

# Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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# Editor's Note

**H**earts & Minds. Readers of this newsletter will notice a small ad for Hearts & Minds somewhere in each issue. No, we aren't taking advertising. Partnering with this bookstore is merely our attempt to provide you with an easy way to order the resources we call attention to in *Critique*. Hearts & Minds is the sort of bookstore we wish could be found in every community. Stocking books and music that are worth savoring—rather than merely ones by Christians on “religious” topics—the store is dedicated to reaching hearts and minds with the claims of Christ. When you order, please mention *Critique*—a portion of your order will be donated to Ransom. And the next time you are traveling in Pennsylvania, stop by Hearts & Minds. It's the sort of bookstore that truly warrants the adjective “Christian.”

**T**he Darkened Room. Some readers have expressed concern about our movie reviews since they don't simply warn Christians away from films that depict ideas and values contrary to righteousness. It is Ransom's conviction, however, that the films we call attention to are valuable for the discerning Christian. Valuable as a window of insight into the thinking and values of our postmodern culture, or as a point of contact to begin discussion with non-Christians about things that matter. We aren't truly loving our non-Christian friends if we don't take the time and effort to first see things from their perspective, to enter into their world and life view. How else can we possibly share the gospel in a way that addresses the very specific questions and issues that interest and concern them? We can accomplish this by truly befriending our neighbors, by asking questions, and by being sensitive to the art that resonates with their hopes and fears, and that they are eager to discuss.

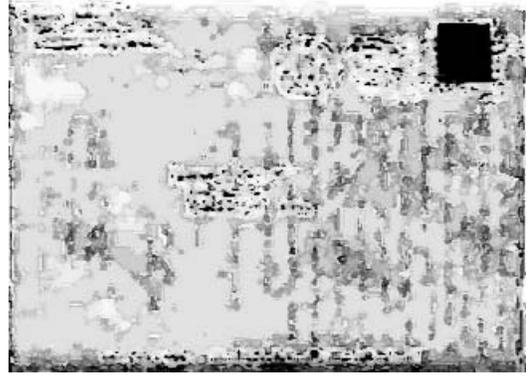
Even when we recommend a film in these pages it does not mean that everyone should see it. We all need windows of insight and points of

contact, but that does not mean we must all use the same ones all the time. Different callings and gifts may in fact require different ones, and faithfulness involves being sensitive to this glorious diversity among the people of God. We must also be aware of our own weaknesses, and flee temptation. If certain scenes or movies tempt us to sin, it is wrong to fail to act on that insight, just as it is self-centered to assume that since we shouldn't see a certain film, no one else should either. *Critique's* film column is called “The Darkened Room,” which reminds us not only that we watch movies in the dark, but that we watch them in a fallen and dark world.

Our desire is to stimulate the people of God to think Christianly about all of life and culture. As Os Guinness points out in *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to do About It*, “thinking Christianly should not be confused with adopting a ‘Christian line’ on every issue.” The goal is faithfulness, not conformity to some rule of dos and don'ts set by experts. “The time has come for evangelicals to wake from our lethargy or turn from our fear, blaming, and victim-playing,” Guinness says. “We must move out into all spheres of society, presenting the case for the gospel of Jesus in ways that are fresh, powerful, imaginative, compassionate, and persuasive.”

We realize our perspective on film sets *Critique* apart from some other voices in the evangelical community, but we trust our approach will enrich your reflections on what it means to be faithful in our fast-paced world. ■  
-Denis D. Haack

# Dialogue



## A reader asks if there are movies to avoid at all costs and Trotter responds...

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 have appreciated the discussions in *Critique* regarding the need for learning and teaching discernment, the reflections on the challenges of communicating the Christian world view in the postmodern world, and the movie reviews with suggested points of discussion.

But can we be infected by what we watch and listen or can we be vaccinated with discernment and thereby gain immunity? Are there infectious areas for which there is no known immunity (areas to avoid at all cost)? Is frequency of exposure a factor? Is this an area only trained "healthcare" workers should risk? Can one be numbed (or titillated) by the overload of violence, profanity, graphic sex, and propaganda that accompanies the current culture wars? How do you monitor whether numbness has set in?

Dan Balbach  
Ann Arbor, MI

Thank you, Dan, for your thoughtful questions. In this space I cannot do justice to them, but I will try to shed some light on the subjects you raise.

Yes, we can be "infected" by what we watch, but it is also true that we can build up an immunity to any sensory experience by a right and proper objectifying of it unless that experience is, in itself, a sinful act. Some experiences are sinful in and of themselves for all people at all times; one cannot build up an immunity to the negative effects of adultery by objectifying that experience while continuing to indulge in it. But movie-going is not sinful per se, as for example adultery or drunkenness are.

How does one "objectify" the experience of watching a film and thereby, as you put it, be vaccinated with discernment? First—always first—is the importance of prayer, asking God to protect you. This cannot be overempha-

sized. Secondly, the Christian mind must be trained in the Scriptures so that our habit is to think on the things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, gracious, excellent and worthy of praise (Phil 4.8). This discipline will help keep us from being hardened to the sad, truly sick elements found in films like *American Beauty*, *Fight Club*, *Being John Malkovich*, etc., even while we appreciate the brilliance, imagination and technical mastery evidenced in them. Thirdly, knowing the right questions to ask will help us keep in mind that this is, after all, only a movie. The film may disturb us, but that is not necessarily a bad thing. If we think about what we saw, break it down into its components, piece it back together and then compare its truths or lies to the understanding of reality found in a Christian framework, we will be the better for it. We will have learned more of God's truth, even if the road to that result was difficult and threatening.

