

EXPANDED EDITION

critique

A RANSOM FELLOWSHIP PUBLICATION

ISSUE ONE 2011



To the Editor

We are thrilled to be able to help support the work of Ransom. Both of you have impacted our lives in ways we can only try to describe. Thank you for all you do!

We received *Notes from Toad Hall* today, so Brad will probably get to see it, and Alicia, in about three hours when she emerges from her reading corner, having read it cover to cover! And, we're excited to say, you have begun to "infect" the next generation of Brummelers. Jacob, our 13-year-old, is often found with *Critique* or *Notes*, reading them on his own.

Thank you so much for your ministry to us and so many others. May God bless you richly during this next stretch.

In the name of our Lord,
Alicia and Brad Brummeler
Waco, TX

Denis Haack responds:

Alicia and Brad: Thank you for your kindness. It means a great deal to us. Finding that our publications and speaking is somehow interesting or relevant or attractive to the next generation is something we didn't plan for but something for which we are deeply grateful. It is simply a reflection of the timelessness and depth of the Christian gospel, and of the fact that all those created in God's image, regardless of age ask the same questions and yearn to make sense of the same reality. Knowing of Jacob increased my motivation to work on this issue.



To the editor:

I'm not much for blog commenting, but there are more of us "out here" than your comment list reveals! I read both of you regularly—in fact, I prefer no "blog reader" on my computer because it means I can click on you in my "favorites" and have hope daily that there just might be a new post. Thank you, thank you, thank you for living your lives before us, challenging and amusing us, and as always, being a balm for my soul.

Linda Lewis
Rochester, MN

Denis Haack responds:

Linda: Margie and I so appreciate your comments here, even if you never leave comments on our blogs. It has sometimes been difficult to determine how much attention to give to the various opportunities that are available to us. Facebook, Twitter, blogs, publications—all take time and energy, especially to do them well, and that means time and energy that cannot be given to something else. And there are always other things clamoring for attention it seems. So, it's very reassuring that what we are writing is being read, and that what you read might be touched by grace. A note like yours is a balm in return, and we are grateful.



Text Denis Haack

Listening to Critics:
Mole in a Hole
When Musicians Raise Questions About Faith (III)

Each autumn in Minnesota, as temperatures drop and days shorten, we can see signs that nature is preparing for the winter that is to come. The leaves on trees become brilliant, red, gold, and yellow, and then lose their grip and float to the ground. The goldfinches visiting our thistle feeder molt, setting aside their bright yellow coats for greenish-gray ones that are still lovely but less flamboyant. Rows of jars of dill and bread and butter pickles, and corn relish appear on the shelves of the laundry room in the basement of Toad Hall. Great flocks of Canadian geese trace massive V's in the sky, and whitetail deer and wild turkeys venture out of the woods into grain fields at dusk to feed. And little voles work at finding ways into our basement.

The voles are not a major problem, all things considered, being small and not at all like the ROUS featured in *The Princess Bride*. (Google it if you don't remember.) Still, allowing rodents in one's basement is not recommended so each autumn it is my job to keep the little creatures out.

Toad Hall was built in 1916 so over the years the structure has settled and shifted and tiny cracks have appeared in the limestone walls. Hardly noticeable, except in the unfinished furnace room, where no one spends time unless it's necessary, but the openings are there and a few enterprising voles always seem to find them. I don't like using poison (recommended at my hardware store) because I don't like spreading chemicals around, and because I don't want voles wandering off to die and rot next to some air intake for the furnace. So, traps it is.

Now, I do not want to get into an ethical discussion about trapping voles, so let me just say I've thought it through, believe it godly and leave it at that.

In any case, this year for some reason I mentioned the voles in my Facebook status, and was amazed at the com-

ments that followed. Amazed at the number, I mean. People were actually interested, and left thoughtful, witty comments. It was lovely. Who would have thought rodents were so popular?

One commentator was my good friend, Scott Twite, who often seems to have the perfect song for every occasion, and once again he came through. He asked if I had heard "Mole in a Hole" from Richard and Linda Thompson's album, *Hokey Pokey* (1975). I had not, but now it is part of the playlist I listen to most frequently.

*Like the flowers, like the bees
Like the woodlands and the trees
I like the Byrds on their LP's
And I'm a refugee*

*I wanna be a mole in a hole, digging low and slow
I wanna be a fly flying high in the sky
I wanna be a mole in a hole, digging low and slow
I wanna be a fly flying high in the sky*



(The Thompsons did not write "Mole in a Hole"—it is by Mike Waterson, an English songwriter and singer.)

I was familiar with Richard Thompson from the soundtrack of *Grizzly Man* (2005). The music Thompson composed and performed for that film is stunning. When I noticed that "Mole in a Hole" was on a CD by him and his wife, I knew I'd be interested.

The melody is light and pleasant, the kind of song you would teach children who would love the imagery in the lyrics. I thought of a walk in the "hundred acre wood," with dear friends, taking the time to see the flowers that are blooming and the bees that visit the blossoms. Then, like two extremes that form brackets in space, moles and flies, the low and the high, are celebrated for their freedom. Neither are particularly attractive creatures, but in the song we sense they exist to fulfill some greater purpose, their dignity flowing from the fact that they live as they were created to live, whether "digging low and slow... flying high in the sky."

There is in all of us a deep yearning for freedom, a ▶

freedom that we know is our true destiny even though we can't quite name the slavery that has us in its grip and that has torn the freedom from us. We wish to be ourselves and to be free—a double grace that always seems just a little out of reach.

This is the dilemma that haunts us. Often, just to make it through our days we have to find ways to push the dilemma and our yearning from our consciousness. A few solutions have been proposed. From the East come voices encouraging enlightenment, a state that once achieved claims that our dilemma—and existence itself—is merely an illusion. From the West come voices saying our dilemma and yearning are merely the random sparking of neurons in an impersonal cosmos—not an illusion exactly, but an illusionary existence nevertheless. Neither solution seems viable to me for what they propose, if true, seems worse than the problem we had to begin with.

Then, amid the clamor there is news of an empty tomb, of a death and burial followed by resurrection and ascension. Of a mysterious spiritual rebirth in which people yearning to be free can find themselves indwelt with the Source of Life, made free not merely in ourselves but in the One promised by seers and prophets to be fully divine and fully human, world without end. It is this story, this news that strikes me as most satisfying, most viable of all the proposed solutions.

But then we find that some embrace it, or claim to, and then deface it.

*I had a friend who had a friend in Jesus
He used to read the good book every day
But my friend got so friendly with friend Jesus
Friend Jesus took my only friend away*

*I wanna be a mole in a hole, digging low and slow
I wanna be a fly flying high in the sky
I wanna be a mole in a hole, digging low and slow
I wanna be a fly flying high in the sky*

It is an oxymoron, of course. If we claim to follow Christ but are withdrawn from the world and from those who do not share our faith, then though much may remain unclear, this much is clear: we do not follow Christ.

How is it possible to follow someone but then not go where he goes? How can we be his follower if we dismiss those with whom he spent his time and for whom he gave his life? What do we imagine “following” means?

*Well, my feet are smelly and hair's a mess
My teeth are yellow and I've got bad breath*

*I may look great but I feel like death
And I'm a refugee*

*My friend he was as wise as Mister Wise Owl
He could count from one to ten, from A to Z
My friend he was so wise he got religion
That's why I'm alive today and he is dead*

*I wanna be a mole in a hole, digging low and slow
I wanna be a fly flying high in the sky
I wanna be a mole in a hole, digging low and slow
I wanna be a fly flying high in the sky*

There is a perverted wonder here. The truly free are so bound in fear, defensiveness, and busyness that they cast away their freedom to embrace withdrawal, imagining they have discovered a place of safety. A watching world yearns to be free, and sees freedom in God's creation but not in God's people.

It is a criticism worth hearing.

David Eugene Edwards of 16 Horsepower captures the reality of Christian freedom well.

*hide me in your hand
with the mother of my children
where the land sinks deep in it's color
bless the ground where we kneel
safe in your woven creel
we follow for you speak
you speak as no other*

[from “My Russia” on Woven Hand (2002)]

If you like to fish you will know the imagery Edwards invokes. A creel is a small wicker basket used by anglers to hold their catch. Light yet strong, for the fish suddenly pulled from its watery world the angler's creel is a place of death. But Edwards knows the reversal of redemption, and in this perspective God's creel is the only safe place to be. There we are hidden from danger, in God's hand, blessed with shalom, made alive by the word of the One who is The Word. We are free because we are safely in God's grace, safely caught and kept, and so have nothing to fear.

