

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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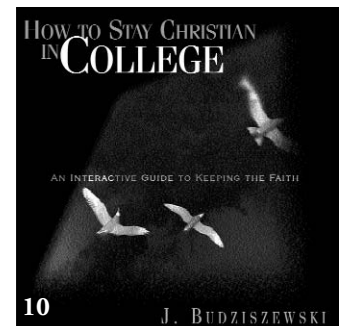
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Editor's Note

Failing to mention something can make a real difference. A friend recently told me about a woman whom he remembers as having the reputation of being a fabulous cook. People looked forward to invitations to dinner, knowing that they would be treated to a superb meal. At church pot-luck dinners her contribution was always noted, and folks moved through the buffet line hoping those ahead of them hadn't taken it all. She was gracious about the praise she received, insisting the food she made wasn't that special. And she always made copies of her recipes for everyone who requested them. Without fail, however, people always returned with the identical message. "I tried your recipe last week," they would tell her. "It was good, really good, but not as good as yours. I followed the recipe, but somehow it wasn't quite the same." The woman would smile, and assure them that with some perseverance their culinary efforts would improve. After all, she reminded them, she had been cooking for a very long time.

What they didn't know, of course, was that the recipe she had given them was incomplete in some way. An ingredient would always be left out, or sometimes the proportions would be altered slightly. If the copy had been compared to the original recipe, it would have looked like a simple error, a copying mistake anyone could have made. The change was always small, hardly worth noticing, almost imperceptible. Still, when the recipe was followed, the omission always made a difference. Things just didn't seem quite right.

Though it's not really the same thing, reviewing the past few issues of *Critique* has caused me to realize that we've failed to mention a few things. More specifically, there are some essential ideas or definitions, some concepts foundational to what we mean by discernment that we haven't repeated often enough in these pages. We haven't left them out on purpose, of course. That's the main difference between us and the cook—I'm not confessing to a conspiracy

here. It's just that it's been some time since we spelled them out. And like a recipe missing one ingredient, that can make the rest of what we publish in these pages a bit less understandable.

For one thing, there are new readers every issue, and they deserve to know what we mean by discernment, since that's what this newsletter is all about. Though what we mean by discernment is implicit in all that we publish, making these ideas explicit will help readers develop skill in using them—in turning them from ideas into skills, and finally into habits of thought and imagination and life. And since discernment in a fallen world is so crucial to faithfulness, even those who have been reading *Critique* for awhile could benefit from reviewing the basics periodically.

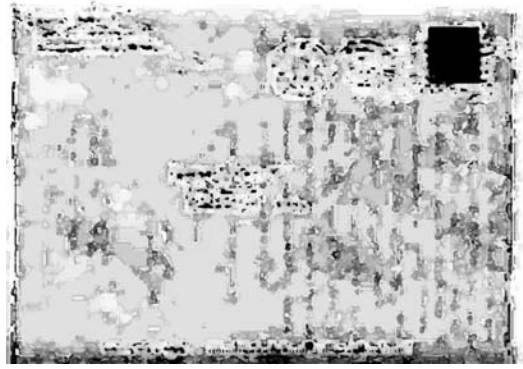
So, I hope you'll spend some time reflecting on the column in *The Discerning Life* in this issue of *Critique*. This is where I usually either pose an issue which requires a discerning response, or I occasionally take one of those exercises in discernment and propose a possible response. This time, however, the column reviews what we mean by discernment. We plan to reprint this column from time to time, perhaps annually. To be discerning means to have a questioning mind, and so our understanding of discernment can be summarized as a series of simple but probing questions which help us reflect Christianly on life and culture in a fallen world.

As you'll see (I hope), these questions form the backbone of all that is found in these pages. They are the framework which defines our approach to engaging the culture with the gospel. They are present in each issue of *Critique*—even if we have failed to mention them as often as we should. ■

~Denis D. Haack

Dialogue

The movie discussion continues...



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 was disappointed in Drew Trotter's response to Dan Balbach's letter (*Critique* #3 - 2000). Balbach asked some important questions about whether we can be infected by the movies we watch, and how to deal with the violence, sex, etc., in modern movies. (In other words, should we have standards for ourselves like those we set for our children?)

I believe Trotter has neglected several issues in his response. These are holiness, calling, and the nature of rest and entertainment.

The Bible consistently sets a perfect standard of holiness. The deeper I go with God, the more sensitive I am to things that grieve him. This means I am now more deliberate about what I do with my time; I watch far fewer movies than before, select them more carefully, and am less tolerant of trash and triviality than I used to be.

Although all of us are called to exercise critical thinking, not all of us are called to be movie critics. I have found that having a deep, personal interest in people is more than adequate for me to connect with them, whether or not I know the movies they watch or the music they listen to. I think Trotter—and *Critique*—have vastly overstated the need to be students of our culture.

One issue that deserves deeper discussion in *Critique* is the nature of rest and entertainment. Should our rest even include passive entertainment like t.v., movies, or spectator sports? Are there more edifying, constructive, and refreshing things we should be doing instead?

Tim Goring
Dallas, Texas

My church recently had its third cinema festival and I would love to share our experience in hopes that others will see this as a vital part of interacting with post-modern culture and even revealing our own misguided and idolatrous hearts.

At the first festival, we had a writer from *Entertainment Weekly* who attends our church discuss some of the language of cinema, as well as classic narrative structures in film. The second year we concentrated on the perception of Christians in a number of "secular" movies and in a Billy Graham film.

This year we looked at the way we approach films in general. The reviews and critical questions from *Critique* really helped outline what a thoughtful Christian response to film might look like. We began with meditations from scripture that addressed the idea of entertainment and Paul's example of "taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (II Cor.10:5), as well as his exhortation not to be taken captive to worldly philosophy (Col. 2:8). This was followed by a discussion led by a screenwriter/producer on Christians' attitudes toward the entertainment industry and how to discern the worldviews within a film. We then watched *The Matrix* and *The Straight Story* and applied some of *Critique's* tools and questions in our discussion.

