

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

In This Issue

04 An Attractive Faith?

To what extent should the outward trappings of our lives be attractive to unbelievers? A good question, worthy of discernment.

05 Respecting the Ungodly

An excerpt from *The Heart of Evangelism* by Jerram Barrs. See also the review on page 11.

06 The Cruellest Lies

A review by Drew Trotter of the timeless and discussion-worthy classic, *Sunset Boulevard*.

08 Scripture, Ancient Texts & more

Reviews of *Basic Christian Leadership* by Stott; *Readings from the Ancient Near East*; and "Reading the Bible like a Grown-up Child" by Seerveld.

10 Grace is Richer than I Imagined

Reviews of *He Shines in all That's Fair* by Mouw; *The Heart of Evangelism* by Barrs; *Children of the Living God* by Ferguson; *Walking Away from Faith* by Tucker; and *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday* by Nash and McLennan.

15 Metaphysics of the Morning After

Why the pain in Counting Crow's popular music should break our hearts. A review by David John Seel, Jr.



02 Editor's Note

03 Dialogue

16 Poetry

Editor

Denis Haack

Managing Editor

Marsena Konkle

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Donald Guthrie, John Mason
Hodges, David John Seel, Jr.,
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for Coalition for Christian
Outreach*

Henry Tazelaar MD
*Professor of Pathology,
Mayo Medical School*

Submissions

Critique considers unsolicited manuscripts only for poetry.
E-mail: marsena@itis.com
or mail with SASE to:
Critique Managing Editor
406 Bowman Avenue
Madison, WI 53716

Correspondence

All other correspondence
and changes of address:
Denis D. Haack
1150 West Center
Rochester, MN 55902
**Ransom_Fellowship@
compuserve.com**

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Editor's Note



Humility Learned

As a Protestant I have taken a dim view of the monastic movement, associating it with the idea that some vocations are more “spiritual,” and contributing to an unbiblical sacred/secular dichotomy in the Church. So,

it was with interest that I began the assignments in my class “Ancient to Medieval Church History” covering the origins of the monastic movement in the 4th century.

To my surprise I learned that the faulty theology of sacred/secular was a much later development, and wasn't the primary motivation behind the earliest hermits and monks who took off into the desert. Instead, they were reacting to what they deemed a worldliness which had crept into the church. Previously, confessing faith in Christ had come at great cost, but now hundreds were claiming faith. So many that the careful, lengthy instruction given to new converts had to be reduced due to the sheer numbers involved. Worse, elements of imperial pomp began to creep into the church: luxurious robes, grand cathedrals, elaborate processions and furnishings, enormous wealth. They thought this was conformity to the world, wanted no part of it, and sought a simpler, purer life in the wilderness.

I wondered what I would have done had I been alive at that moment in history—but that's not a difficult question. I suspect I would have been unhappy with imperial trappings in the worship of the church, since the danger of being conformed to the world has long been a passion. Though we'll never know for sure, chances are I would have followed those early monastics out into the desert. After all, in the early 1970's, Margie and I quit our jobs, sold all we owned,

and went to live in a Christian commune in New Mexico.

When I began my Church History class I didn't realize that one of the things I would learn is humility. In realizing that I was mistaken in what I knew about my spiritual forebears. So mistaken, in fact, that I probably would have cast my lot in with precisely the group I have long looked down on. I now think of and speak of the early monastics in a completely new light. What the movement developed into may be less than helpful, but it was begun by believers who loved Christ and his church so much that they were determined to live out their faith, even at cost.

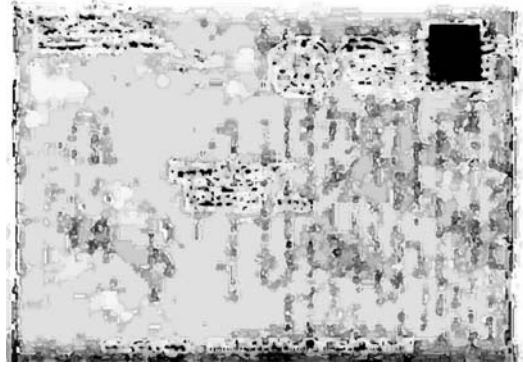
And though I am choosing a different route today than moving into the wilderness, I pray my faith might be as genuine.

An apology.

We received quite a few letters from readers after publishing Preston Jones' piece “Classical Christian Learning” (#3-2002). It's always difficult to decide how much space to give to various topics, especially since we have space for only a fraction of what we'd like to address. In this case, we decided that the discussion warranted more space than usually given to Dialogue, but that we needed to call it quits at some point, and thought we should indicate that in an Editor's Note. An alert reader has called our attention to the fact that the Note (#5-2002) stated “we won't be able to publish any more letters on this topic,” but that, in fact we did so, and wondered if our integrity wasn't in question. What we had decided, was that “we won't be able to publish any more letters on this topic *than what we've already received,*” but though that's what we were thinking, it isn't what we communicated. The Editor's Note in question was written by Marsena, but as editor I read and approved it—and we both apologize for our failure to communicate clearly. ■

~Denis Haack

Dialogue



Leonard Bernstein and George Lloyd

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

Marsena Konkle
Critique Managing Editor
406 Bowman Avenue
Madison, WI 53716

or e-mail:
marsena@itis.com

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.

Loved the last issue (#6 -2002), well beyond the norm... Excellent review of a most excellent movie (*Signs*), a great book review on evolution and education, and my favorite: the piece on Bernstein. Bravo! Keep up the great critique of our culture from a Christian perspective, and to quote C.S. Lewis, to help us "read the times through the eyes of a Christian."

I'd like to follow up John Mason Hodges excellent piece on Bernstein [*Critique* #6, pp. 14-15] with a comment that Leonard was not the lone proponent of sacred choral music written rebelliously in the tonal, or traditional style of "the great" classical composers at the height of dissonant serialism, the late 20th century. The near-worship of all that is *avant garde* in the latter half of the last century reached its zenith in Great Britain under the iron hand of the BBC, more so than in the US which has always held a flickering ember of hope for tonality. Though it is now returning more and more to its traditional roots, such was not the case ten and twenty years ago in England.