May God's world, yearning to be free, see in us who claim to be free a freedom that makes them wonder whether there might be something to our faith after all. May we somehow remind them of moles, or flies, or maybe even both. ❀

Text **Denis Haack**

Calvin and Culture Across All of Life

When I first stumbled across a book by Francis Schaeffer in 1968 I was not interested in changing my theology. I was interested in saving my faith, because the fundamentalist dispensationalism in which I had been raised had proven to be sadly inadequate. Spirituality applied only to personal morality, God's full pleasure attached only to religious pursuits, and art and culture were dismissed as “worldly.”

A faith that limited, I concluded, was hardly worth the effort. I almost didn't read *The God who is There*, but as I thumbed through it I saw that Schaeffer neither disdained culture nor was dismissive of asking honest questions—and that caught my interest. It was a Christianity I had not known.

So I read Schaeffer's books, learned that taped lectures were available and devoured them as well. At first it made little sense to me, but slowly I began to discover that in Schaeffer's view, the Bible didn't just present a theology, it provided a worldview that applied to all of life and culture. This was not a novel idea, it turned out, but was actually based on what the Reformers had taught in the 16th century, what Augustine had taught in the 4th century, and what the apostles taught in the 1st. Abraham Kuyper had summarized it in his Stone lectures, given in 1898 at Princeton and published under the title, *Lectures on Calvinism*. In the series he explained how Christ's Lordship extended to all of life, and how the revelation of God in Scripture shed light on every sphere of existence. The six lectures explored Christian orthodoxy as a worldview, and then how it worked itself out in religious life, politics, science, art, and a view of the future. I didn't have to agree with Kuyper at every point (and I don't) to undergo what can only be called a paradigm shift. I hadn't merely come across a few new ideas to accept but a whole new way of thinking and seeing.

I had begun this pilgrimage in an attempt to save my faith, to try to discover whether the Bible was relevant to all of life or only to a tiny slice of existence. In the process two things transpired: I adopted Kuyper's ringing confession of faith as my own (“No single piece of our mental world is to

be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”), and my theology was changed.

To hold a faith that addresses not just “spiritual” (religious or devotional) concerns, but that speaks to all of life provides a motivation to love and serve God. Every legitimate vocation pursued to his glory pleases him, all truth is his, every glimmer of beauty resounds to his glory, and we are not awaiting release from the physical but will serve him body and soul in a new heaven and earth forever.

This holistic vision must be constantly renewed or it will wither away. Our culture pushes us towards fragmented living and thinking. The church is haunted by pseudo-Gnostic beliefs that pull us towards dividing the sacred from the secular, the spiritual from the material. Reminding ourselves of the richness of the Christian worldview and exploring afresh the implications of Christian belief to life and culture is not burdensome but necessary. Besides, new challenges and ideas arise in a broken world and we are commended to “bring every thought captive,” which means our thinking is never done (2 Corinthians 10:5).

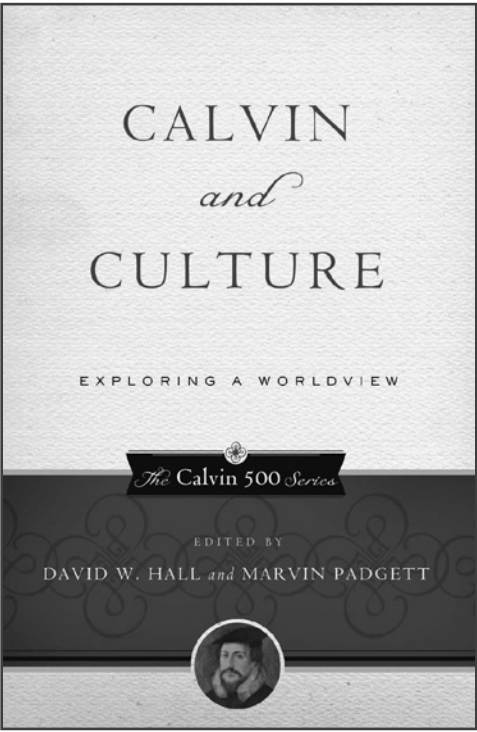
In *Calvin and Culture*, David Hall and Marvin Padgett help us in this process by editing a book that essentially works through the same material

Kuyper did in his Stone lectures. In the process they provide us a chance to refresh our thinking about the biblical worldview and reflect on how the gospel speaks creatively to every aspect of our lives and thinking.

We recommend *Calvin and Culture*. It will not provide all that's needed in every sphere of life and work and culture that is addressed, but it will provide a good foundation. And it will remind us of the vitality of Christian belief, and how the perspective given us in Scripture sheds light and life to all that is encompassed in Christ's kingdom—and that includes precisely everything. ❀

BOOK RECOMMENDED

Calvin and Culture: Exploring a Worldview edited by David W. Hall and Marvin Padgett (Phillipsburg, PA: P & R Publishing; 2010) 305 pages + indices.



Text **Denis Haack**

Losing Memory, Losing Oneself

*Promise me you'll never forget me.
Because if I thought you would, I'd never leave.*
[Winnie the Pooh]



Fiona Anderson (played with simple, heart-breaking honesty by Julie Christie) has been showing signs of forgetfulness, a slow decline in functioning. While washing dishes after dinner with her husband she places a newly cleaned pan in the freezer instead of in its accustomed spot under the sink. Post-it notes, neatly penned labels detailing contents on drawers and cabinets have proven insufficient in holding back the loss of memory. Though she and Grant (played by Gordon Pinsent) have lived in the same house for years she wanders off the cross-country ski tracks they use and gets lost in the cold. In a frightening scene Fiona wanders among birch at the edge of the frozen lake, drops her skis and poles on the ground and lies down in the snow, arms outstretched. The camera (always our point of view) watches from above, helpless to intervene and frightened at the possibilities. It is one thing to be alone and lost; to be within sight of home and safety and not have memory to recognize it is to be lost without hope of finding our way. At dinner with friends she goes to pour wine, but forgets the word, a senior moment stretching into a senior tragedy when it becomes clear that even hearing the word spoken by Grant does not erase her bewilderment. An interview with a medical professional is both wrenchingly revealing and inadvertently demeaning, when simple obvious questions provoke not answers but confusion and embarrassment. Once again, with Grant, we watch helplessly. ▶



Away From Her (2006)

Starring
Gordon Pinsent (Grant Anderson)
Stacey LaBerge (Young Fiona)
Julie Christie (Fiona Anderson)
Olympia Dukakis (Marian)
Deanna Dez mari (Veronica)
Clare Coulter (Phoebe Hart)
Thomas Hauff (William Hart)
Alberta Watson (Dr. Fischer)
Grace Lynn King (Nurse Betty)

Director
Sarah Polley

Writers
Sarah Polley (screenplay); Alice Munro (short story "The Bear Came Over the Mountain")

Producers
Atom Egovan, Doug Mankoff & others

Original Music:
Jonathan Goldsmith

Cinematographer
Luc Montpellier

Runtime
110 min

Release
USA; 2006

Rated
PG-13
(for some strong language)

As her dementia grows, Fiona is painfully aware of her intractable problem. "I think all we can aspire to in this situation," she says at one point, "is a little bit of grace." Unlike many such patients, Fiona decides to enter an assisted living facility, and leads a mourning Grant through the intake process. During the initial month in the facility, Fiona develops a close bond with Aubrey (played by Michael Murphy) a man she insists worked for her grandfather in a hardware store as a teenager, though this memory isn't true. Grant visits faithfully, but Fiona's affection and attention has shifted away from him to another. It seems a painful punishment for the affairs Grant enjoyed decades earlier as a young university professor with young willing female students.

Over the course of *Away From Her* (2006) we watch a slow progression—as Grant notes, an unfortunate word choice—as Fiona slips into greater and greater forgetfulness, confusion, disorientation, dependency, and finally a deterioration that encompasses more and more of her being, body and mind, unto death. Or, in institutional terms, eventually she has to be moved to the dreaded second floor of the memory care facility, to live among those whose bodies linger on, such as they are, but whose minds have a medical label: Dementia of the Alzheimer's Type, as the DSM-IV puts it.

We all know forgetfulness. The other day I could not remember a word, and went to Margie's office to ask her to help me remember it. I'd tell you the word, but I don't remember, and I'm not saying this just for effect. It's gone, and no, I am not going to ask her to help me remember it a second time. Nor am I being morbid about being in my sixties, since I know we all have such moments. Still, I have more trouble remembering some things that I used to be fairly sharp about—like movie

titles and actor's names, or where some text appears in the Scriptures. I've started a cheat-sheet for Bible references I want to keep track of, and have begun to think that having constant access to imdb.com might be a good reason to upgrade my cell phone to include Internet access.

