

# Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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# Editor's Note

One of the myths surrounding the idea of a Christian mind is that if Christians think Christianly about something, they'll agree on every point. Or that discerning believers will be able to identify "the Christian line" on whatever issue they happen to be addressing.

Not so. As Os Guinness points out in *Fit Bodies Fat Minds*, the desirability of a Christian line "is a good deal rarer than many Christians think." Diversity enriches the community of God's people, and need not threaten the unity we enjoy in Christ.

The expectation that believers will agree on everything is contrary to Scripture. Twice in his epistles St. Paul, for example, addressed the question of whether Christians should eat food sacrificed to idols. In *Chameleon Christianity* Dick Keyes points out that the "safest, clearest, most unambiguous thing for Paul to do" was to derive a simple rule on the matter, but he didn't. "Paul resisted the temptation to give one fixed answer for all people in all occasions," Keyes says. "This is a wonderful example of New Testament faith in action. Life is complicated. The world is bent out of shape. Things are not simple. But we do have certain absolutes to live by and within them we have great freedom. In the context of discussing Christian freedom to value different days differently, Paul wrote, 'Let all be fully convinced in their own minds' (Romans 14:5). Imagine that—he did not expect all Christians to agree." As we move from the text of Scripture to policy to practice we need to grant one another great freedom. It is proper for me, in other words, to encourage fellow Christian parents to raise their children "in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4), but it is presumptuous and legalistic for me to imply that all Christians must therefore educate their children a certain way.

Our deepest desire is to stimulate our readers to think and live Christianly, but we are under no illusion that the thinking published in these pages convey some final word from God for every believer for all time. We see through a glass darkly, even when we seek to see as God sees.

Consider, for example, the wonderful article by Seel and Wilensky in this issue's Tuned In. I appreciate the insight they bring to the topic of teen fashion, and that they allow us to listen in as they seek to think biblically about Abercrombie and Fitch. How we dress matters, for Christ is Lord of all. They serve us well when they warn us about how A&F advertises its clothing. And I love the way their article makes me ask questions.

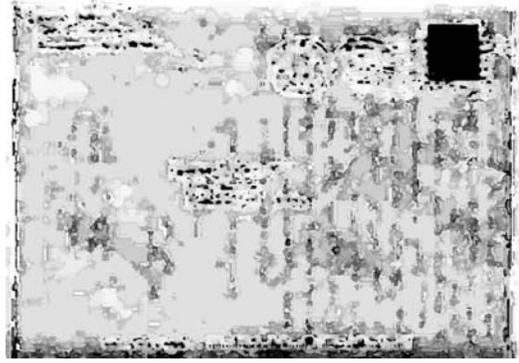
If wearing A&F clothing makes me "guilty by association," what does this imply about using other products made by sinners in a fallen world? Many products are advertised with appeals to hedonism—where does guilt by association begin, and end? Does watching a Disney movie mean I am guilty by association in Disney's support of the gay lifestyle?

Is it possible that "guilt by association" is partially determined by our own context? That perhaps Christian students in a private college-prep high school might properly discern that faithfulness implies they not wear A&F clothing, yet without suggesting that this conclusion must be embraced by believers in very different cultural contexts?

A shirt made by A&F is simply a shirt. Or is it that simple? Surely Seel and Wilensky are correct to insist that even in this we need to be discerning. We need to ask what A&F stands for, and whether wearing its shirts means we support those values. And as we do so, remember that the goal is not to advance a list of which brand names Christians can wear, about which we can't disagree, but to seek to be faithful to the One whose claim of Lordship means that nothing is neutral in this fallen world. The difference between being discerning and being legalistic means that if I decide to ditch all the A&F in my wardrobe I must refuse the temptation of assuming I know your spiritual state when you show up wearing the very latest style from Abercrombie and Fitch. ■

~Denis D. Haack

# Dialogue



## A Reader on Heavy Metal, Seel's reply, and general comments...

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**n light of Seel's article "Would Jesus Mosh?" [Issue #5 - 2000] I feel compelled to ask, "Would Jesus hang out with tax collectors and prostitutes?"

Surely the admonition not to "walk in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers" applies. Prostitutes were clearly the definition of immorality. Their lifestyle would surely have overshadowed any intended witness by Jesus. And tax collectors were nothing but traitors to their people, welcoming Rome and violating the Torah. As evidence of their despised status, the sages condemn all lies, except lies to tax collectors. By being with them, Jesus would have intentionally validated the tax collectors and unintentionally devalued his own reputation.

All satire aside, I must say that Seel asks many good questions in his article, but I believe that his answers are tainted with his own musical preferences. I think one more question should be asked: "Should we abandon these areas of culture (heavy metal, et al) and leave them to their own destruction for fear of being tainted or should we instead seek to be a light to a dark world?"

**Rev. Joshua Kelley**  
Mount Vernon, WA

**John Seel replies:**

**J** Surely the admonition not to "walk in the way of sinners" has to do with living their lifestyle rather than friendship or proximity. We are to befriend all those in need of grace with love and humility. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that Jesus would go to a strip bar in order to befriend the dancers. I suspect that he would seek to find other contexts in which to establish friendships and express concern. Perhaps the Coffee Shop they visit as the day dawns. Isolation from sinners is not the way of Christ, separation from sin is. My concern regarding POD is that by opening for Korn

they tacitly legitimize their music and lifestyle. These are matters that require prayerful discernment. I am of the view, for example, that we should befriend gays and lesbians and not automatically appeal to political legislation or polarizing rhetoric. This being said, I doubt it justifies visiting a San Francisco bath house.

Regarding my own "musical preferences," is this not itself one of the deeper issues that the article seeks to explore? Is music merely a matter of preference or taste? Does music reflect a world view not merely in its lyrics but in its musical quality and structure? Does beautiful music somehow reflect the structures of reality and God's created order? Certainly in God's world one would expect a diversity of musical styles. But is there a difference between music and noise? Is the difference merely in the ears of the listener or are there objective standards that allow for such a differentiation? Only in our modern/postmodern era have all criteria of judgment been dropped. Should Christians uncritically follow along with this tendency? I would hope to be less judgmental about heavy metal music and more discerning about the important questions it raises about developing a Christian mind on life in our times. Where I am merely judgmental based on my own opinions and tastes, I am eager to stand corrected.

