard to "let life pause." Expect plenty of criticism—some of the most scathing from Christians—if you decide to cultivate this grace. And, for those who would like to cultivate it, I have a simple, practical suggestion: get a bird feeder. We have three: one in our backyard, one mounted just outside Margie's office window, and one strategically hung in a pine tree so as to be visible from my desk. As I write this there are goldfinches eating thistle seed, squabbling over the perches.

I had never thought of making this suggestion until Donald Guthrie mentioned a comment made by Calvin DeWitt. Dr Guthrie teaches at Covenant Seminary which was hosting a lecture series by Dr DeWitt, a man who takes seriously the biblical mandate to care for the earth. Donald said that in chapel he had asked Dr DeWitt what advice he would give to Seminary students, who represent the next generation of teaching elders in the church. "Get a bird feeder," DeWitt said.

There are always interruptions when I am

at my desk. The phone rings, emails arrive, and out of the corner of my eye I can see my calendar and To-Do list. (Putting them in a drawer doesn't help—their existence is far too substantial to be hidden.)

I know I shouldn't, but sometimes I resent phone calls. I'm working on it, OK? The same goes for emails. I'm working on that, too. I know I should never be irritated by people made in God's image, that they aren't an interruption. I try to remember that every time they interrupt me.

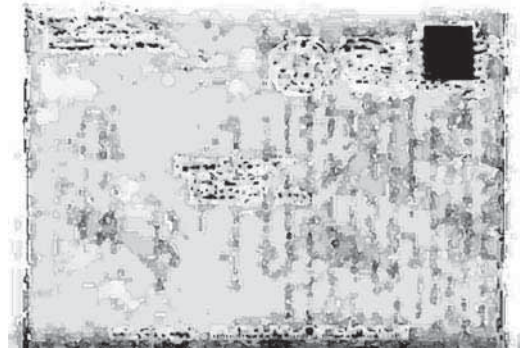
There is one interruption that I cherish: the bird feeder, an interruption of delight, beauty and wonder. I refill it regularly, and don't like it when the birds for whatever reason don't visit. I happily pause in what I'm doing to watch them. Just last week we had our first snow fall of the season, and in the tree above the feeder a pair of mourning doves found refuge. They roosted on a branch under an bough heavy with snow, protected from the storm in a natural pine shelter. I watched them preen and was sorry when they left. Gold finches came in a small drove to the feeder after the snow stopped, their subdued winter plumage still colorful against the green of the pine and the white of the new fallen snow. Later, when I went out to restock the feeder they flew into a neighboring linden tree, scolding until I was finished.

Our bird feeders remind us of the wonder of God's creation. They are one small part of our effort to be faithful in stewarding God's good creation. And they remind us, constantly, that stopping to watch, and wait, and watch some more is too important to be missed. That to hurry delight is to destroy it, and that gentle beauty can make the heart ache with hope.

So, please: get a bird feeder, and let life pause. ■

~Denis Haack

# Dialogue



## Re: Dylan's faith & cultural influence

Send e-mail to:

[letters@ransomfellowship.org](mailto:letters@ransomfellowship.org)

You are invited to take part in *Critique's* Dialogue. Address all correspondence to:

Ransom Fellowship  
1150 West Center Street  
Rochester, MN 55902

or e-mail:  
[letters@ransomfellowship.org](mailto:letters@ransomfellowship.org)

Unfortunately, we are unable to respond personally to all correspondence received, but each one is greatly appreciated. We reserve the right to edit letters for length.

### To the editor:

Thanks for your review of T Bone Burnett's latest CD [*Critique* #5-2006]. I fell in love with it. One question from the article—you relate Burnett to U2 and Bob Dylan, calling all three “fellow believers.”

It seems to me you are insinuating all three are Christian. Is this correct? Do you know something I don't know about Bob Dylan? I recall you stating in a past *Critique* that Dylan has never publically rejected Christ—are you being optimistic here? Trying to generate discussion? (You would NEVER try to do that, would you?)

Regardless I still hold Dylan's (three?) Christian albums as some of his finest work, and find myself praying for the man almost every time I listen to them. *Shot of Love* ranks as one of my favorite albums. And regardless of Burnett's faith I find his lyrics to be stimulating, eloquently advocating a world view I think we share. Keep up the good work.

**Bradley Johannsen**  
Minneapolis, MN

### Denis Haack responds:

You've asked a good question. I approach an artist's work just as I approach a carpenter's or a doctor's. I don't first ask if they are a Christian, but whether their work demonstrates truth, integrity, and excellence in their craft.

We should not speculate much about the faith of public figures. The Father knows his children, but our knowledge of such things is very limited. Some Christians assume that if Dylan's faith was real he would continue producing “Christian” (“religious” in a narrow sense) albums. I disagree. In the mid-Sixties he moved to electronic music when he found the folk tradition too limiting. Continuing to produce religious music in the Eighties would have

been equally restricting. I liked those albums but am glad he moved on. So, I have no special insight or knowledge. Dylan professed faith, I see nothing in his work or interviews that would be a final repudiation, and so I am happy to leave it at that.

### To the editor:

“Preconditions of Cultural Influence” by John Seel [*Critique* #5-2006] reminded me of a long-ago conversation: A lab mate commented nastily about religious people to another grad student, who pointed silently at me as if to say, “aren't you offending him?” My lab mate looked over her shoulder and saw me. “Oh, I know you're religious, Erik, but you're weird. You actually think about it.” I hadn't taken offense, and she knew I wouldn't.

After years of developing the kind of respectful relationships with co-workers that allow such conversations, you might think I'd agree with D.J.S.'s essay, but I have two disagreements: first, he assumes that loving-respectful-godly behavior will be acknowledged; second, that we should try to attain cultural influence.