There is an intimate link between memory, remembering and a sense of significance, so that forgetfulness does not merely erase distinct memories but seems to eat away the foundations of our being. "I think I'm beginning to disappear," Fiona says at one point. Life makes sense only within a narrative that provides structure and meaning to reality, and the loss of memory reduces life to bare

existence, a succession of unrelated details. When regrets or loss interrupt our happiness we may yearn to forget them, but as *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) revealed, such forgetfulness is not always the grace we imagine.

It is not surprising that the Scriptures are rich in the themes of memory, remembering, and the danger of forgetting. Memory is explored not just in relation to human beings, but also to the nature of God. The covenant making God who reveals himself in history is the One who remembers (Genesis 9:15-16). The people of God were to remember their painful past in slavery and God's gracious rescue, so that they would be eager to act with justice and compassion to the powerless, the alien that live within their community (Deuteronomy 16:12). When the Old Testament people of God forgot God's grace, the Hebrew poet called it rebellion (Psalm 106:7). The Teacher in the wisdom literature meditates on life and meaning, concluding that at the core of things is the need to remember one's Creator while still young (Ecclesiastes 12:1). In a wonderful irony express-



lion (Psalm 106:7). The Teacher in the wisdom literature meditates on life and meaning, concluding that at the core of things is the need to remember one's Creator while still young (Ecclesiastes 12:1). In a wonderful irony express-

ing his mercy the God who always remembers his covenant graciously promises to always forget his people’s misdeeds (Isaiah 43:25). A thief crucified beside Jesus expresses hope by asking to be remembered, and is promised paradise (Luke 23:42-43). The Eucharist is not just a ritual of future hope but of remembering the past (1 Corinthians 11:25-26). The list could be easily expanded. If nothing else, this biblical emphasis throws into stark relief how dementia captures so much of the horror and brokenness of the fall.

Grant’s faithfulness in visiting regularly, and their financial ability to place her in a better-than-average facility for care are both positive things in an otherwise grievous situation. Though his earlier promiscuity may not have made his decision easier, Grant’s willingness to allow Fiona her attachment to Aubrey probably eased Fiona’s transition to assisted care. “Sometimes you have to let go,” the movie tag line says, “of what you can’t live without.” Now that they must be apart, Grant’s heart speaks a deeper truth he expresses with quiet longing, “I never wanted to be away from her.”

It is difficult to think of a more painful effect of the brokenness of our sad world. Sliding into dementia, no cure known, often occurring as a person ages, a disease of the brain that can occasionally afflict people in their 50s, a lingering living on while it seems that humanness itself is slipping away. I fear almost nothing more than this, a dread of returning to a burdensome infancy for those I love and for whom I desire freedom not burden. I’m far less fearful of death than I am of this.

The Western church will need to speak of euthanasia with greater compassion and thoughtfulness as the population continues to age. Fiona showed courage entering the assisted care facility. “I’d like to make love, and then I’d like you to go,” she says to Grant. “Because I need to stay here and if you make it hard for me, I may cry so hard I’ll never stop.” It seemed impossible to watch that scene and not think of my best friend, my wife, and wondering what I would do. I know I have no desire to enter such a place myself, instituting the need for my family to visit me when I may not even remember who they are. Too much of the discussion about euthanasia in the church has involved easy

sound bites and has addressed easy situations—much more substance and compassion will be needed as relatively more people grow old enough to begin the painful slide into dementia.

The church also should take more of a lead in helping families discuss the problems of aging and dementia. Perhaps this would be a better topic for an adult class than some of the usual oft-repeated fare. Perhaps there is research that shows whether many families thoughtfully discuss and plan for the possibility of dementia in an aging family member, but my limited anecdotal evidence suggests such honest interaction is rare. Though it is a topic no one wants to face, is politely ignoring it until dementia is evident a wise choice? Perhaps this is one way to update the care the 1st century church showed to the widows of its day, when they displayed sensitivity and practical ministry to the unfortunate brokenness of life afflicting those who could no longer care for themselves.

Biblical faith requires assuming some certainties. We remain God’s covenant people regardless of the illness that afflicts us. Though the result of the fall, illness, including dementia is no cause for shame. It is God’s grace not our memory that assures us of his love, presence, and acceptance. Even unlikable, difficult patients are worthy of care because they retain God’s image. Family caregivers are worthy of care for the same reason. Loving, safe, and trusted community should assist

caregivers in the difficult task of determining when the patient has outgrown their ability to care for them and needs professional attention. And caregivers need to be helped to see that receiving care themselves is not a sign of weakness or cause for shame.

This past weekend Margie and I visited a beloved maternal aunt of mine suffering from Alzheimer’s. Each visit the disease is more evident, her memory more ravaged, her functioning declining, her emotional swings less rational and more abrupt. When I was a child being with her was a safe place for me, when I felt acceptance rather than the solemn watchfulness on the lookout for my next, inevitable failure that was my constant companion at home. Some of the changes in her are almost amusing, in a perverse way. ▶



She’s had fisticuffs with some of her fellow patients, men in the facility who were, she said, harassing someone and she wasn’t going to put up with it. She’s even taken to occasionally swearing, my dear Fundamentalist aunt standing next to her bedside table where her old worn King James Bible lies open to her reading for the day. I know it is not her, not really, but the disease. As it is when she rails angrily at me for taking her cane with us when we take her out to lunch. While we eat she asks the same question six times, and we answer each time as if we hadn’t heard it before. Besides the vital addition of prayer, there seems to be little practical difference to our response as Christians to my aunt’s dementia and the care outlined for Fiona in *Away From Her*. Nor need there be any difference, given the grandeur and extent of God’s common grace expressed so freely in his creation. She claims she stays in her room alone, but the staff tells us otherwise, and when we arrive for lunch she seems happy sitting with the other residents in the main lounge. In the car she tells us she avoids the lounge. I have always been able to make her laugh, and I am happy this grace remains. Over lunch I tell her stories from our past, and it makes her happy to remember through my memories. The fact that I am repeating some of the same stories from the last visit is a secret that breaks my heart.

The church needs to be alert to growing despair as people watch loved one’s lose their memory. To gently remind them that though forgetting is sad beyond words, the final grace is not our remembering God but his remembering us. St Paul himself contrasts the two modes of knowing (Galatians 4:9). God’s people, the apostle assures us, are “known by God” (1 Corinthians 8:3). And that is the certain memory—the only fully certain memory—in which we can finally, fully hope. ✱



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What impressed you most about *Away from Her*? Why?
2. Have you experienced watching someone close to you slide into dementia or Alzheimer’s? What part of the experience seemed hardest to accept? How did they change as the disease advanced?
3. Sometimes the onset of dementia or Alzheimer’s can seem to bring a measure of relief to the person suffering the disease. “People think it’s a terrible tragedy when somebody has Alzheimer’s,” author Amy Tan says. “But in my mother’s case, it’s different. My mother has been unhappy all her life. For the first time in her life, she’s happy.” How is it that the brokenness of this sad world can produce such abnormal things?
4. To what extent have you considered what it would look like to age gracefully? Whom have you known who achieved that grace?
5. To what extent does the church thoughtfully address the topics raised in *Away from Her*? If there seems to be reluctance, what might be the reason?
6. Do you know someone who is a caregiver for an elderly member of their family? Does the caregiver receive adequate care for their task?
7. One striking aspect of *Away from Her* is that it was directed and written (screenplay based on a short story by Alice Munro) by Sarah Polley who was 28 years old at the time she made the film. Discuss the various aspects of the film (lighting, sets, dialogue, direction, music, etc.) with this in mind.
8. Read the texts of Scripture mentioned in this article. What does the Bible teach about memory, remembering, and forgetting that seems most important to you at this point in your spiritual pilgrimage? Why?

FOR FURTHER READING

Real Love for Real Life: The Art and Work of Caring by Andi Ashworth (Colorado Springs, CO: Shaw Books; 2002) 176 pages.

Another Country: Navigating the Emotional Terrain of Our Elders by Mary Pipher (New York, NY: Riverhead Books; 1999) 328 pages.

Calvin on Offense When Christians Offend Christians

Several years ago I was speaking at a large weekend annual conference on the East Coast, leading several breakout sessions and giving one plenary. I had been asked to address popular culture so one breakout was on music and the other on film. Usually the conference consisted of lectures, I had been told, so the organizers were pleased I was going to use film clips in my main talk. The audience was skewed towards an older demographic—there were a handful of

people in their 20s and 30s, a few more in their 40s, and the majority were older. In situations like this I've learned that some folk are easily offended, so I used scenes that contained no bad words or nudity or violence or sex—everything I showed could have appeared on television. In fact, far edgier scenes appear on television every day, but that's beside the point. Actually, the Bible contains far edgier scenes, but that's beside the point too. I wanted to help my listeners think about living faithfully as Christians in a world saturated by popular culture, not get into a debate about R-rated movies. That's an issue I'm very happy to address, but this day it was a tangent that would take us off topic—the Q&A period was too brief to do it justice.