We now plan on having two monthly film discussion groups to continue developing discernment in what we are watching, as well as to learn how to use film as a bridge for sharing the Gospel with non-Christian friends.

Thanks again for modelling Christian discernment of postmodern culture in *Critique*.

Greg Stump
Grace Brethren Church, Long Beach

Christian Discernment 101

Probing questions to help develop skill in discernment.

If anything is certain for Christians today, it is that we find ourselves living among people who do not share our deepest convictions and values. If we are to be faithful as Christians in such a pluralistic setting, we'll need to develop skill in discernment. An ability to respond winsomely to those who see things very differently than we do, instead of merely reacting to the ideas, values, and behavior of the non-Christians around us. An ability, by God's grace, to creatively chart a godly path through the maze of choices and options that confront us, even when we're faced with situations and issues that aren't specifically mentioned in the Scriptures.

This was what Paul wanted for the Christians who lived in the pluralistic culture of the first century. "We have not stopped praying for you," he wrote to the Colossians, "asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom" (1:9). J. B. Phillips translates it this way: "We are asking God that you may see things, as it were, from his point of view by being given spiritual insight and understanding." Os Guinness uses the term thinking Christianly, and defines it as "thinking about anything at all in a distinctly Christian way. Where our minds are so informed by the truth of God's word in terms of our assumptions and presuppositions that we increasingly see as God sees, though it will be in an imperfect way."

One way to develop skill in discernment is to recognize that being discerning

is a process which involves answering four simple but probing questions. The questions are simple enough to be taught to children; they are probing enough to help us get to the heart of whatever we are trying to reflect on as Christians. The questions can be learned and used, until with practice they become a habit, a way of biblically interacting with ideas and issues in a fallen world.

Our concern is not simply with isolated ideas, but with the whole of life and

The questions can—should—be asked as we scan the newspaper, attend a seminar, read a book, listen to a sermon, or talk with a neighbor.

culture. The questions can—should—be asked as we scan the newspaper, attend a seminar, read a book, listen to a sermon, or talk with a neighbor. We need to be discerning about all of life and culture, because all of life and culture has been tainted by the Fall.

The process outlined here is not a formula or recipe, nor is discernment some sort of technique. Nor are we guaranteed that answering the questions will somehow make everything turn out well. Rather, as discerning Christians we may, by God's grace, be remembered as those who sought to be faithful.

Discernment Questions for Believers

1. *What's being said?* What is the nature of the challenge confronting us? What ideas are presented, or are implicit as

assumptions? What's really at stake, or being requested, or argued for, or disputed?

What are the essential or foundational issues? What are the secondary or less important issues? It's vital to distinguish between the two, so we don't get distracted by things that may have significance, but are not of primary importance.

2. *What is a Christian response?* Notice we are concerned with "a" Christian response, not necessarily "the" Christian response. Minds renewed by the truth of God's word may not agree at every point on every issue, and there is room for diversity among the people of God.

Where do we agree? Where do we disagree? Seek points of agreement before identifying areas of disagreement. Christians have the unfortunate reputation of being unnecessarily negative and disagreeable, unlike Paul, who in Athens began his discussion with a pagan audience by finding a point of contact with them.

3. *Why do we believe the Christian position?* What reasons would we give?
4. *How can we talk about and live out the truth creatively and winsomely in a pluralistic culture?* Since most of our friends and neighbors see things differently, how can we make sure we are being understood?

Discerning Discussions with Unbelievers

When we are talking with non-Christian friends about issues that matter, the four discernment questions can be changed slightly to become a framework for

Devilish Schemes

One devil advises another.

discussion. (Note: they are questions, not mini-sermons.)

1. *What's being said?* What's the message(s) or issue(s)?
2. *Where do you agree? Where do you disagree?*
3. *Why?* Why do you believe that? What reasons would you give?
4. *What difference does it make in your life?*
How does this conviction or value change how you live or affect your choices?

Because movies and popular music are art forms, and not merely ideas, we can add a couple of questions to help us better comprehend what's being said in each case.

Movie Discussions

1. *What was your initial or immediate reaction to the film? Why do you think you reacted that way?*
2. *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?*
3. *Since movies tell a story, what elements of narrative are important to this film? What is the significance of each of the main characters? With whom did you identify in the film? Why?*

Music Discussions

1. *What is the message of the lyrics? How good is the poetry?*
2. *What is the message communicated by the music? How good is the music? Does the music fit the words?*
3. *How is the performance?*
4. *Do I like it? What does that say about me?* ■

-Denis D. Haack

My Dear Wormwood,
Men are not angered by mere misfortune but by misfortune conceived as injury. And the sense of injury depends on the feeling that a legitimate claim has been denied. The more claims on life, therefore, that your patient can be induced to make, the more often he will feel injured and, as a result, ill-tempered. Now you will have noticed that nothing throws him into a passion so easily as to find a tract of time which he reckoned on having at his own disposal unexpectedly taken from him. It is the unexpected visitor (when he looked forward to a quiet evening), or the friend's talkative wife (turning up when he looked forward to a tête-à-tête with the friend), that throws him out of gear. Now he is not yet so uncharitable or slothful that these small demands on his courtesy are in themselves too much for it. They anger him because he regards his time as his own and feels that it is being stolen. You must therefore zealously guard in his mind the curious assumption "My time is my own." Let him have the feeling that he starts each day as the lawful possessor of twenty-four hours. Let him feel as a grievous tax that portion of this property which he has to make over to his employers, and as a generous donation that further portion which he allows to religious duties. But what he must never be permitted to doubt is that the total from which these deductions have been made was, in some mysterious sense, his own personal birthright.