At about the same time Bernstein wrote *Chichester Psalms*, in England George Lloyd was writing his own Symphonic Mass, the traditional Latin Mass set to his own orchestral and choral score. At just over 60 minutes, it eclipses Leonard's in scope, but like *Chichester*, is written in the traditional tonal style to great effect in one of the most moving Masses I've ever listened to. And like Leonard, his own attempts at atonal serialism came to a frustrating naught; he turned to farming to eke out a living while the established musical world turned their back on him. It is only in the last few years that his music has been recorded (Albany Records) at all.

The one remaining attribute I know about Mr. Lloyd (I struck up a friendship with him in London before his death in 1998) that

I do not know about Mr. Bernstein involves the matter of personal faith. What role did faith play in Bernstein's composition? I can relate that Mr. Lloyd was a believer, and that simple fact not only allowed him to remain unswayed by all that was vogueish, and to be inspired on the spiritual level in the manner of Bach and others of his ilk, but cast his music always with hopeful, sonorous, and towering conclusions. Despite what life may dole out to us, the tension of life, like the tensions in his music, always end joyfully because there is a God, and life is far from a meaningless series of tragic events.

Donald Clark
Amesbury, Mass

John Hodges responds:

I want to thank Mr. Clark for his response to my article. I'm not acquainted with George Lloyd's music, but thanks to his recommendation I will rectify that lack as soon as possible! As for Bernstein's faith, it was certainly not Christian, but there was something Bernstein believed about God. His symphonies explore a relationship with God, even if it was more often than not only on Bernstein's own terms, and often blasphemous. In discussions with him, my sense was that he wanted to embrace what his Jewish heritage taught him about God, but he could not see how it fit with the reality he saw around him. He was fascinated with the large questions that Christianity answers, but as far as I know, he never embraced the Answer. I spoke to him at some length a few times, and gave him a copy of C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, and he thanked me and told me that he read it. The last time I met with him was 1984 and he died in 1990.

An Attractive Faith?

In the opening scenes of the movie *Chocolat*, Vianne, played by Juliette Binoche, moves into a new town and rents a dingy, dirty storefront. As the villagers watch from behind half-drawn shades, she cleans it up, paints it, places intriguing objects on shelves and in the window, and puts a new sign out front announcing it as a *chocolaterie*. The colors of the new store stand in stark contrast to the dark, unimaginative drabness of the rest of the town, and the Mayan objects that decorate the store contrast with the traditionally familiar lives of the townspeople. When Vianne finally opens for business she is the talk of the village, and her shop quickly becomes a shelter as she

welcomes and extends grace to the lonely and the marginalized.

The tension these scenes produce is at the heart of the themes of *Chocolat*. We are meant to see the film as a metaphor for the struggle between a cold, unimaginative Christianity (represented by the villagers), and a warm, welcoming, creative neopaganism (represented by Vianne). Or, as one of my friends commented, tongue in cheek, “Vianne is the only real Christian in the movie.”

The question I wish to raise here for reflection and discussion is this: If we as Christians moved into town, would we and our faith be attractive to the neopagan villagers? Wouldn't it be wise to take

a step back for a few moments and look at our life, our traditions, our living rooms, and the personal items we have on our desk at work, and reflect on what they communicate to a watching world that is increasingly post-Christian and pluralistic?

Which suggests a number of questions discerning believers might wish to address. ■

~Denis Haack

Editor's note:

For more on *Chocolat*, see the review and discussion questions in *Critique* #4-2001.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What qualities (warm, welcoming, creative, mysterious, etc.) would you desire your home, living room, life, to communicate? Why?
2. Sit in your living room (or dorm room, or whatever) and try to see it with the eyes of a non-Christian who would doubt that Christianity is either creative or relevant. What might they conclude about you? About your faith? Is there anything there that might prompt them to wonder or ask questions? What feeling(s) are evoked by the room? Is it the sort of place in which strangers tend to immediately feel at home, talk, and want to stay? Why or why not? What plans might you want to make? Do the same for your bathroom—which is the other room in your house that strangers tend to visit regularly. And your guest bedroom. Do you have good friends, Christian or not, who would be willing to give you honest feedback about this?
3. What objects do you choose to signal your faith by having them visible (in your home, on your desk, or whatever)? What artwork is exhibited? What do these communicate? Do they signal creativity, mystery, wonder, hope, and a joy in life? Why or why not? Is it possible that Christian artists (perhaps from other cultures or times) might help us in this effort? How?
4. Many of us were raised to pray or say grace before eating a meal. Many of us were also taught that hesitating to do this in public—say, at a restaurant or in a college cafeteria—is an indication that we are ashamed of our faith. How did this tradition arise? To what extent is it biblical? Are there any godly, biblical reasons for perhaps skipping the practice, at least at times? Under what conditions?
5. I have a friend who gives thanks for his meal in public, but believes that a new approach is needed in a postmodern culture. Since his non-Christian friends have misunderstood his bowing his head and praying silently, he does it differently. When the food arrives, he quietly takes his plate, raises it up a foot or so off the table, and eyes raised, says quietly, “In a starving world, I am grateful for these your gifts which I do not deserve, for Christ's sake, now and forever, Amen.” How do you respond to his practice? Why?
6. Have you ever been in a home (apartment, dorm room) that struck you as warm, welcoming, creative, and mysterious (etc.)? What made it so? What might you learn from this?

Respecting the Ungodly

Excerpt from *The Heart of Evangelism* by Jerram Barrs.

Peter writes: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15-16). Paul’s words are similar: “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:6).

Both of these apostles are explicit. Non-Christians are to be treated with “grace” and “respect.” Our words to them must be honoring, no matter what they believe, no matter how they live, no matter how they speak to us or how they speak about us and about our faith.

A question arises for us at this point. If the New Testament is so clear, why do so many of us have such a problem with this? Our attitude quite commonly is, “How can we respect people who are sinful and who believe in such foolish things?” Or “Surely you don’t expect me to show honor to people who not only disobey God’s commandments themselves, but teach publicly that others should disobey them?”

On one occasion I was addressing the faculty of another seminary about biblical principles for communicating the Gospel. I could see that one listener was becoming increasingly angry, and he finally burst out, “How can you ask me to respect unbelievers and sinners? They reek to heaven.” This was a good question, for of

course it is true that sin is an offense to the nostrils of God. Because sin is so offensive to God, it ought to be distressing to us, just as it was to Lot (2 Peter 2:7-8) and to Paul (Acts 17:16)! What answers can be given to such questions and charges? How is respect toward the ungodly possible?