After my talk a group of young adults asked if they could eat lunch with me. We had a wonderful conversation and I found them to be delightfully thoughtful, in love with the gospel but uncomfortable with the church. One was the

vocalist for a death metal band.

Later that afternoon my host took me aside and thanked me for my lecture. He mentioned a group needed to talk to me—he had told them they needed to do so but was unsure whether they would. (Sadly, they didn't.) During my plenary they had walked out, gone back to their hotel rooms and spent the hour praying that God would protect the conference from the demonic influence I was allow-

ing in with my use of film. They told my host that they had been deeply offended and would never attend the conference again.

Growing up in the church I found that certain phrases from Scripture seemed to carry particular weight. It was important not to “stumble” people or to cause them “offense,” because the apostle Paul had warned against such things in 1 Corinthians 8. If we failed at this point our testimony could “be destroyed” and that was something no

Christian wanted to have on their conscience. Even if we were convinced our actions were right and proper, we must “please” the other person for their “good” and be careful “not to please ourselves” (Romans 15). The apostle even gave practical examples of what he was talking about so no misunderstanding could arise. “It is good,” the apostle argued, “not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother [or sister] to stumble” (Romans 14:21).

The Christians at the conference were offended at my ▶



use of film clips. Over the years I've known Christians who have been stumbled by all sorts of things: bad words in a movie, *Rolling Stone* on a coffee table, drinking wine, nudes in an art museum, contemporary praise music, traditional worship music, rock music, never attending Sunday school, sipping single malt, smoking a cigar with old friends, having a tattoo.

Offense can arise even when the offended party agrees that no wrongdoing was involved. “There is nothing sinful about it,” one woman said, “but it offends me.” The woman had a Baptist background, and objected when her Presbyterian daughter ordered a glass of wine with dinner at a restaurant. She enjoyed wine herself occasionally, she said, but only at home, never in public where anyone could see you who might be stumbled. “It's offensive the way you Presbyterians flaunt your freedom,” she said.

All of this raises intriguing questions for the thoughtful Christian. When does giving and taking offense become spiritually problematic? Since the film clips offended some of the Christians in the audience, should I have used them? Did I need to apologize for offending them? What are the proper biblical limits to embracing the freedom we have in Christ? Should the Presbyterian daughter never order wine in public because it offends her Baptist mother? And what role, if any, should our witness to Christ and his gospel before the world become part of the issue?

What did Calvin say?

There are a number of ways I could approach answering these questions. I could simply go back to the texts of Scripture involved, analyze their meaning and provide some ideas about how we could respond in how we think and live. And we'll do that, but I want to also take into account the fact that we are not the first generation who has had to wrestle with this issue. We are not the first to have to reflect on these texts of Scripture and figure out what it means to live faithfully under their direction. As always when I study the Scriptures, I want to find a way to help make certain I am not inadvertently captive to the prejudices of my own culture and

period of history. One way to help with that is to consider what orthodox teachers from previous centuries have said about the texts we are studying. In this case we'll use John Calvin (1509-1564).

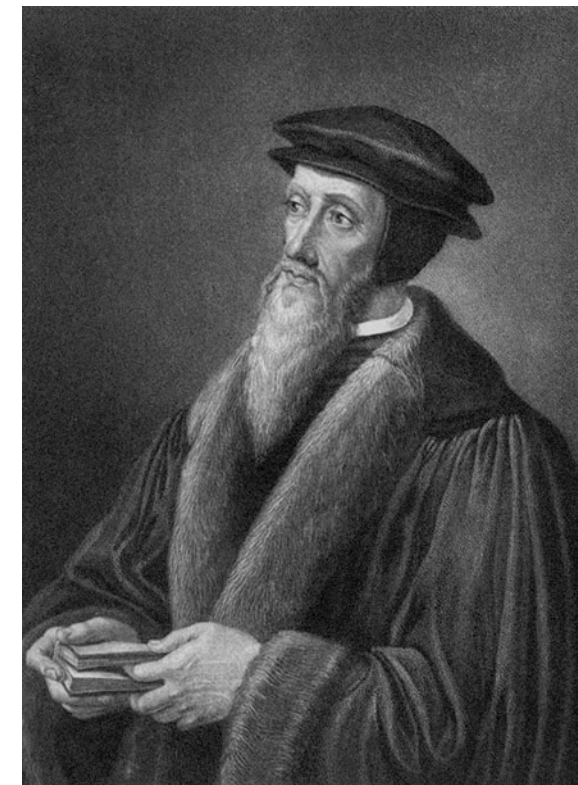
I reread Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* last year and was intrigued with what he wrote on this topic. As I think you'll see, his comments are remarkably applicable for the 21st century. Calvin was a lawyer known for careful scholarship, and unfortunately more than a few theologians have taken his thinking and reworked it into a rather cold, academic, abstract theological system. Calvin, on the other hand, I find to be warm, biblical, and practical. His concern was that the people of God would know God through Christ, love, understand and obey God's word in Scripture, and in gratitude for grace live faithfully to God's glory. So, let's get started.

I know this is a lot to ask in our busy world, but I would urge you to take the time as you read to look up the biblical texts I reference. I've written out quotes from Calvin because all readers will not have easy access to his works, but you do have access to a Bible so I don't always quote the text involved.

In the *Institutes*, Calvin addressed the issue of giving and taking offense in his chapter on Christian Freedom (chapter 19, sections 10-13). [By the way, for those who want to know, I am using the two-volume version of the *Institutes* translated by Ford Lewis Battles.] That's where it belongs because the question we are really asking is whether we are free to do something if that act causes someone offense.

For Calvin, the biblical doctrine of Christian freedom—or liberty in Christ—was of real significance. He referred to it as “an appendage of justification” (an essential aspect of being right with God), and therefore “a thing of prime necessity.” If it is neglected,

he said, believers will be plagued with doubt and made fearful and hesitant—all needlessly. He was keenly aware that the topic of freedom often roils up heated debate in the church, where differences of opinion can be difficult to resolve. ▶



Text **Denis Haack**

For, as soon as Christian freedom is mentioned, either passions boil or wild tumults rise unless these wanton spirits are opposed in time, who otherwise most wickedly corrupt the best things. Some, on the pretext of this freedom, shake off all obedience toward God and break out into unbridled license. Others disdain it, thinking that it takes away all moderation, order, and choice of things. What should we do here, hedged about with such perplexities? Shall we say good-bye to Christian freedom, thus cutting off occasion for such dangers? But, as we have said, unless this freedom be comprehended, neither Christ nor gospel truth, nor inner peace of soul, can be rightly known. Rather, we must take care that so necessary a part of doctrine be not suppressed, yet at the same time that those absurd objections which are wont to arise be met.

[III.19.1, p. 834]

Apparently some things in the 16th century are very similar to those in the 21st.

This is classic Calvin. His interest here is not simply doctrinal. Instead his interest flows out of a practical concern as a pastor for the people of God. In his view, the doctrine of Christian freedom must be taught, with care taken to correct misunderstandings, so that extreme views on either side—either license on the one hand or legalism on the other—may be adequately addressed. Far too much is at stake—“neither Christ nor gospel truth, nor inner peace of soul, can be rightly known”—for us to sidestep this potentially difficult, even divisive area, of biblical instruction. I think it would be wise for church elders and parents to reflect on Calvin’s insistence on this point so that neither a tendency to avoid conflict nor an assumption that the doctrine of Christian liberty is of secondary importance leads inadvertently to a lack of clear teaching on the topic.

Calvin on Christian Freedom

For Calvin there are three essential parts to the doctrine of Christian freedom. The first is that because of the cross we are free from what is called “works righteousness”—the notion that our good works can in any way earn or merit the grace or favor of God. Calvin’s concern, in his words, is “that the conscience of believers, in seeking assurance of their justification before God, should rise above and advance beyond the law, forgetting all law righteousness.” [III.19.2, p. 834]. In other words ▶



the Christian should understand and believe that we are free from the burden of proving ourselves by works. Our being a child of God is not determined by what we do or don’t do, and nothing we do or don’t do earns God’s favor. This, Calvin believed, is something essential to the gospel of grace. It is also, I think, something that many evangelicals do not grasp, and so feel the weight of having to perform in order to feel accepted by God and by his people.