You have here a delicate task. The assumption which you want him to go on making is so absurd that, if once it is questioned, even we cannot find a shred of argument in its defence. The man can neither make, nor retain, one moment of time; it all comes to him by pure gift; he might as well

regard the sun and moon as his chattels. He is also, in theory, committed to a total service of the Enemy; and if the Enemy appeared to him in bodily form and demanded that total service for even one day, he would not refuse. He would be greatly relieved if that one day involved nothing harder than listening to the conversation of a foolish woman; and he would be relieved almost to the pitch of disappointment if for one half-hour in that day the Enemy said, "Now you may go and amuse yourself." Now, if he thinks about his assumption for a moment, even he is bound to realise that he is actually in this situation every day. When I speak of preserving this assumption in his mind, therefore, the last thing I mean you to do is to furnish him with arguments in its defence. There aren't any. Your task is purely negative. Don't let his thoughts come anywhere near it: Wrap a darkness about it, and in the center of that darkness let his sense of ownership-in-Time lie silent, uninspected, and operative.

And all the time the joke is that the word "mine" in its fully possessive sense cannot be uttered by a human being about anything. They will find out in the end, never fear, to whom their time, their souls, and their bodies really belong—certainly not to *them*, whatever happens. At the present the Enemy says "mine" of everything on the pedantic, legalistic ground that He made it. Our Father hopes in the end to say "mine" of all things on the more realistic and dynamic ground of conquest.

Your affectionate uncle
Screwtape ■

Copyright © C.S. Lewis, 1961

Source: *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis (New York: Time Inc. Book Division; 1961) pp. 72-75.

Straight Shooter



A Review of The Straight Story

by Drew Trotter

No movie in recent memory so exemplifies the wisdom of the less-is-more principle than *The Straight Story*, David Lynch's G-rated, true story of Alvin Straight, the man who rode his lawnmower across Iowa to visit his brother in order to be reconciled to him before his death. Though this film is not as short as many (one hour, fifty-one minutes), dialogue is kept to a minimum, and the most exciting action is that of Alvin's John Deere careening down a hill out of control. Alvin, played by Richard Farnsworth in an Oscar-nominated performance, does encounter a number of people and have a lot of experiences during his six-week journey, but *Titanic* this is not. What it is, is a powerful statement of the gospel of humility and forgiveness.

Lynch tells much of the story with his camera. Recurrent themes of the stars of a late summer Iowa evening, the sweeping vistas of corn and wheat fields, close-ups of members of the present older generation, showing their sadness and strength build a statement that focuses on the simple, primary virtues of life as it is supposed to be lived: the beauty of nature, the worth of work that grows things out-of-doors, the knowledge that comes through suffering.

Nowhere is Lynch's use of the camera to speak more evident than when Alvin finally crosses the Mississippi. After three hundred miles and almost six weeks, he is just about there. Alvin goes over the bridge entirely alone, rejoicing in the steady, slow clack of the lawnmower as it rides along, looking left, right and down through the cracks of the bridge to see the water as it

tells him of the near-accomplishment of the journey. It is a moment of triumph without a single word, just the tears of joy on an old man's face that signal to him that he has not suffered in vain. Powerful and deeply moving without being maudlin, the scene causes us to feel the special sense of rightness in what Alvin is doing; his journey will be worth the effort after all.

Lynch uses the camera in other ways. Off-camera noises build tension in the viewer as we are made to be as patient as Alvin in order to find out what we want to know. In the opening scene of the movie, for instance, a helicopter shot of the empty main street of Laurens, Iowa becomes a crane shot of two modest houses with an overweight woman sunning herself optimistically while wolfing down cream puffs and drinking iced tea. She gets up to go fill her plate again and while gone, the camera slowly moves in and rests on a single window of the house next door. We hear an ominous thump from within, one that would have alarmed the woman had she heard it. We do not find out what has happened until at least five minutes later when we learn that Alvin has fallen and cannot get up without assistance. It seems like an eternity to us, but we learn something of the patience that Alvin has, as he calmly lays there on the floor waiting for someone to find him so he can get up. The same device is used later in one of the funniest scenes in the movie (and there are many) when a frus-

Straight Story

Credits

Starring:

Sissy Spacek

(Rose Straight)

Richard Farnsworth

(Alvin Straight)

Everett McGill

(Tom, John Deere Dealer)

John Farley

(Thorvald Olsen)

Kevin P. Farley

(Harold Olsen)

Jane Heitz

(Dorothy)

Director:

David Lynch

Screenwriters:

John Roach

Mary Sweeney

Producers:

Pierre Edelman

Neal Edelstein

Michael Polaire

Alain Sarde

Mary Sweeney

Music:

Angelo Badalamenti

Cinematographer:

Freddie Francis

Costumes:

Patricia Norris

Run Time: 111

Rated G



trated woman runs over a deer, but I will leave that one to your viewing. I cannot remember when I have laughed so hard.

But the real strength of this film lies in the character of Straight himself.

Farnsworth's performance (as well as those of all the characters in the film, especially that of Sissy Spacek who plays his full-grown, retarded daughter) is an unbelievably wonderful blend of cantankerousness and warmth. Full of wisdom that he has gained from the years of his experience in his family, and also especially the Second World War, Alvin gives us lines, stories and images that lift our spirits and make us want to "be like that when we get old."

His patience, stubborn adherence to

what he knows he must do, no matter how crazy it might seem, his ability to listen to others or even simply tell from looking in their eyes how he can help them are woven together around a story that is dominated by one single motivation: Alvin Straight, proud master of his own fate, knows he needs to humble himself and go see the brother to whom he has not spoken in over eleven



The real strength of this film lies in the character of Straight himself...a wonderful blend of cantankerousness and warmth, and full of wisdom.

years. It does not matter what it will take to get there, he must do it simply because it is the right thing to do. What he learns along the way, and what others learn from him, is worth infinitely more than all that Alvin Straight does not have—the money, power or fame so coveted in our possession-drunk culture. And what we learn from this movie is worth even more than that. ■

~Drew Trotter

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 significance of this story? Why bother telling it—as a film, or a short story, or a novel? Why is it worth reflection and discussion? What does it reveal about humanity as created in God's image in a fallen world?
3. Where do you agree or disagree with the message of the film? Why? In the areas in which you disagree, how can you talk about and demonstrate the truth in a winsome and creative way?
4. 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?
5. What is the significance of Alvin's pilgrimage? To what extent is Alvin's pilgrimage a metaphor for the Christian life? With whom did you identify in this movie? With whom are viewers meant to identify? Discuss the different characters in the film and their significance to the story.
6. Since we as Christians are commanded to offer hospitality to strangers (see Matthew 25), what responsibility would we have before the Lord to allow an Alvin to camp in our yard?
7. 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?
8. Might the film be a useful point of contact for discussion with non-Christians? What plans should you make?