I don't know of any areas of film-going that are to be avoided by all people. You may, however, know of areas in your own life that cannot withstand the challenges that a certain type of film presents. These you should avoid, while they may be perfectly permissible for someone else. Over-exposure and numbness are constant threats, but the benefit to be gained by intelligent film-going outweighs the difficulty. In addition to the thinking, the objectifying, mentioned above, I find reading about a film and discussing it with friends to be the best tonic against that numbness.

One more thing. If we care about our culture and its people, we must take risks and work out the disturbing problems which the culture's artifacts present us. This seems to me a basic principle of life. After all, doesn't life often disturb us? And Who is the director of that movie?!

Drew Trotter

## Banned in Schools

### Christian Parents Struggle with Literature

**A** Christian school recently decided to develop a series of guidelines to help teachers select literature for use in the classroom. The idea for the proposal arose when several parents objected to books their children had been assigned as homework. The parents noted that they were sending their children to a private Christian school—at considerable expense—because they did not want their children exposed to questionable material, and that the school therefore had a responsibility to the parents to make sure the books assigned in classes and available in the library met basic Christian standards. Even more important, the parents expected the school to nurture the student's faith and love of godliness, and the books which were part of the curriculum

were important to that process of spiritual growth.

A number of the parents felt the problem had existed for some time. For example, though the book hadn't been assigned, per se, one student had been allowed to give an oral report on *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. That caused a lot of other students to want to read it, much to their parent's dismay. (Soon after this controversy, interestingly, the copy of *Harry Potter* in the school library simply disappeared, though no official action had been taken.) Another parent objected to a biography of Amy Carmichael, missionary to India, because it dealt with child prostitution. A student had mentioned it at the supper table in the presence of younger siblings, and the par-

ents felt forced to discuss a topic their children were not yet old enough to understand properly. And several objected to the art teacher having art books in her classroom as resources since they included reproductions of classical nudes. (This issue was resolved by covering the art depicting female nudes, since boys are stimulated visually while girls are not.)

To resolve the issue concerning literature, a member of the board and a concerned parent submitted the following guidelines:

1. All literature to be assigned to students or made available as resources in classes must first be read either by a member of the board of trustees or a member of a committee of parents, and then presented to those bodies (respectively) for final approval. An updated list of approved books will be maintained by the headmaster and circulated to all

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What is your initial or immediate response to the guidelines? Why do you think you responded this way? Would you send your child to this school? Why or why not?
2. What are the basic issues at stake and motivations in operation here? With what do you agree in this scenario, and in the guidelines? Why? With what do you disagree? Why?
3. Have the guideline authors used Philippians 4:8 correctly? Why or why not?
4. How would you express a Christian view of literature in a fallen world? What is the goal and nature of a "Christian school" and a "Christian education?"
5. What sections of Scripture could not be assigned according to these guidelines? What great literature could not be assigned? Even if we can think of books or biblical texts that would be excluded, is there not enough other good material that can be assigned that this excluded material can be safely left out of the curriculum?
6. To the extent that you disagree with the guidelines, rewrite them.
7. How could you best express your concerns and/or disagreement to the authors of the guidelines? What reasons would you give for any revisions you propose? What books—on literature or education—would you recommend the authors of the guidelines read? What Scriptures would you appeal to? What hope would you have of getting a fair hearing? Why do you feel that way?

## He Who Has Ears

teachers and parents.

2. No literature will be assigned that could cause turmoil in any child's mind, violate their conscience, or raise doubt concerning the truth. Any literature which describes non-Christian practices, beliefs, or sin must be set within a Christian framework and must therefore explicitly condemn it or show the deadly nature of such rebellion against God and His Word.

3. All literature should be both Christian and classical, enhance and support traditional biblical moral standards, and should never force parents to address topics of a sensitive nature with their child before the parent decides the child is ready for that discussion.

4. All literature should be of such a nature as to inspire thought and godliness, be worthy of study, and merit emulation by the reader. To that end, it must meet the apostolic standard of quality found in Philippians 4:8: "...whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

You don't have to be married, have children, or be involved with private education to realize this raises some interesting and important questions for discerning Christians. ■

~Denis D. Haack

Editor's note: This discernment scenario is based on actual events from a number of Christian schools.

### An Excerpt from *Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

**T**he first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear. So it is His work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him. Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking.

Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life, and in the end there is nothing left but spiritual chatter and clerical condescension arrayed in pious words. One who cannot listen long and patiently will presently be talking beside the point and be never really speaking to others, albeit he be not conscious of it. Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies.

Brotherly pastoral care is essentially distinguished from preaching by the fact that, added to the task of speaking the Word, there is the obligation of listening. There is a kind of listening with half an ear that presumes already to know what the other

person has to say. It is an impatient, inattentive listening, that despises the brother and is only waiting for a chance to speak and thus get rid of the other person. This is no fulfillment of our obligation, and it is certain that here too our attitude toward our brother only reflects our relationship to God. It is little wonder that we are no longer capable of the

***Christians, especially ministers...forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking.***

greatest service of listening that God has committed to us, that of hearing our brother's confession, if we refuse to give ear to our brother on lesser subjects.

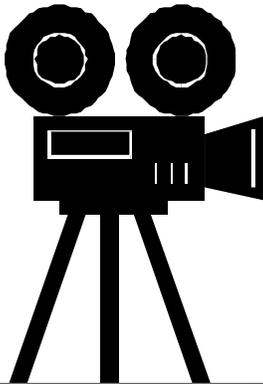
**S**ecular education today is aware that often a person can be helped merely by having someone who will listen to him seriously, and upon this insight it has constructed its own soul therapy, which has attracted great numbers of people, including Christians. But Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been committed to them by Him who is Himself the great listener and whose work they should share. We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God. ■

~Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Source:

*Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, translated by John W. Doberstein (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954) pp. 97-99.

## Bringing Out the Dead



### A Review of The Sixth Sense

by Dr. Andrew H. Trotter, Jr.