Scripture teaches us that all people bear the image of God. This is the foundational statement of the first chapter of Genesis about what it means to be human (v. 27): “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

God is infinite, but we are finite. However, He is personal, and so are we. We are made for relationships, for love, for being like God in righteousness, to be history makers, to create, to have dominion.

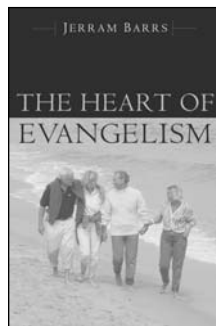
In Psalm 8 David asks a very similar question to that asked by the professor mentioned above: “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him?”

David, inspired by the Spirit, answers his own question: “You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your

hands; you put everything under his feet” (vv. 3-6).

God has given us such great dignity as those who are made in His image that, as the psalmist says, even God Himself is “mindful” of us. If God is respectful of the glory of our humanity, how much more should we honor the divine image in all those we meet? The apostle James reminds us of this very fact when he rebukes his readers for failing to show respect for their fellow human beings: “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be” (James 3:9-10). ■

—Excerpted, Jerram Barrs

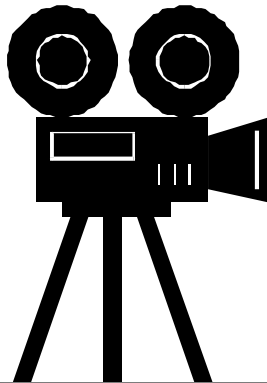


If God is respectful of the glory of our humanity, how much more should we honor the divine image in all those we meet?

Excerpted from The Heart of Evangelism by Jerram Barrs (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001) pp.191-193. See review on page 11.

The Darkened Room

The Cruellest Lies



A review of **Sunset Boulevard**

by Drew Trotter

Film Credits

Starring:

William Holden
(Joe Gillis)
Gloria Swanson
(Norma Desmond)
Erich von Stroheim
(Max Von Mayerling)
Nancy Olson
(Betty Schaefer)
Fred Clark
(Sheldrake)
Lloyd Gough
(Morino)
Jack Webb
(Artie Green)

Director:

Billy Wilder

Screenplay:

Charles Brackett
Billy Wilder

Producer:

Charles Brackett

Original Music:

Franz Waxman

Cinematographer:

John F. Seitz

Costume Designer:

Edith Head

Runtime: 110 min

Unrated.

What could possibly cause a fifty-something year old, black and white film, not even available in DVD format yet, to merit discussion in these pages and consideration by Christians for thought about character and commitment? *Sunset Boulevard* was released in 1950 by a producer who is now dead, written by writers, shot by a director, and acted in by actors who are almost all now dead. Why would we want to exercise the skills of discernment with which God has graced us on an old movie like this one?

There are lots of reasons of course. Never mind those who realize that history is an integral aspect of the truly Christian mind, and that those who rightly believe an understanding of movies and their content to be a key ingredient to comprehending American culture—and therefore our neighbor across the street—will always seek to understand the history of that medium. Put aside the fact that *Sunset Boulevard* continues to make a difference in the discussion of film theory in the West, and that it ranks high in the American Film Institute's list of the hundred greatest movies of all time. These reasons, while good enough for many, pale beside the greater reason to rent *Boulevard* and study it. And that is that *Sunset Boulevard* is, *par excellence*, the Hollywood story of the consequences of a web of deceit, based on pride and misplaced glory. As such, it still, as tightly today as it did half a century ago, grips the viewer with its deep truths.

Scripted by Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder, one of the most creative writing teams in the history of Hollywood (*A Foreign Affair*, *The Lost Weekend*, *Ninotchka*), *Sunset Boulevard* garnered eleven academy award nominations. Though it lost all but two of the races to the equally brilliant *All About Eve*, *Boulevard* is probably better remembered than *Eve*, and certainly better than many of the films that won the best picture award in the 1940's and 50's. It is often called Billy Wilder's best picture (he was the director as well as one of the writers) and is filled with memorable lines that have passed into popular culture today: "I am big. It's the pictures that got small." "Wake up, Norma. You'd be killing yourself to an empty house. The audience left twenty years ago." "No one leaves a star. That's what makes one a star." "There's nothing else—just us and the cameras and those wonderful people out there in the dark..." "All right, Mr. DeMille, I'm ready for my close-up."

Sunset Boulevard is the story of a down-on-his-luck Hollywood writer who chances upon the decaying mansion of Norma Desmond, an aging silent screen star left behind when the "movies" became "talkies." The writer, named Joe Gillis and played marvelously by William Holden, sees an opportunity to finger the old lady for some cash and at the same time escape the repo men who are close on his heels. He agrees to stay overnight at the mansion, when invited by Norma, but he has not figured on the strength of her manipulative wiles. She manages to entrap him until he is dependent on her and the luxuries she can afford him, by using tricks ranging from pathetically pleading for help, through offering large sums of money, to simply having her butler move Gillis' belongings from his apartment to her house without his permission.

The deceitful, maniacally calculating clutches of Norma Desmond may be without parallel in the history of American film. Wilder wanted to cast Mae West for the part, but she declined to play the role of a fading star. Wilder interviewed Mary Pickford but found her far too nice for the role. Eventually he settled on what turned out to be the perfect choice: Gloria Swanson, an actual silent screen star who got left behind by Hollywood at the advent of sound tracks. Swanson claims that the role ruined her for any future roles, that no one could ever think of her again as anyone other than Norma Desmond, and this is not surprising. The character is so powerful, so sad and despicable at the same time, that it is impossible to forget her when one thinks of Hollywood's portrayal of pride and fading glory.

And that is just the reason the movie is so worth watching today. The clarity with which *Boulevard* displays several biblical themes is bound to engender good discussion along the lines of conceit going before a fall, being certain that one's sins will find one out and the horrible, tragic consequences of deceit. A number of films today—*Changing Lanes* and *Signs* come to mind—point out how important one seemingly “chance” event

in one's life can be for one's whole future direction. *Sunset Boulevard* picks up another related but opposite idea. In *Boulevard* Norma Desmond's repeated lies to herself, coupled with the lies of Gillis and Max, the butler (played by Erich Von Stroheim in one of the most extraordinary pieces of casting ever), eventually build a fabric of deceit so strong that, when she is confronted undeniably with the truth, Norma is driven over the edge to madness and murder.