In my experience, our self-appointed opponents will portray us as polarizing, defensive, coercive, judgmental, and uncaring no matter our actions (How many times does Fred Phelps have to be condemned by evangelicals before the media stops quoting him as our spokesman? It will never happen. The very existence of the propaganda film reviewed, in which Daytonians are negatively portrayed when real life was quite different, is proof enough that liars will lie about us too), and most people will believe the portrayal. The ones who see differently will be those we have lifted up, encouraged, and defended. My lab mate was hurt by our advisor's words, and I encouraged and defended her, trying to help

her weather the storms. It was my unconditional defense of her dignity that gave me credibility, in spite of the many times I was polarizing, defensive, and all the rest. Historically, the early Christians were no sudden blaze of light among the artistic and philosophical intelligentsia of the day, but were viewed as we are now: stupid, uneducated, arrogant, unintellectual, uncreative. Scum. But this was scum that reached out to other scum and lifted it high above scumitude. What great pagan philosophers of the first few centuries treated Christianity as worthy of serious discussion? None. Only as the scum converted in numbers were they forced to deal with Christianity as something not entirely beneath their notice. Was it the action of Paul on Mars Hill that was so significant, or the innumerable acts of Christians in the Athenian back alleys?

Let's not worry about how our rhetoric is portrayed, but find the injured and downtrodden and help them. If we first insist that men are made in God's image and deserve defense of their dignity, all of the truth in DJS's five lessons grow from that. But we don't need to ask our haters how we're doing—they have no idea.

Paul may have offered common ground on Mars Hill, but Paul and Silas also told another center of subcultural influence, "since you reject this message... we now go to the gentiles." Why do we insanely keep trying to figure out how to get our foot in the door of the great cultural influencers of the day? There is better art in the religious kitsch collection of the most pathetic

Christian bookstore than in many modern nihilist art collections. What do we care what they think of our art? My three-year old makes up songs with better lyrics than almost anything my co-workers bring to work. What do we care what they think of our music?

The intelligentsia have rejected us. Let us go seek out some scum, and invite them to the banquet. If I meet some of the cultural influencers on the way, I'll invite them too. But I'll be neither surprised nor disheartened when they reject the invitation and lie about the way I asked.

**Erik Powers**  
Nunn, CO

## **J**ohn Seel responds:

Thank you for your thoughtful interaction with my article. You have raised two important questions. Here are some thoughts in reverse order.

### **1. *Why is cultural influence a goal for Christians?***

Our kingdom work is to bring about God's will on earth as it is done in heaven. We are to be ambassadors of redemption to persons and agents of restoration to creation in the midst of its brokenness, rebelliousness, and suffering (2 Corinthians 5:20). Our goal is not power or getting our way, but being active life-enhancing beacons of goodness to others in our own areas of calling and influence (Matthew 5:13-16). Every cup of cold water, given in Jesus' name, bears his distinguishing mark whether given among the cultural

elites of New York City or the untouchables of Calcutta. Mother Theresa's motto was to do "small things with great love."

While Christianity may be largely rejected by the intelligentsia, we dare not abandon the life of the mind or the centers of cultural influence. It was to the major cities that Paul traveled. There in the synagogues and public forums—arenas of thought and influence—he faithfully brought the word of Christ. The unique challenge of our time is to be able to communicate the gospel to those who have lost all memory of a Christian past and whose minds and hearts have been framed since birth by a naturalistic world view that borders on nihilism. Culture is that matrix of ideas, images, and institutions that frame the assumed reality for a group of people. When this matrix is alien to the plausibility of orthodox Christian truth, as it is today in the West, it makes the work of presenting the gospel much more difficult. J. Gresham Machen writes, "We may preach with the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the relentless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion." This pretty much describes how most of our contemporaries think about religion in general and Christianity in particular. This is our unique challenge and opportunity in the West at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It should also be

noted that cultural change, as it is dominated by the reality-defining institutions of the media, entertainment, and academy, is influenced by elites and not masses, by cultural gatekeepers and not grassroots mobilization. Politics alone cannot change the assumptions and attitudes of culture. This is why we need a generation of apprentices of Jesus who have earned access to these institutions and are able to provide influence in a manner that is intellectually respectable and personally compelling.

## 2. Are we not to expect persecution and suffering?

You are correct: Christians will be persecuted and suffer for following Christ. As it was for Jesus, so will it be for his followers (John 15:20). We are promised that all who seek to live a godly life will be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12). While we should not be surprised by pagan attitudes towards followers of Jesus, we must learn not to respond in kind, but to bless them, avoid offense when possible, and seek peace with all. Towards those who are out for our specific destruction—true enemies—we are to love, pray for, and leave their personal response in God's hands. We may be reviled and rejected, but we must continue to live lives before others that are beyond reproach (Romans 12:17). In the end, God is our witness and our reward is in heaven (Matthew 5:13).

In practice, I have found that our strongest critics are harshest in writing and much more reasonable and understanding in person. My dissertation advisor in graduate school was an atheist Marxist. He had little personal experience with outspoken Christians until we met. During my graduate study, we developed a warm friendship.

Never did he attack my beliefs, even while finding them, no doubt, personally incredulous. Nothing promotes mutual understanding

more than respectful conversation.

Orhan Pamuk writes of the West's attitudes towards Muslims, "No one could understand us from so far away." He is right.

We do ourselves a serious disservice to fail to listen to our strongest critics. The kernel of truth their criticism holds deserves our close attention. We must avoid being sucked into the zero-sum attitudes of cultural warriors with their tendency to demonize and dismiss, rather than listen to and love those with whom they disagree. The power of group-think and self-deception is so great that we need our detractors—God's "heavenly sandpaper." Contemporary Americans do not easily talk about differences face-to-face, the emotional cost has become too high. Instead, we tend to associate with those who are most like us and remain silent when with those we assume differ in belief or lifestyle. We have gradually lost the ability for civil discourse and the possibility of true disagreement based on a respectful mutual understanding of the other person and his or her positions. It is true that some of our loudest opponents have not spent much time getting to know reflective followers of Jesus. They too tend to hang out in their own social circles. Consequently, we are left with the twiddle-dee twiddle-dum of Ann Coulter (*Godless*) and Susan Estrich (*Soulless*). Warring stereotypes do little to further mutual understanding

where deep differences exist.