*The Sixth Sense* was my choice to receive the 1999 best movie Oscar, given the five nominees the Academy selected. Better than any of the others, *Sense* combines good writing, good acting, good directing and all the other practical aspects of making a movie that stimulates the heart, challenges the mind and advances the soul.

Christians who have seen the movie may have questions about whether the movie is edifying. It does raise controversial issues like whether or not ghosts exist and, if they do, whether or not we can interact with them—not only speaking to them, but helping them and allowing them to help us. These sorts of questions will not be answered in this review, though they are good ones to ask in a late-night discussion after viewing this creepy masterpiece.

Starring Bruce Willis as Malcolm Crowe, a caring, though doubting, child psychologist, the movie begins with him being shot by one of his former clients—grown-up now but not “cured”—on the very night Crowe was honored by the city of Philadelphia for his accomplishments. A few months after the shooting, the psychologist encounters a small boy who suffers from the same delusions the shooter did; in his own words: “I see dead people.”

Haley Joel Osment (who plays the boy, Cole Sear) and Toni Collette (Lynn Sear, Cole’s widowed mother) were both nominated for Academy Awards and Willis should have been. The portraits they paint are so convincing that we buy everything else: thermostats which suddenly plunge, teen-age boy ghosts with half their head

blown away, counseling appointments in churches, schools, on the street. Willis is a fine actor, unselfishly making those around him better and allowing them the stage when they should have it. Collette plays a stereotypical character—the over-worked, trying-to-make-ends-meet Mom who loves her son but is baffled and distraught by his behavior—with such a wide range of emotion and effortless ease that she is thoroughly believable.

But the movie belongs to Osment, the 9 year-old boy suffering from encounters he does not understand and wants even less. In what has been called the best performance by a child star ever, Osment must be both *Everybody*—laughing and playing with friends—and an extraordinary outsider with a gift that isolates him from all of us. He is alternately the child playing with his toy soldiers and the tormented bearer of wisdom that sometimes exceeds that of his adult counterparts. Osment’s work will make Cole Sear one of the longest-lasting characters in the memories of movie-goers everywhere.

The performances, outstanding as they are, should not overshadow the very fine work Night M. Shyamalan did as both scriptwriter and director, presenting us with a film that is always, strangely, both creepy and yet tender. Horror is never used with the sadism of Wes Craven’s teen slasher films; Cole’s mere vulnerability, huddling in the tent he has constructed in his room, is enough to cause us concern.

Structuring the movie around relationships—Cole with his mother, Malcolm with his wife, and above all Cole with Malcolm—gives the movie a tenderness that belies the rubrics “horror film” or “thriller” and is the genius of Shyamalan’s narrative frame. The idea that “perfect love casts out fear” wells up in the climax of the film with such a power that one is left

#### Film Credits

##### Starring:

Haley Joel Osment  
(Cole Sear)

Bruce Willis  
(Malcolm Crowe)

Toni Collette  
(Lynn Sear)

Olivia Williams  
(Anna Crowe)

Trevor Morgan  
(Tommy Tammisimo)

Donnie Wahlberg  
(Vincent Grey)

##### Director:

M. Night Shyamalan

##### Screenwriter

M. Night Shyamalan

##### Producers

Kathleen Kennedy  
Frank Marshall (I)

Barry Mendel  
Sam Mercer

##### Music:

James Newton  
Howard

##### Cinematography:

Tak Fujimoto

##### Costumes:

Joanna Johnston

106 minutes

Rated PG-13 for intense  
thematic material and  
violent images

breathless at its ability to right even the most heinous wrongs.

Although the film on first viewing does not appear to be religious, the truths of divine assistance and supernatural reality are present in the film. They are in the background, shaping the character of young Cole as he tries to sort

out what is happening to him.

The first time he runs from

Malcolm, Cole

seeks asylum in a church. The importance of this common symbol for God is emphasized by a tilt shot, panning from the street up to the top of the steeple as Malcolm looks on.

The discussion that Malcolm and Cole have about how churches were used in olden times by people seeking asylum from things they fear strengthens the impression that the boy is looking for God's help. Even more impor-

tant, immediately prior to that discussion, Malcolm discovers Cole repeating the Latin phrase *de profundis clamo te domine*, a close quota-

***The idea that “perfect love casts out fear” wells up with such power that one is left breathless at its ability to right even the most heinous wrongs.***

tion from the Vulgate of Psalm 129.1: “Out of the depths I cry to You, O Lord.” In the shrine Cole builds for his protection in his room, statues of Jesus and icons of Mary abound. Cole and his mother even say grace at the table.

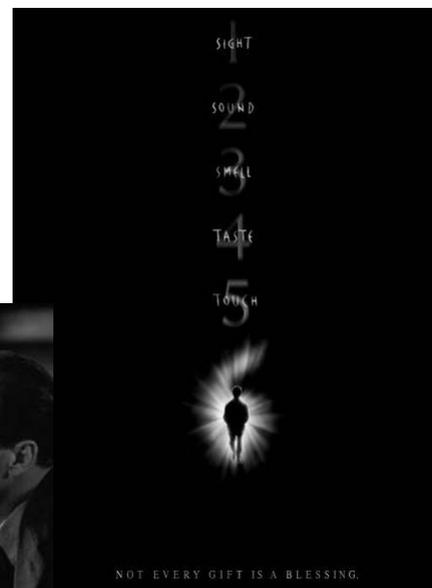
Malcolm Crowe on the other hand does not have any clear indications of faith in his character; his psychology and his wife are his

life, and both are coming apart at the seams. It is only as they work together, struggling to understand the remarkable sixth sense the boy has and its purpose, that it becomes clear Cole's prayers are answered in the person of Malcolm, and that Malcolm who did not even know what his own needs were, finds his answers in the love and wisdom of the boy. God, the unseen helper in all this, dis-

plays His common grace in a profound and moving way, touching us, as He so often does, with the grace of others.■

~Drew Trotter

*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? What does *The Sixth Sense* assume concerning... death? ...choices made in this life? ...life after death? ...good and evil? ...spirituality? 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. In what ways is the Bruce Willis character a positive model for the Christian who wishes to bring grace and healing into the lives of broken and hurting people?
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?