Norma Desmond eerily, chillingly descends “the staircase of the palace” at the end of the movie. This shot, so stylized with news and police men frozen in time while the music and the camera focus on the mad “star,” reveals not only a descent into hell but also an entrance into the real world, a world where she will not be applauded as a star but incarcerated as a killer. Norma has lost her



The clarity with which Boulevard displays several biblical themes is bound to engender good discussion about conceit, sin, and the horrible, tragic consequences of deceit.

mind completely, and she, the great deceiver, has tricked herself into thinking the news cameras, there to show her to the world as the pathetic, small person that she is, are actually the cameras of the great DeMille, filming a scene of *Salome*, her “greatest role.” The prescription of Moses and the prophets, captured so well in the warning of Numbers “Be sure your sin will find you out” (Num. 32:23; cf. Isa. 59:1-20; Jer. 5:18-31; Ezek. 21:24), has never been illustrated so memorably.

We have no space to probe all the other ways one can take the *via negativa* to learn from *Sunset Boulevard*; the questions below may help those who want to go further. The film is scheduled for release in DVD this fall, complete with audio tracks and all the other usual bells and whistles. Buy it and study it well, as a disturbing example of how not to live one's life based on pride and deceit. ■

~Drew Trotter

Dr. Andrew H. Trotter, Jr., is the executive director of the Center for Christian Study in Charlottesville, VA, where he teaches and writes on theology and culture, focusing on modern American film. Copyright © 2002 by Andrew H. Trotter, Jr.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Joe Gillis and Max, the butler, contribute to the web of lies that ultimately cause Norma's downfall. How could they have avoided the tragic ending of the picture? At what point in the film is there no turning back?
2. What redemptive characteristics are there in the characters of the film? Discuss each one and think about how they could have acted differently to follow a better path.
3. Billy Wilder was known as one of the most dark and cynical directors in Hollywood; his experience fleeing Nazism from his native Austria helps us understand this attitude. How does it surface in the movie? Is there any hope portrayed in *Sunset Boulevard* at all?
4. What role does the accolades of man play in the Christian life? None? Limited? A lot?
5. What other Biblical passages or thoughts does contemplation of *Sunset Boulevard* bring to mind. Why?

Scripture, Ancient Texts

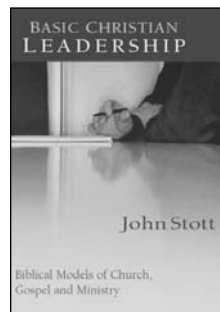
Since Christian discernment involves learning to see all of life and culture from a biblical perspective, Bible study is essential to thinking and living Christianly. Here are several resources to help us sharpen our understanding of Scripture—and to enjoy it at the same time.

Unpacking 1 Cor. 1-4

One of the delights of life in this world is the grace to sit under the instruction of a godly expositor of Scripture like the Rev. John Stott. Every time I have heard him preach, I have come away with a deeper love for God, amazed that his clear unpacking of the text can seem to be so simple, yet be so rich and so meaningful. Reading Stott's expositions of Scripture are, I admit, never quite as fulfilling as hearing him preach—somehow preaching is always more full when actually listening to the preacher in person—but the rich content

is there, and can be read, prayed over, reread, and discussed. God's grace to his church has always included raising up preachers whom the Holy Spirit uses to bring God's word to God's people. It's a grace we need to make time for in our busy lives.

Basic Christian Leadership consists of five expositions by Stott on the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians. "For



The early chapters of 1 Corinthians "have a special message for church leaders today, whether ordained or lay, whether their ministry is in the world or in the church."

forty years and more I have been fascinated and challenged by the early chapters of 1 Corinthians," he says. "They have cast their spell over me. I believe they have a special message for church leaders today, whether ordained or lay, whether their ministry is in the world or in the church."

Stott is correct. The opening chapters of Paul's letter to the church in Corinth address a variety of issues which though originally set in a particular context for that specific congregation so many centuries ago, are supremely relevant today. Issues such as the ambiguous nature of the church in a fallen world, the meaning of ministry and service, the essential roles of Spirit and Scripture, God's presence and power among his people, and the tension that results when believers disagree. Stott's masterful, straightforward explanations of these

chapters of Scripture give us insight into the world of our first century forebears in the faith, into God's heart and will for his church, and into what faithfulness looks like in our own lives and Christian communities. "Our model of leadership," Stott says, "is often shaped more by culture than by Christ." In these first four chapters of First Corinthians the apostle Paul reflects on his own leadership as an

apostle of Christ. Though the age of the apostles has past, their approach to leadership as servants of God and his church remains as needful today as it was in the first century.

Basic Christian Leadership includes the full text of 1 Corinthians 1-4 (NIV), as well as a chapter by chapter discussion guide making it useful not merely for individual study and reflection but small group discussion as well.

We recommend *Basic Christian Leadership* to you. Read it once to be nourished by God's word. Then read it again to try to learn from Stott's giftedness in unpacking the Scriptures—a useful skill whatever our calling, whether pastor, teacher, small group leader, or mentor.

Book reviewed:

Basic Christian Leadership: Biblical Models of Church, Gospel and Ministry by John R. W. Stott (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2002) 114 pp. + notes + study guide + index.

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& Reading Like Grown-Ups

Extra-biblical texts

As we read the Old Testament it's impossible to miss the wide variety of tribes, religions, peoples, and cultures that are mentioned as the story of the Israelites is told. The people of God were not the only people around, though the Old Testament concentrates on their history, leaving us with only fragmentary hints of their neighbors' beliefs and practices. Yet, those beliefs and practices are important to the story, because occasionally the Israelites were seduced by them to leave the truth of the One true God for the myths and gods of their neighbors. Now we can gain some insight into those competing cultures and religions through a wide variety of ancient texts that have been collected, along with helpful introductory historical notes, in *Readings from the Ancient Near East*. Organized according to the flow of the canonical Scriptures, here are creation myths, epic tales, law codes, sample covenants, letters, histories, poems, hymns and prayers, rites and incantations, and prophetic works, from a wide variety of cultures, including the Egyptians, Sumarians, Babylonians, Hittites, Assyrians, Canaanites, and Phoenicians.

