

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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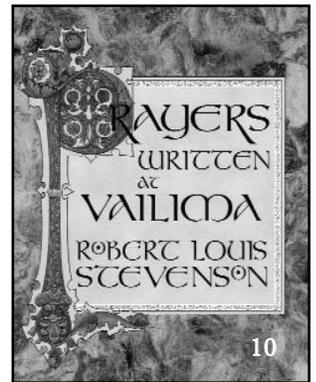
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Editor's Note

Those of you who have read previous issues of this newsletter may notice a few changes in this edition of *Critique*. Marsena Konkle, who is now Managing Editor, has increased its length by four pages, and redesigned it to make it more attractive. We hope you like the changes. I certainly do. (And by the way, what is less obvious to you, dear reader, but more obvious to me, is that she has also imposed publishing deadlines and word counts—two things I've never before faced in my 18 years as editor.)

That's right: 18 years. The first issue of this newsletter was mailed out in 1982, though it wasn't called *Critique*, and the mailing list was considerably smaller. Exactly six names, as a matter of fact. This small group of friends—primarily fellow campus staff members with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship—always had books, films, and articles to recommend when we saw each other, so I offered to serve as a clearinghouse for those resources. Send your recommendations to me, I told them, and I'll make sure everyone gets a list. And, truth be told, my offer did not arise, I might as well confess, from simple altruism. Since we saw one another infrequently, this seemed to me the best way to ensure that I wouldn't miss out on anything. So, alas, now you know, as Paul Harvey would say, the rest of the story: *Critique* was begun with less than fully pure motives.

In any case, I typed up a list of what they sent me, called it "World View Review," and mailed out two photocopied issues that first year. The next year saw five issues of the newsletter, and a new name, *Critique*. Then slowly, in a way that has never ceased to surprise me, word began to spread, people began to request that they be added to the mailing list, and the rest, as they say, is history.

One thing has never changed, however, and it remains true to this day. The purpose, right from the very beginning, has always been the same. To help Christians develop skill in discernment—though we haven't always expressed it in

precisely those words. Even back in 1982, there were brief reviews of films (*Time Bandits* and *Altered States*, as it happens), books (*The Arrogance of Humanism*), and articles from a variety of publications. And all with one goal in mind: to help believers think and live Christianly by helping them read the world in light of reading the Word. So, even if *Critique* looks different, our purpose remains constant.

We haven't added graphics and spiffed up *Critique's* appearance simply because we thought it a good way to begin a new millennium (though we did plan to introduce the new design with the first issue of 2000). Nor have we done it merely to attract new readers (though we hope that will be the case). We've done it because we believe truth that is separated from beauty isn't fully the truth, for the simple reason that the God of truth is also God most glorious. Asaph put it very well so many centuries ago: "The Mighty One, God, the LORD, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets. From Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth" (Psalm 50:1-2). As always, of course, our attempt to be faithful remains incomplete and faulty, but by God's grace, we trust this newsletter will in some small and feeble way witness to the splendor of his kingdom. ■

-Denis D. Haack

Critique

Issue 1, 2000



Developing Discernment
Deepening Discipleship

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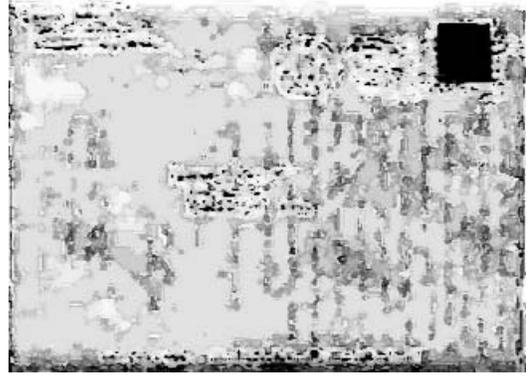
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Dialogue



Readers respond to Denis Haack's review of *The Matrix* (Critique #7-1999).

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

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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.

I read your review and found another opinion on the Focus on the Family (FOTF) website. Your review says [*The Matrix*] “addresses serious issues in such a thoughtful manner,” and that “was what intrigued my high school friends. They were eager to discuss the religious—actually, Christian symbolism woven throughout the plot, the interplay of reality and virtual reality, and whether anything was worth dying for in our fragmented world.”

FOTF also speaks of the spiritual content. “Mysticism and prophesies play a large role in the freedom fighters’ worldview [but] for every part Christian allegory, there’s equal parts Buddhism, Greek mythology, *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Terminator*.”

Frankly, [whether to see this movie] is not a very tough decision. This movie neither glorifies God, nor does it line up with what I know of God through prayer and study of His word. The FOTF review is right on the mark.

At the risk of being unpopular with the teens in our home, I agree with them.

John Billington
Mpls, MN

I gave your review of *The Matrix* to my daughter [Adrianna] and asked her to respond to some of your discussion questions. Your review filled an important gap in her experience, affirming her enjoyment of the movie but also steering her toward a more insightful response to it. Thanks so much for providing her with an avenue for processing her reactions to the movie.

Sue Radosti
Sioux City, IA

[Thanks to Adrianna Radosti for allowing us to print the following excerpt from her essay.]

The comparison [between the Oracle and Biblical Prophets] is quite interesting. Jesus did constantly surprise people with what he [said], as does the Oracle. But the Oracle got around to saying these things by a completely opposite route. She used things that were not true to get Neo to do things the way they were supposed to happen, such as telling him he wasn't The One so he could learn to believe it of his own accord. Good incentive. Bad way of carrying it out.