## Youth Culture &

**Adapted from a lecture given by Mardi Keyes at a L'Abri Conference, Feb-2000.**

It is impossible to think about “growing up” in modern America without considering the role of the “youth culture” which every young person—even those who do not attend public school—is confronted by and must deal with. It is impossible to be so isolated that we are untouched by the surrounding culture. Nor should we wish to be—as we are called to be salt and light in a very confused and broken world. Popular culture deserves neither uncritical acceptance nor knee jerk rejection, but thoughtful critique.

There is not one monolithic youth culture that defines all young people. Popular youth culture embraces a diversity of sub-cultures or “tribes” such as skaters, druggies, snobs, band geeks, Satanists, Jesus freaks, techno-goths, computer dweebs, blacks, Latinos, and white trash. Groups distinguish themselves by dress, style, music, body modification practices, race, ethnicity, and language.<sup>1</sup> Most adults can't tell the difference, which is why in the aftermath of Columbine, many unfairly associated all high school students who wear black with violence, drugs and even Satanism.

My generation has erected obstacles in front of the next generations—making the process of growing up much more difficult than it need be. We have bequeathed them a huge national debt, an uncertain economic future, a global environmental catastrophe, a corrupt political system, leaders whose lack of integrity invites cynicism, messed up families, and too often, churches that are out of touch with their lives. And we have left them to their peers and the media to figure everything out.

In his book *The Rise & Fall of the American Teenager*, Thomas Hines makes the uncomfortable observation that the baby boomers, “seem to have moved, without skipping a beat, from blaming our parents for the ills of society to blaming our children. We want them to embody virtues we only rarely practice. We want them to eschew habits we've

***We have left them to their peers and the media to figure everything out.***

never managed to break. Their transgressions aren't their own. They send us the unwelcome, rarely voiced message that we, the adults, have failed.”<sup>2</sup>

If we care about our children, their friends, and the whole shape of the next generation, it is essential for us to try to understand the world they are growing up in, and to dialogue with them about it. We must know them as individuals and friends whom we care about, listen to, learn from and respect.

### **Attitudes Toward Young People**

Adults tend to idolize, envy, exploit, condescend to, fear and blame youth today. Evidence that youth is idolized and envied can be seen everywhere. Riley Weston, the writer on the Warner Brothers series *Felicity* was fired when it was learned that she was 32, not 19 years old.<sup>3</sup> WB teen programs are extremely popular among 25 to 54 year olds.<sup>4</sup> An article in *Seventeen* magazine on mothers and daughters begins: “She gave birth to you, changed your diapers, taught you how to use scissors—so what's up with

her suddenly flirting with your boyfriend and borrowing your clothes?”<sup>5</sup> Ever younger women are having cosmetic surgery to hide evidence of aging. A 21 year old college student says, “I'm going to say I'm 21 until I'm 30...What's the advantage of being older? Your health declines, your husband leaves you for another woman and you can't find a job.”<sup>6</sup>

But youth are also exploited. A baby boomer writes: “My generation turned adolescence into a commodity that could be sold worldwide by 45-year-old executives at Nike or Warner Bros. To that extent we control youth.”<sup>7</sup>

The word teenager was first used in a marketing context<sup>8</sup> in 1941. Teenagers were defined by their shared experience (high school), being young, open to new things and most important, easy to sell to. *Time* writes, “The youth market is highly attractive to advertisers because young people spend a lot of money, are impressionable and are forming habits that may last a lifetime.”<sup>9</sup>

Hines gives a vivid example of large-scale commercial exploitation. He writes, “Creators of youth fashion, such as Nike, go so far as to send scouts to the ghetto to take pictures of what young people are wearing on the streets and writing on the walls. Nike seeks to reflect the latest sensibilities, both in its products and its advertising. The company feeds the imagery right back to those who created it, offering them something they cannot afford as a way of affirming themselves.”<sup>10</sup> In contrast to the 1960's rebellion which was against the materialism and consumerism

# Growing Up, Part One

of the adult world, today's youth culture and its forms of rebellion have been co-opted by the adult commercial establishment.

**A**n article in the *Tribune* reflects on the co-opting of rebellion: "Video games like *Doom*, a favorite of the two (Columbine killers) and *Wolfenstein #3D* are reviewed in daily papers and glossy popular magazines. Tattoos, pierced tongues and Extreme sports sell soda. Rebellious teens don't look any different from what's being featured on MTV and ESPN (sports network) or even on sitcoms. It gets harder to break the boundaries, to distinguish oneself, to rebel from the mainstream, when alternative culture has become the dominant one."<sup>11</sup>

This situation gives Christian young people a tremendous opportunity to be an authentic, attractive "counterculture." (What this could look like, and how it could be done, is the kind of inter-generational discussion that should be going on in our churches.)

I have asked high schoolers and college students if they like being called adolescents or teenagers. Invariably, the answer is no. They say the labels are condescending, imply immaturity and stereotype all people in their teens as unreliable, unpredictable, and unable to handle responsibility. They feel that being classified as adolescents or teenagers gives adults justification for not taking them and their ideas seriously. They resent statements like "you're just going through a stage...when you're older, you'll see things our way."

I completely sympathize with these reactions. A *New York Times* article described "the American teenager" as a new "Frankensteinian creature...a bored, restless young person with the emotions of a child in the body of an adult."<sup>12</sup> Commonly, the words "adolescents" or "teenagers" refer to a class of people

who are uninterested in, and incapable of handling much of anything in life except for sex, social life and shopping.