Adding *Readings from the Ancient Near East* to your library will widen your horizons as you read and study the Old Testament.

Book reviewed:

Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study edited by Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker; 2002) 226 pp. + notes + bibliography + index.



Occasionally the Israelites were seduced by their neighbors' beliefs and practices... We can gain some insight into those competing cultures and religions through this collection of ancient texts.

Reading rightly

Calvin Seerveld, a Christian art historian, is a godly man who loves the Bible. He has spent his years thinking about life and art from the perspective of the Christian world view revealed in Scripture. "A man with brilliant insights into the meaning of aesthetics," Steve Garber says, "he is also someone with a profound love for Christ." For many years a professor, and author of such works as *Rainbows for the Fallen World*, Seerveld has always been in tune with the daily struggle that each believer faces as we seek to be faithful in a post-Christian world. Or as Steve expressed it in an email encouraging me to call attention to "Reading the Bible Like a Grown-Up Child," Seerveld is "very, very academically capable, and yet very, very grounded in the push-and-pull of daily discipleship."

"Reading the Bible Like a Grown-Up Child," a brief but compellingly creative and infectious article, addresses the most basic of all the spiritual disciplines: how to read the Bible. "I'd wager that if you read a book of the Bible for 10 days and nights straight, something extraordinary will happen to you," Seerveld says. "Once you catch the spoken-word character of the Bible, God's Word is a red-hot goad and a tender hug. The point is to actually hear God's voice—not just scan

the scripted words—and meet the Lord's ongoing, connected, and promising deeds happening now." Seerveld gives simple advice as to how to read the Bible rightly, while warning us away from reading it wrongly, all the while revealing how our reading can be an ongoing adventure of discovery, redemption, and life.

To find the article, log onto the Coalition for Christian Outreach's website (ccojubilee.org), click on Resources, under Discipleship click on Bible Study, and then click on Seerveld's piece. Or you can track down a copy from the original source: *The Banner* (June 26, 1995), 2850 Kalamazoo Avenue, SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560. Then get ready to be excited about reading the Bible, and about sharing that excitement with others.

"Reading the Bible Like a Grown-Up Child" is a wonderful resource for Christians, young or old or in-between, who wish to deepen their discipleship. It should be distributed widely for its mature counsel, and so that Seerveld's childlike delight can grip our hearts and imaginations. ■

~Denis Haack

Article recommended:

"Reading the Bible Like a Grown-Up Child" by Calvin Seerveld available on the website of the Coalition for Christian Outreach (ccojubilee.org).

Grace is Richer

One of the finest teachers I ever had the honor to learn from was a zoology professor at the University of Minnesota. His research was not something that would win him much fame: his specialty was chipmunks, as I remember. He said he loved spending every summer camped out in the woods observing them. It was his passion that set him apart as a teacher. He was passionately in love with zoology, and every class seemed designed to infect his students with a similar love. I remember one lecture began with the instruction to put our notebooks away. “I won’t be testing you on any of this,” he told us. “Just listen and enjoy the slides. I’m going to tell you about some of the most amazing creatures in the world.” And for an hour he lectured on guppies. I remember thinking I really should go into zoology.

God’s love for his church includes gracing it with teachers whose passion for God and his word means that sitting under their instruction results not just in learning, but in worship, not just in new information, but a sense of awe for God’s glory and grace. The three books I mention here were a means of grace to me, causing me to love God more deeply with both mind and heart. I commend them to you.

Uncommon common grace

We all know that God causes rain to fall on the fields of both just and unjust farmers. If we have somehow failed to observe that fact of nature in operation, Jesus states it (Matthew 5:43-48), and goes on to say it is a reason why we should love even those who treat us shabbily. The point is that God blesses both believers and unbelievers, both those who

love him and those who hate him. He does this because they are his creatures, made in his image. The ungodly may have great gifts, or exhibit great virtue, or, like my zoology professor so many years ago have much to teach, even though they know neither God nor his saving grace in Christ. This is usually referred to as God’s “common grace,” gifts of God to his creatures that are true blessings, true instances of grace since they are undeserved, yet which must be



Mouw believes Scripture teaches that God delights in the good things done by non-Christians.

distinguished from saving grace which redeems through the finished work of Christ. Calvin, for example, noted the “admirable light of truth shining” in the work of non-Christian thinkers, and said it should “teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts.” To reject or despise such gifts of God, he warned, is to dishonor the Holy Spirit who gives them.

A question arises, however, as to how far we can extend such ideas. It is obvious that God blesses the ungodly, but could we say he is ever pleased with them? Or that he approves, in some way, of the virtue they demonstrate? Did God appreciate my professor’s creativity, accepting it as something which brings him glory? Or is redemption so central to God’s relationship with us that it effectively pushes all other considerations aside? “More specifically,” Richard Mouw asks, “is the ultimate destiny of human beings the

only thing that God thinks about in assessing what we think, feel, and do? Does he care about the actions and achievements on non-elect persons in a way that is not linked directly to issues of individual salvation?”

If you think about it for a moment, how we answer these questions is of real importance. Our answers not only reflect our view of God and the working of his grace, they have serious implications about what faithfulness looks like in a fallen world. How we answer them will

have a marked impact on our relationship with non-Christians, on where we see God’s grace at work in this fallen world, and on how

we respond to the culture of which we are a part.

Theologian Richard Mouw addressed these questions in a series of lectures which have been published in a brief but very stimulating book, *He Shines in all That’s Fair*. Originally given at Calvin College, he sets his discussion of common grace within the context of the debates about this doctrine that have arisen over the years within the Christian Reformed Church. Don’t let that discourage you from reading this book. His explanation of the ideas which were debated is clear, and readers do not need to understand the persons and historical details involved to appreciate his argument.