Neo's story-line is similar, in a sense, to that of Christ. Near the end of the movie, Neo is killed, but “rises again” to defeat the Agents (symbolizing Satan), and “saves” humanity from the clutches of The Matrix. Morpheus says something along the lines of: “There was one man, a long time ago, who could move through The Matrix and change things as he pleased...When he died, the Oracle prophesied his return. And when he returned, he would destroy The Matrix.” This symbolizes more the Second Coming than Christ's initial triumph, but the symbolism is there, just the same.

In conclusion, The Matrix, while being violent and profane, does have many religious undertones, though not always Christian themes.

Adrianna “Rizzo” Radosti
Sioux City, IA

Ever Been Bitter?

An Excerpt from Elisabeth Elliot's book, *Keep a Quiet Heart*.

Sometimes I've said, "O Lord, you wouldn't do this to me, would you? How could you, Lord?" I can recall such times later on and realize that my perspective was skewed. One Scripture passage which helps me rectify it is Isaiah 45:9-11 (NEB): "Will the pot contend with the potter, or the earthenware with the hand that shapes it? Will the clay ask the potter what he is making?...Thus says the Lord, would you dare question me concerning my children, or instruct me in my handiwork? I alone, I made the earth and created man upon it." He knows exactly what He is doing. I am *clay*. The word humble comes from the root word *humus*, earth, clay. Let me remember that when I question God's dealings. I don't understand Him, but then I'm not asked to understand, only to trust. Bitterness dissolves when I remember the kind of love with which He has loved me—He gave Himself for me. He gave Himself for me. *He gave Himself for me*. Whatever He is doing now, therefore, is not cause for bitterness. It has to be designed for good, because He loved me and gave Himself for me.

Is it a sin to ask God why?

It is always best to go first for our answers to Jesus Himself. He cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" It was a human cry, a cry of desperation, springing from His heart's agony at the prospect of being put into the hands of wicked men and actually *becoming sin* for you and me. We can never suffer anything like that, yet we do

at times feel forsaken and cry, *Why, Lord?*

The psalmist asked why. Job, a blameless man, suffering horrible torments on an ash heap, asked why. It does not seem to me to be sinful to ask the question. What is sinful is resentment against God and His dealings with us. When we begin to doubt His love and imagine that He is cheating us of something we have a right to, we are guilty as Adam and Eve were guilty. They took the snake at his word rather than God. The same snake comes to us repeatedly with

Many things have happened which I didn't plan on and which human rationality could not explain.

the same suggestions: Does God love you? Does He really want the best for you? Is His word trustworthy? Isn't He cheating you? Forget His promises. You'd be better off if you do it your way.

I have often asked why. Many things have happened which I didn't plan on and which human rationality could not explain. In the darkness of my perplexity and sorrow I have heard Him say quietly, *Trust Me*. He knew that my question was not the challenge of unbelief or resentment. I have never doubted that He loves me, but I have sometimes felt like St. Teresa of Avila who, when she was dumped out of a carriage into a ditch, said, "If this is the way You treat your friends, no wonder You have so few!" Job was not, it seems to me, a very

patient man. But he never gave up his conviction that he was in God's hands. God was big enough to take whatever Job dished out (see Job 16 for a sample). Do not be afraid to tell Him exactly how you feel (He's already read your thoughts anyway). Don't tell the whole world. God can take it—others can't. Then listen for His answer. Six scriptural answers to the question WHY come from: 1 Peter 4:12-13; Romans 5:3-4; 2 Corinthians 12:9; John 14:31; Romans 8:17; Colossians 1:24. There is mystery, but it is not all mystery. Here are clear reasons. ■

~Elisabeth Elliot

Source:

Keep a Quiet Heart by Elisabeth Elliot (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications; 1995) pp. 44-45.

Boredom

Adam and Eve Rested. But Were They Ever Bored?

Boredom is so common nowadays that most of us tend to assume it has always plagued the human race. At least since the Fall. Not necessarily, says author James Gleick.

Our idea of boredom—ennui, tedium, monotony, lassitude, mental doldrums—has been a modern invention. The word boredom barely existed even a century ago. To bore meant, at first, something another person could do to you, specifically by speaking too long, too rudely, and too irrelevantly. Boredom as silence, as emptiness, as time unfilled—was such a mental state even possible? Samuel Johnson, in the eighteenth century, believed it was not, for curious creatures such as ourselves. “To be born in ignorance with a capacity of knowledge,” he wrote, “and to be placed in the midst of a world filled with variety, perpetually pressing upon the senses and irritating curiosity, is surely a sufficient security against”—here no simple word came to his mind—“the languishment of inattention.”

And that—assuming the topic doesn't bore you, of course—is worth some thought. ■

~Denis D. Haack

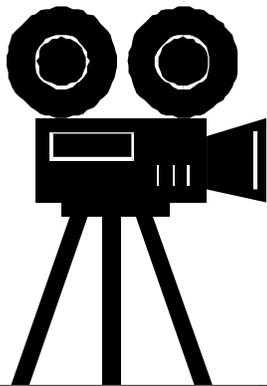
Source:

Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything by James Gleick (New York, NY: Pantheon Books; 1999) pp. 268, 270.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. When do you tend to feel bored? What is the source(s) of your boredom? How do you normally solve boredom?
2. Are there passages of Scripture which seem to speak directly to the topic of boredom? Are there biblical characters which are depicted as specifically suffering from it? If so, what do they teach concerning boredom? (Do commentators over the past 2000 years agree with your understanding of these passages?) And if we find no texts directly addressing the topic, what does that imply? What biblical principles might shed light, albeit indirectly, on the topic?
3. To what extent does our boredom relate to the conviction that it is wrong to have periods of time in which we have little or nothing productive to do? Are we so enamored with the modern secular ideal of productivity that unproductive periods of time seem wasteful (i.e., sinful) to us? Is such a conviction biblical? Why or why not?
4. What is the relationship between “unproductive periods of time” and the biblical meaning of rest? (Texts to consider: Genesis 2:1-3; Exodus 20:8-11; 31:12-17; 35:1-3; 2 Chronicles 36:20-21; Psalm 95; and Hebrews 4:1-16.) Do we break the 4th commandment because we fear being unproductive?
5. Since parents know that boredom can be a good gift for children—it often motivates them to greater creativity—is it possible that a similar relationship between boredom and creativity exists for adults? Why or why not?
6. “Perhaps you can judge the inner health of a land by the capacity of its people to do nothing,” Sebastian de Grazia wrote in 1962, “to lie abed musing, to amble about aimlessly, to sit having a coffee—because whoever can do nothing, letting his thoughts go where they may, must be at peace with himself.” What does this suggest about modern American society? About modern American evangelicals? To what extent do you think de Grazia's point is correct? Why? (To the extent you disagree with de Grazia's comment, rewrite it to reflect your convictions.) To what extent does de Grazia's comment resonate with the biblical call to rest?
7. Is there a relationship between our struggle with boredom and the fact that the traditional Christian disciplines (e.g., disciplines of meditation, solitude, waiting in prayer) are rarely taught and even more rarely practiced today?
8. Given your reflections here—not simply as an individual, but as you wrestle with the topic within the community of believers—what plans should you make to live more faithfully before the Lord?

Beautiful Obsession



A Review of American Beauty

by Dr. Andrew H. Trotter, Jr.

American Beauty, the first effort of director Sam Mendes and writer Alan Ball, is a remarkable production reminiscent of the best-made films of the '60s and '70s like *Midnight Cowboy* and *The Graduate*. Heavy in its existential despair, *Beauty* explores the relationship of death and art that

twentieth-century painting has made its obsession. Death as a beautiful thing, rather than as the defeated enemy that faith proclaims, splashes across the canvas of this rich cinematic experience with color, texture, rich dialogue and stellar performances. Leaving the theater, the Christian soul aches for the lostness of the human condition in the last year of our second millennium anno domini.

The story traces the life of Lester Burnham through the short period between the moment that he awakens from the doldrums of his deathly, boring existence to the moment in which he dies. Using a quotation of Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*, the film begins with a voice-over narration by Lester, telling us that he is dead, and promising to relate to us the events leading up to that death. If the haunting score by Thomas Newman, reminiscent of the same composer's fragile questioning in *The Player*, weren't enough, this opening moves us to the edges of our seats, and we know we are in for a long, hard, thoughtful evening.

Mendes is up to the task in every respect. His direction is fresh, innovative, and chillingly elegant. Two scenes from many illustrate his uncanny ability to make

what might in someone else's hands seem clichéd or overly stylized camera work, in fact coldly realistic. The shot of a crucial scene at a basketball game where the camera isolates Lester in the stands as he fantasizes about one of the cheerleaders rings with the clarity of every viewer's romantic notion that some moments exist just for us. Similarly, the devastating pan moving right to left from the gun that kills Lester through a profile of him to a picture of his family through a bowl of roses to the white wall soon to be covered by Lester's blood encapsules the entire movie as a great climactic shot should. Camera work this good is as rare as icebergs in the Caribbean.

Remarkable performances also abound. Kevin Spacey, perhaps the best actor in America today, takes the lead as the bumpkin Lester Burnham, though his physical attempts at stumbling and looking like a nerd are the least convincing part of his performance. He simply is too dangerous and intelligent-looking to be as milquetoast and moronic as he is portrayed throughout the early moments of the film. Nevertheless, Spacey uses his face and hands in extraordinary ways in both lustful and tender contexts of lovemaking. Not surprisingly, he gets better as his character grows more aware of his world and his own life. Annette Bening, playing Lester's manic wife Carolyn, goes over-the-top too often, but plays the wild stereotypical freak she is with a wide range of emotions, succeeding in the difficult task of making such an extreme character believable. All three teenagers in the movie turn in superb performances,



Film Credits

Starring:

Kevin Spacey
(Lester Burnham)
Annette Bening
(Carolyn Burnham)
Thora Birch
(Jane Burnham)
Wes Bentley
(Ricky Fitts)
Mena Suvari
(Angela Hayes)
Peter Gallagher
(Buddy King)
Chris Cooper
(Colonel Fitts)
Allison Janney
(Barbara Fitts)
Scott Bakula
(Jim #1)
Sam Robards
(Jim #2)

Director:

Sam Mendes

Writer:

Alan Ball

Producers:

Alan Ball
Bruce Cohen
Dan Jinks
Stan Wlodkowski

Music:

Thomas Newman

Cinematography:

Conrad L. Hall

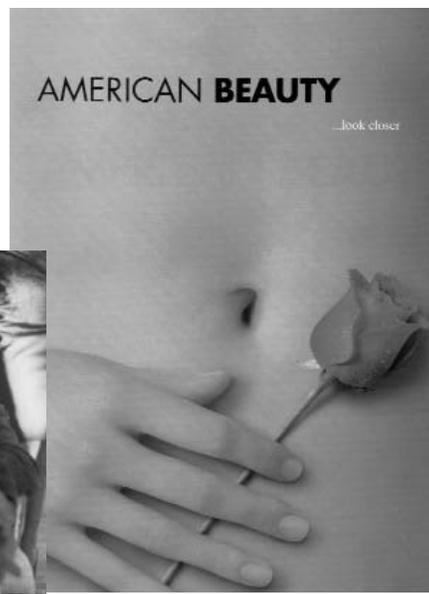
121 minutes
Rated R for strong
sexuality, language,
violence, and drug
content

and Chris Cooper, new neighbor to the Burnhams and a fanatical Marine colonel, continues his remarkable string of in-depth character portrayals, though he is given relatively little screen time.