**John Seel, Ph.D.**

**I** so enjoy the challenges in each issue of *Critique*. Being discerning and engaging the culture rather than avoiding it run contrary to the way I was raised, yet it's the way I want to live, so I've been delighted to receive *Critique* over the last several years. It has been a real help to me, both personally and as I work on training my young daughter.

**Barbara J. Carlson**  
Pullman, WA

## Techno-Enhanced Faith

### Christianized technology: E-mail prayer chains, Web-based training, and Automatic Tithing.

Several years ago on a trip in the breathtaking back country of Alaska, the silence was regularly interrupted not with the call of the wild, but with the beeps of technology. One member of our party wore coveralls with an impressive array of pockets, each containing some electronic gadget which provided us with a steady flow of data on everything from altitude to temperature to the time in Zanzibar. As my friend pointed out while he searched through various pockets trying to identify which gadget was beeping, we didn't have to worry about getting lost, since he had the capability to not only pinpoint our location but to call in the National Guard.

I thought about that technology-enhanced trip while pondering the ways Christians are using technology within the community of God's people. Without a doubt, technology is a good gift of God; nevertheless, our technology-trans-

formed life is worth reflecting on with some care.

Consider, for example, the following three ways technology is being used by some congregations—and some of the arguments for and against each practice.

#### E-mail prayer chains.

Instead of instituting a series of phone calls which ripple through the congregation in order to request prayer for some need, the need is simply sent via e-mail to all members simultaneously. Not only is the request circulated more quickly and efficiently, but even those who are away from home can learn of the news when they log on. On the other hand, this method is less personal than if members phone one another, a contact which provides an opportunity to talk, even if briefly. And keeping community personal is particularly important today, because people are so busy they rarely have much

time to talk, and because life and relationships are so fragmented.

#### Leadership training on the Web.

Since people tend to be so busy, leadership training classes are difficult to schedule, and when they are offered, many members have to miss one or more meetings. Thus, more and more training in churches—for Sunday school teachers and small group leaders, for example—is being offered via the Internet. People log on at their convenience, work through the assigned material, and e-mail questions if they have any. The difficulty, of course, is that though this solves the problem of trainees missing classes, it removes group dynamics from the training. Even if the Internet lessons are supplemented with classes, most of the leadership training occurs not within the context of community, people, and discussion, but individualis-

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What other uses of technology are being welcomed into the life of the church? What issues and questions do each of these uses imply?
2. Discuss each of the three examples mentioned above (and any others you came up with in answering question #1). Are you comfortable with each use of technology within the church? Why or why not?
3. What basic biblical principles are important when we begin to consider the relationship of technology and Christian faith? How does the Scriptural story of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation shed light on technology in a fallen world?
4. What might be lost as efficiency and ease is gained through technology? In what ways does community need to be developed among God's people? How can various technologies help build community? In what ways can various technologies defeat community?
5. What guidelines would you propose for your church to follow concerning using technology in the life of the congregation?
6. To what extent might this be a generational issue? Is it possible that younger people might be comfortable with using technology in ways their seniors might not?

## Bowling Alone

### From Chapter One: Thinking about Social Change in America

tically, with each trainee alone in front of a computer.

#### Automatic tithing.

Some churches are encouraging members to contribute not via the offering plate on Sunday morning, but via automatic withdrawals from their checking accounts. “Many parishioners already use this method to pay their mortgages, so they just have to transfer the idea to their church giving,” one pastor notes. “Direct deposits will ensure that donations don’t drop off during the summer and holiday season.” The convenience of this is undeniable, of course, though some would argue that it tends to make giving less personal. “Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give,” Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 9:7, “not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” Does automatic withdrawal fulfill that command? Or is something lost as efficiency and ease is gained?

All of which raises some interesting discernment questions for the Christian. ■

~Denis D. Haack

#### For further reading:

*The Technological Society* by Jacques Ellul (New York: Vintage Books; 1964).

*Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* by Neil Postman (New York: Vintage Books; 1992).

*That Hideous Strength: A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups* by C. S. Lewis (New York: Macmillan; 1946).

#### Source:

“Automatic tithing” from *The Church Around the World* (April 1999; p. 1), a monthly church bulletin insert produced by Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, IL.

**O**ur national myths often exaggerate the role of individual heroes and understate the importance of collective effort. Historian David Hackett Fischer’s gripping account of opening night in the American Revolution, for example, reminds us that Paul Revere’s alarm was successful only because of networks of civic engagement in the Middlesex villages. Towns without well-organized local militia, no matter how patriotic their inhabitants, were AWOL from Lexington and Concord. Nevertheless, the myth of rugged individualism continues to strike a powerful inner chord in the American psyche.

Debates about the waxing and waning of “community” have been endemic for at least two centuries. “Declensionist narratives”—postmodernist jargon for tales of decline and fall—have a long pedigree in our letters. We seem perennially tempted to contrast our tawdry todays with past golden ages. We apparently share this nostalgic predilection with the rest of humanity. As sociologist Barry Wellman observes,

“It is likely that pundits have worried about the impact of social change on communities ever since human beings ventured beyond their caves....In the [past] two centuries many leading social commentators have been gainfully employed suggesting various ways in which large-scale social changes associated with the Industrial Revolution may have affected the structure and operation of communities....This ambivalence about the consequences of large-scale changes continued well into the twentieth century. Analysts have kept asking if things have, in fact, fallen apart.”