The second element in the doctrine of Christian freedom, Calvin taught, is related to what is called the “third use of the law.” This refers to the notion that God’s law given in Scripture has three uses. The first use of God’s law is to convict people of sin in their life, of what is present in their acts or thoughts or imagination that is contrary to the standard of God’s holiness and glory. The second use of God’s law is to help restrain evil in a fallen world. Even secularists recognize that civil society is impossible without a proper legal and ethical structure to keep things from descending into anarchy. Finally, the third use of God’s law involves the fact that in revealing his law to us God reveals what is pleasing to him. Since his people are redeemed by grace, accepted in Christ, we are then free to serve and obey God through gratitude and not necessity. We keep his law because he loves us, not to earn his love. Calvin’s concern is that believers, “freed from the law’s yoke they willingly obey God’s will” [III.19.4, p. 836]. Calvin believed that unless our true freedom is understood and embraced, a Christian’s good works will be a matter of meriting approval—from God and man—instead of flowing out of a heart simply overwhelmed with gratitude for the amazing grace and love bestowed on us in Christ. Sadly, many evangelicals never experience this profound freedom to serve in love rather than duty. They do or don’t do things primarily through guilt, or because they fear missing God’s approval, or because they know friends or church leaders will disapprove. They need to hear the good news of the gospel.

So, Calvin believed that the doctrine of Christian freedom was important because first, we need to be free from any sense of works righteousness (the need to earn approval by what we do or don’t do) and second, so that we could be free to serve God and our fellow creatures out of love and gratitude. Calvin identified a third essential element in the biblical teaching of Christian freedom. This is that the believer is free to embrace God’s good creation and receive his good gifts in life without endless rules—Calvin called them “superstitions”—that appear spiritual but do nothing to promote true maturity ▶



in Christ. Thus, he said, “regarding outward things that are of themselves ‘indifferent,’ we are not bound before God by any religious obligation preventing us from sometimes using them and other times not using them, indifferently” [III.19.7, p. 838]. He has in mind St Paul’s teaching that “everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer” (1 Timothy 4:4-5). Calvin says we can identify a simple principle to guide our understanding and application of this aspect of Christian freedom. “To sum up, we see whither this freedom tends: namely, that we should use God’s gifts for the purpose for which he gave them to us, with no scruple of conscience, no trouble of mind. With such confidence our minds will be at peace with him, and will recognize his liberality toward us.” [III.19.8, p. 840]. In other words, we are free to embrace and enjoy the grace of God in his good creation, without fearing that his gifts come bundled with all sorts of regulations and rules. Culture and the arts, good food and drink, rest and work, hospitality and silence, education and skill—we are free in Christ to enjoy all that God has provided in his creation.

Calvin on Weak and Strong

Calvin was a pastor, however, and knew that there is a practical problem involved in the proper understanding and embrace of this grand freedom we have in Christ. The problem is that some people are very weak in faith. Perhaps they are new believers, or have gone through a period of enormous disappointment, or have become overwhelmed with doubts and questions and uncertainty. So, while Calvin recognizes and celebrates the freedom we have in Christ, he also cautions against using that freedom in ways that will cause injury to those who are weak in faith. Some, he says, have turned liberty into something that wounds others unnecessarily and makes their faith more tenuous. “They use their freedom indiscriminately and unwisely,” he says, “as though it were not sound and safe if men did not witness it. By this heedless use, they very often offend weak brothers” and sisters [III.19.10, p. 842]. So eager are they to express the freedom that is theirs in Christ they ignore the fact their freedom is inexplicable and perhaps deeply problematic to a believer whose faith is so weak as to be near the edge of unbelief.

Loving weaker sisters and brothers must be such a priority that we willingly forgo our freedom for their sake. This does not mean, however, that we are therefore at the mercy of all who might claim “offense.” Calvin acknowledg-

es that exercising the freedom we have in Christ might not always be fully appreciated by others who witness it. “It is sometimes important for our freedom to be declared before men,” he says. “Yet we must with the greatest caution hold to this limitation, that we do not abandon the care of the weak, whom the Lord has so strongly commended to us” [III.19.10, p. 842].

Calvin is correct here because the apostolic tradition about this in the New Testament is indisputable. “As for the one who is weak in faith,” St. Paul writes in Romans 14:1, “welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.” The apostle mentions two specific issues that were being quarreled over in the 1st century, an omnivore versus a vegetarian diet, and the identification of certain dates as having religious significance. Sadly, they are still being argued about in some circles today. It is the weak Christian for whom such things are an issue of conscience, Paul says, and those who are strong in faith are forbidden to pass judgment on them [Romans 14:4, 10].

In his commentary on Romans 14:1, Calvin defines the strong as “they who have made the most progress in Christian doctrine,” and the weak as “more ignorant,” meaning those less mature or advanced in understanding and applying biblical teaching. These weak believers, he says, are those “who, except they are treated with great tenderness and kindness, will be discouraged, and become at length alienated from religion.” At stake, in other words, is not people who might feel offended but people for whom the stability and continuance of their faith is in question. Commenting on Romans 15:1, Calvin defines the strong as those who have “made more advances than others in the knowledge of God.” ▶



Calvin points out, in commenting on 1 Corinthians 8:9, that the apostle “expressly desires that regard be had to the weak, that is, to those who are not yet thoroughly confirmed in the doctrine of piety.”

It is clear that Calvin sees the intentional limitation to freedom as not an issue of trying to please everyone’s whims that might feel offended, but an honest concern to show grace to those whose faith might totter or collapse. The weak Christian’s lack of knowledge and growth requires

sacrificial love on the part of those who are stronger. What they do not need is a defiant insistence on freedom that could breed doubt, confusion, or even unbelief in them. It is a matter of love, in other words, of a willingness to sacrifice for the sake of another person’s growth in Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 8:7-13, St Paul warns Christians not to offend those who are weak in faith. In this text he is discussing if it is acceptable for Christians to eat meat purchased in a pagan marketplace where the seller might have offered

it to an idol. He points out that idols are not truly divine, and in fact have no ontological (or real) existence as a rival to the true God. Therefore, eating the meat offered to them need not trouble us as a spiritual problem. But then the apostle issues a warning that all Christians must take seriously.

However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Food will not commend us to God.

We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

The issue is not that certain believers feel offended by something we do. They may feel offended or not—it simply doesn’t matter. The issue is whether we know of someone whose faith is precarious enough that our freedom might put them over the edge into doubt and unbelief. If so, then we are to give up our freedom for their sake.

“This is the kind of offense that Paul reproves in the Corinthians,” Calvin writes, “when we induce weak brethren, by our example, to venture upon anything against their conscience.” We must never encourage people to violate their conscience. Their conscience may be deeply skewed, of course, and so may need to be shaped and molded by the standard of God’s word. They will have no opportunity to mature in this way, however, if we, by what we say or do encourage them to violate their conscience and collapse their faith.

Calvin defines Paul’s phrase, “become a stumbling block” as “they emboldened the ignorant to hurry on, contrary to conscience, to attempt what they did not think it lawful for them to do.” Paul says that when a strong Christian inappropriately insists on exercising their freedom, “the weak person is destroyed.” Calvin translates the phrase a bit differently, “And thy brother perish.” And then he comments, “Mark how serious an evil it is, that mankind commonly think so little of—that of venturing upon anything with a doubtful or opposing conscience.” Since Christ died for the weaker person, being disdainful of them is to be disdainful of Christ. Or, as Calvin puts it, “contempt of this kind is an open insult to Christ.”

In reality, both those who are strong and those who are weak are in danger of mistreating their brother or sister in Christ. As he discusses the controversy over eating meat or sticking to vegetables, for example, Paul warns, “Let not the ▶

Text **Denis Haack**

one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats” (Romans 14:3). In his commentary on this text Calvin expands and explains the apostle’s meaning this way:

They who were strong had this fault, that they despised those as superstitious who were scrupulous about insignificant things, and also derided them: these, on the other hand, were hardly able to refrain from rash judgments, so as not to condemn what they did not follow; for whatever they perceived to be contrary to their own sentiments, they thought was evil. Hence he exhorts the former to refrain from contempt, and the latter from excessive moroseness.

So far Calvin has stressed three important biblical teachings: first, he has rightly insisted on the importance of Christian freedom, second, he has noted that not all believers will necessarily appreciate the biblically appropriate liberties taken by their brothers and sisters, and third, he has argued that Christians must be eager to forgo their freedom in loving sacrifice for those who are weaker in faith, those who are in danger of slipping into doubt and unbelief.

So, it should be clear that we are not required to guess what might stumble some weak person somewhere and take this to be the limit for our freedom. Even if our intentions were honorable this would be nothing but the imposition of a legalism, a standard set for Christian behavior that is beyond that imposed by Scripture. What all this does mean is that in a loving community the weak will be helped to grow to take their place among the strong. Such growth will shape their conscience more in line with the truth of God’s word, and allow them greater enjoyment of the true freedom that is rightfully theirs in Christ. And because the strong love the weak, the strong will willingly sacrifice their freedom when necessary to give the weak space and time to grow towards greater maturity. If we need to limit our freedom it will be because we know a person weak in faith.