The movie develops so many themes in so many ways that it is difficult to focus on one. Despair, anger, teen sexuality, marital fidelity, parent-child relationships at all levels, mid-life crisis, aggressive social climbing, homosexuality, murder, suburban rot—all are powerfully stated by everything from sharp dialogue and economical editing to the rich symbol of the title “character,” a class of rose known as an American Beauty.

Tragically, however, like hungry bears scrounging in the garbage bins of a campsite, Mendes and Ball rummage relentlessly in the rubbish of suburban American culture, scattering it throughout their film. The principals in the film’s production have all described the movie as a comedy, and it has

some very funny moments. But *Beauty* is by any stretch an ugly and difficult experience for the Christian viewer. The film is an important



Camera work this good is as rare as icebergs in the Caribbean.

one, though, for Christians to see if we are to live with understanding in the midst of a society full of lost, hungry souls.

American Beauty evinces a complete lack of real hope, even in Lester’s personal discovery and resolution. At the end of the film an uncannily beautiful video reappears, shot by Ricky, the neighbor’s son and the Burnham’s daughter’s boyfriend. Reiterating what Ricky has said in so many words earlier,

Lester tells us from the grave that “it’s hard to stay mad, when there’s so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I’m seeing it all at once, and it’s too much, my heart fills up like a balloon that’s about to burst...” In the wake of the massive assault of death and despair we have just experienced, the encouragement that, as an emotionally drained audience, we so desperately need, almost surfaces. The shot switches to an oft-used one, flying over the neighborhood where most of the action of the movie takes place, and Lester continues: “...and then I remember to relax, and stop trying to hold on to it, and then it flows through me like rain and I can’t feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life...”

After an almost imperceptible pause, Spacey says, “You have no idea what I’m talking about, I’m sure. But don’t worry”—and then the movie fades to black—“you will someday.” ■

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

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial or immediate reaction to the film? Why do you think you reacted that way?
2. What is the message(s) of the film? Where do you agree and disagree? Why? In the areas in which you disagree, how can you talk about and demonstrate the truth in a winsome and creative way?
3. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (casting, direction, script, music, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film’s message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling?
4. With whom did you identify in the film? Why? With whom were you meant to identify? Discuss each main character in the film and their significance to the story.
5. What insight does the film give into the way postmodern people see life, meaning, and reality? How can you use the film as a useful window of insight to better understand your non-Christian friends and neighbors?
6. Might the film be a useful point of contact for discussion with non-Christians? What plans should you make?

Post-modern Spirituality

Worth Discussing: Explorations of Spirituality found in a *Psychology Today* Article

For Christians who desire to read the world as they read the Word, the yearning for spirituality increasingly evident in postmodern culture is both welcome and significant. Welcome because it signals a shift away from the cold impersonal naturalism—so profoundly antithetical to the Christian world view—which has been so culturally dominant for so long. And significant because the pre-evangelism and apologet-

“Spirituality is essential to human happiness and mental health.”

ics developed to speak to naturalism are no longer sufficient. The issues raised by the new spirituality are remarkably different from those raised by the idea that reality finally consists of nothing more than matter and energy.

Evidence for this cultural shift, for this new yearning for spirituality can be found, as has been often remarked in this newsletter, in popular culture—which tends to both reflect and to mold the concerns and convictions of those who consume it. Evidence has also shown up in a myriad books and magazines, and Dr. Elkins’ article “Spirituality: It’s What’s Missing in Mental Health” published in *Psychology Today* is one of the most accessible of the lot. “I believe that spirituality is essential,” he writes, “to human happiness and mental health.” The beauty of his article is that in one brief, well-written piece, the essence of the new yearning—how spirituality is understood, sought, why, and its relationship to traditional religion—is clearly summarized. Though “Spirituality” is not all you need

to read on the topic, it is a great place to begin. Dr. Elkins also includes three helpful sidebars: “Four Great Ways to Begin Your Spiritual Journey,” a summary of some research into the healing effects of spiritual practices, and “Kabbalah Kraze,” on the popularity of this form of Jewish mysticism. And by the way, though Dr. Elkins teaches psychology at Pepperdine University and is the president of the Humanistic Psychology Division of the American Psychological Association, the article’s treatment of spirituality goes far beyond its relationship to therapy.

At the heart of his article, Dr. Elkins defines what he means by spirituality: “From the rain dances of Native Americans to the celebratory dances of Hasidic Jews, from the whirling dervishes of Islam to the meditating monks of Zen Buddhism, from the ecstatic worship services of charismatic churches to the solemn, silent meetings of the Quakers, spirituality takes on many expressions.

“The word spirituality comes from the Latin root spiritus, which means “breath”—referring to the breath of life. It involves opening our hearts and cultivating our capacity to experience awe, reverence, and gratitude. It is the ability to see the sacred in the ordinary, to feel the poignancy of life, to know the passion of existence and to give ourselves over to that which is greater than ourselves.

“Its aim: to bring about compassion. Its effect: good physical and mental health.”

Especially since back copies of *Psychology Today* are easily accessible we recommend you read and discuss “Spirituality: It’s What’s Missing in Mental Health” in small groups with fellow believers. Then read and discuss it with non-Christian friends and neighbors. It is both a window of insight into the hearts and minds of many of those who do not share our faith, and a point of contact to begin a conversation with them about some of the things that matter most. ■

—Denis D. Haack

Source:

“Spirituality: It’s What’s Missing in Mental Health” by David N. Elkins in *Psychology Today* (September/October 1999) pp. 45-48.