A friend of mine taught a class in "teen issues" and at the end of the class, she asked for the students' evaluation. One young man complained: "This was meant to be a class in 'teen issues,' but all we talked about was sex! I am struggling with a whole lot of other things—like school, politics, friendship, money, religion, and work... I have to make decisions in all these areas. Aren't they 'teen issues?'" I was hoping to get some help thinking about them."

While adults pay less attention to individual young people, their fear and disapproval of

"teenagers" as a class has increased. A proliferation of contradictory laws communicate adult fear and disapproval. Nighttime youth curfews have been revived in many cities, even though most juvenile crimes are minor, and 83% of them are committed outside of curfew hours (mostly right after school gets out).<sup>13</sup> Yet many states are requiring youth as young as eleven to be prosecuted as adults for a growing variety of crimes.<sup>14</sup>

In the aftermath of school shootings, schools have understandably tightened security. But all kids, not just the dangerous ones, are hurt by a growing atmosphere of mistrust. Many express the feeling that no one really cares for them as individuals. Coaches and some teachers are often mentioned as the only exceptions.

**I**n *The Rise & Fall of the American Teenager*, Hines summarizes our culture's contradictory beliefs about young people today: "They should be free to become themselves. They need many years of training and study. They know more about the future than

adults do. They know hardly anything at all. They ought to know the value of a dollar. They should be protected from the world of work. They are frail, vulnerable creatures. They are children. They are sex fiends. They are the death of culture. They are the hope of us all."

He calls this a "teenage mystique: a seductive but damaging way of understanding young people. This mystique encourages adults to see teenagers (and young people to see themselves) not as individuals but as potential problems. Such a pessimistic view of the young can easily lead adults to feel that they are powerless to help young people make better lives for themselves. Thus, the teenage mystique can serve as an excuse for elders to neglect the coming generation and, ultimately, to see their worst fears realized."<sup>15</sup>

## The Invention of Adolescence

The truth is, young people have not always been viewed the way they are today. Compared with young people in 1900 and before, young people today spend much more time in school than working. They are essentially consumers rather than producers.

In the past, a wide age range of people worked, played, learned, and worshiped together. But young people today tend to interact with adults only in professional, formal, or controlled contexts. These profound changes in the social and economic relationship between youth and adults began in the 19th century, when industrialization removed work from the home.

At the same time, new ideas were formed about human development. Spearheaded by the psychologist G. Stanley Hall in 1904, a host of "experts" popularized a concept of adolescence that saw sexual maturation as the most significant, defining thing that happens to young people. For the first time "adolescence" was defined as a period of terrible storm and stress, of "inner tur-

moil” that rendered young people vulnerable, awkward and even incapacitated.

**T**hese social scientists believed that in order for the transition to adulthood to happen successfully, “adolescents” needed to be institutionally segregated with peers and protected from adult responsibilities and concerns. Sexual maturation was believed to be so all-encompassing and draining that young people couldn’t deal with anything else. To help them maneuver this stressful period, a

### *The “teenage mystique” encourages adults to see teenagers not as individuals but as potential problems.*

whole array of adult-sponsored youth organizations and institutions were established, the age-graded high school being the most important.

Historians speak of the “invention” rather than the “discovery” of adolescence, because the new views were not based on actual observation of youth behavior, but on new psychological theories. Prior to the late 19th century, the changes in size, sexual maturity and intellectual capability associated with the teen years were viewed as milestones of progress toward competent adulthood, rather than a cause for crisis and alarm.

In fact, young men and women were

handling a great deal more responsibility without suffering the dire consequences psychologists predicted. They were pioneers, entrepreneurs, soldiers, cowboys, miners, sailors, schoolteachers and physicians. Only a few were full-time students, living at home, devoting years to preparing for the future.<sup>16</sup>

Since the 1950’s, adults have provided young people with money and leisure, and created a huge electronic entertainment industry that is committed to sus-

taining and expanding the “youth culture.” It is obviously in the best interest of this multi-billion dollar industry to keep as many people in a state of so-called “adolescence” for as long as possible, i.e., segregated from the adult world and assaulted with the message that sex, popularity, fashion and consumption are the only things that matter.

### **Age Segregation**

Adults are much less likely to idolize and envy, exploit, fear, blame and condescend to “adolescents” as a group, if they have genuine friendships with individual young people. In the book *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence*, Patricia Hersch writes:

Every morning, “all over the country the pattern is the same, the gathering up of young people, the leaving of adults to separate worlds, not to be brought together again until evening...Around 3:00 in the afternoon...the middle and high school buses return...most kids come home to an empty house.”

“Nobody is paying much attention to individual adolescents, but everyone is

hysterical about the aggregate...half of all America’s adolescents are at some risk for serious problems. Theories abound on how to manage them, fix them, and improve them, as if they were products off an assembly line...but the piecemeal attempts to mend, motivate, or rescue them obscure the larger reality: We don’t know them.”

“A clear picture of adolescents, of even our own children, eludes us—not necessarily because they are rebelling, or avoiding or evading us. It is because we aren’t there. Not just parents, but any adults...adolescents are growing up with no adults around, a deficit of attention, and no discussion about whether it matters at all. The dramatic separation from the adult world creates a milieu for growing up that adults categorically cannot understand because their absence causes it.”

A separate youth culture could not exist at all if it were not for this “dramatic separation of young people from the adult world.” As Hersch writes, “More than a group of peers, (this tribe) becomes in isolation a society “with its own values, ethics, rules, world view, rites of passage, worries, joys and momentum. It becomes teacher, adviser, entertainer, challenger, nurturer, inspirer, and sometimes destroyer.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Strands of Youth Culture**

The following outline of the characteristics of youth culture is far from complete, and is skewed toward the negative, however I don’t believe youth culture is all bad. There is an enormous amount of creativity in films, music, and fashion, and young people have a great deal to teach their elders about friendship: about loyalty and faithfulness to friends, about the time commitment needed to build

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friendships. Many provide for each other what they are not getting from adults by sticking together through thick and thin, and helping each other through crises, often in costly ways.