We do well to interact thoughtfully with the likes of Richard Dawkins (*The*

*God Delusion*), Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell*),

and Sam Harris (*Letter to a Christian Nation*). There is much to learn by watching Rosie O'Donnell on "The View" or Bill Maher on "Real Time" about how followers of Jesus are perceived. In this regard, Preston Jones's conversation with Greg Graffin of Bad Religion (*Is Belief in God Good, Bad, or Irrelevant?*) is such a helpful model. It is one thing to be rejected because we disagree about the nature of truth, and quite another to be rejected because we act like jerks. The former is an accomplishment, the latter a disgrace. Literally, a dissonance on grace. We are not responsible for how others act or speak, but the pattern of our lives and speech is supposed to be distinctively different. Sadly, it is not. Sam Harris writes, "Thousands of people have written to tell me that I am wrong not to believe in God. The most hostile of these communications have come from Christians. This is ironic, as Christians generally imagine that no faith imparts the virtues of love and forgiveness more effectively than their own. The truth is many who claim to be transformed by Christ's love are deeply, even murderously, intolerant of criticism." It is time to listen and learn from the criticism. Judgment begins at home, and what has been making headlines of late from our camp, gives us much for which to lament and repent. ■

***While Christianity may be largely rejected by the intelligentsia, we dare not abandon the life of the mind or the centers of cultural influence.***



# The Darkened Room

## Home is where



### A review of *Junebug*

by Raymond Blanton

Occasionally, I'm approached by a friend or a friend of, regarding a movie. In this instance, a pastor inquired about *Junebug*. When I sought his motivation, he simply stated that he thought being "Southern" might offer some unique insight or understanding.

Well, having been born and raised in Texas, I have to admit, I had a similar sense. Southern and childhood church nostalgia filled my mind. From the muffled rustle of worn soled shoes scratching the sidewalk tops to humid must and beady sweat cyclically dropping in repeated succession from brow to earth. From the aroma of macaroni and cheese atop apple pie lined up across that red and white checkered table cloth adorned with family dish to the *a capella* hymn echoing in the fellowship hall. These images scrolled and overwhelmed my emotional ticker as I engaged the southern ballad of Angus Mac Lachlan's and Phil Morrison's *Junebug*.

Undoubtedly for those who have tasted small town life, a church potluck, the South, or family drama (that last one gets most of us), *Junebug* is an exploration of the soul and the inevitable nuances of family life. Yea, a first hand taste of 'southern' heritage will likely garner a rich appreciation, but it isn't necessary to enjoy the movie.

Shot on location in their native Winston-Salem, Morrison brilliantly directs the poignantly soft and simple writing of MacLachlan. It is at its most simple a story about family on par with *Ordinary*

#### *Junebug* credits:

##### Starring:

Embeth Davidtz (Madeleine)  
Alessandro Nivola  
(George Johnsten)  
Frank Hoyt Taylor  
(David Wark)  
Scott Wilson  
(Eugene Johnsten)  
Ben McKenzie  
(Johnny Johnsten)  
Celia Weston (Peg Johnsten)  
Amy Adams  
(Ashley Johnsten)  
R. Keith Harris (Bud, pastor)

##### Director:

Phil Morrison

##### Screenwriter:

Angus MacLachlan

##### Producers:

Mark P. Clein, Ethan D. Leder,  
Daniel Rappaport, Dany Wolf.

##### Original music:

Yo La Tengo

##### Cinematography:

Peter Donahue

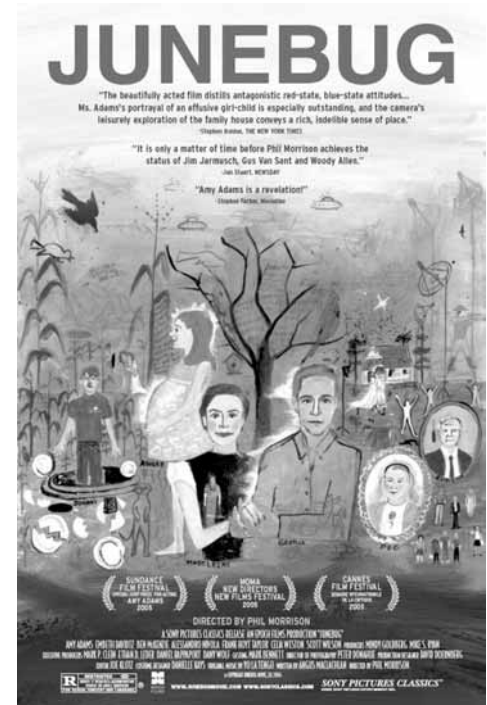
##### Runtime: 106 minutes.

##### Release:

Sony Pictures Classics,  
U.S.A., 2005

##### Rated: R

(for sexual content and  
language)



*People* (1980). Morrison notes that it was meant "to explore the difficulty created by relationships based on patronage, however well meaning." It tackles the "challenges of communicating across great divides" and examines how such relationships "glorify the peculiar and convince us to view what is common as 'cliché'."

*Junebug's* a fixation of wonder on the incessant drama of family life and gives ample opportunity to pluck your pick of emotion from the familial tree: from prickly mother Peg, to taciturn father Eugene, to angry brother Johnny, to innocently garrulous Ashley. All in all, it's a film that is most enjoyed with a hearty spoonful of patience as both character and narrative, complete with southern visual flair, churn slowly like good ole buttermilk.

The story: Madeleine is a Chicago dealer of outside art and has stumbled upon a reclusive gem, David Wark, and his

# the heart is

colorful and bombastic creations of Civil War art in the Carolinas. Her new and younger husband George is a native North Carolinian and her lucrative business transaction and the chance to meet his family creates the ideal opportunity for a road trip. The crux of the story's tension intersects at Johnny and the innocence of Ashley (cue "As the World Turns" theme) as resentment surfaces when 'golden boy' older brother George comes home and leaves Johnny in purposeful limbo while Ashley is in effervescent anticipation of her beautiful new sister-in-law. Family dynamics swell as Peg, in skeptical disdain of her new daughter-in-law, grows hard to handle as Eugene, in melancholy juggle, is reduced to the work of the 'little Dutch boy' hoping to keep the leaky familial damn from breaking in.