Weak offense v Pharisaical Offense

An important question remains. How should those who are strong in the faith respond not to weak believers, but to those whose offense is a matter of taste, or social etiquette, or cultural preference, or misguided doctrine, or some legalistic standard? At stake here is not the possibility of someone weak in faith being turned away from the faith, but rather the possibility of someone being offended by another believer’s behavior and then using their “offense” to disapprove, and control another’s expression of freedom. This is the situation I faced in my talk at the conference where people walked out, offended that I showed film clips. Their faith in Christ was in no danger of toppling. They would probably have been offended if such a possibility was suggested. Instead, they were offended by my freedom

and wanted their sense of offense to set the limits of freedom for everyone at the conference.

Calvin solves this issue by distinguishing two types of offense.

If you do anything with unseemly levity, or wantonness, or rashness, out of its proper order or place, so as to cause the ignorant and the simple to stumble, such will be called an offense given by you, since by your fault it came about that this sort of offense arose.

And, to be sure, one speaks of an offense as given in some matter when its fault arises from the doer of the thing itself. An offense is spoken of as received when something, otherwise not wickedly or unseasonably committed, is by ill will or malicious intent of mind wrenched into occasion for offense. Here is no ‘given’ offense, but those wicked interpreters baselessly so understand it. None but the weak is made to stumble by the first kind of offense, but the second gives offense to persons of bitter disposition and pharisaical pride. Accordingly, we shall call the one the offense of the weak, the other that of the Pharisees. Thus we shall so temper



the use of our freedom as to allow for the ignorance of our weak brothers, but for the rigor of the Pharisees, not at all!

[III.19.11, p. 843]

In Calvin’s understanding, then, it is possible for a Christian to offend another person without needing to be troubled by that fact. The real problem, according to the Scriptures is not the action that caused the offense, but the state of the heart of the believer that registered the offense. The question to be asked is not whether someone was offended, but whether someone was stumbled in their faith. If the person involved is weak in faith, then we should be concerned, if they are strong and merely put off by our actions, we need not be too concerned. Love does not require forgoing one’s liberty to please others (who are strong in faith but offended), but instead requires that we serve the other person (who is weak) so that their faith is not undermined.

To illustrate this biblical teaching, Calvin reflects on the controversy between Jesus and some Pharisees in Matthew 15.

We learn from the Lord’s words how much we ought to regard the offense of the Pharisees: He bids us let them alone because they are blind leaders of the blind (Matt. 15:14). His disciples had warned him that the Pharisees had been offended by his talk (Matt. 15:12). He answered that they were to be ignored and their offense disregarded

[III.19.11, p. 844]

Can you see how freeing this is? Instead of being held captive to the emotional reactions of Christians who want everyone to conform to their personal standards, we are free in Christ to ignore and disregard what is little more than a power play on their part.

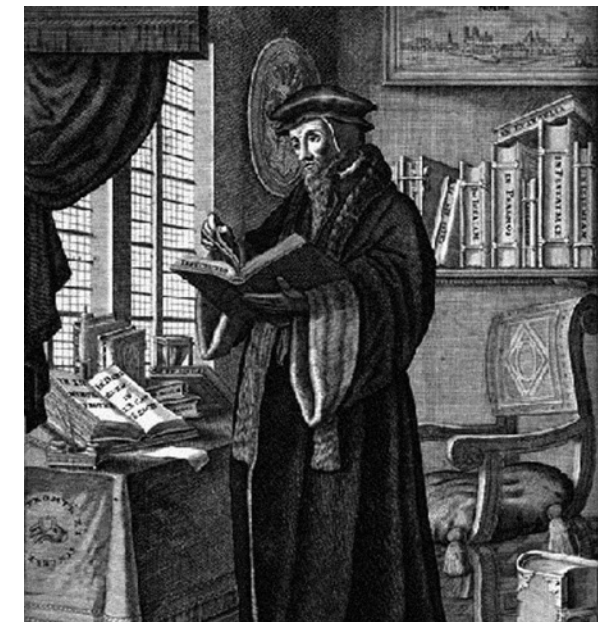
Another biblical example arises in Calvin’s commentary on Luke 11:37-41.

Jesus is at table with a group of Pharisees, but did not wash according to tradition before the meal. This did not escape the Pharisees’ notice, yet Christ neither apologizes nor washes to make up for the offense, but instead rebukes them. “Christ is fully aware that his neglect of this ceremony

will give offense,” Calvin says, “but he declines to observe it.” Christ has made us free, and this freedom, according to Scripture allows us—actually if we want to be like Christ it requires us—to disregard what Calvin terms “Pharisaical offense,” when strong Christians claim they are offended and want us to conform to their preferences. What they are doing via their offense is merely propagating legalism.

In the New Testament there is an interesting series of events involving whether a Christian should be circumcised. The apostles taught that since Christ fulfilled the law on our behalf and since baptism takes the place of circumcision this requirement in the law is no longer in force. We are free in Christ from the need to be circumcised as a sign of being part of God’s covenant people. That part was clear. Out of concern for weaker Jewish believers, however, Paul had Timothy circumcised, but in opposition to strong (and legalistic) Christians who insisted on the observance of the law for salvation Paul refused to have Titus undergo the same ceremony. Calvin argues that this is a clear biblical example of how to distinguish between weak and Pharisaical offense [III.19.12, p. 844-845]. In the one case Timothy freely sacrificed his freedom (and much more!) for the sake of weaker Christians, while on the other Titus refused to be controlled by believers who claimed they were offended by his life. “We must at all times seek after love,” Calvin concludes, “and look toward the edification of our neighbor” [III.19.12, p. 845]. Loving weak believers means not offending them, while loving Pharisaical believers means not giving in to them.

Refraining from the freedom that is ours in order to serve a weaker brother or sister is a grace that edifies everyone involved, but refraining from freedom in order to fulfill the demands of legalists serves to edify no one. It merely affirms the dangerous legalism of the offended Pharisee. There are times when faithfulness to God will result in offending some who



are not in danger of losing their faith but whose desire is to make others conform to their own extra-biblical standards. In such cases we must be careful to be faithful regardless of the resulting “offense” being claimed. “For,” Calvin says, “as our freedom must be subordinated to love, so in turn ought love itself to abide under purity of faith.” [III.19.13, p. 845].

A Few Final Reflections

I may be mistaken but it seems that questions about Christian freedom and causing offence arise fairly frequently in evangelical circles today. Some feel under pressure to never do anything that might offend others in their fellowship. For some the pressure has been sufficient to drive them from the church. Others simply operate below the church’s radar screen, unwilling to be bullied into conformity in nonessential areas. When strong believers use their own offense to set standards it doesn’t take long before these standards take on a sort of biblical significance. Soon they are so accepted that questioning them is interpreted as a sign of spiritual insensitivity or coldness. Disappointing Christian leaders can produce a rolling series of negative reactions.


It needs to be noted that in a world like ours that is increasingly post-Christian, this doctrine of freedom and causing offence is important as we live out our faith before a watching world. Many non-Christians, Tim Keller says in *The Reason for God*, are deeply disillusioned by a church culture that appears to outsiders to be both conformist and legalistic.

Pharisaic religion doesn’t just damage the inner soul; it also creates social strife. Pharisees need to shore up their sense of righteousness, so they despise and attack all who don’t share their doctrinal beliefs and religious practices. Racism and cultural imperialism result. Churches that are filled with self-righteous, exclusive, insecure, angry, moralistic people are extremely unattractive. Their public pronouncements are often highly judgmental, while internally such churches experience many bitter conflicts, splits, and divisions. When one of their leaders has a moral lapse, the churches either rationalize it and denounce the leader’s critics, or else they scapegoat him. Millions of people raised in or near these kinds of churches reject Christianity at an early age or in college largely because of their experience. For the rest of their lives, then, they are inoculated against Christianity [p. 179].

If Keller is correct, and I believe he is, he has provided one more reason both to teach the doctrine of Christian freedom with biblical care and to refuse to give in to the pressure of Pharisaical offense. We live not in isolation but before a watching world and are responsible to our Lord that what is seen in us is a clear demonstration of the gospel. And our care for those who are weak in faith is also of importance before a watching world as a sacrificial demonstration of the love that proves our relationship with the risen Christ [John 13:35].

I am not here suggesting that we delight in offending strong members of our community and simply set out to do it vigorously—a silly, childish option. “If possible,” St Paul writes, “as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Romans 12:18). We must pick our battles carefully and draw lines in the sand prayerfully. Many things are simply not worth dying for. The only option not open to us is always giving in to Pharisaical offense.