### **Consumerism**

Young people work primarily in the service industry, at what Douglas Coupland calls “McJobs” (menial, futureless, considered a “good job” by those who have never held one). But few teenagers contribute anything to the needs of the family, or even to their own educations. Teenage consumers spend about \$100 billion a year, just on things for themselves<sup>18</sup>. Two thirds of this comes from their own earnings and the rest from their parents. Busy, guilt-ridden parents willingly give their teenagers what they want, which is easier than giving them time.

A high school junior in my son’s class wrote in their school paper: “there is a cross-generational bond which unites us as the youth of America. Reluctantly, I admit that our bond is our mutual belief in the ethic of mass consumption. We love our malls. We trust our stuff. And so, together, we are lost.”<sup>19</sup> Of course, not everyone realizes their “lostness” as he put it. Like adults, most are distracted from thinking very deeply about the effects of the consumer culture.

### **Sex-saturation**

Teen movies, television, magazines, and some music, are obsessed with sex. They assault us with the message that this is the main thing teenagers are interested in. But the picture they give is what the *New York Times Magazine* calls a “fantasy version of youth, complete with witty comebacks and enormous sexual confidence.”<sup>20</sup>

Attitudes toward sex have changed quite dramatically since the 1960’s, when sexual liberation was associated with rebellion against the emptiness, triviality and moralism

of the 1950’s. There was a quasi-religious, reverent attitude attached to it.

Now a common attitude is nonchalance—“it’s just sex, what’s the big deal?” One 17 year-old told me that she and most of her girl friends don’t like sex very much, but it’s a whole lot easier than talking. There’s been a similar change in attitude toward drugs. In the 1960’s, students took drugs to expand their consciousness. Starting in the 1970’s, they reported taking drugs primarily to dull their pain and relieve their boredom.<sup>21</sup>

For most kids, this kind of nonchalance covers a lot of anxiety and pain. With the loss of a widely shared cultural consensus about sexual behavior and morality, and with all kinds of contradictory messages from the culture, media, teachers, parents, and peers,

*Young people have a great deal to teach their elders about loyalty and faithfulness to friends...many provide for each other what they are not getting from adults.*

it should not be surprising that sex is now a huge source of anxiety for many girls and boys.

One of the scariest attitude changes is a growing sense that adolescent boys are entitled to sex. A Rhode Island Rape Center study of 1700 6th and 9th graders found 65% of boys and 57% of girls believed it acceptable for a male to force a female to have sex if they’ve been dating for 6 months.<sup>22</sup>

Christians who teach that God wants girls and women to be generally “submissive” (particularly to men) seriously misrepresent the Bible’s teaching, and do not prepare them for those times when they must be firmly and stubbornly unsubmitive.

### **Alienation from Education and Learning**

In teen movies and television—school is virtually always viewed as negative. Teachers and school administrators are losers—boring, ridiculous or malevolent. Thankfully, there are wonderful exceptions, but for many young people, school does not provide a positive learning or social environment.

Hines challenges the contemporary monolithic pattern of education, which forces “all young people to spend their teens simply waiting for adulthood.” Many would do better dropping in and out of work and school. For those whose abilities and interests suit them for long years of education, work opportunities should be coordinated with schooling. These suggestions come out of his insight that it is “difficult for teenagers to imagine themselves living useful lives. They

are offered few immediate and meaningful ways to test their new-found powers, to feel needed, to be essential members of a community.”<sup>23</sup>

Looking at the social history of youth should encourage us to think creatively about new possibilities for our time and the future.

### **Violence**

I’ll just make one observation here. Jackson Katz and Sut Jhally have argued and documented the fact that violence in our culture is an overwhelmingly male phenomenon. They write: “The fact that violence—whether of the spectacular kind represented in the school shootings or the more routine murder, assault, and rape—is an overwhelmingly male phenomenon should indicate to us that gender is a vital factor, perhaps the vital factor.”<sup>24</sup>

In a powerful educational film called *Tough Guise: Media Images & the Crisis in*

*Masculinity*, Katz and Jhally persuasively document the equation of violence with manhood and masculinity in our culture. They argue that since the shooters at Columbine were victimized by the dominant system of masculinity at their school, they took their revenge with weapons—the great equalizers.

Katz and Jhally challenge us with the “crying need for a national conversation about what it means to be a man, since cultural definitions of manhood and masculinity are ever-shifting and are particularly volatile in the contemporary era.”<sup>25</sup>

### Growing Fascination with Spirituality

There is a hunger for the transcendent unseen world to give us power, guidance, meaning and mystery, and to assure us that we are more than just bodies. Wicca is growing faster among teenage girls than any other group. It is very much in reaction against “traditional” religion, especially Christianity—which they see as anti-woman, environmentally irresponsible, and spiritually dead.<sup>26</sup>

These are challenges we must take seriously, if the Church is to meet the spiritual needs of young people with true religion, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. ■

—Mardi Keyes

**To be continued...**In part two, Keyes will reflect on the loss of a coherent self in young people and the role parents play, while offering a biblical perspective.

*Mardi Keyes co-directs the Southborough, MA, branch of L'Abri Fellowship with her husband Dick. They are the parents of three sons aged 29, 28, and 22.*

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## A Poem

### EMOTIONAL BEDOUINS

Perhaps we all go through our lives like emotional Bedouins, stopping at any oasis or caravan full of what we later realize are mirages: sweet, temporarily filling our psychic voids and travel sacks billowing empty with the wind. This way we do not have to suffer an emptiness wider than the desert sky, than ever-shifting sand, than unmappable stars and dunes.