This movie is inspired by "moments" in movies; the often "transcendent moments" that make a movie worthwhile. "I could see opportunities to attempt those moments" noted Morrison and the hope of these moments converging unto something "worthwhile" was the motivation. Roger Ebert has a finger on the pulse of this film: It's "a great film because it is a true film. It humbles other films that claim

to be about family secrets and eccentricities. It understands that families are complicated and their problems are not solved during a short visit, just in time for the film to end. Families and their problems go on and on and they aren't solved, they're dealt with."

I must admit a personal hypnotism of nostalgia tends to cloud my bias here but this movie is poetic and charming. However these great thumping questions that metronome in our minds might greet you, peaceful and parallel rivers upstream inevitably create white water before merging downstream. In other words, relationships are the embodiment of our pursuit of meaningful identity and they undergird our sense of stability in day to day life. Family is the essential focus of our sitcoms, our movies, our music, our advertising, etc. and humbly I declare that the gospel of grace is truly familiar with and not immune to such realities—and yet Christ is sufficient in the merging rage.

The irony with knowledge sometimes is that our questions don't necessarily produce concluding answers but simply more questions. As I watched and reflected on the film, this irony became itchy real and true. Initially, it was simply, what is family? How do our traditions and values sink or swim in the intermingling of contrary ones? How does the human condition handle the intermixing of traditional values? What communication and cultural divides hinder our connections? There are lots of questions, but are there definitive answers? I invite you to ponder.

I think at least one is noted in



Ashley's (Amy McAdams) simple wish, "All I really want is for Johnny to love me like he did in high school." Perhaps many of us, if not all, can attest to the challenge of the emotional dip of a goal conquered or met. It's one of marriages great adversaries. I think a simple observation would conclude that we all long for assurance. We want and need to know that not only when all is well, but when hope is dim, that we have dependability in our family and beyond. The Church is no different with numerous triumphs and tragedies in its repertoire. The Church, the whore Gomer, arm in arm with our great 'bridegroom' Christ is the pinnacle of sacrifice and dependability (see Hosea and Ephesians 5). It may seem simple and cookie cutter Sunday school-esque but gospel truth be declared: "But you are a chosen people... that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness and into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God..." (1 Peter 2:9-10). There is hope.

*Junebug* is a meaningful movie and a worthy opportunity to reflect on our home and the body of Christ, the Church universal. ■

~Raymond Blanton

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Raymond Blanton received a B.S. in Speech Communication and Human Relations from TCU and a Masters of Divinity with an emphasis in Counseling from Westminster Theological Seminary. He currently is serving as Assistant Director for Residential Living at Drexel University in Philadelphia, where he lives with his wife of seven years, Hope, and his two-year old daughter Cana.

**Discussion questions on next page**



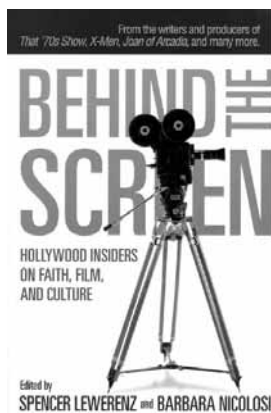
# Darkened Room cont.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. We often equate personal preferences for style into terms of quality, i.e. good or bad movie. Do you consider *Junebug* a good or bad film? What defines a good/bad film?
2. Can you relate to the 'southern' imagery? How do images help steer our understanding/appreciation of movies? This movie?
3. Could you relate to any of the family dynamics? If so, what?
4. What significance does the religiosity have in the film? Is it genuine, cultural or both?
5. What stereotypes, if any, does the film exploit or celebrate?
6. What is the significance of the hymn "Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling" to the characters? To the movie?
7. It seems as though religion is rarely presented in favorable light in modern movies. How does this movie compare?
8. The typical stereotypes of southern life, Roger Ebert noted, of "provincial hick" and the city slicker as "materialist" is avoided. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
9. Are there any redeemable characters? If so, who?
10. What, if any, sense of redemption does this movie establish?

## Briefly Noted: Christian voices in Hollywood

by Denis Haack



Here is (part of) what I believe. I believe that Christ is Lord of all, including Lord of the arts. I believe that art and human creativity began not at the Fall, but before it, a God-blessed and God pleasing expression of being made in the image of the Creator. I believe that God calls his people to serve him in the arts. And I believe, contrary to popular opinion, that the cinema is one form of art for which all this is true.

By God's grace a growing number of Christians are working in Hollywood. In *Behind the Screen*, eighteen of them write about faith and the movies. Though each essay is different, each is concerned not just about the ways that Hollywood needs to

change, but how the church needs to change as well. (After all, what are Christians more likely to do: condemn Hollywood—which by the way consists of people—or pray for them?) The essays also explore how Christians can make a difference in a post-Christian culture. Chapters include:

"Why do Heathens Make the Best Christian Films?"  
"The World's Most Influential Mission Field"  
"What Kind of Stories Should We Tell?"  
"A Hollywood Survival Guide"  
"What Would Jesus Write?"

Those interested in Christian faith and film will find *Behind the Screen* a helpful introduction to a few of the believers working in Hollywood. ■

**Book recommended:** *Behind the Screen: Hollywood Insiders on Faith, Film, and Culture* edited by Spencer Lewerenz and Barbara Nicolosi (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books; 2005) 216 pp.



## John Stott leads devotions

For years evangelical Christians have urged believers to have what is often called a “Quiet Time” every day. An intentional time set aside for Bible reading, meditation, prayer, and stillness before God. A time to focus not on the needs and demands of our busy lives, but to listen to God’s word to us, to be reminded that regardless of how things appear, the Lord is King and his tomb remains empty.

It can be a difficult spiritual discipline to maintain, what with cell phones, long work days and commutes, and the requirements of fitness, family, and community. Still, it provides a few precious moments in which our equilibrium can be restored and our inner speed slowed to a reasonable pace. As with all good things, some have turned the Quiet Time into a legalism, using it as a formal measure of spirituality so that one more grace is used to manipulate the people of God with guilt to make them conform. (For those that discover this has happened to them and find that even the idea of a Quiet Time has become a weight of guilt, I recommend simply skipping it for awhile. When you discover God continues to work anyway, that spiritual growth is a grace and by grace, and that you miss the discipline for joy—not for guilt relief—begin again.) Some who have wanted to faithfully maintain this spiritual discipline have found it boring—though that usually can’t be confessed openly—and so have been rather sporadic in doing it. (My recommendation here is to vary what you do: perhaps read through the Scriptures for awhile, then use a devotional guide, and then read through a spiritual classic like J. I. Packer’s *Knowing God*.)