At the conclusion of the twentieth century, ordinary Americans shared this sense of civic malaise. We were reasonably content

about our economic prospects, hardly a surprise after an expansion of unprecedented length, but we were not equally convinced that we were on the right track morally or culturally. Of baby boomers interviewed in 1987, 53 percent thought their parents’ generation was better in terms of “being a concerned citizen”...In 1996 only 8 percent of all Americans said that “the honesty and integrity of the average American” were improving, as compared with 50 percent of us who thought we were becoming less trustworthy...More than 80 percent said there should be more emphasis on community, even if that put more demands on individuals. Americans’ concern about weakening community bonds may be misplaced or exaggerated, but a decent respect for the opinion of our fellow citizens suggests that we should explore the issue more thoroughly.

It is emphatically not my view that community bonds in America have weakened steadily throughout our history—or even throughout the last hundred years. On the contrary, American history carefully examined is a story of ups and downs in civic engagement, not just downs—a story of collapse and of renewal. As I have already hinted in the opening pages of this book, within living memory the bonds of community in America were becoming stronger, not weaker, and as I shall argue in the concluding pages, it is within our power to reverse the decline of the last several decades.

In small ways—and in larger ways, too—we Americans need to reconnect with one another. That is the simple argument of this book. ■

~Robert D. Putnam

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[See review of *Bowling Alone* on page 12.]

## All You Need is You



### A Review of Nurse Betty

by Drew Trotter



*Nurse Betty*, the first movie since *Erin Brockovich* to deserve the attention of both the critics and the general public, is another paean to the prevailing spiritual philosophy of the age: You can create the reality you want to live, and you alone are all you need to make it happen. There is no one home in the universe; just wake up and realize: “You can do it!”

In this season of Olympics and political races, we are reminded that there is a grain of truth in the postmodern view. Hard work can overcome obstacles that seem insurmountable, and to follow a dream is a noble thing, *if* that dream coalesces with the will of God. But the idea regularly surfacing in movies these days is that one can do anything one puts one’s mind to, that there is no reality to be discovered, only a reality to be created. The forgettable Robin Williams film of a couple of years ago, *What Dreams May Come*, even extended this principle as far as the after-life. We create the heaven or hell in which we dwell eternally.

*Nurse Betty* pushes just this same philosophy. Directed by the cynical Neil LaBute (*In the Company of Men*, *Your Friends and Neighbors*) and superbly acted and structured, the story follows a traumatized waitress from a small town in Kansas who, after viewing the shocking and brutal murder of her husband, believes her favorite soap opera is real, and that she is a character in it. Through a complicated, yet believable, set of circumstances, Betty, played flawlessly by Renée Zellweger, is able to

escape and take off for Hollywood and her “ex-fiancee” Dr. David Ravel (Greg Kinnear in another of what is now a long string of remarkable performances). Events transpire in classic comic fashion with slapstick characters and events moving in and out of the picture, but the comedy always has a hard edge to it, balanced finely with disturbing rumblings of violence and mayhem as the two hit-men who killed Betty’s husband pursue her cross-country. Another child of *Pulp Fiction* has been born, but this one is kinder and gentler than its parent, though no less wrong in its basic message.

In a review on [cultureculture.net](http://cultureculture.net), Gary Mairs points out that the movie itself is a statement on popular culture. “Everyone here translates their experiences through television or music (they’re always watching the soaps or blasting the radio), but the film isn’t judgmental about their immersion in trash... When arch music swells behind a kiss, it’s both funny and moving—we’re invited to laugh at the cliché at the same time that we’re swept away by its transcendent emotion. *Nurse Betty* is something quite original: a comic meditation on our involvement with popular culture, one that honors the power of even the most banal and trivial art.”

*Nurse Betty* shows the success of a combination of good acting, good writing and good directing. Zellweger (*Jerry Maguire*, *One True Thing*, and *Me, Myself and Irene*) is so good at the sweet, girl-next-door role that one really begins to think she



#### Nurse Betty Credits

##### Starring:

Renée Zellweger  
(Betty)  
Morgan Freeman  
(Charlie)  
Chris Rock  
(Wesley)  
Greg Kinnear  
(Dr. David Ravel)  
Aaron Eckhart  
(Del Sizemore)  
Tia Texada  
(Rosa)  
Allison Janney  
Lyla Branch

##### Director:

Neil LaBute

##### Screenwriters:

John C. Richards  
James Flamberg

##### Producers:

Moritz Borman  
Steve Golin  
Stephen Pevner  
and others

##### Music:

Rolfe Kent

##### Cinematographer:

Jean-Yves Escoffier

##### Costumes:

Lynette Meyer

Run Time: 112

Rated R for strong violence, pervasive language, and a sex scene

is the girl next door. In this movie she shows her prowess as an actress by underplaying a mentally unbalanced character; the scene when she is traumatized into that condition is a masterpiece of tricky facial expression that takes care not to do too much.

Morgan Freeman is superb as the older hit-man and pulls off a triumph in the movie's crucial final scenes. In a situation that totters on the brink of silliness, he exudes a deep compassion and vulnerability, while remaining menacing. It is a prodigious accomplishment. All the other actors in the film are similarly impressive, Kinnear and Allison Janney, the press secretary to the president on the successful television series, *The West Wing*.

Tight, to-the-point- writing keeps the movie fast-paced and helps the audience not think too much about the ridiculous leaps in suspension-of-disbelief required of them, a fair task in a movie that is intended as a fable



*Once again*

***Hollywood tries to get us to swallow a naked humanism, devoid of any need for dependence on God.***

anyway. Some of the minor characters are a hard pill to swallow, but LaBute's direction doesn't allow anyone to become so over-the-top that they stand out (a feature that actually hurts the normally more showy Chris Rock) and generally serves the picture well.

The problems with the picture are not technical; they are moral. Once again Hollywood tries to get us to swallow a naked

humanism, devoid of any need for dependence on God, or any recognition of the deep and troubling hindrance that sin is to living life successfully. This time the humanism is direct. Freeman delivers the key lines to Zellweger when she has recovered from her trauma and is now wondering what she should do next: "You don't need a man. You don't need anyone. You've got yourself." She

follows her dream and lives happily ever after, and the audience is happy that a truly good person has realized her dream after all. But what happens when she wakes up? ■

~Drew Trotter

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## **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. 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. 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?
7. Might the film be a useful point of contact for discussion with non-Christians? What plans should you make?