To find a copy of this article, check your public library. Or order a copy (cost is \$7.50 for each back issue) from *Psychology Today*, Back Issues, 49 East 21st Street, 11th Floor, New York, NY 10010.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION **AND DISCUSSION**

Window of insight questions for Christians:

1. What's being said? Identify the specific sentences in the article which best express Dr. Elkins' ideas or are essential to his argument.
2. Where do we agree? Identify the specific points and/or sentences with which we could agree. Then, only after that is completed, where do we disagree? Identify the specific points and/or sentences with which we as Christian would disagree. To what extent do the Christians in the group disagree with one another? What does that suggest?
3. What is the biblical understanding of spirituality and why do we believe it?
4. How can we express and demonstrate the Christian understanding of spirituality in our pluralistic culture in a way that is both win-some and understandable to those outside our faith?

Point of contact questions for discussion with non-Christians:

1. What's being said? Identify the specific sentences in the article which best express Dr. Elkins' ideas or are essential to his argument.
2. Where do you agree? Where do you disagree?
3. Why?
4. What difference does it make in your life?

A Poem

To Live in Love

All the other times that I was in Love, I was only visiting. I've passed through it many times and stayed in the hotels and visited the memorials and the amusement parks it's famous for and even found a few hidden places along the river that runs through it where I felt at home, but I've never stayed for long. I've never really been a resident of Love nor felt like I belonged there.

I've always secretly wanted a house in Love but could never afford one, or I was in a rush to get back to Hate, back to Jealousy, back to Goodenough or to that old hammock bivouacked in the boughs of an old oak by the lemonade stand just outside of Settleforlessboro. Now that I see how things work in Love I think I'd like to move in down here, buy some land, build a home, grow some vegetables and flowers. I think I'd like it in Love. I used to fear even stopping in Love. I thought I would be forced by the overpopulation and crime rate in Love to become coarse and defensive, set in my ways, or lose passion altogether. Most people who say they're in Love don't really live in Love anyway, but in some of the outlying suburbs: Possession, Adultery, Security, Custody, Social Pressure.

I want a plot and a loft right in the heated nexus of Love. I want to be one of those people you come visit in Love when you're growing up and you can't believe such a beautiful place exists but it lets you know it does. A place to come home to. I want someone like her to live there in Love with me. Sure we'll go on vacations to the country of Passionata. Or we may have a job in the Longing and Missing Islands. We'll have relatives in Sickness, Boredom, Reconstruction. But at least our kids'll be able to say they were born in Love and that they grew up there and that they know right where it is and feel at home in Love.

-Aaren Perry

Aaren Perry has his MFA in Creative Writing from Vermont College.

Spontaneous vs.

I was raised in a branch of evangelical Christianity which viewed written prayers with great suspicion. Smacked of Rome, for one thing. Why would a true believer need something written down before they could speak to their heavenly Father, for goodness sake? Prayer, we were taught, should not be read from a page, but should spring spontaneously out of the believer's heart and mind. Written prayers quickly become empty rituals, words repeated unthinkingly by disengaged worshipers. Better silence than that.

Spontaneity is no guarantee of right worship, since it can become lifeless.

The first chink in that teaching appeared for me when as a child I discovered that most of the prayers offered in our church were actually a lot less spontaneous than we had been led to believe. Listen with care and you could usually identify a stock set of phrases and ideas which were simply recycled each time that individual led in prayer. And though we had to be careful not to get caught, some friends and I eventually made a game of surreptitiously mouthing phrases that we knew would be heard next. It wasn't difficult achieving a high degree of accuracy; it was very difficult, however, to keep from giggling.

It is true, of course, that written prayers can degenerate into empty rituals, becoming little more than meaningless words repeated unthinkingly by disengaged worshipers. But so can anything that's repeated—like Communion—but the solution isn't to throw them out, but to guard against their degeneration. Besides, spontaneity is no guarantee of right worship, since it too can become

lifeless. And then there is the book of psalms. And the discovery that a written prayer—precisely because it was composed rather than generated spontaneously—can turn out to better express both a proper biblical balance and the highly nuanced, so-very-hard-to-put-into-words subtleties of our heart's cry.

In the end, of course, surely it's not either/or but both/and. Our hearts should be filled, by God's grace, with worship, gratitude, and petition which overflows in spontaneous prayer. And we can use carefully crafted prayers which have stood the test of time, rich in poetic beauty and biblical balance, to express the deepest yearnings of our hearts. And so, to that end, I call your attention to three books of prayers.

The *Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions* edited by Arthur Bennett (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust; 1975) 223 pp. + bibliography.

One of the myths commonly held about the Puritans is that they were so concerned about theological minutia that they had little interest in spirituality and displayed little spiritual warmth in their preaching and writing. If anything should be able to dispel that myth, *The Valley of Vision* should do the trick. This marvelous volume brings together 223 prayers from the works of fourteen Puritan leaders including John Bunyan, David Brainerd, Isaac Watts, and Charles Haddon Spurgeon. These prayers do not merely express great spiritual warmth, they burn with a deep passion for God, for his Word, and for salvation in Christ. Few books have so encouraged me in my

faith, and none have been of greater help during dark times of the soul, when words seem to fail at the very moment when the need to pray is greatest. The prayers are arranged topically and Bennett has provided a brief title for each, making the book even more useful for private devotions or corporate worship. The only criticism I have is that I wish he had identified the author of each prayer, but that is a very small criticism of a truly splendid book.