I’ve always yearned to live in a community where each day ends with some sort of corporate Quiet Time, a simple vesper service, the people of God gathering to hear God’s word read and to pray together before dispersing silently to their homes to sleep.

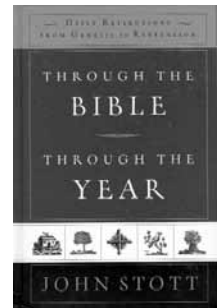
Those who would like to begin or end each day with a devotional time led by John Stott now can do so. In *Through the Bible Through the Year*, Stott walks with us through the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation as he leads us through the Christian year. “To recall, relive, and celebrate annually this divine story,” Stott writes, “should lead us into a wholesome and balanced trinitarian faith, should increase our familiarity with the framework and content of the Bible, and should establish our confidence in the God of history who has been and still is working out his purpose before, during, and after the incarnate life of our Lord Jesus Christ until he comes in power and glory.”

Each daily reflection is one page in length and includes a suggested reading in Scripture. The selections are not drawn from Stott’s previously published works, but were written by him expressly for this book. ■

~Denis Haack

For those wanting to read through the entire Bible see “Bible Reading for Shirkers and Slackers” by Margie Haack (<http://ransomfellowship.org/Shirkers.pdf>).

**Book recommended:** *Through the Bible Through the Year: Daily Reflections from Genesis to Revelation* by John Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books; 2006) 432 pages.



### The Flight into Egypt

*An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt.”* (Matthew 2:13)

The Magi had left Jerusalem to begin their journey home, and Herod had been foiled in his plot to destroy the baby Jesus. So now Joseph was instructed to take Jesus and his mother and flee south into Egypt. There is something very poignant about the Son of God becoming a refugee baby and so identifying himself with the dispossessed people of the world.

But Matthew detects something else. He sees the flight into Egypt as a fulfillment of Scripture. “So was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘Out of Egypt I called my son’” (v. 15). It is not that these words from Hosea 11:1 were a literal prediction of the holy family’s flight into Egypt, for their original reference was to the exodus. It is rather that Matthew sees in the story of Jesus a recapitulation of the story of Israel. This is apparent in at least four ways.

As Israel was oppressed in Egypt under the despotic rule of Pharaoh, so the infant Jesus became a refugee in Egypt under the despotic rule of Herod. As Israel passed through the waters of the Red Sea, so Jesus passed through the waters of John’s baptism in the River Jordan. As Israel was tested in the wilderness of Zin for forty years, so Jesus was tested in the wilderness of Judea for forty days. And as Moses from Mount Sinai gave Israel the law, so Jesus from the Mount of Beatitudes gave his disciples the true interpretation and amplification of the law.

We can only marvel at the providence of God in this repetition of the pattern of sacred history.

For further reading: Hosea 11:1; Matthew 2:13-18.

[Excerpted from *Through the Bible Through the Year* (page 154).]

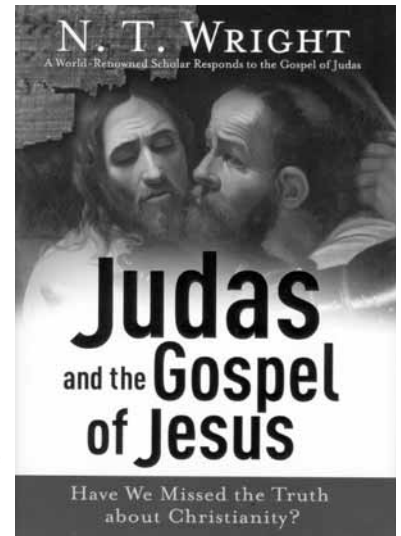
## The Gospel of Judas

In the Seventies, significant portions of a manuscript called the *Gospel of Judas*, written in a variant of Coptic, dating to between 240 and 320 AD was discovered. Historians had known of its existence because Irenaeus (130-202 AD), an early Christian theologian and bishop of Lyons had mentioned it in one of his writings. In 2006 the document was finally translated and with a great deal of fanfare, made public. Contrary to what the Bible records about Judas, who betrayed Jesus, in this *Gospel* Judas is a hero. Questions were therefore raised in the media by various scholars as to whether the Church had suppressed this gospel, had manufactured a great deal of what the New Testament teaches concerning Christ, and whether the biblical gospel of Jesus proclaimed over the past 2000 years could be trusted.

Such discoveries and ideas, even when not examined with care, resonate in our cynical age. Since historic biblical Christianity is considered to be largely irrelevant, and because historic institutions such as the Church are viewed with extreme skepticism, such discoveries by science and pronouncements by scholars are granted real significance. So, though chances are that not every Christian will be called upon to discuss the issues raised by *The Gospel of Judas*, we

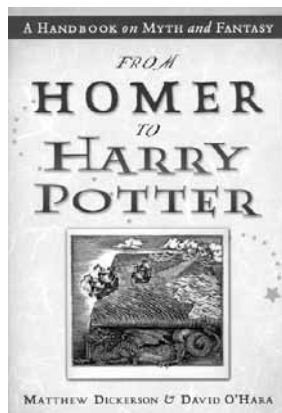
need to be ready to do so if the occasion arises. And a resource that will be of great help is N. T. Wright's *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus*. Dr Wright, a prolific author, Anglican bishop, and esteemed scholar of New Testament history, tells the story of the discovery, examines the content of the *Gospel of Judas*, compares it to the gospel of the Bible, and carefully assesses the claims surrounding the discovery in light of science, historical research, and biblical study. His chapter on Gnosticism, of which the *Gospel of Judas* is a prime example, is a succinct introduction to this ancient heresy which has become increasingly popular today.