Calvin’s understanding of Christian freedom—as a necessary aspect of biblical doctrine; of the need to distinguish between the offense of the weak and the Pharisee; of the mandate that the strong in faith care tenderly for the weak while ignoring the prideful pretensions of the legalist—is practical, pastoral and most important of all, biblically orthodox. It is not a matter of flaunting our liberty—though our deceitful hearts are capable of even this perversion—but of embracing the grace of true freedom that Christ died to give us. ❀



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600 Songs in 2 Volumes, And Counting

Text Denis Haack



Bob Dylan is not merely an entertainer, though he has entertained millions over the years, and it is a mistake to think of him in such terms. He is a poet who has captured the essence of our time in his music, so that those of us who have yearned for insight into the meaning of things might be able to see below the surface of events. Dylan’s poetry is deeply rooted in reality but always in a way that transcends the details of the here and now to touch on the deeper questions of life and meaning and spirituality and death. “Dylan’s is an art,” Christopher Ricks says, “in which sins are laid bare (and resisted), virtues are valued (and manifested), and the graces brought home. The seven deadly sins, the four cardinal virtues, and the three heavenly graces: these make up everybody’s world—but Dylan’s in particular.”

What is significant is not merely that phrases from his lyrics have made their way into the patterns of our speech, but that his lyrics help unpack the loud and demanding cacophony that is daily life in a media-saturated world so that we can begin to make some sense of who we are, where we are, and why it matters. Over the decades his songs have appeared like signposts for me, pointing in some direction when so much of life and society and the church seems to be going in circles.

Please understand what I am claiming here. It is not just that I like his music, though I do. It is not just that I think his unceasing musical output has been creatively stunning, though I believe it is. It is not that I disdain people who don’t like his voice or albums, because liking his art really has nothing to do with it. I am claiming he is a poet—perhaps *the* poet—for my generation, and that in his lyrics is a record of our time, for blessing and for curse. We may listen to the news to know some of what’s happening and read history books for some of the context, but for unpacking a deeper level of understanding we need to listen to poets. It is the poets who have always provided a way to sort the significant from the meaningless, a way to see the glimmers of light hidden in the shadows of our dark world. And from that perspective, Bob Dylan is the voice that time and again has swept aside the distracting details covered with such mind-numbing repetition in media and gossip to expose the heart and soul of what truly matters.

In two volumes Clinton Heylin, a prolific writer on popular culture, has produced a chronological (according to when the songs were written) commentary on all the songs written by Bob Dylan. *Revolution in the Air: The songs of Bob Dylan, 1957-1973* and *Still On the Road: The Songs of Bob Dylan, 1974-2006* include notes, historical background, and reflection on the 600 titles Dylan penned over those 49 years. Not everyone will necessarily be interested in reading Heylin’s two volumes, but those interested in Dylan, popular culture, and the significant signs of our times will want access to them. ❀

RECOMMENDED

Revolution in the Air: The songs of Bob Dylan, 1957-1973 (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press; 2009) 450 pages + bibliography, and indices.

Still On the Road: The Songs of Bob Dylan, 1974-2006 (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press; 2010) 497 pages + notes, bibliography, and indices.

SOURCE

Dylan’s Visions of Sin by Christopher Ricks (New York, NY: HarperCollins Books; 2003)

Science, Creation and the Bible

Understanding the Genesis Creation Story



As Christians a basic and essential article of our faith is that we believe that God has not remained silent but has revealed himself to his creatures. God's revelation, we believe, appears in nature that he spoke into being by his word, in the living Word Christ Jesus our Lord, and in the written word, the Scriptures given through prophets and apostles. Further, we believe God's word is one, so that these three are one revelation, and not contradictory or confused. The Father has not revealed one thing in his Son, another in his Creation and a third in the Bible so that we must somehow pick and choose among a series of mutually exclusive claims, conflicting ideas, or contradictory doctrines. Creation, Scripture, and Christ do not go against one another in their revelation of God, for one God, Father, Son, and Spirit has revealed himself in all three.

I have no data to back this up, but I suspect that more than a few non-Christians might have difficulty believing we actually believe that. I think we give them good reasons to doubt our claim, especially when it comes to reconciling what is revealed in nature and in the Scriptures, in the claims of science and a theology of creation.

In 1988 the evangelical theologian John Stott engaged in a thoughtful exchange of ideas with David Edwards, a lib-

eral theologian in *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Hodder & Stoughton). In the process of their discussion Stott made an important point about God's word in creation and Scripture:

Nature and Scripture are both divine revelation ("general and special," "natural and supernatural," to use the traditional terms), since God has revealed himself both in the world he has made and in Christ and the biblical witness to Christ. Science is the fallible human interpretation of nature, while theology (or "tradition," which is theological reflection) is the fallible human interpretation of Scripture. You and I believe (I think) that in nature and Scripture there are certain given things, data (although they relate to largely different spheres), which, if they truly come from God, cannot contradict one another. The contradictions have not been between nature and Scripture, but between science and theology, that is, between different human interpretations of God's double revelation. If, therefore, we are to learn lessons from the past, it is neither for conservatives to deny the evidence of nature, nor for liberals to deny the evidence of Scripture, but for all of us to re-examine our interpretations of both.

It is necessary, Stott says, for Christians to "re-examine our interpretations of both." I believe that to be true, but it is a proposal fraught with difficulty. Some evangelicals resist the notion altogether and see any re-examination as the first step towards liberalism or in allowing the latest theories of unbelieving scientists to overturn the instruction of God's word. It is one thing to be aware of the dangers of thinking wrongly, but it is another thing to allow those dangers to keep us from thinking rightly. We must not do that—the refusal to seek the truth is a repudiation of following Christ, ▶

who claimed to be nothing less than truth incarnated (John 14:6). Rather than fear the search for truth we will find, as Jesus promised, that in the truth we discover the freedom God has always intended for us (John 8:32).

The work of careful scholars—scientists and theologians—can help us in our task. And in *Science, Creation and the Bible* we find just such help. The authors are Richard Carlson (physics professor at the University of Redlands) and Tremper Longman III (biblical studies professor at Westmont College). You may not agree with all they write, but they what they write is important to consider with care. Carlson and Longman are committed to truth, believing as I do that all truth is God's truth. But I should let them speak for themselves:

We profess our deep commitment to Christian faith and the biblical teaching about creation. At the same time, we believe contemporary science addresses questions on how physical and biological processes began and continue to develop, while theology and philosophy answer why for the same questions. The creation-evolution conflict hinges on two issues: (1) the question of the trustworthiness of contemporary scientific understanding of the beginnings of the universe, the earth and life on the earth, and (2) the question of the faithful reading of the two creation passages in Genesis 1:1-2:3 and Genesis 2:4-25 in their literal or nonliteral forms.

Why would such a long-standing conflict concern us? First, our purpose is to encourage all Christians to ground their theological and scientific beliefs in an impartial search for truth. Second, we want to remove false barriers that discourage non-Christians from considering the Christian gospel. We want to attempt to present an accurate description of both the scientific and the theological enterprises, including suggestions for a systematic reading of the Bible. Above all, we hope to suggest a way to resolve the creation-evolution conflict and bring conciliation between scientific and spiritual truths that underlie faith. To that end we propose the following thesis:

The first two chapters of Genesis, which accurately present two accounts of creation in terms of ancient Hebrew scientific observations and their historical understanding, are neither historical nor scientific in the twenty-first-century literal sense. Instead, the underlying message of these chapters applies for all time and constitutes a complete statement of the worldview of the Hebrew people in the

ancient Near East. They accurately understood the universe in terms of why God created it but not how in the modern scientific and historical sense. This worldview, markedly different from those of their pagan neighbors, articulates the principles underlying their understanding of the relation of God to the universe, their relation to the true God, and their relation to each other and to the created order.

Science, Creation and the Bible is accessible to the lay reader, and short enough that even those unwilling to wade through long arguments on this topic can find the book helpful. Carlson and Longman develop the case for their conclusions clearly, allowing the reader to see each step of their thinking. They go back to basics in both science and theology, identify the assumptions they are making, and due to their shared scholarship can speak authoritatively about both science and biblical interpretation.

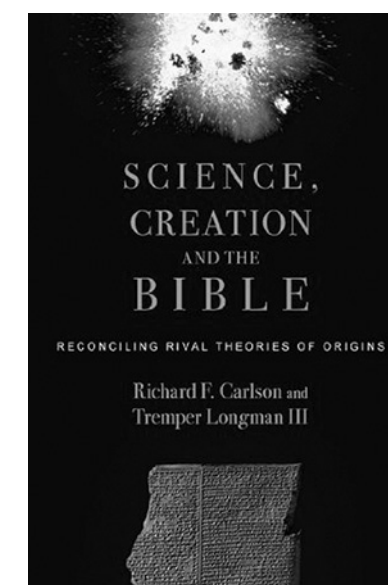
I recommend *Science, Creation and the Bible* to you. ❁

SOURCE

John R. W. Stott from *Essentials*, page 335.