## Finding the True, Noble,

**Seventh in a series on being in the world but not of it.**

It's a good thing the Bible identifies sin as folly, because sometimes it's almost impossible to keep from laughing. Relativism may be a deadly philosophy, but it can produce events of stunning absurdity. Consider this, for example, which appeared a few years ago in an article by John Leo in *U. S. News & World Report*. "In his new book, *Leading with My Chin*, Jay Leno tells a mildly embarrassing story about himself on the old Dinah Shore television show. The only problem with the incident is that it didn't happen to Leno. It happened to another comedian, Jeff Altman. Leno told Josef Adalian of the *New York Post* last week that he liked the story so much he paid Altman \$1000 for the right to publish the tale as his own." If this wasn't a true story, it wouldn't be funny—it wouldn't even be believable.

We don't need stories of ethical absurdity to remind us that anyone committed to holiness will have serious concerns living in Babylon. After all, Babylon is a society in which the Bible is considered to be merely one religious book among many, and the law of God to be nothing more than the primitive moral code of a religious minority. It would be different if we were living in Jerusalem, of course, but we aren't—we're in exile, to adopt a biblical metaphor, living among people who increasingly do not share our deepest convictions and values.

Given this reality, how can we live in a post-Christian culture without being contaminated by the fallenness around us? One common answer is that we should make Philippians 4:8 the standard for our involvement with the non-Christian world. In that text Paul tells the

believers in Philippi that "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." This verse, then, provides us with a straightforward list of qualities by which we can determine exactly what we should allow to fill our minds. If the book or joke or TV show or pop song fails this simple test, then the Christian should set it aside. Besides, who would want to give precious time to something not characterized by the qualities in Paul's list?

This understanding of Philippians 4:8, of course, would call into question some of what we publish in this newsletter. For example, since the music of Nine Inch Nails doubtlessly fails this test, is it wise for Dr. Seel to expose himself to it in order to write his review (*Critique #7-1999*)? How can we suggest that films be a window of insight to help us understand our culture when so many include material that even some non-Christians find objectionable? Would I say that watching *The X-Files* regularly is filling my mind with whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy (*Critique #3-2000*)?

How should we understand Philippians 4:8?

### Our heart's deepest desire

First, we need to remind ourselves that not only must we have a concern for holiness, we must yearn for it. Jesus expects this of his people. "Blessed are

those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," he taught in the Sermon on the Mount, "for they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6). Luther describes it as a "hunger and thirst for righteousness that can never be curbed or stopped or sated, one that looks for nothing and cares for nothing except the accomplishment and maintenance of the right, despising everything that hinders this end." The apostle Peter stresses the same thing when he teaches us to be holy, and then repeats himself to drive the point home. "As obe-

***We don't need stories of ethical absurdity to remind us that anyone committed to holiness will have serious concerns living in Babylon.***

dient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy' (1 Peter 1:14-16).

Those who teach that Philippians 4:8 is the standard for holiness by which to measure our involvement with the non-Christian world are to be commended for desiring holiness. If we love the Lord Christ as Savior we can never be complacent about evil. It is not enough that I believe that sin is bad in some vague theoretical sense; rather I must be mortified at the sin I see in myself. I must resist excusing myself, and by God's grace never grow comfortable with those sins which particularly plague me. "There is an old comedy," James Packer writes,

# and Pure in Babylon

“in which an escaped lion takes the place of the shaggy dog beside the armchair and the comic affectionately runs his fingers through its mane several times before realizing that, as we say, he has a problem. We act like that with regard to our sinful habits. We treat them as friends rather than killers, and never suspect how indwelling sin when indulged enervates and deadens. This, one fears, is because we are already its victims, never having known what it is to be really alive in our relationship with God, just as children born with crippled legs never know what it is to run around, as distinct from hobbling.”

A heart's desire for holiness, a hunger and thirst for righteousness is not optional for the believer. This means that we must know ourselves, identify those areas in which we are weak, and resist temptation. Living in a fallen world means we are living among those whose lives and art express both something of glory, for they are made in God's image, and something of the Fall, for they too are rebels against God. Living in Babylon means that many of our neighbors and friends may mistake evil for good, and may disdain what is good, mistaking it for weakness or prudishness. “Nearly all the wisdom we possess,” Calvin says in the first line of his *Institutes*, “consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” As we get to know God, we love him and desire to be like him, and he is holy. Knowing ourselves means, among other things, we will take our disposition to sin with deadly seriousness, making sure we are part of accountable relationships in the community of God's people, and seeking to grow in grace by the Spirit's sanctifying power.

Taking holiness seriously also means we will be discerning about our culture's lust for entertainment. If entertainment means allowing something which amuses us to wash over us as we relax and give ourselves mindlessly to it, then there is no place for entertainment

in the Christian world and life view. We live in a fallen world. At no time can we cease to be discerning, whether watching a movie or the news, reading a book bought at amazon.com or at a Christian bookstore, undergoing training at work, or listening to a sermon. This does not mean that novels and films can not be enjoyed, but rather we must be discerning as we enjoy them. In fact, I would argue that the more we engage the book or painting or film or whatever thoughtfully and critically and biblically, the greater can be our enjoyment of it.

## Misunderstanding Philippians 4:8

If holiness is so important, it seems reasonable to argue that we should withdraw from anything that fails to measure up to the standard Paul gives in this text. Anything that is not true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy is, therefore, out-of-bounds for the believer, and must be set aside. And, since precious little in Babylonian culture comes even close to passing this test, it is inappropriate (at best)

***At no time can we cease to be discerning, whether watching the news, reading a book bought at amazon.com or at a Christian book store, or listening to a sermon.***

and dishonoring to Christ (at worst) to get involved with it, regardless of the reason.

I believe this understanding of Philippians 4:8 is mistaken. Let me explain why.