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.

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The Second Martin

Martin Chemnitz may not be well-known outside of Lutheran circles, but he was an important figure in the Protestant Reformation. Known as the “second Martin,” Chemnitz not only followed in Luther’s footsteps, he is credited by historians with rescuing the Lutheran stream of reform from dying out. “After Luther’s death,” translator Georg Williams writes, “the Lutheran movement drifted into such theological and political diversity that this disarray eventually would have led to its fragmentation and demise. Chemnitz stepped into this arena with his deliberate, systematic, and pastoral method and became a major force in the unification that was achieved in the Formula of Concord. Without his efforts, much of the Lutheran realm would have fallen into such confusion that soon Roman tradition would have once again dominated European Christianity.”

The Lord’s Prayer by Martin



Chemnitz allows us to listen in as this 16th century Lutheran pastor and theologian teaches on the Lord’s Prayer, phrase by phrase. Here, for example, are a couple of sentences from Chemnitz’s chapter on “who art in heaven” which will give you the flavor of the work.

“When we say ‘Our Father,’ we by faith think about the readiness, willingness, and eagerness of God to help us. When we add ‘who art in heaven,’ we add to the good will of God the following 1) divine power, that having all things in his power he is able to do and to give those things we ask; 2) divine providence, that seeing and knowing our wants, he is aware of our requests and hears the same; that he cares for us; that he orders, disposes, administers, and governs all things, especially all

things in his Church; 3) divine wisdom, that he knows the way to send help and deliverance; and 4) divine rule and dominion, that it belongs to the kingdom and office of him who dwells in heaven to hear our prayers, to regard our affairs, to help, to deliver.”

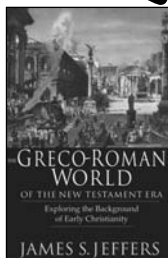
Those of you who are aware of the tendency of authors in Chemnitz’s day to give their books very long titles might

This brief study is both a good reminder of the wonderful grace God has granted his people in calling us to a life of faithful prayer, and a thoughtful exposition of how Christ taught us to pray.

suspect *The Lord’s Prayer* is not the original title. Your suspicion is warranted. Though Chemnitz’s original Latin version has been lost, the work was published in English by the University of Cambridge

Briefly Noted: First Century Life

by Denis D. Haack

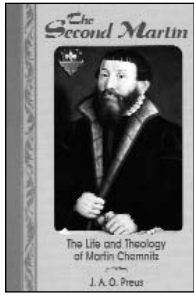


The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity by James S. Jeffers (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1999) 323 pp. + maps + notes + index.

When my copy of *The Greco-Roman World* arrived, I scanned the table of contents and the first page, as I always do with new books. Usually it then goes in the ever growing to-be-read pile in my office. In this case, however, I sat down and began to read. This is a very good book.

Well-written enough to be read for enjoyment, and carefully organized and indexed so as to be a useful resource, *The Greco-Roman World* is a superb introduction to first century life and culture. Dr. Jeffers, who teaches ancient history at California State University, brings a wealth of historical research to shed light on the names, places, events, and times that we read about in the Scriptures. “If the New Testament texts were written to make sense to people in the first century,” Jeffers writes, “then we must try to put ourselves into their places in order to determine what the writers of the New Testament intended their readers to understand by what they wrote.”

Perhaps not since the first century have the people of God lived in such a pluralistic setting religiously and culturally as we do today. *The Greco-Roman World* can help us better understand the culture of the New Testament, so that we can be more faithful in our own. We recommend it to you.



in 1598 as *A Substantial and Godly Exposition of the Prayer Commonly Called the Lord's Prayer*. Still, long title or short, this brief study is both a good reminder of the wonderful grace God has granted his people in

calling us to a life of faithful prayer, and a thoughtful exposition of how Christ taught us to pray.

The *Second Martin: The Life and Theology of Martin Chemnitz* is the first biography of Chemnitz to be published in English, and is by the former president of the Lutheran Church/Missouri Synod, who has become intimately acquainted with the Reformer by translating some of Chemnitz's 65 works into English over the past three decades.

The Second Martin is a scholarly biography, with a far greater emphasis on Chemnitz's thought and theology than on the details of his life and times. Chemnitz was a modest man, leaving a professorship at Wittenburg to assume a far less prestigious position in Brunswick, where he remained for the rest of his life as a pastor. He traveled extensively, wrote tirelessly, trained and encouraged men for the pastorate, and defended Lutheranism at a time when both Roman Catholicism and Calvinism seemed to threaten the movement. "Chemnitz did not hesitate in the defense of the truth and of Lutheran theology," Preus writes, "to enter into theological dialogs and controversies with anyone." Well-read, a devoted father and husband, Chemnitz was so deeply loved by his congregation that they never released him to accept another call. With none of the earthiness for which Luther is well known,

no hint of scandal ever tainted his reputation. Often ill, he served faithfully until his death in 1586 at the age of 63.

The Second Martin is not light reading, but it is a good introduction to Lutheranism, to the great debates of the Reformation, and to a man who should be remembered and honored as a pastor, theologian, and Reformer of integrity and courage. ■

~Denis D. Haack

Books reviewed:

The Lord's Prayer by Martin Chemnitz, translated by Georg Williams (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House; 1999) 103 pp. + index + biography.

The Second Martin: The Life and Theology of Martin Chemnitz by J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House; 1994) 343 pp. + chronology + notes + index.

A Poem

The Divine Perfections

How shall I praise th' eternal God,
That Infinite Unknown?
Who can ascend his high abode,
Or venture near his throne?