And if we do actually happen upon a spring, reach the edge where land and sky meet sea; and awaken to sustained notes and the shimmering polyrhythms of water laughing as it tries to feed us, why shouldn't we throw ourselves in disbelief and awe into its depths in wild gratitude? Isn't all we know to offer ourselves to these offerings? And shouldn't we act like children with them when we can?

Some have never really been loved, some never able to love. For those of us who can, it is a kind of death. It is that final. All we know of love lacking is gone. There is no turning back. But love cannot turn one to dust or twist one into nomadic mirage. It awakens us next to the water, places us squarely in the place we are supposed to be, positions us to drink.

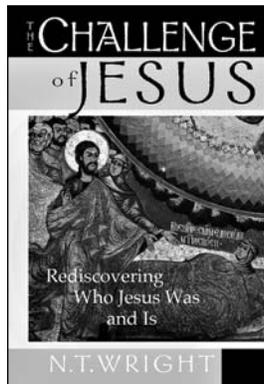
—Aaren Perry

## Quest for the Historical Jesus

If some books are difficult to market, I would suspect *The Challenge of Jesus* might fall into the marketing department category for “nightmare.” For one thing, it is a serious book written by a serious thinker who intends to make his readers think. (Just what the average busy Christian is dying to dig into next.) Second, it is written for evangelicals by a scholar

whose work has been part of what is often referred to as “the quest for the historical Jesus.” (A research project which most evangelicals have been happy to ignore, if not disdain.) And third, it argues that some of the ways evangelicals interpret the New Testament texts concerning Christ are, in fact, wrong. (Oh, yeah?) Not precisely a book designed to become an evangelical best-seller, and that is sad, because N. T. Wright is someone we need to listen to with care.

In the February 8, 1999, issue of *Christianity Today*, Tim Stafford profiled five “new” theologians (new in the sense of replacing an older generation of scholars in top academic positions) who have something



of importance to say to the church: Richard Hays (Duke Divinity School), Miroslav Volf (Yale), Kevin Vanhoozer (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School), Ellen Charry (Princeton), and N. T. Wright, (Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey). They “signal a discernable and surprising shift within the fields of biblical studies and theology,” Stafford says. “They certainly do not represent the majority of their peers. Yet their work—articulating an unapologetically orthodox faith—is highly regarded in the academy.”

Dr. Wright’s primary work is found in two massive books of scholarship, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (700 pages) and *The New Testament and the People of God* (500 pages), the first two in a projected series of six volumes. *The Challenge of Jesus*, written for a lay audience, is both a good introduction to this keen thinker and an examination of Jesus within the historical context of the first century—which is guaranteed to send us back to the Scriptures for further study.

If you are like me, *The Challenge of Jesus* will cause you to rethink your reaction to the scholarly quest for the historical Jesus. Wright’s single-minded insistence that Christians need not fear the truth is bracing, as is his conviction that the best response to historical scholarship which ignores the Scriptures is not to withdraw from scholarship but to do better scholarship.

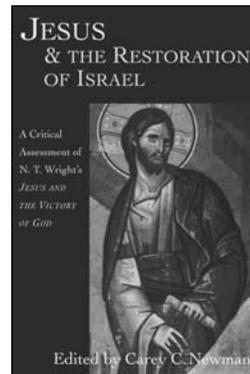
If you are like me, you will also find *The Challenge of Jesus* challenging reading. Not because it is so academic as to be incomprehensible, but rather because it forces us to reconsider how we see and understand Jesus, and how we interpret the

New Testament. “The more I take part in the quest for Jesus,” he says, “the more I am challenged by it both as an individual and as a churchman. This is not because what I find undermines traditional orthodoxy, but precisely because the rich, full-blooded orthodoxy I find bubbling up from the pages of history poses challenges to me personally and to all the congregations I know. These challenges are extremely demanding, precisely because they are gospel challenges, kingdom challenges.”

I hope you are up to the challenge of *The Challenge of Jesus*. Few books have so stimulated my desire to study the New Testament or to know Jesus better.

Those who wish to listen in to the scholarly conversation around Wright’s work will be interested in *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel*. Twelve scholars, not all evangelicals, respond to aspects of Wright’s *Jesus and the Victory of God*. ■

—Denis D. Haack



### Books reviewed:

*The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* by N. T. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1999) 197 pp.+ notes.  
*Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God* edited by Carey C. Newman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1999) 288 pp. + notes.



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## The Truth Is Out There:



### Watching television with Discernment

**T**he popularity of *The X-Files* is actually something of a surprise. Unlike the majority of programs which become popular, it was not initially scheduled to follow an established hit like *Friends* or *Home Improvement*. In its first season Fox scheduled it for Friday evenings—a time slot not known to attract young people, but by the middle of the first season its technically-literate fans took to the Internet to discuss each episode. Even more interesting is the fact that *The X-Files* breaks the rules we've come to expect from mysteries. Though each program

begins with some mystery or crime, few if any of them are ever solved by FBI agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully—and it is this resolution which usually makes mystery satisfying as a genre. Yet millions watch it weekly, in over 60 countries.

Chris Carter, the creative mind behind *The X-Files* remembers loving a program which ran in the mid-70s called *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*. Darren McGavin played Carl Kolchak, a reporter who investigated crimes that always included some supernatural twist. Convinced that television had for too long not had a series which was both technically well-done and scary, Carter conceived *The X-Files*. Not since *Star Trek* has there been a science fiction program which so imaginatively explores the fears, values, and yearnings of so many.