BOOK RECOMMENDED

Science, Creation and the Bible: Reconciling Rival Theories of Origins by Richard F. Carlson and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2010) 144 pages.



Text Denis Haack

Handel’s *MESSIAH*
A Guided Tour
of a
Masterpiece

Some works of art survive the test of time, touching hearts, minds and imaginations across both generations and cultures. One such work is Handel’s *Messiah*, which was performed for the first time in April 1742 when the composer was 57 years old. It has been performed countless times since, texts of Scripture set to music both stirring and adoring. Within ten years of composing the piece, health problems and deteriorating eyesight would effectively end Handel’s work as a composer. He died in 1759.

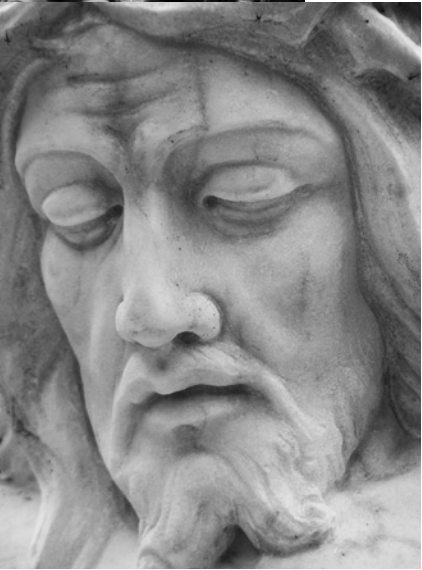
In *Handel’s Messiah*, Calvin College music professor (emeritus) Calvin Stapert introduces us to Handel, his times, his music and then walks us carefully through the famous oratorio. And when I say he does this for us, I mean non-musicians who love music and want to know more. “I simply wish,” Stapert says, “to supply some information, explanation, and interpretation that might enhance appreciation of *Messiah*.” He defines musical terms when he uses them—besides providing a glossary—and helps us know what to listen for in order to hear Handel’s work more fully.

Stapert suggests, and it is a good suggestion, that readers listen to *Messiah* as they read through the book. I suspect too few of us will do that (I doubt I will), and our lives will be poorer as a result. Good music should not just be on in the background as we drive or exercise or read or work. At times it needs to be the center of attention. To be too busy for good music is to be too busy.

I’m not scolding you. I’m making a note to myself. ❀

Book Recommended

Handel’s Messiah: Comfort for God’s People by Calvin R. Stapert (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; 2010) 152 pages + glossary, notes, indices.



Text Denis Haack

Loving People...
On Relationships,
And All That

The Bible makes it clear that God’s covenant people are to be characterized by love. He loves us and is our God, and in gratitude for that unimaginable grace we love him and others. In *The Mark of the Christian*, Francis Schaeffer insisted that love was to be the essential, primary characteristic of Christians, actually setting us apart from the rest of humanity. He had good biblical reasons for making that argument, as these texts (out of many more I could have chosen) reveal:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; never be conceited. Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” [Romans 12:14-20]

A new commandment I [Jesus] give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. [John 13:34-35]

My [Jesus’] prayer is not for them [the apostles] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me [John 17:20-21].

Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. [Hebrews 12:14-15]

The end of all things is at hand; therefore keep sane and sober for your prayers. Above all hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins. Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another. As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God; whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies; in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. [1 Peter 4:7-11]

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But if any one has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth. [1 John 3:16-18]

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who keep his commandments abide in him, and he in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit which he has given us. [1 John 3:23-24]

Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. [1 John 4:7-12]

Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God, and every one who loves the parent loves the child.
[1 John 5:1]

Even a cursory reading of these texts raises questions for the discerning Christian. ❀



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- 1. What impresses you most about these texts? Is there anything in the contexts of these Scriptures that would change your impression of them, or your sense of their meaning?
- 2. Would your non-Christian friends think we Christians are living up to these standards? How do you know? Do you think we are living up to these standards? Why or why not?
- 3. Francis Schaeffer points out that according to the statements of Jesus—in John 13 and 17—our failure to be characterized by love gives the world reason to disbelieve in Jesus. More specifically, it gives them reason to doubt the reality of our faith and the fact that Jesus comes from God. How can we understand this without being eaten up with guilt?
- 4. What makes people so very hard to love?
- 5. What hindrances to love reside in us?
- 6. What reasons are given in these texts for the importance of love? How is love defined?
- 7. St Augustine said: “What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. That is what love looks like.” Do you agree? Why or why not? By this standard, are you a loving person?
- 8. Note the sentence in the Romans 12 text: *If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all.* How do we determine whether we have fulfilled this very realistic and thus reassuring provision without using it as an excuse to bail out of difficult relationships?
- 9. We cannot possibly have equally close relationships with everyone, because we are finite creatures. Even Christ had circles of closeness during his life on earth. How should we construct circles of closeness? How are the circles similar? How are they different? How do we deal with people who believe they should be in a closer circle than we have placed them?
- 10. Does this discussion suggest you need to take some action... perhaps to apologize to someone? ... perhaps to reconsider priorities and use of time? ...perhaps to intentionally develop circles of closeness based on your calling, vocation, health, etc.? ... perhaps to make the practical necessity of love a matter of prayer?
- 11. How can we take this discussion and these texts seriously without being motivated by guilt? Since the love of God should be the motivation of our love of him and others, how might we grow in love of him?

Text Denis Haack

What would Jesus wear? Or...



This is only my impression, but I tend to believe that Christians tend to fall into two major categories: people who wear “Christian Tees” and people who would not be caught dead in one. I promise to try to remain completely objective in this article and not let slip that I fall into the second category.

It’s not that I don’t wear Tees with slogans on them. I have one from despair.com that I love. It’s message is simple and to the point:

i > u

But wear Tees with “Christian” slogans? No.

A friend of mine—minister and artisan Mark Weathers of Providence Presbyterian (Concord, NC)—mentioned the topic in a sermon and then later, in a letter to his congregation. From which I extract a couple of quotes:

It is so easy in our freedom-of-speech country to flippantly speak out against authority and those in positions of leadership. This nonchalant attitude has so influenced the church to a point that we don’t think twice about what we say (or wear) when it comes to Christ. He is the King of Kings, and at the sight of him both Isaiah and John were driven to the ground in absolute humility. They didn’t bow because it was the proper thing to do. No, they bowed because they couldn’t do anything else—not even look at him. And it wasn’t until they experienced the touch of grace that gave them the ability to stand in God’s presence. On the point of Christian t-shirts, there are so many today that flaunt the obnoxious flippancy we have before God. Our allegiance to

Christ is poorly demonstrated through 100% cotton tees with some silk-screened piece of ‘borrowed’ art... which leads me to the next point.

There exists a host of Christian T-shirts whose images are nothing more than logo manipulations from popular establishments. To name a few:

HIS WAY (take off from SUBWAY)

All Faith: you’re in good hands (stealing from All State Insurance)

King of Kings (from Burger King)

Got Jesus? (from the Got Milk? campaign)

There are more examples but they’re too obnoxious to list. The point I make is that we—as God’s children who celebrate the reality of God’s image being restored in us—should not be stealing from capitalist America to communicate our allegiance. Further, it is we who should be leading the arts in excellency! All that we do in our areas of ‘creation’ should be excellent and praiseworthy.

All of which should probably be enough—along with the images on the back page of this issue, to launch some discussion. ❀

[Note: Please see the images on the Back Page.]

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- 1. Which category of Christian do you fall in concerning “Christian” Tees? Why? What is your impression of the people in the other category?
- 2. How can these two categories co-exist in the sort of loving fellowship Christ requires of his followers?
- 3. Weathers claims some of the slogans on “Christian Tees” involve “stealing.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
- 4. What slogans, or types of slogans, do you wear—or would you wear—on a Tee? Why?
- 5. Weathers says that “Christian” slogans based on company logos is a form of stealing. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- 6. If you were required to design a “Christian” Tee that you would be willing to wear, what would the slogan (and/or image) be?
- 7. What are the dangers when Christian witness is based on a slogan? What are the advantages? How should we sort out the pros and cons?

Text **Denis Haack**



Should Christians Wear This Sh**t?



Discerning Christians should probably reflect on the wisdom of wearing “Christian Tees.” On the one hand, it’s just a shirt; on the other we are intentionally saying something to the watching world about our faith. Do such slogans and images cheapen the gospel? Or do they alert our friends and neighbors that we take our faith seriously and commend it to them?



Note: See full article [on page 27].