The great invisible! He dwells
Conceal'd in dazzling light:
But his all-searching eye reveals
The secrets of the night.

Those watchful eyes that never sleep,
Survey the world around;
His wisdom is the boundless deep,
Where all our thoughts are
drown'd.

He knows no shadow of a change,
Nor alters his decrees;
Firm as a rock his truth remains,
To guard his promises.

Justice, upon a dreadful throne,
Maintains the rights of God;
While mercy sends her pardons down,
Bought with a Saviour's blood.

Now to my soul immortal King,
Speak some forgiving word;
Then `twill be double joy to sing
The glories of my Lord.

~Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

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College Prep 101

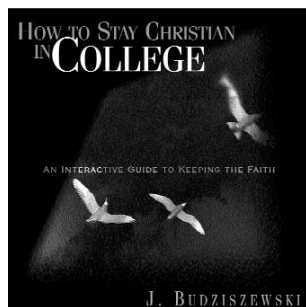
The irony of the title of J. Budziszewski's book, *How to Stay Christian in College* is not lost on him. After all, why write a book like this when you yourself failed to stay Christian in college? Budziszewski's (pronounced "BOOjee SHEFski") own story is,

perhaps, the best answer to this question.

"At the age of ten I had committed my life to Jesus Christ and was baptized. As a teenager I had not been a mature believer, but I had certainly been an enthusiastic one..."

"Why [did] I fall away from faith? For many reasons. One was that I had been caught up in the radical politics popular among many students...I had my own ideas about redeeming the world, and my politics became a kind of substitute religion. During my student years I had also committed certain sins that I didn't want to repent. Because the presence of God made me more and more uncomfortable, I began looking for reasons to believe that He didn't exist."

While earning his Ph.D. at Yale, J was convinced he'd found plenty of reasons for atheism and moral relativism, so much so that the latter became more than a personal faith to him; promoting it became his career. "Eighteen years ago, I stood before the Government Department at the University of Texas to give my here's-why-you-should-hire-me lecture. Fresh out of grad school, I wanted to teach about ethics and politics, so I was showing the faculty my stuff. What did I tell them? First, that we humans beings just make up the difference between good and evil; second, that we aren't responsible for what we do anyway. For that, I was hired to teach..."



"How then did God bring me back? I came, over time, to feel a greater and greater horror about myself—an overpowering sense that my condition was terribly wrong. Finally it occurred to me to wonder why I should feel horror if the

difference between the wonderful and the horrible was something we humans make up. I had to admit that there was a difference between the wonderful and the horrible after all. And that meant that there had to exist a wonderful, of which the horrible was the absence. So the walls of my self-deception collapsed all at once."

To his credit J not only reaffirmed his faith in God, he changed his academic goals. He turned from the study of relativism to natural law (see his *Written on the Heart*, IVP, 1997). Even more importantly the man who once tried to undermine the faith of his students is now perhaps the most eloquent and out-spoken Christian witness on the University of Texas faculty.

He wrote *How to Stay Christian in College* with three needy groups in mind: Christian high school students who plan to go to college, Christian students (especially freshmen) who are there already, and the parents of students. The shortage of good books on apologetics written for this audience is a pity, for no one needs them more. *How to Stay Christian* nicely fills the gap between such excellent books as Susan Maculay's *How To Be Your Own Selfish Pig* (David C. Cook, 2001—for younger students) and Steve Garber's *The*

Fabric of Faithfulness (IVP, 1996—for more mature students).

The style of *How to Stay Christian* is pure USA Today: wide margins with big type and lots of highlighted boxes full of catchy quotes, comments, and questions. At first glance readers of J's articles in *First Things* may find this disappointing, but only at first glance, for *How to Stay Christian* is a rare example of the triumph of substance over style. In this book, J not only tackles the intellectual issues of the campus—the world's ideas vs. God's ideas—he is immensely practical. Chapters on loneliness, sex, dealing with hostile teachers, even "Holding Your Own Without Being a Jerk" make faith a matter of doing, not just knowing.

Chapters on loneliness, sex, hostile teachers, even "Holding Your Own Without Being a Jerk" make faith a matter of doing, not just knowing.

Perhaps the best thing I can say about *How to Stay Christian* is simply this: after reading J's book, one knows that he hasn't only read lots of good books; he has spent hours enjoying the company of real students. To those of you who know and love real students, I heartily recommend this book. ■

~Greg Grooms

Greg Grooms is the director of the Probe Center, a Christian study center serving students at the University of Texas at Austin.

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Book reviewed:

How to Stay Christian in College by J. Budziszewski (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress; 1999) pp. 140 plus notes.

Grace in Clay Pots

Each February Margie and I look forward to attending the Bethlehem Conference for Pastors in Minneapolis. And each year we look forward to John Piper's lecture during the conference, which always consists of a biographical sketch of one of his theological heroes. "God ordains that we gaze on his glory," Piper says, "dimly mirrored in the ministry of his flawed servants. He intends for us to consider their lives and peer through the imperfections of their faith and behold the glory of their God. 'Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith' (Hebrews 13:7)."

Now three of those lectures—on Augustine, Luther, and Calvin—are available in book form as *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*.

"It is a book about three famous and flawed fathers in the Christian church," Piper

writes. "Therefore it is a book about grace, not only because the faithfulness of God triumphs over the flaws of men, but also because this was the very theme of their lives and work. Aurelius Augustine (354-430), Martin Luther (1483-1546), and John Calvin (1509-1564) had this in common: they experienced, and then built their lives and ministries on, the reality of God's omnipotent grace. In this way their common passion for the supremacy of God was preserved from the taint of human competition. Each of them confessed openly that the essence of experiential Christianity is the glorious triumph of grace over the guilty impotence of man."

Piper's obvious love for these heroes of the faith, his eagerness to honor and learn from them while refusing to overlook their faults and errors, and his passion for calling

the people of God to rejoice in God's grace make these biographical sketches a delight to read and discuss.