We live in a fallen world. A world which, though created by God and declared to be good by him, is now abnormal and under his judgment because of our sin and rebellion. It's not merely that human beings occasionally commit some sin, but that by nature we are sinners. It is not surprising, then, that the effects of the Fall permeate all

that we are and do. Since we are created in God's image we bear true significance, but we are also fallen which means that everything about us is tainted by sin. It's not just non-Christians of whom this is true, but Christians as well. We are all sinners, and thus all fall short of God's glory. Even if we are redeemed by God's grace and deeply desire to honor our Lord above all, we realize that even our worship is incomplete, at best, and flawed, at worst. We seek as believers to live to God's glory, but we are well aware that this can occur only by grace. Until our redemption is consummated, even our service to him is imperfect, affected by the inevitable ripples of the Fall.

This means that nothing anyone does or makes in this fallen world (except for Christ, of course) measures up fully to the list Paul gives in Philippians 4:8. Everything falls short in one way or another. As a result, trying to use this text as a measure by which to draw lines for our involvement in a non-Christian world ends up being a rather subjective affair. We don't intend that, of course,

but how could it be any different? If nothing in this bent world fully meets this standard, we end up drawing our lines arbitrarily. We rule out the things we tend to be uncomfortable with, and then conveniently, we tend to ignore the fact that what we have ruled “in” doesn't meet the standard, either.

This is not, of course, an argument for not making distinctions. Some things do partake more of purity than do others, and that is significant. Christians need to be discerning in such things. On the other hand, the reality of living in a fallen world means that

if Philippians 4:8 is to be used as a standard by which to measure involvement in a post-Christian culture, we should be honest enough to admit that our application will be, by definition, both subjective and arbitrary.

Let's take literature as an example. No doubt some evangelicals would be troubled by the language in *Foreign Bodies*, a novel that is not featured on the shelves of Christian bookstores. Yet, it is a deeply Christian story, by which I mean that it not only is written from the perspective of a Christian world view, but the main character is an outspoken believer who leads a friend to faith. It's a postmodern novel, written by a Gen-Xer, and yet the gospel of Christ is expressed clearly. Many would argue that the rough language, examined in light of Philippians 4:8, fails the "pure" test, and so the novel must be ruled out-of-bounds. Yet, I would argue the language is realistic for the sort of non-Christian character speaking in the story. Does not that make it "true?" Many of those who are uncomfortable with *Foreign Bodies*, on the other hand, have no trouble with the poorly written fiction hawked in religious book stores. Yet, do not these novels fail to be "lovely," a term which includes the notion of aesthetic excellence? In terms of quality of writing they are neither "excellent" nor "praiseworthy." The truth of the matter is that we are more comfortable with the one than with the other.

Because we live in a fallen world, using Philippians 4:8 as a standard by which to measure our involvement in a non-Christian culture will always, by definition, end up being both subjective and arbitrary. The text does not tell us where to draw lines in a fallen world; it is used

by believers to justify the lines they draw.

If Philippians 4:8 means we can only think about what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy, it is impossible to

### ***Paul is not giving us a checklist by which to measure our involvement with the non-Christian world.***

have a thoughtful relationship with a non-Christian. If we compare Philippians 4:8 with Romans 3:9-18 where the apostle describes the characteristics of the person apart from God, we find they are polar opposites. True: "there is no one who understands." Right: "there is no one righteous." Pure: "their throats are open graves." Lovely: "their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." Admirable: "they have together become worthless." Praiseworthy: "there is no one who does good."

Yet, surely we do not believe that Paul is telling the Philippians never to think about their unbelieving neighbors and co-workers. Or that their relationships with non-Christians should somehow be mindless or thoughtless. Understanding Philippians 4:8 as a standard by which to measure the Christian's involvement in a non-Christian world falls apart when we compare Scripture with Scripture—an important key in rightly interpreting the Bible.

And finally, if this is how Paul intended us to understand this text, why did he not live that way himself? In Acts 17 we find him reading Greek philosophers, thinking about what they were saying in order to discern truth in the midst of a work about the pagan god

Zeus. And Paul expects us to model ourselves after his example, for the text we are discussing is followed by this: "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put into practice" (Philippians 4:9). If we interpret Philippians 4:8 to be the standard by which to measure our involvement with the non-Christian world, we must first explain Paul's failure to abide by his own teaching.

Even if motivated by a desire for holiness, this interpretation of Philippians 4:8 will cause us to live less than faithfully as God's people in a fallen world. It will tend to make us withdraw, when we are called, instead, to engage, and will erect unnecessary barriers between non-Christians and the gospel.

### **Obeying Philippians 4:8**

The apostle is not giving us a checklist by which to measure our involvement with the non-Christian world. Neither is he giving us a justification for withdrawing from the people and culture of Babylon. He is rather commending—and commanding—the development of a fully Christian mind and heart and imagination. When he tells us to "think about such things," he is using a word which means to meditate and reflect on, to contemplate, with the result that what is meditated upon becomes so much a part of us that it molds our thinking, our doing, and our feeling. In other words, he is teaching us what is necessary to prepare us to engage the culture and people of Babylon with the gospel, without compromising, and without being seduced by Babylonian ideas and values.

The apostle's instruction here is parallel to what he writes in Romans 12, when he insists that a renewed mind is required if we are to live transformed

lives instead of being pressed into the mold of the world. The spiritual disciplines of solitude, prayer, and meditation on the word of God grounds us in what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy, preparing us to live faithfully in exile in Babylon. Just as Christ did not have to be withdrawn from a sinful world to be holy, neither do we. And the Gospels record numerous instances when Jesus spent time alone with his Father. We must follow his example.

This doesn't make Philippians 4:8 easier to obey; in fact, I would argue it makes it much harder. It's reassuring to be able to justify withdrawing from some activity or person or cultural artifact that I find offensive or uncomfortable. Far more difficult is the realization that not only am I called to engage the culture of Babylon with the gospel, but that I must nurture and grow in the spiritual disciplines. But who has unhurried time in the midst of our busyness to meditate, to pray, to wait quietly before the Lord? And yet the command of Scripture is clear: "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."