"I am writing this little book," Wright says, "to make



## Briefly Noted: Myth, Scripture, stories, & truth

by Denis Haack



C. S. Lewis not only wrote remarkable stories, he taught us that "myth" doesn't merely refer to a fictional story, but to a story that imaginatively captures something of the inner, deeper truth about life, reality, and meaning. In "On Stories," Lewis argued that "the story does what no theorem can quite do. It may not be 'like real life' in the superficial sense, but it sets before us an image of what reality may well be like at some more central region." From this perspective, the gospel

is The Myth that is fully true, The Myth to which all other myths point and in which they are fully and finally fulfilled.

*From Homer to Harry Potter* is a thoughtful study on the

nature of myth, story, fantasy, and truth. "The myth-maker, the teller of fairy tales, and the writer of fantasy," the authors write, "all may speak profoundly to the human soul. They do so through art, and imagery, including the imagery of magic in many of its forms, and as such they speak directly to the soul through the imagination."

*From Homer to Harry Potter* will deepen your understanding of the meaning of story and myth, and challenge your approach to the Scriptures. You may not always agree, but your mind will be sharpened by the encounter. ■

**Book reviewed:** *From Homer to Harry Potter: A Handbook on Myth and Fantasy* by Matthew Dickerson & David O'Hara (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press; 2006) 260 pp. + suggested readings + index.

# & the Gospel

three points. First, this new 'Gospel of Judas,' though a spectacularly interesting archaeological find, tells us nothing about the real Jesus, or for that matter the real Judas. In particular, it doesn't (as some have claimed) 'rehabilitate' Judas over against either the charges laid against him in the New Testament or the anti-Jewish use that was made of the Judas tradition in the Middle Ages. Second, the enthusiasm for this new 'gospel' lays bare the real agenda which has been driving both what we might call the scholarly 'Quest for an Alternative Jesus' and also the popular eagerness for such sensational material that we find in books like Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. Third, the specific teachings of the 'Gospel of Judas' only serves to highlight certain features about first-century Christianity that needs to be drawn out more fully than is sometimes done. When we put these together we discover that the publication of this extraordinary find, over 1,500 years after it was written, reveals more strikingly than

before the bankruptcy of the worldview it articulated and, by contrast, the compelling and attractive nature (not of much modern Western Christianity, we may grant, but) of the genuine Christian faith articulated in the New Testament, the faith for which those who opposed the second-century Gnostics suffered and died."

Dr Wright writes extremely well and this is an accessible book. It is a careful, thoughtful, scholarly treatment of an important issue written with clarity and without technical jargon for a popular audience. ■

~Denis Haack

**Book recommended:** *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus: Have We Missed the Truth about Christianity?* by N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books; 2006) 146 pages + notes.

## Briefly Noted: Selections worth discussing



*Leading Lives that Matter* aims to bring the wisdom of the ages to bear on issues of work, meaning, and what it means to live a good life rather than a mediocre one. The editors collect selections from some of the best and most creative thinkers and writers, providing a brief introduction and discussion questions for each one. The range is impressive: poetry, philosophy, fiction, Scripture, essay, and autobiography are all included. Authors include Albert Schweitzer, Aristotle, C. S. Lewis, Robert Frost, H. G. Wells, Wendell Berry, Willa Cather, Annie Dillard, Leo Tolstoy, Amy Tan—to list just a few.

The book is intended for readers who want to reflect on the direction and meaning of their lives. To that end, it is divided into sections:

Vocabularies: Authenticity; Virtue; & Vocation.

Are Some Lives More Significant than Others?

Must My Job be the Primary Source of my Identity?

Is a Balanced Life Possible & Preferable to a Life Focused Primarily on Work?

Should I Follow My Talents as I Decide What to Do to Earn a Living?

To Whom Should I Listen?

Can I Control What I Shall Do and Become?

How Shall I Tell the Story of My Life?

Each selection included in each of the sections is carefully chosen to deepen our understanding of life, broaden our horizons, and challenge our assumptions.

One of the teachers I most admire, Stephen Garber, often uses similar readings in small groups or classes he is leading, and I am always impressed at how the discussion that follows is so rich. Carefully chosen selections, however, can be hard to come by and require a lot of work and a wide breadth of reading to identify. Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass (both at Valparaiso University) have done us all a great service.

We recommend *Leading Lives That Matter* to parents, pastors, Sunday school teachers, and small group leaders. The book is centered on a topic of perennial importance and instead of purporting to tell us how to live meaningfully, it invites us to join a conversation in order to develop wisdom in living. ■

**Book recommended:** *Leading Lives that Matter: What We Should Do & Who We Should Be* edited by Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2006) 359 pp. + index.

## New evidence, new history

One of the positive contributions of postmodernism has been a concern to listen in fresh ways to those who have been previously rendered voiceless and marginalized. One expression of this concern is to look again at the way history has been recorded. Just because “history is written by the victors,” that history may turn out to be, on closer examination, both unfairly selective and therefore, incomplete in ways that careful research can and should correct. This is an aspect of postmodernism that should be supported and encouraged by Christians. After all, if the coming Consummation is characterized by a glorious diversity, with representatives from every tribe and nation joining to praise the risen Christ, then we should be among the first to insist that the story of even the least well-documented people is of significance. Granting a voice to the voiceless is a wonderful grace.

One fascinating example of this trend is found in *1491*, a book which explores the new theories being proposed by historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists about what life was like in the Americas before the arrival of Europeans. These new findings and theories are worth reading about in detail, but they can be summarized rather succinctly: most of what Americans were taught in school about the Indians before Columbus arrived is incorrect. More specifically, the image of isolated, primitive bands of hunters/gatherers living in a wilderness untouched by human effort may turn out to be as untrue as the Enlightenment’s conceit that what came before it was an unrelieved Dark Age. “Indians were here far longer than previously thought,” this new generation of researchers argue, “and in much greater numbers. And they were so successful at imposing their will on the landscape that in 1492 Columbus set foot in a hemisphere thoroughly marked by humankind.”