When I ask college students why they watch *The X-Files*, the comment I hear most often is that the show makes them think. The show is literally peppered with little clues that have some wider significance. The time appearing on digital

clocks, for example, might be birth dates of people associated with the show—which means that every detail of every show might mean something. An episode involving the power to heal was titled “Talitha Cumi,” the words Jesus spoke to the young woman in Mark 4 when he raised her from the dead. Characters weave in and out of episodes, often without revealing whether they are good or bad. Even Scully and Mulder’s supervisor,

***Each program begins with some mystery or crime, but few are ever solved.***

Assistant Director Skinner, is an ambiguous character. Episodes which stand on their own might contain little clues which relate to previous shows. And most of the questions raised remain unresolved, making viewers think about life, death, meaning, and the ultimate nature of reality.

The show introduces a wide variety of beliefs and religious practices, but leaves the viewer to decide what to think about them. This includes everything from Christianity to Native American rituals to UFOs to agnosticism to neo-paganism. *The X-Files* is a window of insight into the postmodern notion of tolerance and “designer spirituality,” where every narrative is a local narrative, with no metanarrative to give meaning to the whole, or to sort out conflicting truth



# A Review of The X-Files

claims. One remarkable episode, "All Souls," depicted a crime that was actually a battle for souls by Satan and an archangel, causing Scully to reexamine her Catholic faith.

There is a delicious postmodern irony in the show, where the weightiest issues might turn out to be insignificant while fragmented details spread out over numerous episodes carry a meaning we can only guess at. And everything is confronted with a casual gaze which suggests that, in a world in which the truth is always out there, we might as well keep a sense of humor.

**T**he *X-Files* also unpacks the postmodern critique of truth. Agent Dana Scully is a pathologist, committed to science, facts, and conclusions that can be confirmed by logic and experimentation. Agent Fox Mulder is more intuitive and open to the paranormal. His office at FBI headquarters is dominated by a poster of a UFO with the words "I want to believe." Intuition and faith are as important as reason, reality is far more than the mere here-and-now, and science has few answers, especially concerning the most crucial questions.

Carter enjoys scaring his viewers as well as occasionally grossing them out. Aliens and victims are seldom attractive, and the show leaves a lot to the imagination, which heightens the weirdness. Adding to the horror, a dark conspiracy exists, made up of shadowy figures such as the Cigarette-Smoking Man, who know what is happening, and are seeking to manipulate it for their own ends. Sometimes the sense of horror comes from allusions to current events. In one episode Scully and Mulder were assigned to an FBI antiterrorist squad in a setting which eerily evoked the Oklahoma City bombing. The show exhibited "an audacious display of questionable taste," *Newsweek* said. "But Carter is a hot-button pusher, capable of shocking even jaded viewers with tactics most film-makers would shy away from."

It is easy for Christians to be critical, but we must not dismiss the appeal of thrillers, of stories designed to scare. Fear is not all bad, as

anyone who knows God realizes. And if there is no God to fear, life becomes excruciatingly boring.

*The X-Files* is relentless in its insistence that there is more to knowing than human knowing will ever know. Life can not be explained simply by logic and science, and sometimes, even after science has offered its explanation, a mystery remains about which the only possible response is awe. In a secularized culture, we are tempted to live as if God does not exist. That is not only a lie, it is profoundly unsatisfying. It should not be a surprise that the generation which was raised on the myth that "the cosmos is all that is, all that was, and all that ever will be" is yearning for spiritual experience, for a sense that there is some reality which transcends the here and now.

*The X-Files* raises questions we Christians need to ask of ourselves. Where do we exhibit—not talk about, but exhibit—our belief in transcendence and our commitment to the God who is known in Christ, but who is yet beyond all comprehension? When we are defensive and reactionary when confronted with alternate spiritualities, what does that say about the God we serve? And why is our personal and corporate worship seldom infused with a fear of the Lord which issues from an awe-struck love for the God who would redeem the likes of us?

*The X-Files* is both a window of insight into our culture and a point of contact with those who do not share our deepest convictions. It is also a very creative, sometimes funny, often ridiculous, occasionally grisly thriller of a show that challenges the viewer to consider what they believe and why, and what difference it might make in a postmodern world. ■

-Denis D. Haack



by  
Denis  
D.  
Haack

*The X-Files raises questions we  
Christians need to ask of ourselves.*

## The Danger in Safety

Is it possible that Christians insisting their children wear bike helmets will someday be seen as killing the modern missionary movement?

Now, I phrased that question to be intentionally provocative, but I do have a point to make. We live in a culture which has adopted survival as a primary value. Health, fitness, and personal safety have been embraced with a passion which considers risk to be unacceptable. Whenever an accident occurs, for example, cries immediately are heard to find ways to lower the risk, and to institute safety procedures so that similar accidents need never occur again. It is true that various forms of recreation for adults have become popular which are risky in the extreme, but this exception simply serves to highlight the rule. In daily life, at least, where we live out our lives, risk is unacceptable and survival is a primary concern.

What does it mean to be faithful in such a cultural setting? After all, to paraphrase Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Christ's call to us is "Come and die," not "Come and survive."

Philip Hallie, the philosopher who told the world the story of the courageous Christians of Le Chambon who saved Jews from the Nazis, argues that one les-

son from Le Chambon is that children must be taught that risk is acceptable if they are to grow up willing to take risks for what is right. "If all we do for our children is pound into their heads reasons for protecting their own hides," he writes, "their second nature will be as wide as the confines of their own... skins." If we raise our children such that risk is unacceptable, and that survival is paramount, we can hardly expect them to lay their lives on the line for the gospel when they grow up. And since that is the mes-

sage they will receive from the culture all their lives, don't we have a responsibility to demonstrate and teach a distinctly Christian view of risk in life?

This is not an argument for trashing children's bike helmets. It is an argument, however, for remembering that just as the Enemy masquerades as an angel of light, so even the very healthy, scientifically reasonable, common sense values of a post-Christian culture may be contrary to Christian faithfulness. ■

-Denis D. Haack

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