We recommend *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy* to you. And we recommend listening to the audio version on tape as well, since Piper is a passionate and effective public speaker. ■



~Denis D. Haack

Book reviewed:

The Legacy of Sovereign Joy: God's Triumphant Grace in the Lives of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin by John Piper (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books; 2000) 148 pp.+ index.

For tapes:

Rev. Piper's biographical sketches given at the annual Bethlehem Conference for Pastors are available on audio tape from Desiring God Ministries. The three lectures published in *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy* include "The Swan is not Silent: Sovereign Joy in the Life and Thought of St. Augustine" (1998); "Martin Luther: Lessons from his Life and Labor" (1996); and "The Divine Majesty of the Word: John Calvin: The Man and His Preaching" (1997). To order or for information write to Desiring God Ministries, 720, Thirteenth Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55415 or phone toll-free (888-346-4700) or visit them on the web (www.DesiringGod.org) or email (mail@DesiringGod.org). The tapes are available at a very reasonable cost, and those who cannot afford the listed price are invited to order the tapes for whatever they can afford to send.

Briefly Noted: Tech Danger

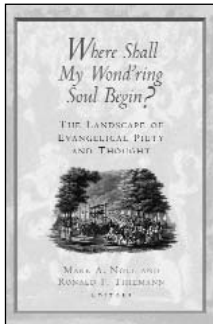
Bill Joy, cofounder and Chief Scientist of Sun Microsystems, is concerned enough about where science and technology is headed that he makes a radical suggestion: some knowledge is so dangerous and some technology is so ethically questionable that they simply must not be pursued. "I think it is no exaggeration to say we are on the cusp of the further perfection of extreme evil," he says, "an evil whose possibility spreads well beyond that which weapons of mass destruction bequeathed to the nation-states, on to a surprising and terrible empowerment of extreme individuals."

We recommend his article in *Wired*, "Why the Future Doesn't Need Us" to you. Well written and accessible, Joy writes not just for fellow scientists or computer nerds, but for the thoughtful lay person. That it appeared in *Wired*, which usually celebrates technology with an almost religious optimism, is interesting. That it was written by such a knowledgeable leader in the field is significant. And that it is a serious effort in postmodern ethical reasoning about issues that truly matter means it is part of an ongoing conversation in which Christians must be thoughtfully and creatively engaged.

Source:

"Why the Future Doesn't Need Us: Our most powerful 21st century technologies—robotics, genetic engineering, and nanotech—are threatening to make humans an endangered species" by Bill Joy in *Wired* (April 2000; #8.04) pp. 238-262.

Evangelicalism: An Overview



One of the gifts that Christian scholars can give to the believing community comes from their ability to see the whole picture. Or, to use an overused metaphor, they can survey the forest so the rest of us don't get lost among the trees.

This is exactly what the scholars in *Where Shall My Wond'ring Soul Begin?* do for their readers, offering a wide-ranging survey of the stream of Christian faith known as evangelicalism. The papers which make up this book were written originally for a colloquium on "Understanding Evangelicalism" celebrating the founding of an endowed professorship in evangelical theological studies at Harvard Divinity School.

Mark Noll, Wheaton College professor and first incumbent of the McDonald chair writes "Evangelical-ism at Its Best," which is displayed, he argues, in its classic hymns. Philosophy professor Dallas Willard contributes "Christ-Centered Piety," suggesting that evangelical thought and practice has been responsible for much individual and social transformation. William Abraham, professor at Southern Methodist University, says evangelicalism's commitment to Scripture is the source of the movement's strength. Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, examines evangelicalism's growing role in defining both personal ethics and

social responsibility. Other papers touch on spirituality, tradition, and trinitarian theology.

"Evangelicalism is historic Christian-ity. Its beliefs correspond to the central doctrines of the Christian church down the ages," Alister McGrath argues in his book *Evangelicalism & the Future of Christianity*. "In its vigorous defense of the biblical foundations, theological legitimacy and spiritual relevance of these doctrines, evangelicalism has shown itself to have every right to claim to be a modern standard-bearer of historic, orthodox Christianity." For a survey of the movement, by committed

members who are committed enough to be critical, consider reading *Where Shall My Wond'ring Soul Begin?* ■

~Denis D. Haack

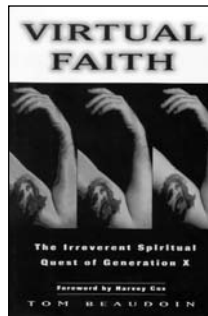
Book reviewed:

Where Shall My Wond'ring Soul Begin?: The Landscape of Evangelical Piety and Thought edited by Mark Noll and Ronald Thiemann (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 2000) 96 pp.

Source:

Evangelicalism & the Future of Christianity by Alister McGrath (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1995) p. 94.

Briefly Noted: Pop Culture



by Denis D. Haack.

"This is a book about impropriety and irreverence, beginning with my fundamental claim that Generation X is—despite and even because of appearances—strikingly religious," Tom Beaudoin writes. "We express our religious interests, dreams, fears, hopes, and desires through popular culture." Beaudoin, a Catholic Gen-Xer who studied with Harvey Cox at Harvard University School of Divinity, explores four interrelated themes in *Virtual Faith*: Generation X, pop culture, postmodern spirituality, and Christianity. In the process he develops a

theology of pop culture and attempts to bridge the chasm that separates the church from the generation of unchurched young people who tend to find Christianity irrelevant, negative, and unattractive.

My response to *Virtual Faith* is mixed. I found Beaudoin's theology sadly lacking, some of his analysis of pop culture flaky, and some of his conclusions flawed. *Virtual Faith* is very helpful, however, for those who wish to better understand Generation X, the nature and significance of postmodern spirituality, and the importance of pop culture in today's world.

Book reviewed: *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* by Tom Beaudoin (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers; 1998) 181 pp. + appendix + references + index.

Could the ACLU be Right?

The full-page ad for the ACLU is designed to get your attention. It got mine. It depicts a stained wanted-poster nailed to a rough wall. The poster features two pictures, side by side. The left picture is that of Martin Luther King, and the one on the right shows the scruffy face of convicted murderer Charles Manson.