Another fascinating aspect of the story told in *1491* is also worth mentioning. A common myth about science is that it proceeds calmly, with dispassionate researchers content to follow the data no matter where it leads. The truth is different, and more deeply human. Like the rest of us, scientists don’t like people telling them they are wrong and resist having to change their ideas and beliefs. The theories explored in *1491* are still hotly debated, and it could be years before the dust finally settles. What seems incontestable is that new, strikingly significant archeological, documentary, and historical evidence has come to light that does not fit the old para-

digms. This body of evidence seems to make it clear that the Indians engaged in commerce, agriculture, mathematics, the creation of accurate, complex calendars, and empire and city building on a scope not previously imagined. But some historians are contesting it—and hotly.

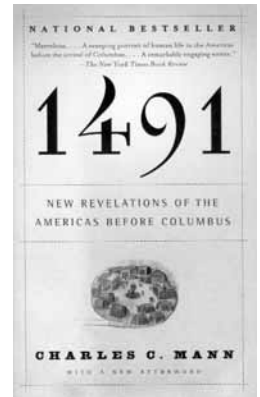
In writing *1491*, Charles Mann works hard to present the arguments on both sides fairly. A freelance science writer, he knows how to tell a story well, and whether he is reconstructing life in the Americas before Columbus or relating the latest quarrel between researchers, he spins a tale worth reading. He downplays the religious rituals involving human sacrifice among some Indians as if acknowledging their existence might tarnish their reputation, but that is unneeded. As I read about the new discoveries I found myself confirmed in my conviction that all people are created in God’s image. Even though fallen, they live in God’s world and are able to live with amazing creativity, inventiveness, and insight.

The implications of the story told in *1491* are many, and important. The native Americans who perished by the thousands by disease introduced from Europe or slaughtered by invading Europeans were people like us. Trying to restore American environments to their “native state” for ecological reasons may not be the only wise option if that original state had been shaped and changed, perhaps drastically, by previous populations. Science proceeds slowly, and theories die hard, even when challenged with new evidence, so there is no need to get excited at each new development reported by the media. The myriad Indians who preceded us in the Americas are worthy of our respect and admiration. And Christians need to be in the forefront in insisting that the U. S. Government treat native American populations with the dignity befitting those created in God’s image.

We commend *1491* to you. ■

~Denis Haack

**Book recommended:** *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* by Charles C. Mann (New York, NY: Vintage Books; 2005, 2006) 407 pp. + notes + bibliography + index.





## Briefly Noted: Discomforting Scriptures



“Oh how I love your law,” the ancient Hebrew poet exults to God, “your commandments are my delight” (Psalm 119: 97, 143). Well, yes. No Christian who takes their faith seriously would quibble with that. And it’s true that I love God’s word: the unfolding story of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation contained in the Scriptures gives meaning to the story of my life and makes sense of life, culture and reality. And yet: have you actually *read* the Bible carefully? Let’s be honest: there are texts that are hard—very hard—not in the sense of under-

standing them but in the sense of living them. Our Lord’s commandments may be good, but they certainly aren’t always palatable.

In *Ten Things I Wish Jesus Never Said*, Victor Kuligin, Academic Dean at Namibia Evangelical Theological Seminary, asks us to reflect carefully on ten hard statements by Jesus. Statements that, for example, teach the art of spiritual poverty (Matthew 5:3), spiritual self-loathing (Luke 14:26), spiritual self-mutilation (Matthew 5:29), and a love that seems simply impossible in our broken world (Matthew 5:43-45).

“Perhaps the best way to summarize the intention of this book,” Kuligin writes “is to ask the question, ‘Is following Jesus Christ easy?’ The answer this book gives is a resounding ‘No!’ And it was never meant to be.”

If you doubt the truth of that statement and find being a Christian a really comfortable affair, please read *Ten Things I Wish Jesus Never Said*. If you’ve been troubled by some of the commands and teachings of Jesus, you’ll find Kuligin’s reflections a chance to study the texts afresh. Being a follower of Christ does not allow us the option of selective faithfulness. And if you find yourself disagreeing with some of Kuligin’s ideas and conclusions, just be sure it isn’t because you are explaining the texts away. ■

**Book recommended:** *Ten Things I Wish Jesus Never Said* by Victor Kuligin (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books; 2006) 283 pp. + notes + index.

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## Accepting Muslim

In *Meeting our Multifaith Neighbors*, Mennonite Brice Balmer encourages Christians to explore an aspect of living in an religiously pluralistic world that many would rather ignore. No matter where we live, chances are good we have neighbors and co-workers who do not share our deepest convictions and values. What is more, increasingly the various religions my grandfather only heard about when missionaries visited now have moved in next door. And those are the people Balmer wants us to consider—how we should relate to them, interact with them, and love them.

*Meeting our Multifaith Neighbors* was written, Balmer says, “to help Christians openly discuss their faith in a way that respects another person’s religion... My goal is to open doors to help the reader imagine, feel, pray, and think in safety and freedom.” We don’t have to agree with all of Balmer’s ideas and conclusions to appreciate the importance of what he’s set out to accomplish. As we have noted often in *Critique*, learning to ask questions, to listen with care, and to think creatively from the perspective of Scripture is vital if we are to be faithful in our fast-paced and fast-changing pluralistic world. Each chapter of *Meeting* ends with discussion questions, and several chapters include detailed case studies that discerning Christians would be wise to reflect on. Including this one, which asks us what Christian faithfulness looks like if a Muslim becomes related to us by marriage.

### **A Multifaith Experience**

*Our son is a deeply committed Christian. At the Mennonite college he attended, he studied Bible and theology. He met his future wife, a committed Muslim, at college. She was also a Bible and theology major. She is very knowledgeable about the Bible and Qur’an. Both our son and daughter-in-law live highly moral lives and are very respectful of each other and their faiths.*

*Their engagement and marriage were not sudden. They dated at college, but when her parents saw that this was a serious relationship, they decided that she should come back home and perhaps go to a different college. The year apart did not decrease their love for each other. She came back to college and graduated.*

*It was four years from the time our son told us how serious the relationship was until they were married. After graduating from college, he worked another three years until they were married. After our daughter-in-law graduated, she worked one year*

*before getting married. Since her family was prominent in their community, they had a formal engagement celebration, which her parents arranged. In her culture, the engagement was as important as the wedding. We were unable to attend. The wedding was at the college chapel and the two of them planned it carefully with the pastor. It was a very meaningful worship service.*