Mouw believes the Scriptures teach that God delights in the good things done by non-Christians. “Let me be concrete,” he says. “I think God takes delight in Benjamin Franklin’s wit and in Tiger Woods’s putts and in some well-crafted narrative paragraphs in a Salman Rushdie novel, even if these accomplishments are

Than I Imagined

in fact achieved by non-Christian people... God enjoys these things for their own sakes." The doctrine of common grace teaches us, he argues, that God even "gives positive moral appraisals to non-elect persons," and "has real empathy for their very real experiences of joy and sadness, just as he does for those of the elect." This is a perspective that is not often taught in Christian circles, and that produces a poverty in our relationships with unbelievers. If all God is concerned about is salvation, then any interaction we have with non-Christians that doesn't include witnessing is somehow a failure on our part. But forcing evangelism into every interaction trivializes the gospel even as it drains the humanity out of our relationships.

"Common grace thinking says clearly to me that God isn't exclusively focused on saving souls," Mouw said in an interview in *Christianity Today*. "Obviously, I don't know whether Barry Bonds is going to end up in heaven, but I think God likes it when he sees him hit a really fine home run. And I don't know whether Tom Hanks is going to end up in heaven, but I do believe that when I take delight in a good acting performance that I'm taking delight in something that God wants me to, that God himself delights in."

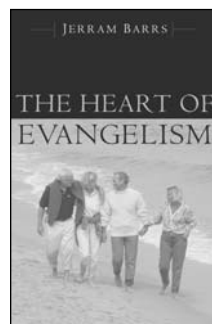
"And so, while I care deeply about whether these people are going to be saved, my interest in them cannot be exhausted purely in soteriological terms. I can enjoy good musical performances, good works of art, good pieces of writing, because I think God takes delight in them, because the God who called his creation good also says let there be good music and let there be good art, and on occasion looks

down on the works of some unbeliever and says, That's good; I like that."

He Shines in all That's Fair is an important book for Christians who want to think rightly about God and about faithfulness, about what it means to be in the world but to not be of it, and to glorify and enjoy God in the process. It's a book of theology that explains what the Bible teaches, and in the process transforms our ideas about how we should live as the people of God.

Sources: Calvin from *Institutes of the Christian Religion* translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press; 1960) II.2.15; pp. 273-274. Interview from "Why God Enjoys Baseball" by David Neff in *Christianity Today* (July 8, 2002) pp. 49-52.

Book recommended: *He Shines in all That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* by Richard J. Mouw (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2001) 101 pp.



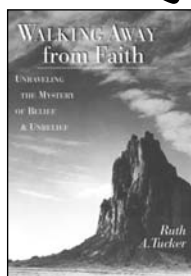
Witnessing to grace isn't a chore

It is sad that evangelism produces so much paralysis in Christians. It should be a privilege to share the grace of God, a natural part of relationships we have with non-Christians, but few experience it in that light. We know that what we have in Christ is precious, so

why should talking about it be so painful? Some even claim that this pain is part of the cost of discipleship, a form of suffering the Christian is called to endure. It is true, of course, that the good news is not always appreciated in a fallen world, and there is an offense to the cross that can provoke a negative reaction in our hearers. On the other hand, too often evangelism has been reduced to technique, debasing this most personal of interactions into a sales-pitch motivated by little more than guilt or the fear that if we

Briefly Noted: Denying Christ

by Denis Haack



Chances are we all know people who claim faith in Christ only to later walk away from that faith. The phenomenon raises all sorts of troubling questions: Were they truly Christians to begin with? Is it possible to lose one's faith and be lost? And what prompts people to walk away? In *Walking Away From Faith*, Ruth Tucker, professor of missions at Calvin Theological Seminary reports on conversations she has had over many years with those who have taken this step. Her purpose is not to sort out the theological issues involved, for, as she says, those books have already been written. Instead, she has sought to listen with respect and care, and now reports on what she has learned.

Walking Away From Faith is a superb example of how to listen to those with whom we disagree. It is also full of insight on how the Christian community is at times less than sensitive to issues of faith, doubt, and unbelief, which is important for all believers, but especially so for those moving not from faith to unbelief, but from Christian faith to a different faith. Pastors, parents, teachers, and mentors (did I miss anyone?) need to read this book.

Book recommended: *Walking Away From Faith: Unraveling the Mystery of Belief and Unbelief* by Ruth A. Tucker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2002) 224 pp. + notes + index.

“Evangelism should be an encouraging and even exciting subject.”

fail to share adequately, our friend will go to hell. No wonder we are paralyzed.

“I long to see believers set free from this feeling of frustration and failure,” Jerram Barrs writes in *The Heart of Evangelism*. “In place of this I pray that the Lord will help believers realize that evangelism should be an encouraging and even exciting subject to think about and to put into practice.”

Evangelism as “encouraging” and “exciting.” To the extent we find those terms difficult to believe, to that extent we need to read *The Heart of Evangelism*. This is not a book by someone specially gifted as an evangelist who thinks everyone should be like him. Nor does it contain techniques to make you effective as a “soul-winner.” Nor does it give you a summary of the gospel which you can regurgitate to every unbeliever you meet. Rather, *The Heart of Evangelism* is by a man passionately in love with God who takes the Bible seriously enough to take another look at what it actually says on the topic. And what it says not only runs directly counter to much of what we hear about evangelism today, it frees us to be creative and loving as we seek to be faithful in our interactions with non-Christians.

The Heart of Evangelism should be widely read, and needs to be discussed in small groups and Sunday school classes. Barrs does not simply tell us what to believe, but takes us through a careful study of the Scriptures so we can see evangelism in the light of God’s word. *The Heart of Evangelism* can teach us to

witness to God’s grace in a way that is deeply human, profoundly personal, consistently winsome, and motivated by grace, not guilt. And that is grace, indeed.

Book recommended: *The Heart of Evangelism* by Jerram Barrs (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books; 2001) 278 pp.+ index.

Adopted by grace

“My baby needs a shepherd,” Emmylou Harris sings, “she’s lost out on the hill.” A mother looks back with yearning and deep regret for a child she abandoned. It’s a powerful image that strikes at the very heart of our humanity. “Too late I tried to call her / When the night was cold and still / And I tell myself I’ll find her / But I know I never will.” The haunting melody of that song came to mind as I read Sinclair Ferguson’s superb study of the doctrine of adoption, *Children of the Living God*. At a time when fragmented families seem to be the norm and when fatherlessness spreads like a dark shadow across the land, the good news that God is our Father is good news, indeed.