Reading the Word and reading the world. Without the first, the second is not only impossible, it is dangerous. ■

~Denis D. Haack

**Editor's Note:**

This is the seventh in a series of studies on being in the world but not of it. A photocopy of the previous articles on being faithful in exile in Babylon is available by request: please send \$3 payable to Ransom Fellowship (not tax-deductible) to cover the cost of copying and postage.

**Sources:**

John Leo on Leno quoted in *When No One Sees: The Importance of Character in an Age of Image* by Os

Guinness (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress; 2000) p. 141. Martin Luther on Matthew 4:6 quoted in *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* by John R. W. Stott (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1978) p. 45. James I. Packer on sin from "Mortify" in *God's Words:*

*Studies of Key Bible Themes* by J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1981) p. 182. John Calvin from *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by John Calvin, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press; 1960) p. 35.

## A Poem

### On Another's Sorrow

Can I see another's woe,  
And not be in sorrow too?  
Can I see another's grief,  
And not seek for kind relief?

Can I see a falling tear,  
And not feel my sorrow's share?  
Can a father see his child  
Weep, nor be with sorrow filled?

Can a mother sit and hear  
An infant groan, an infant fear?  
No, no! never can it be!  
Never, never can it be!

And can He who smiles on all  
Hear the wren with sorrows small,  
Hear the small bird's grief and care,  
Hear the woes that infants bear—

And not sit beside the nest,  
Pouring pity in their breast,  
And not sit the cradle near,  
Weeping tear on infant's tear?

And not sit both night and day,  
Wiping all our tears away?  
Oh no! never can it be!  
Never, never can it be!

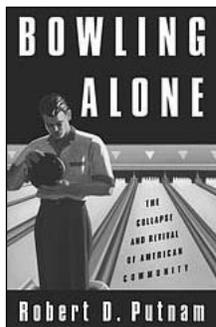
He doth give his joy to all:  
He becomes an infant small,  
He becomes a man of woe,  
He doth feel the sorrow too.

Think not thou canst sigh a sigh,  
And thy Maker is not by:  
Think not thou canst weep a tear,  
And thy Maker is not near.

Oh He gives to us his joy,  
That our grief He may destroy:  
Till our grief is fled and gone  
He doth sit by us and moan.

~William Blake (1757-1827)

## Multiplying Picnics



Gone bowling lately? If you have, chances are you enjoyed the nation's favorite leisure activity by yourself, according to Harvard Professor Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Not only are Americans bowling alone (participation in league bowling has decreased by 40% since 1980 while individuals bowling increased by 10%), we apparently are disengaging from almost all types of social activity. Putnam's ambitious project includes sifting through hundreds of research studies on American social behavior conducted over the past century. His conclusion: we've grown increasingly isolated from one another and lost massive amounts of "social capital." Membership and participation in nearly every major civic and social group has declined over the past forty years. We are an increasingly isolated, anonymous collection of non-neighbors.

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Social capital refers to the connections among individuals that produce social networks, reciprocal norms, and trustworthiness. According to Putnam, social capital is the most crucial element and indicator of stable societies and individual life satisfaction within those societies. The degree to which people participate in civic organizations, entertain neighbors in their homes, volunteer in community efforts, and participate in church activities contributes as much, if not more, to societal productivity as efficient manufacturing plants or an educated work force.

Putnam's theory of disengagement struck a cord from the moment he published an article with the book's title in the *Journal of Democracy* in 1995. Putnam was profiled in *People* magazine, invited by President Clinton to Camp David, and endlessly interviewed on talk shows. An inevitable backlash produced cries from soccer moms, self-help group organizers, and other social critics who argued that Putnam did not account for their experi-

ence or pet theory. Indeed, when Putnam surfaced newer research, he not only reasserted his disengagement hypothesis, he discovered he had actually underestimated how disconnected we had become.

Many factors have contributed to the "civic malaise" according to Putnam. The biggest culprit has been the lack of a unifying crisis like war, depression, or natural disaster. These kinds of galvanizing moments occurred regularly in the early part of the twentieth century and so affected those generations living and coping during the crises. However, later generations have known only relative peace, stability, and freedom to follow their consumeristic bliss.

Short of a crisis, Putnam argues that it will take both collective and individual initiative to replenish social capital and to renew civic engagement. New structures and policies will need to be created that foster such growth. Putnam offers six spheres in which budding "social capitalists" can work toward social renewal: community service proj-

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. It appears as if Putnam has accurately interpreted the massive research he has uncovered and so, it is no wonder that he has received such attention in the press. Does Putnam's disengagement thesis ring true in your experience and observation of civic life? How? Where? In what contexts?
2. Are you "connected" with your friends and neighbors? How would you describe "being connected?" What hinders connecting? What do you do to connect?
3. How might your small group use Putnam's book in discussion about participating in civic engagement? How is civic engagement addressed in the Bible? Is civic engagement an option for the Christian? How much? What kinds? With whom?
4. How much does or should the church take up Putnam's call to multiply picnics? Where would such picnics take place? Who would be invited? What form could these picnics take? What goals would the picnics have?

# Girl Secrets

ects, family and civic-friendly workplaces, integrated living and public spaces, active and tolerant faith-based communities, community engaged leisure time activities, cultural activities, and political activities. On the last page of the book, Putnam urges us to “reconnect with our friends and neighbors.” He recalls Henry Ward Beecher’s society-building advice from a century ago—“multiply picnics”—to drive his point home. ■

~Donald Guthrie

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## Book Reviewed:

*Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* by Robert Putnam (New York: Simon & Schuster; 2000).

Recently I was asked which publications I find most useful in trying to understand our postmodern world. I mentioned several, but *Rolling Stone* was near the top of the list. Not merely a source of information about pop music, *Rolling Stone* publishes articles like “The Secret Life of Teenage Girls” which open a window of insight into our postmodern culture.