The headline frames the issue in large bold print: **The man on the left is 75 times more likely to be stopped by the police while driving than the man on the right.**

The small print spells out the details: "It happens every day on America's highways. Police stop drivers based on their skin color rather than for the way they are driving. For example, in Florida 80% of those stopped and searched were black and Hispanic, while they constituted only 5% of all drivers. These humiliating and illegal searches are violations of the Constitution and must be fought. Help us defend your rights. Support the ACLU."

Many evangelicals believe that whatever the ACLU stands for must be wrong. It's a liberal organization, after all, in the forefront of the fight for the liberal agenda. The ACLU has defended abortion, fought against prayer in schools, and sought to strengthen the rights of criminals. It's almost an article of faith: if the ACLU is for something, it must be wrong.

This past summer I had the privilege to work with Luke Bobo, the Administrative Director of the Francis Schaeffer Institute in St. Louis. Luke is a godly man, a gifted minister and leader whose love for the Lord and his Word is both passionate and compelling. At one point during the week, Jerram Barrs mentioned that when Luke's son was born, Luke had cried. There was a mixture of emotions at that precious moment, of course, but Luke's tears were not all due to happiness. He cried also because he knew that his son would someday stand the real

chance of being stopped by the police simply because he is black. Not because he has a criminal record. Or because he is breaking a law. Or because he is driving erratically. But because he is black.

In our racially torn society, racial reconciliation is not optional for evangelicals. To align ourselves with a conservative agenda which supports law enforcement without simultaneously supporting justice is not worthy of the Christian. Faithfulness requires

In our racially torn society, racial reconciliation is not optional for evangelicals.

that we seek to flesh out the gospel of Christ in this broken world. That gospel is called the "message of reconciliation" by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5, where he states we have been given a "ministry of reconciliation." And lest we explain that text away by insisting the reconciliation in question is merely between God and humans, we should read Ephesians 2:14-17. There Paul teaches that Christ himself is the peace that breaks down the barriers—the walls of hostility—that divide people from one another.

At the last Rochester L'Abri Conference, Jerram Barrs was scheduled to lead a workshop on racial reconciliation. His workshops are usually standing-room-only affairs, crowded even when the assigned room is one of the larger ones. This time, however, only a handful of people showed up. Now, in fairness, I should add that I do not know why this was the case. Perhaps everyone else had already heard him speak on the topic. Perhaps everyone else is conscientiously working for racial reconciliation. I do not know. But I doubt it.

White evangelicals need to repent of our failure to live out the gospel, to stand for

justice, and to work for racial reconciliation. Because we take the Bible seriously, we should be in the vanguard, but we aren't. Most of us are so removed from the reality of racial injustice in our society, in fact, that we find the story of Luke's grief at the birth of son surprising, if not shocking.

We also need to give one cheer for the ACLU. Perhaps not three cheers, but at least one. On this issue they are correct. On this issue the ACLU is our co-belligerent.

If you'd like a tape of Jerram's workshop, order "The Importance of Racial Reconciliation" by Jerram Barrs (catalog #6416) from L'Abri Cassettes, P.O. Box 2036, Chesterton, IN 46304. Or order online (www.sound-word.com). ■

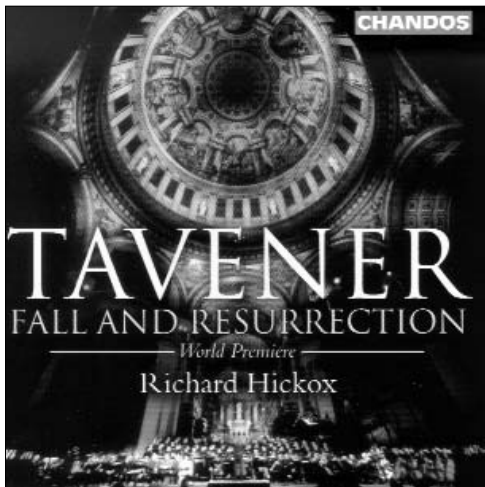
~Denis D. Haack

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Tavener,



**Looking
for
Classical
Contemporary
Christian
Musicians**

I am often asked, “We know there were faithful Christian composers in the past, but what about Christian composers today?” One of the most popular living composers today is the Englishman John Tavener, whose name may be heard with Henryk Gorecki of Poland, and Arvo Pärt of Estonia. Together these three are called Christian minimalists, or the “God squad” of post-modern composition.

Born in London in 1944, John Tavener is a graduate of the Royal Academy of Music whose music openly embraces Christian spirituality. His compositional style is a pairing of medieval counterpoint (drones and chant-like melodies) with ecstatic outbursts of radiant chords held by full orchestra and chorus.

For many years Tavener served as organist and composer in a Presbyterian church, but in 1977, Tavener entered the Eastern Orthodox Church. He said, “It sounds very extreme, but I think sacred art has gone downhill since the Middle Ages...however impressed I am by Michelangelo, the simple Greek peasant icon means much, much more to me. Or to give a musical example, I’m deeply moved by the very simple harmonic music they sing at the Russian Orthodox cathedral.”

Tavener exemplifies a growing fascination with the differences between Western and Eastern approaches to composition. The Western linear approach is to develop the musical themes as they go through time. The Eastern circular approach meditates on a musical idea without much development over the course of the piece. Like an icon, there is no directional movement, development, or expression of dramatic time.

So it is with Tavener’s recent composition and world premiere recording of *Fall and Resurrection*.

In it, Tavener “tries to encompass the events which have taken place since the beginning of time, and before time.” Quite a goal for a 67 minute work! But for the Christian, it *is* possible to encapsulate the impossibly complex work of God in the words “creation, fall, and redemption,” or as Tavener’s work is formed: Paradise and Catastrophe, Prediction, Incarnation of the Logos, and finally, Dance of Resurrection.

Tavener’s compositional language is sparse and minimal. The texts he chose (by Mother Thekla) are distillations of the biblical story and become a moment suspended in time. For example, the entire paradisaical relationship between Adam and Eve is summed up in their repeated lines:

Adam: Wife.