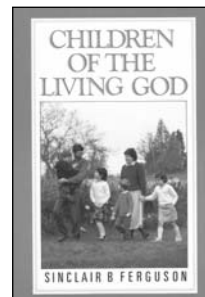
Being able to call God, “Father,” has an intimacy that staggers the imagination. It means that we have been granted new birth in Christ. In this new relationship, Ferguson says, we have “come to share in the risen life and power of Jesus Christ, and to enter into vital fellowship with him.” The Holy Spirit does not merely inform us in some intellectually sterile way that we are God’s child, but instead “works in the inner recesses of our being to persuade us that we belong to the Father.” This is a living reality, not simply words designed to give psychological relief

in a fragmented world. “The creation of a family, with children, is the reason for all of God’s activity. This is how he intends to show his glory,” Dr. Ferguson says. “The notion that because Christ has ‘brothered’ us, we may become children of God, lies at the heart of the New Testament’s teaching about our salvation.”

What is more, he is not ashamed to be known as our Elder Brother. Christ entered our world “in order,” Ferguson says, “to enter into a relationship of fellowship with us of which he would not be ashamed. He took our nature, our humanity, and in it destroyed the powers that have rendered us objects of shame in the sight of the glorious God. He who is holy, and makes us holy by his grace, brings us into his own family. Because he has cleansed and sanctified us, he is not ashamed of us. We are his brothers!”

The postmodern generation yearns for spirituality and relationship, yet tragically their yearning is seldom expressed in a desire to investigate evangelical Christianity. Too little of what they see in us is endowed with holy mystery, and apparently the relationships we exhibit are not compellingly wholesome enough to attract their attention. Perhaps our hearts and imaginations are not fully captured by the truth that we are God’s children, he is our Father, Christ is our Elder Brother, and we are members of his family. A fatherless generation needs to hear about the family of God, and surely the gospel can be presented in terms of the doctrine of adoption.

A primary means by which he uses us in this sad world is by our being the family he in fact has called us to be. “By this all people will know that you are my



disciples,” Jesus says in John 13:35, “if you love one another.” Being the family of God in this increasingly fragmented-family world, we exhibit for all to see that Jesus is Lord. “As God’s own children,” Dr. Ferguson writes, “we have a new relationship with one another, and a new attitude toward each other. The New Testament is full of this emphasis. It constantly declares that God does not create isolated individuals who have been born again by his Spirit. It is a family he is creating, in whom the mutual love of his own eternal family in the Trinity is reflected for the world to see.”

To the extent that the doctrine of adoption is poorly understood by Christians, we will fail to comprehend all that is ours in union with Christ. “It is ‘in Christ’ that God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing,” John Stott says. “So if we are ourselves ‘in Christ,’ and only if we are ‘in Christ,’ every spiritual blessing from God the Father becomes ours. For in giving Christ to us in the intimacy of a personal union with him,

A failure to appreciate the doctrine of adoption means we will not share the gospel in a way that touches the deepest yearnings of a fatherless generation.

our heavenly Father has given us all the blessings he has to give.”

And in terms of our witness before a watching world, a failure to appreciate the doctrine of adoption means we will not share the gospel in a way that is designed to touch the deepest yearnings of a fatherless generation. The sublime mystery of our union in Christ, the wonder of being made a child of God, and the reality of a living relationship with the Creator as Father—this is good news that our lonely world needs desperately to hear.

The doctrine of adoption is confessed by most evangelicals, and most of us think nothing of addressing God as “Father.” Few of us know the depths of grace in the doctrine of adoption, however, for it is seldom taught in

any detail. And that is to our loss. *Children of the Living God* is concise, well-written, and easy to comprehend. It is theology as theology needs to be written: out of a deep love for God’s word and a heart-felt desire that God’s people appreciate and live in the reality of the grace that is theirs in Christ.

Read it to learn, to worship, to serve your Elder Brother, and to love your Father as a child of the living God. ■

~Denis Haack

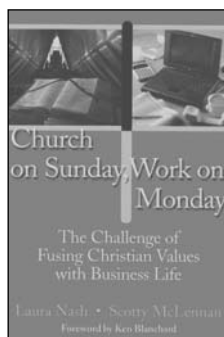
Amazon.com lists this book as out of print, but you can still order it through Hearts and Minds Bookstore (see their ad on page 8).

Sources: “My Baby Needs a Shepherd,” words and music by Emmylou Harris, on *Red Dirt Girl* (2000; Nonesuch CD #79616-2). *Life in Christ* by John Stott, chapter 3: “In Christ our Life-giver.”

Book recommended: *Children of the Living God* by Sinclair B. Ferguson (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust; 1989) 127 pp.

Briefly Noted: Church and Marketplace

by Denis Haack



Laura Nash, of Harvard Business School, and Scotty McLennan, dean of religious life at Stanford University are concerned that at a time when interest in spirituality is spawning a host of programs and resources for the business world, most of this activity bypasses the church—the evangelical community included. “The Church could be one of the strongest resources we have for leading a balanced and effective business life,” they write. “In most cases, it is not. It could provide spiritual and ethical insight about work that would revolutionize business life. In most cases, it does not.” Most sad of all, Nash and McLennan report that their research indicates the leaders in the two spheres do not even listen to one another. For Christians concerned to engage the world with the gospel, the marketplace is a part of life that must not be ignored. *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday* is helpful primarily because it raises the right questions. Nash and McLennan do not outline a Christian perspective on business, nor do they explain how a biblical world view will address the issues faced by those whose vocation is in business. Nor

do they try to respond to all the misunderstandings that produce the yawning gap between business and church leaders. They do issue a challenge to both sides to listen to one another, in the hope that the gap can be bridged. *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday* is not all that is needed for this to occur, but it can help get the process started. A discussion guide for the book is also available from the publisher.

Book reviewed: *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday: The Challenge of Fusing Christian Values with Business Life* by Laura Nash and Scotty McLennan (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; 2001) 283 pp. + notes + suggested readings + index.

Metaphysics of the



Counting Crows “Hard Candy”

*And it's a dangerous time for a heart on a wire
Shuttled from station to station noisily
Not knowing why*

“Goodnight L.A.”

The alternative rock group, Counting Crows, has been around. For nearly a decade, this Bay area inspired band has been making music about the bittersweet randomness of life. Their name stems from the English verse that suggests that one's fate can be determined by the number of crows seen together: “one for sorrow, two for joy” and so on for health, wealth, marriage, birth, and life.