In preparation for writing this piece, the author Jancee Dunn hung out with twelve teenage girls (14-16 years old) in Norwich, Connecticut, and then set her findings in the wider context of some of the latest research on the family in America.

“These girls are carrying around more knowledge of everything that could go wrong,” Dunn notes. “They spend their lives waiting for the other shoe to drop. I think

the reason *Titanic* did so well with teenage girls is that everyone wants to know the ending of a story before they watch it.”

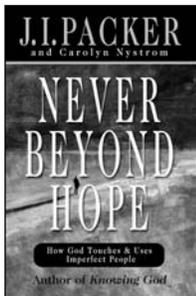
All of us share that desire, regardless of age. Our search for significance is actually part of a quest to find a story which will make sense of things. A story which will give meaning to the fragmented and often painful details of our lives in this broken world. A story to give hope. Will we, the people of God, love this generation enough to share our lives, our homes, our time, and our story with them? ■

~Denis D. Haack

## Source:

“The Secret Life of Teenage Girls” by Jancee Dunn in *Rolling Stone* (November 11, 1999) pp. 107-121.

## Briefly Noted: Imperfect Servants Like Us



*Never Beyond Hope* is the sort of book that not only provides an opportunity to learn from one of the premier evangelical theologians of our day, it also provides an opportunity to reflect with others on what he has written. The book consists of eight character studies by J. I. Packer, including chapters on Samson, Jacob, Manoah’s wife, Jonah, Martha, Thomas, Simon Peter, and Nehemiah. And each chapter ends with questions for reflection and discussion written by Carolyn Nystrom.

“A truth of which healthy growing Christians become more and more aware is that God is transcendentally great and the human individual by comparison is infinitely insignificant,” Packer writes in the Introduction. “God, we realize, can get on very well without any of us. So it should give us an overwhelming sense of privilege that not only has he made, loved and saved us but also he takes us as his working partners for advancing his plans.” This grace is all the more breathtaking, of course, because to use us means he uses flawed and imperfect servants. “And none of us is excluded,” Packer adds, “for Scripture shows God using the oddest, rawest, most lopsided and flawed of his children to further his work, at the same time as he carries on his sanctifying strategy for getting them into better moral and spiritual shape... In this book we shall see God dealing with Samson the womanizer, Jacob the cheat, hot-tempered Nehemiah, diffident Mrs. Manoah, bossy noisy Martha and quiet passive Mary, Jonah the pig-headed patriot, Thomas the stupid-smart professional pessimist, and impulsive, warm-hearted, unstable Simon Peter.”

The fact that God uses the likes of us is so glorious that to grasp it is to worship in humility and awe. To study it is to meditate on and learn of grace. To be convinced of it is to be filled with hope.

We recommend *Never Beyond Hope* to you. Use it for your own personal devotions. And use it in a small group, so that the grace of which it speaks can ripple out into the community of God’s people. ■

**Book reviewed:** *Never Beyond Hope: How God Touches and Uses Imperfect People* by J. I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2000) 178 pp.

## The World According to



What do a naked man and woman sitting on a horse bareback have to do with selling T-shirts and shorts? Everything—if the clothes are Abercrombie & Fitch. And A&F is “way cool.” It’s the leading selling clothing brand among youth. Its products are sold in 200 U.S. stores and

through its combination magazine and catalog, *A&F Quarterly*. On the surface, it seems that Abercrombie sells high-priced sports and casual wear to preppy college students, with 1998 retail sales topping \$815 million. But in reality, Abercrombie sells an Ivy League lifestyle of status, sex, and sports. “I’m from the East Side, so it’s like our style. It’s what’s cool,” explained a 19-year-old male New England shopper at a Dallas mall. “You know the West Coast is surfer stuff, the East Coast is Abercrombie.” A&F was named a “Top 100 Company” by *Ad Age* magazine in 1999. Though publicly claiming to target 18-23 year olds, the “Abercrombie-look” is dominating teenage style across the country. In fact, A&F is opening new stores called “Abercrombie,” with the same clothes in smaller sizes aimed at the younger teens.

What turned a failing 108-year old Cleveland-based company into the hottest selling teen style was the inspiration of CEO Michael Jeffries who joined A&F in 1992. He tightened A&F’s market and shifted its emphasis from clothes to experience. A&F is an interesting case study in Christian discernment. For it serves as both a window on the nature of advertising and a mirror on the soul of American youth.

Abercrombie & Fitch is not about clothes. Or ultimately about fashion. Instead, A&F offers its buyers the experience of stepping into the fantasy world of adolescent dreams, unlimited popularity and carnal pleasures. Here the beautiful people belong.

“Consumption,” writes cultural critic James Twitchell, “is the central meaning-making act in a

postmodern world.” It serves in the place of religion for most young people. And the lifestyles it promotes serve as secular religions. “Tell me what you buy and I’ll tell you who you are, and who you want to be.” What gets branded in the process of consumption is not the product, but the purchaser. We consume meaning, not A&F T-shirts or cargo pants. And the meaning we consume is not intellectual or abstract, but experiential. It’s meaning we live out. Pine and Gilmore explain in their provocative book, *The Experience Economy*, that our economy is based not on service or information, but on experience, where the transformation of the consumer is the ultimate product. A successful brand does not sell a product, but a lifestyle. Thus from an assortment of “brandsapes,” young people create their identities and foster their self-transformations. In a teen-oriented chat room provided by A&F, “Krista” wrote, “Abercrombie is the best thing to happen in the 90’s and I hope that they will keep their clothes in style for a long period of time. I wear Abercrombie every day of the week. I even wear it to church, so please get some church clothes in. I would like to be on one of the posters when you walk in there, so if you need a model e-mail me any time.”