Actually, my greatest difficulty in writing this review has been to choose one prayer to include here to give you a hint of what is in store in its pages. So many have become so precious to me that I wish I could simply send you the book—or better yet, pray through it with you over time. So I chose "Sleep," written to be prayed in the evening before sleep, primarily because it is a meditation that is, I think, far removed from the way modern Christians tend to think.

The prayers collected here are biblically sound, theologically informed, thoughtful, and deeply passionate. Using them will deepen your prayer life and bring you into contact with believers who



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Written Prayers

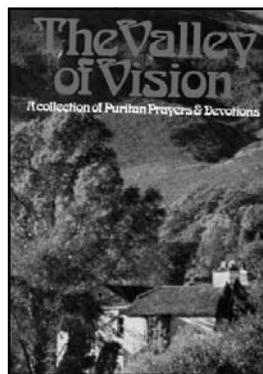
had learned to pray, often in the midst of suffering, with the mind of Christ.

The *Collects of Thomas Cranmer* compiled for devotional use by C. Frederick Barbee and Paul F. M. Zahl (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1999) 119 pp.

If it was necessary to dispel a myth in calling attention to *The Valley of Vision*, it is probably prudent to begin this review with a few facts. A few facts, that is, on Collects and on Thomas Cranmer, since it is probably safe to assume that relatively few readers of this newsletter are well-versed in the history of Anglicanism. (Barbee and Zahl, it is worth

fully composed that when prayed they open up rich areas of life and reflection for praise and petition.

About Thomas Cranmer. Born in 1489, his story is included in *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, for he was burned at the stake in 1556. Cranmer worked hard for reform as archbishop of Canterbury, demonstrating a concern for both right doctrine and right worship. His influence can perhaps best be seen in the Forty-Two Articles of the Anglican Church (which grew out of a list of



Sleep

*Blessed Creator,
Thou has promised thy beloved sleep;
Give me restoring rest needful for
tomorrow's toil.*

*If dreams be mine, let them not be
tinged with evil.*

*Let thy Spirit make my time of repose
a blessed temple of his holy presence.*

*May my frequent lying down make
me familiar with death, the bed I*

*approach remind my of the grave, the eyes I now
close picture to me their final closing.*

*Keep me always ready, waiting for admittance to
thy presence.*

Weaken my attachment to earthly things.

*May I hold life loosely in my hand, knowing that I
receive it on condition of its surrender.*

*As pain and suffering betoken transitory health,
may I not shrink from a death that introduces
me the freshness of eternal youth. I retire this
night in full assurance of one day's awakening
with thee.*

*All glory for this blessed hope, for the gospel of grace,
for thine unspeakable gift of Jesus, for the fellow-
ship of the Trinity.*

*Withhold not thy mercies in the night season; thy
hand never wearies, thy power needs no repose,
thine eye never sleeps.*

*Help me when I helpless lie, when my conscience
accuses me of sin, when my mind is harassed by
foreboding thoughts, when my eyes are held
awake by personal anxieties.*

*Show thyself to me as the God of all grace, love and
power; thou hast a balm for every wound, a sol-
ace for all anguish, a remedy for every pain, a
peace for all disquietude.*

*Permit me to commit myself to thee awake or sleep.
Amen.*

The prayers collected here are biblically sound, theologically informed, thoughtful, and deeply passionate. Using them will deepen your prayer life.

noting, begin *The Collects of Thomas Cranmer* with helpful introductions to both—which is where I gleaned most of the information in the next paragraph.)

First, a few words about Collects. It is pronounced with the accent on the first syllable, instead of on the second syllable as we are used to saying when we tell someone to “go collect the eggs in this basket.” A Collect is a short prayer, usually but not always consisting of five parts: the address, the acknowledgment, the petition, the aspiration, and the pleading. (In some Collects one of the parts is missing. You should be able to identify all five parts in the one included on the next page) The name is from the Latin *collecta*, which refers both to “gathering the people together,” as well as to “gathering up their petitions” into a single corporate prayer. So, though Collects are brief prayers, the Collects written by Thomas Cranmer are so thought-

important biblical beliefs he wrote for his own diocese to counter confusion in doctrine), and in the *Book of Common Prayer*, which he helped shape. His martyrdom is controversial, since he recanted his beliefs under pressure after his arrest. On the day of his martyrdom he shocked his accusers by recanting his recantation, and when the fire was lit, held the hand that had signed the recantation in the flames so it would burn first.

Cranmer's Collects are profoundly influenced by Scripture, and express powerfully and poetically the heart's cry of the people of God. With each Collect, Barbee and Zahl include a short history of the prayer, usually noting the original source of the prayer which Cranmer rewrote to

Resources

reflect the teaching of the Reformation. They also include a page-long meditation, reflecting on the meaning of the Collect in light of Scripture and life.

We recommend *The Collects of Thomas Cranmer* for use in your private devotions and in corporate worship. And give the book as a gift to friends who take prayer seriously.

Prayers *Written at Vailima* by Robert Louis Stevenson (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House; 1999) 24 pp.

Robert Louis Stevenson is perhaps best remembered as the author of *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1850, he moved to Samoa with his family in 1889 in the hope that the warmer climate would help his health, which had been deteriorating. Named “Tusitala” (story-teller) by the Samoans, he lived and wrote at his home, Vailima, until his death at the age of 44, in 1894, and was buried, as he wished, at the top of Mount Vaea.