*We’ve gone through many stages as we’ve learned to accept this marriage. At first we were very emotional and worried about how a mixed marriage would work. We wanted the best for our son. We asked how he, who was baptized and took his Christian commitment so seriously, could marry a Muslim and remain Christian. We wondered about our grandchildren. What kind of faith would they have? We wondered if we could be ourselves as Christians with our grandchildren? We had many sleepless nights.*

*The second stage was learning to know other parents whose Christian children were married to Muslims. It was comforting to hear their stories, know about their struggles, and learn about their children’s current lives. Several parents were prominent in the wider church. Our congregational and denominational family were very important to us, so we had wondered how others would accept us as well as our son and future daughter-in-law. We did not feel so alone or anxious after talking with other parents.*

*The third stage has been learning to know our future daughter-in-law, her religion and her culture. She is most delightful, and we have grown to love her. After their marriage, we visited the Middle East with them to experience a Muslim culture, one stricter than her own. We were in a number of Muslim homes there. While our daughter-in-law was careful to cover her hair with the hijab in public as well as keep essential Muslim practices, we started to realize how uncomfortable she was in a strict Muslim environment. She also had lived in North America for several years and was questioning some aspects of the Muslim culture, especially the status and lifestyle of many women. She was firm in her faith while also believing that women and men had dignity and the right to be active in vocations and in the political arena.*

*We met our future daughter-in-law’s parents when she graduated from college, a year before the wedding. They had lived in the United States, so they understood the culture here. We learned we had several mutual acquaintances, which also helped us to relax.*

*As the wedding day approached, we visited some of our rela-*

# in-laws

tives to answer their questions. This went better than we'd expected. No one refused to attend the wedding, which was in the chapel at a Mennonite college. The processional was a traditional Muslim wedding march. Both the Bible and the Qur'an were used in the readings. It was a very worshipful event.

Covering the hair is an important aspect of Muslim modesty for women. Since we are her family, our daughter-in-law is more casual and relaxed with us and does not need to cover her hair. Yet she continues to be very careful to cover her hair when guests are at our home or when we go out.

We are very proud of both our son and daughter-in-law. They are individuals of integrity and are deeply committed to each other and to their faiths. We now see some of the constraints on her because of her family and their prominence in her culture. She respects her parents, her extended family, and her heritage.

We still have some questions and concerns, but we accept and love our daughter-in-law. We are thankful for the support of our friends and our church. We are sure that God loves our son and daughter-in-law, and we know they sincerely love and follow God.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

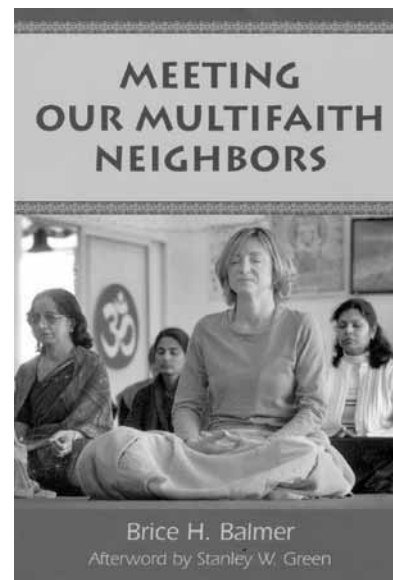
1. Imagine yourself in the situation described above. What personal and theological issues would you need to address as a Christian?
2. What support would you need from your congregation? From friends and family?
3. If a friend or member of your congregation told you that his or

her child was engaged to a person from another faith, how would you respond? What are your questions and issues? How can you reach out to your friend?

For some Christians, this case study represents one of their greatest fears: the intrusion of a fallen pluralistic world into the sacred confines of their family. This may, in fact, be one reason why such things are rarely discussed in Christian circles. Though we will need to approach the topic with sensitivity and compassion, we dare not allow it to remain taboo. Whatever Christian faithfulness means in this situation, we would be wise to begin prayerfully thinking about it before the case study becomes a reality. ■

~Denis Haack

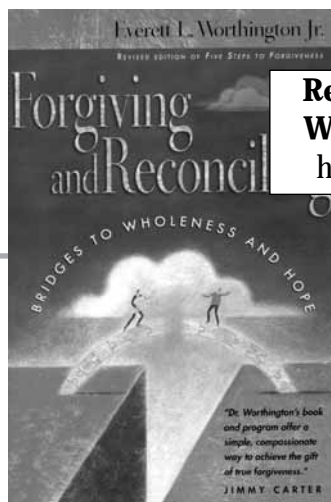
**Source:** *Meeting Our Multifaith Neighbors* by Brice H. Balmer (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press; 2006) pp 53-55.



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial reaction to the story? Why do you think you reacted as you did?
2. How realistic is this case study? How do you know? Have you personally known of or experienced anything similar?
3. What different responses would you imagine occurring in your church if a member's son announced he was going to marry a Muslim? What texts of Scripture would be used to justify each response? What freedom would be allowed?
4. Consider the instruction contained in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 and 2 Corinthians 6:14-18. Do they apply? How?
5. Some Christians argue that since Christians should not marry a non-Christian, their Christian friends should refuse to attend their wedding. Do you agree? Why or why not?
6. Answer the questions Balmer included with the case study.
7. What other questions or issues need to be addressed?

# On the Web



**Reading the Word: *Forgiving & Reconciling* by E. Worthington: a discussion guide by Denis Haack**  
[http://ransomfellowship.org/B\\_Worthington.html](http://ransomfellowship.org/B_Worthington.html)



**Margie Haack's 2006 Christmas gift list**  
[http://ransomfellowship.org/P\\_Gift2006.html](http://ransomfellowship.org/P_Gift2006.html)



**Rock Kills Kid: music review by Raymond Blanton**  
[http://ransomfellowship.org/Music\\_Blanton\\_Rock\\_Kills.html](http://ransomfellowship.org/Music_Blanton_Rock_Kills.html)



**Hard Fi: *Stars of CCTV*: music review by Raymond Blanton**  
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2. To model Christian discernment.
3. To stimulate believers to think biblically about all of life.

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