Eve: Husband.

Adam: Eve.

Eve: Adam.

These lines are compelling, especially when set to Tavener’s haunting melodies, beginning with a rising interval of a major sixth followed by a half step, done antiphonally, as they echo each other in what can only be the bliss of their unfallen relationship.

Into paradise enters the serpent in the guise of an untrustworthy saxophone, playing a line with slithering half-steps trilled then chromatically descending and ascending again, while the man and woman sing lines that seem to be choked with apple pieces in their throats, bending pitches and forcing stutters. The only words sung by Adam and Eve are “apple tree.” The weight of the catastrophe is then made all the more horrifying by a blown ram’s horn. Chaos follows while the chorus repeats, “Knowledge Divine” and “I am God.” After the fall, Adam sings, “Eve! What have we done? Who are you? Who am I? Who is God?”

Now that the rebellion has occurred, the wisdom the serpent promised has come, but in the worst possible way, namely, by the experience of evil. The unforeseen result has been the loss of something they had taken for granted: the intimate knowledge of each other and of God. The ache of these questions has haunted husbands and wives

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ever since, even though marriage is the most intimate relationship we can have with another human being. Later, the two, barred from the garden, sing simply:

Adam: I must clothe Eve.

Eve: I must feed Adam.

In these two lines one hears something of the selfless love they once had and the resignation to life in a fallen world: there is work to be done, work that is at once futile and necessary. The simplicity of this captures the tragedy all the more painfully—perhaps the greatest beauty of minimalism is its understatement. Part one ends with the words, “Paradise lost.”

The next section, “Prediction,” wrings a cry for mercy from Adam and Eve and the chorus, but immediately the question of justice comes to their minds—“How can a man be just before God?” The answer comes in the third section, “The Incarnation of the Logos.” The same ram’s horn announces the Incarnation, and the choir sings “Logos, Logos.” Then, we get a short glimpse of the Magnificat text set to the Adam/Eve melody, once again free and spinning, implying that Mary has something of Eve’s original innocence (in keeping with Orthodox traditions).

Something of Jesus’ life is sung about (healing, teaching, the Last Supper) in between cries for His crucifixion and the text, “We adore thy cross.” Mixing the chronology of the story (non-linear, you see) can be disconcerting, but for those who already know the story it is a powerful poetic device taking all the elements and forcing them on top of each other, each garnering reflected meaning from the others, and finally giving the scene a sort of chaotic, nightmare-like sense one might expect from a fallen world that crucifies its Creator.

Then, in what comes across as one of the most horrible moments, the chorus sings “Crucify Him!” one last time, but perversely to Adam and Eve’s melody from the garden (mocking what humanity used to be), mixed together with the saxophone of the serpent playing the trills from the fall. Then on Him all hell breaks loose.

The last section is the resurrection, with only one word sung, by Mary Magdalene, “Ravoni”

(Rabboni), and a tower of sound grows to signify the resurrection, ending with the words, “All is transfigured...” while what sound like the bells of St. Paul’s Cathedral (where the performance was recorded) ring in glory.

It must be said that surely this is a monumental undertaking for a composer if there ever was to be one, and much of what Tavener does is quite impressive. However, the lament of Adam and Eve seems sappy and not in keeping with the lofty, mystical quality of the rest of the work. The final “Cosmic Dance of the Resurrection” with its repeated bells is also a bit of a disappointment, but how can anything that begins with so wild a palette of musical colors, rhythms, and musical ideas capture that moment? It can only try as all great art to find a fresh way to inspire our imaginations to take delight in the moment described.

With so few great works coming out of the Christian church in the last 150 years, it is a great joy to find a composer with Sir John Tavener’s skills writing music that takes Christianity seriously. Works like this will go far to help make the Faith plausible to a jaded post-modern culture. With its Byzantine and Hebrew modes and melodies, and its colorful timbres, this work is worth hearing to expand our ears beyond the major and minor modes most often heard in everything Western from Mozart to Amy Grant. ■

~John Mason Hodges

John Mason Hodges is Associate Professor of the Arts at Crichton College, Memphis. His background is in orchestral conducting, and performs occasionally with his Ars Nova Chamber Orchestra, and as guest conductor for various instrumental and vocal ensembles. He lives in Memphis with his wife Day, and their son Mason.

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Music reviewed:

John Tavener, *World Premiere Recording of Fall and Resurrection*, St. Paul’s Cathedral Choir and City of London Sinfonia. R. Hickox, Chandos 9800.

It is a great joy to find a composer with Tavener’s skills writing music that takes Christianity seriously.

by

John

Mason

Hodges

A Religious Delicatessen

<http://www.beliefnet.com>

Listening to Competing Voices

A Religious Delicatessen

We live in a pluralistic culture, surrounded by an amazing variety of beliefs, religions, spiritualities, and world views in the public square. Discerning Christians recognize the need to engage this pluralism with a winsome statement of the gospel, and to do that we will need to listen with care to the competing voices around us. Sometimes it almost feels like we've wandered into some sort of spiritual delicatessen, what the *UTNE Reader* calls "Designer God: In a mix-and-match world, why not create your own religion?" Beliefnet.com is a good example of this, where the seeker can find information on almost any world view or religion imaginable.

Ransom Ratings

Design: Not spectacular, but attractive; designed, it seems, primarily to be informative.

Contents: A wide variety of resources on everything from Buddhism to angels to movies to sacred texts to Christianity. Columnists include Margot Adler (Wicca priestess and NPR correspondent), Frederica Mathewes-Green (columnist for *Christianity Today*), David Wolpe (Rabbi of Sinai Temple, Los Angeles), Starhawk (author and ecofeminist), and Surya Das (Tibetan Buddhist Lama). If you want to listen in as believers from various religious traditions explain and discuss their beliefs and concerns in their own words, or if you need to learn in more detail what people believe and why, this is a good place to start your research.

Ease of Use: Lots of material, but it is well organized, and the site is easy to navigate.

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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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