Counting Crows explore the world of meaning and relationships from the vantage point of sleepless nights and mornings after. Repeated often enough—the regrets of failed relationships, casual sex, and alcohol- and drug-induced hangovers—no longer become the exception, but the rule. Lead singer and songwriter, Adam Duritz, has made the morning after a metaphysical truism. It's the way things are. There is in their latest album, *Hard Candy*, a resigned acceptance of heartache. “It's too late for all those things that are going to make you feel good for a moment, whether it's getting high or stepping off the end of the world or calling a girl in the middle of the night or staring at photographs. It doesn't mean you don't wish it would work,” Duritz explains. Breaking up is not only hard to do, it is inevitable.

*You're the pill to ease the pain
Of all the stupid things I do
I'm an anchor on the line
Of a clock that tells the time
That is running out on you*

Hard Candy is the band's fourth album and clearly one of their best. Duritz, taking advice from Paul McCartney of the Beatles, has blended his provocative lyrics with melodic alternative rock. The talent of the group's musical style as well as

Duritz's reflections on life is self-evident. It is an album worth owning for the emotions it evokes and the musings it provokes. Both, however, are very sad.

A number of reviewers have suggested casual listeners start with “Carriage.” In many ways it is a song that succinctly describes the relational world Duritz and many of his fans inhabit—a world where impermanence is the norm and heartbreak an expectation.

The story behind the song is autobiographical, tracing back to his days as an undergraduate English major at Berkeley. “This song,” he explains on C.C.'s web page (www.countingcrows.com), “is about how you go from being the most important person in someone's life one day to being utterly meaningless on another day... I tried to write about the perils of actually caring for other people, because they come and they go, and that leaves you with yet another new hole.”

He was living with this girl and then they broke up. Sometime later he had a one-night stand with his ex-girlfriend and from that sexual encounter she got pregnant.

*If anything
It should have been a better thing
From underneath you staring at the ceiling
There's another world of chocolate bars and base-
ball cards
That hides inside of all this tension that I'm feeling
But it's all inside of you*

With evident mixed emotions, Duritz and the unnamed girl decided to keep the baby even though they were split up, but the girl miscarried and the child was lost. Captured in this very real and intimate portrait of a modern relationship are all the emotions of relief, guilt, confusion, and loss.

*I wish that I was anaesthetized and sterilized
And then you wouldn't have this evidence
congealing
Surprise Surprise
Another pair of lips and eyes*

Morning After

*And this is the consequence of actually feeling
It was all inside of you*

All that is left from “actually feeling” is a broken relationship and a dead baby. It’s hard candy—a sweet memory turned hard. On “Black and Blue,” Duritz sings of a girl contemplating suicide and then lying down next to her lover.

*Cut yourself until you bleed
But fall asleep next to me*

Her suicide note reads: “I’m sorry everyone. I’m tired of feeling nothing. Goodbye.” Feeling or not feeling, both lead to death.

This is a cruel, sad world Duritz describes. The best he can offer is the existentialist grit of just carrying on. “Wash your face. Dry your eyes.” There are no answers—one just moves on to other relationships and other towns.

*I may take a holiday in Spain
Leave my wings behind me
Drive this little girl insane
And fly away with someone new*

The longing for love and human connection gets reduced on this album to the autoeroticism of phone sex, “Why Should You Come When I Call?”

*It’s 1:30 in the morning but that’s alright by me
Weren’t you just waiting by the phone?
I should give you a little warning
But I need the things I need
I’m not proud to need a hand; but I don’t
Understand...*

Hard Candy is not the sugarcoated romanticism of “Friends”—fornication with a laugh track. (Adam Duritz has been romantically connected to both Courtney Cox and Jennifer Aniston in the past.) No, this is real life when lived outside the boundaries of God’s intentions for *shalom*. The longings for love don’t cease, but as the holes in the soul get larger and more frequent, hope is surely lost.

So, as I began, Counting Crows has been around. Life has not been kind. And from what is revealed on this album, they are no wiser for the pain.

One is left with nostalgia for a fleeting memory—of a photograph buried in a desk drawer, of a Miami sunset, of a chance seduction, of a mother’s love—but the morning’s harsh light reveals “it’s just the same hard candy you’re remembering again.” The morning after is all that there is.

We can cluck our tongues and wag our fingers at the immorality of modern relationships. But as Augustine wisely noted, “Sin becomes the punishment of sin.” The modern troubadour songs of heartbreak should begin by breaking our hearts. It is love that is sought, not judgment. Will they find it in our hearts? ■

~John Seel

David John Seel, Jr. is the Headmaster of The Cambridge School of Dallas, a Christ-centered, classical college preparatory school. He is the author of Parenting Without Perfection: Being a Kingdom Influence in a Toxic World and is a frequent speaker on culture, education, and parenting.

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***The modern troubadour
songs of heartbreak should
begin by breaking our hearts.***

**by
David
John
Seel,
Jr.**

The Ghetto

"The place where the whole fraternity . . . dwelleth together, which is called the Ghetto" Coryats Crudities (1611) - Thomas Coryat (OED)

It wasn't always this stifling. We weren't always sunk
in back alley shadows, afraid of the assumed lion in
the square. We used to stand stadium-tall; now shrunk,
we've traded in tongues of fire for saccharin

platitudes and our own inbred language. Who's been
more exclusive than us? On matters so fully legal,
who's been more correct? If grace be sin,
we're nearly perfect. We mount up not like the eagle

but as the penguin: waddling around in regal
black and white, huddled en masse, sleeping and cold.
Where are the old men with dreams? Is it illegal
for the young to have vision? Was the hillside city lost or sold?

Oh, the infuriating peasants in this place! Will they ever leave
their comfortable cardboard shacks for the mansions they've received? ■

~MM McLaughlin

MM McLaughlin lives in La Conner, WA. His poetry has appeared in Cal. State University's Visions Eclectic, Poetry Motel, Cornerstone, and in the University of Iowa's 100 Words.

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Critique is a newsletter (published nine times each year, funds permitting) designed to accomplish, by God's grace, three things:

1. To call attention to resources of interest to thinking Christians.
2. To model Christian discernment.
3. To stimulate believers to think biblically about all of life.

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