Each evening a conch was sounded to call the Stevenson family and their Samoan friends and neighbors to a time of worship. Scriptures would be read, hymns sung, and prayers offered before everyone walked back through the trees with their lanterns to their homes and beds. Some of the prayers offered during these evening times of worship were written by the Scottish novelist, prayers which soon became greatly loved by the worshipers. Though few in number, the prayers of Robert Louis Stevenson are presented here, along with an introduction written by his wife, in a colorful

book of illuminated calligraphy. ■

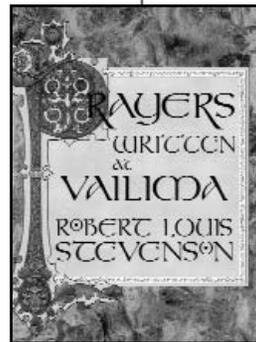
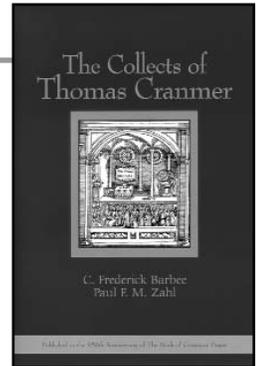
—Denis D. Haack

Thomas Cranmer's Prayer for the 2nd Sunday of Advent

*Blessed Lord,
which hast caused all
holy Scripture to be
written for our learning;*

*grant us that we may in such wise hear them,
read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them;
that by patience and comfort of thy holy word,
we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed
hope of everlasting life,
which thou has given us in our savior Jesus
Christ.*

Amen



Evening Prayer

*Lord,
Receive our supplications for this house,
family, and country.*

*Protect the innocent, restrain the greedy
and the treacherous, lead us out of our
tribulation into a quiet land.*

*Look down upon ourselves and upon
our absent dear ones.*

*Help us and them; prolong our days in
peace and honor.*

*Give us health, food, bright weather, and light
hearts.*

*In what we meditate of evil, frustrate our will; in
what of good, further our endeavors.*

*Cause injuries to be forgot and benefits to be
remembered.*

*Let us lie down without fear and awake and
arise with exultation.*

For his sake, in whose words we now conclude.

Relativism & Saving Time

It is a truism among Christians that relativism is one of the primary characteristics of our postmodern world. So we set out to defend the notion of moral absolutes, pointing out that relativism is self-defeating, since if everything is relative, so is the statement that everything is relative, which means relativism undercuts its own argument. The problem with this approach, however, is that the entire line of reasoning seems to fall on deaf ears. So, those of us who care for people and for the truth need to be willing to ask why this is the case.

“It is not sufficient to merely characterize postmodern friends as relativists,” L’Abri

string the horses of their already defeated enemies? What system of morality insists that a moral Buddhist who is faithful to his wife is damned and utterly without hope, while Christian teachers and celebrities who leave their spouses for someone else can go on selling books or CDs in Christian bookstores?

We live among people who do not share our deepest convictions and values. Most of our postmodern friends object to Christian morality, however, not simply because they are committed to relativism, but because they see Christian morality as inferior to their own. And that is the issue we must address. ■

-Denis D. Haack

Post-modern friends object to Christian morality because they see it as inferior to their own.

Worker Andrew Fellows argues. “Most non-Christians I talk to today have strong moral notions. In fact, what you hear from them if you listen with care is not so much relativism as the conviction that Christianity represents a vastly inferior morality compared to their own.”

What system of morality, for example, would forbid two men or two women who truly love one another from expressing their love physically? An inferior one. What system of morality would prohibit two women or two men who are committed to one another from publicly declaring their commitment in marriage? An inferior one. What God would command his people to slaughter thousands of infants in the process of giving them a homeland? And then cause his followers to label those who terminate an unwanted pregnancy as murderers? What sort of environmental responsibility can a religion have if its God is on record ordering his people to ham-

Does “saving time” mean more time or more things in less time? In his book, *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*, social critic James Gleick raises some interesting questions about what we mean by the expression “saving time.”

It is easy to forget how very new in human history is the whole notion of time-saving. Personal time management did not exist as a distinct category in book publishing until the 1980s. The rare time-management titles of the last century, typically published by religious groups, advised readers on worthy ways to spend time, not ways to save

Time-management did not exist as a distinct category in book publishing until the 1980s.

time. Our culture has been transformed from one with time to fill and time to spare to one that views time as something to guard, hoard, and protect.

Is time saved when we manage to leave

it empty, or when we stuff it with multiple activities, useful or pleasant? Does time-saving mean getting more done? If so, does daydreaming save time or waste it? What about talking on a cellular phone at the beach? Is time saved when we seize it away from a low-satisfaction activity, like ironing clothes, and turn it over to a high-satisfaction activity, like listening to music? What if you do both at once? If you can choose between a thirty-minute train ride, during which you can read, and a twenty-minute drive, during which you cannot, does the drive save ten minutes? Does it make sense to say that it saves ten minutes from your travel budget while removing ten minutes from your reading budget? What if you listen to that audio-tape after all?

And in our oh-so-busy world, does it save time to try to reflect on such questions in Christian community—or waste it? ■

-Denis D. Haack

Source:

Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything by James Gleick (New York, NY: Pantheon Books; 1999) pp. 230-231.

Paula Cole's



**Listening
with
Discernment
to
Music
Christians
Love
to
Admire**

Seven-time Grammy nominee and 1998 Best New Artist, Paula Cole has released her latest album, *Amen*, which has met with a strongly mixed reaction from her predominantly female fans. A regular member of the Lilith Fair troupe, Cole's music has been marked by the strident tones of feminist anger. Her 1996 breakthrough single, "Where Have All The Cowboys Gone?" dripped with ironic disgust at the chauvinistic patterns of traditional relationships. But now in her fourth album, Cole turns to matters of the spirit.