This branding of identities is intentional. In A&F stores, sales people are called “Brand Representatives,” chosen to emulate the models in the popular *A&F Quarterly*. This A&F Look Book states, “We are selling an experience for our customer, an energized store environment creates an atmosphere that people want to experience again and again. The customer sees the natural Abercrombie style and wants to be like the Brand Representative.” CEO Jeffries compares walking into an A&F store with playing a role in a movie. “You buy into the emotional experience of a movie. And that’s what we are creating. Here I am walking into a movie, and I say, ‘What’s going to be the box office today?’” A&F sets the stage. The customer is the actor. The A&F look, then, is a personal identification with a scripted identity.

A&F does little print advertising (apparently only in *Rolling Stone*). Its message and brand iden-

**What  
Do  
Discerning  
Christians  
Wear?**

# Abercrombie & Fitch

tity has been established almost exclusively through *A&F Quarterly*, their 300-page R-rated magalog boasting a circulation of over 200,000. In addition to selling clothes, the publication celebrates the hedonistic, irresponsible, and irreverent world of today's college campus where binge drinking, casual sex, and bashing traditional religion are *de rigueur*. In its pages semi-nude models (frequently in couples or groups) display A&F wear in hetero and homoerotic poses. In addition, readers find tips for dorm room seduction, recipes for alcoholic drinks (with names such as "Dirty Girl Scout Cookie," "Come in With Me," and "Foreplay,"), interviews with porn stars and drag queens, and reviews of books, CDs, and films. In the Abercrombie world there is little time for study; college is apparently about out-of-control fun with friends. Criticized as a "Playboy for teens," the company simply—and probably accurately—answers that they are only portraying American college life realistically. And though *A&F Quarterly* is shrink-wrapped and only legally sold to the 18 and older crowd at Border Books, mall stores are crowded with younger teens who are well aware of its sexy content and the parental outrage that it evokes.

What are Christians to make of A&F? It sounds puritanical to boycott the leading brand of adolescent clothing. And yet to attempt to disassociate the brand from its context of cultural meaning is woefully naïve. Even Charles Colson weighed in on his radio show, *Break Point*, saying: "Abercrombie & Fitch markets a worldview that centers around the pursuit of erotic pleasures. The whole purpose is to appeal to teenagers who think sex is cool." A&F is not simply after our dollars, it's after the transformation of our hearts and sensibilities. This is "American Preppy style" at its most spiritually corrosive level of subtlety. Christians are not alarmed mainly because the commodification of life and identity is so pervasive as to be taken for granted. Consumerism has become American's primary epistemology: our ground of being, our sense of self.

Few apprentices of Jesus would try to justify the lifestyle promoted by Abercrombie & Fitch. Here blatant sin is chic. The only recourse is to attempt to disassociate the meaning A&F attaches to its prod-

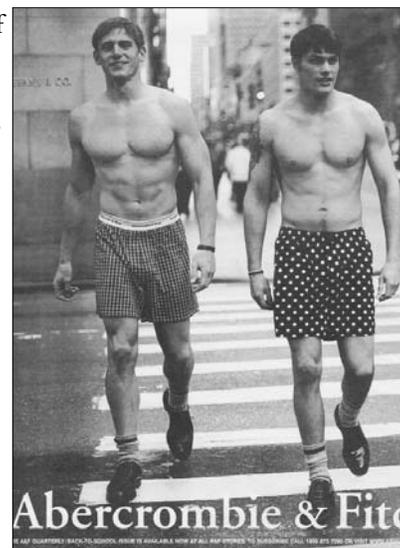
ucts: "I just like the style and color." But even if this argument is granted, its broader cultural meaning still remains. And A&F is in business not to let you forget. A Christian remains, thus, guilty by association. One is still supporting and legitimating the carefully packaged message that sin is "way cool."

**T**he Bible does not say a great deal about how we should dress as followers of Jesus, but it does suggest some boundaries. In a culture where Americans have lost the sense of shame or reticence, Christians do well to remind themselves of these limits: "Dress modestly, with decency and propriety, avoid expensive clothes as is appropriate for [those] who profess to worship God" (1 Timothy 2:10, paraphrased). In short, we wear Sunday clothes every day. We do not dress for ourselves. We dress for God. We dress so that our outerwear does not distract from the Christ-like character Jesus is forming within us. "People wear preppy clothes just to fit in. It's an attitude thing; everyone who looks like me is my friend. There's a difference between dressing for oneself and dressing for God," explains a wise 16-year-old male, reflecting on A&F.

We live in a corrupt society, where sin is called virtue and true virtue is mocked. In the 1999 Christmas issue of *A&F Quarterly*, opposite a picture of Santa and Mrs. Claus engaging in sadomasochistic sexuality, the A&F staff writes, "Sometimes its good to be bad." A&F has an upside-down morality. They have exchanged the truth for a lie; not surprisingly, perverted sexuality follows. Jesus would not aspire to be an A&F Brand Representative. He would not let chic threads undermine cosmic truth. Brand Jesus points in a different direction. ■

~Seel and Wilensky

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Just Common Sense

## The American Chesterton Society

The subtitle of this site sums up Chesterton well: "Common sense for the world's uncommon nonsense." If you are not familiar with G. K. Chesterton, Christian apologist, novelist, poet, and critic, you are missing out on one of the most brilliant thinkers of the twentieth century. His books *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man* are rightly considered Christian classics. *The Man Who was Thursday (A Nightmare)* is a novel that must be read to be believed. And Chesterton's delightful Father Brown detective stories take their place alongside Dorothy Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey novels as prime examples of mysteries written from the perspective of a Christian world and life view. Chesterton's brilliance and prodigious output is more than sufficient to keep a Society very active.

## Ransom Ratings

**Design:** Simply attractive.

**Contents:** The site is designed by people who obviously love G. K. Chesterton, and so it includes everything you'd expect. There is an introduction to Chesterton, biographical and bibliographic information, extensive pages of quotations (he is wonderfully quotable), online discussions, conferences, journals, and numerous other resources.

**Ease of Use:** The site is well organized, with a minimum of graphics so movement tends to be quick.

**The articles and resources reproduced or recommended in *Critique* do not necessarily reflect the thinking of Ransom Fellowship. The purpose of this newsletter is to encourage thought, not dictate points of view.**

*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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