Spirituality has been a favorite theme in recent pop music offerings from Lauryn Hill to Madonna. And music has a unique place within youth culture. Even more than fashion or entertainment, music represents the identity trademark of adolescence. Thus thematic popularity of spirituality in music points to a deeper longing in contemporary society. It is largely a reaction to the scorched-earth rationalism of modern education that explains everything by reason and limits reality to what can be seen. Thus that pop musicians are recognizing that the meaning of life is more than meets the eye is a refreshing turn of events.

Cole explained to *USA Today's* Elysa Gardner, "As a child, I felt what we call 'God,' that spirit, that energy. Then you

In her song, "Rhythm Of Life," she raps a religious apologetic to her skeptical fans:

*To the critics and the cynics who don't
understand the lyrics
To the atheists and the pessimists
Wanting company in their darkness
You may see me as a fool, yes, a charla-
tan, an egoist,
But I'd rather be this in your eyes,
Than a coward in His.*

"It is important," she continued to Gardner, "for me to stand up for what I believe in." Such earnest conviction and honest searching is to be highly esteemed in a culture of mind-numbing and soul-squandering diversion.

Cole, 31, a graduate of Berklee College of Music, is a professionally trained jazz singer and pianist. In *Amen*, she blends a musical sensitivity to Black gospel with her own Buddhist religious sensibilities. It is this religious eclecticism—characteristic of all contemporary forms of pop spirituality—from the AA's Higher Power to Jewel's *Spirit*—which requires Christian discernment. Absent in pop spirituality is the offense of particularity. Religious words waft on the airwaves or fill self-help rhetoric without content or definition.

Thematic popularity of spirituality in music points to a deeper longing in contemporary society.

get schooled by society, and I rationalized that it didn't exist. It made me profoundly unhappy that there was no meaning, no logic, no unity of all life. Now I feel God inside me. If cynical and atheistic people want to judge me, that's their problem."

*I believe in love
To be the center of all things
And I believe in love to be the way
To find our inner light*

Spiritual Creed

Pop spirituality is infused with a pantheistic symbolic system that unites divinity with nature. And so the half-truths of Cole's lyrics are especially troubling. Love is the center of reality, which is why the search for meaning is always relational. But Love is embodied not in Nature but in the Person of Jesus who entered the natural world to establish The Ultimate Relationship. All longing for love is itself a signal of transcendence.

A Christian's first responsibility is to identify with this longing. Augustine, reflecting on his youth, admits in his Confessions that "The single desire that dominated my search for delight was simply to love and to be loved." Yet the heart is not the satisfaction of the heart's longings.

A Christian's second responsibility in understanding pop spirituality is to maintain discernment. Half-truths are always more dangerous than lies. CBS's *Touched by an Angel* may in fact be more spiritually dangerous than Paul Schrader's R-rated film, *Hardcore*. In the first case, therapeutic angel spirituality (what cultural critic Ruth Shalit calls "a civic religion of self-regard") replaces Trinitarian incarnational theology. In the second case, the seduction of pornography is portrayed clearly as moral evil. Sometimes that which is most palatable is most poisonous and that which is most pernicious is

most palliative. The devil's disguise is not darkness, but light.

Words like "god," "spirituality," "gospel," "grace," and "love" are empty apart from biblical content. Take for example, Judy Collins's explanation of John Newton's hymn "Amazing Grace."

"'Amazing Grace' is a song about letting go, bottoming out, seeing the light, turning it over, trusting the universe, breathing in, breathing out, going with the flow; timing is everything, trust your instincts, don't push the river, ease on down the road, get on your knees, let your guard down, drop your defenses, lighten up, like angels they know how to fly, don't be afraid, when all else fails, pray; there are a million ways to say it. If we don't, we crack up, break our heart."

Such is the nature of pop spirituality. God-words do not necessarily point God-ward. And so, even with a catchy tune and religious lyrics, discernment is required.

Can somebody say Amen? ■

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Dr. Seel is a writer, cultural analyst, and educator living in North Carolina. His new book on youth culture, *Parenting Without Perfection: Being a Kingdom Influence in a Toxic World*, is forthcoming from NavPress.

The half truths of Cole's lyrics are especially troubling.



by
Dr
David
John
Seel,
Jr.



Movies Online

www.imdb.com

The Internet Movie Database

A great place to find facts about movies. Designed by and for movie lovers, it contains everything you want to know about a film. This is a secular site and does not include a Christian view of the film.

Ransom Ratings

Design:

Fantastic design and clear organization. Constantly upgraded and updated.

Content:

Search by movie title, name of director, or actor. You will find a complete list of the credits, links to reviews and photos, links to official film sites, a list of the goofs in the film, quotes and tag lines, and a host of other film-related information.

Ease of Use:

Easy to navigate, even for beginners. Excellent design makes for quick download time.

The Internet Movie Database

www.previewonline.org

Family Movie and TV Review

This site examines every film and television show with one thing in mind: counting the number of objectionable words and scenes so they can warn subscribers.

Ransom Ratings

Design:

Attractive and well-organized.

Content:

Each film is briefly reviewed, then rated in terms of entertainment and acceptability, with a detailed list of the movie's moral content, language, and themes which Christians will find objectionable. Though this information can be helpful, especially for parents, this all too-narrow and negative perspective simply does not do justice to films (or any other art form) from a Christian perspective. Often the review warns believers away from films that are keen windows of insight into the surrounding culture, or which raise honest questions deserving an honest answer.

Ease of Use:

Not difficult to navigate, though to have full access, one must be a subscriber (currently \$24/year).

Movie Morality Ministries

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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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