

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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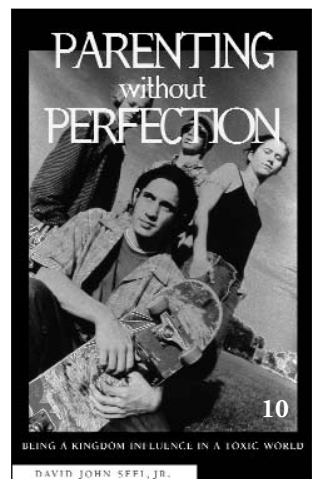
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Editor

Denis Haack

Managing Editor

Marsena Konkle

Contributing Editors

Steven Garber, R. Greg Grooms, Douglas Groothuis, Donald Guthrie, John Mason Hodges, David John Seel, Jr., Andrew H. Trotter, Jr.

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Bonnie Liefer, Director of Communications at Coalition for Christian Outreach

Henry Tazelaar MD, Professor of Pathology, Mayo Medical School

Submissions & Correspondence

Critique considers unsolicited manuscripts only for fiction and poetry. Mail with SASE to:

Marsena Konkle
Critique Managing Editor
406 Bowman Avenue
Madison, WI 53716

All other correspondence and changes of address:

Denis D. Haack
1150 West Center
Rochester, MN 55902
Ransom_Fellowship@compuserve.com

Editor's Note

The meaning of "free"

An e-mail was waiting for me when I logged on recently. The writer requested that he be added to our mailing list to "receive our free newsletter." I was happy to do so, but the request reminded me of the need to explain Ransom's financial policy.

When Margie and I began Ransom in 1982, we had a rather specific vision for this ministry. A vision for what God had called us to do, as well as a sense—at least in general terms—of how we should go about doing it. One principle we decided to adopt right from the beginning was to trust God to supply our financial needs through the generosity of people who benefitted from the ministry and its newsletters, and who saw the need for the sort of work we were doing through Ransom. We would not, for example, ask for pledges, nor would we set fees for our speaking, nor would we charge a subscription for *Critique*. We made this decision not because we believe such fund-raising activities are wrong or unspiritual, but simply because we desired to live another way. We would not be secretive about Ransom's finances, and over the years have used Margie's *Notes From Toad Hall* to inform readers of needs as well as evidences of God's grace. We wanted Ransom's existence to be a quiet demonstration of God's grace and power. And we have never stopped being amazed at God's provision and the generosity of his people.

Thus, our policy for *Critique* is not that it is a free newsletter—something Ransom could never afford—but rather is sent free to all those who support Ransom regularly. *Critique* is costly to produce, print, and mail, and expenses keep rising. Added costs are incurred when we agree to send extra copies to places like the Francis Schaeffer Institute at Covenant Seminary to be distributed among students. We are also happy to add names to our mailing list, when requested, and allow these new readers time to receive our mailings as they consider becoming a donor.

Over the years a number of friends have questioned the wisdom of our policy concerning *Critique*. "People just don't understand this approach," is one common objection, "so it won't work." Which is why we occasionally explain it, while pointing out that so far, at least, by God's grace we have been allowed to continue. For this we are very grateful.

By far the most common objection, however, is this: "People will take advantage of your policy, giving a token donation simply to keep getting *Critique*—an occasional, small amount that doesn't really cover Ransom's publishing costs, to say nothing of really supporting the ministry." I suppose that is a possibility. The bottom line for us, however, is that we're gratified to hear that *Critique* is used in discussion groups and helps people reflect biblically on issues confronting them. We trust that it will continue to be used by the Holy Spirit to train believers in discernment. We realize some who find it helpful may not be able to give much, or perhaps even anything at all. In the end, we remain grateful that anyone would choose, out of so many options, to support Ransom financially at all.

Still, it is probably wise to occasionally explain our financial policy vis-a-vis this newsletter, and I can sum it up in one sentence.

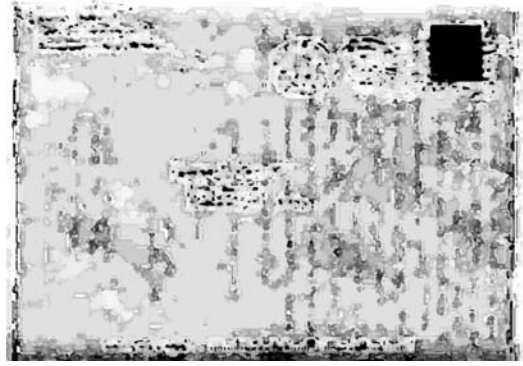
***Critique* is not a free newsletter, rather, it is sent free to all those who support Ransom regularly.**

This represents one small part in our attempt to live faithfully before the Lord, and we're pleased when readers pray seriously about what this might mean for them. ■

-Denis D. Haack

Dialogue

Readers and editors in dialogue...



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

Marsena Konkle
Critique Managing Editor
406 Bowman Avenue
Madison, WI 53716

or e-mail:
marsena@itis.com

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 greatly appreciate *Critique*. Reading your magazine always makes me ask lots of questions and I value your emphasis on the need for discernment as we seek to live Christian lives in an ever changing world.

In issue #7 there was much food for thought, but I was particularly intrigued by the article by Seel and Wilensky ["The World According to A&F"]. What struck me as particularly odd was the coauthors. Why is a grown man teaming with a 16 year-old girl to write about the inappropriateness of A&F's sexual explicit marketing? What discernment is being employed to have Amie so conversant with a magazine/catalogue that she is not even old enough to look at? I understand that Dr. Seel is a headmaster and that he is doing a fine job discussing these significant issues with his students. But to enter into a co-writing relationship on such material with a sophomore seems questionable at best.

Doug Warren
Portland, Maine

John Seel replies:
Amie is a sophomore at Logos Academy where I serve as headmaster and is a student in a class of mine. At Logos, faculty frequently invite students to work with them on their writing projects and in this case, I asked her parents permission before asking her to work with me. She didn't analyze the catalogs herself, but conducted interviews at the mall with A&F patrons and employees and served as a "reality check" on my conclusions. At Logos, we treat our students as young adults, not overgrown children. (Adolescence as a separate developmental period is a totally modern construct, a little less than 100 years old.) We teach our students to engage culture with a biblical worldview, rather than pretend we can isolate them from culture. These young adults are in the process of forming their own identi-

ties and convictions as they negotiate the complexities of youth culture. Our role as educators is to serve as their mentors and role models. This is my parish and consequently this is the world I must understand. Thank you for taking the time to engage in a dialogue about the article. Your letter raises important questions about how educators and parents should address the larger cultural issues with our students and children. Being naive about culture is not the first step in developing a discerning mind as Denis Haack has so consistently argued in these pages.

John Seel, Ph.D.

Amie Wilensky replies:
I am glad you found the article "intriguing," but I cannot help being troubled by your reaction. Your response implies that I am well acquainted with the content of the *A&F Quarterly* magalog. I have never seen an issue except the shrink-wrapped ones on display in the Abercrombie stores. Perhaps you are not as familiar with youth culture as Professor Seel, but he understands that as a young adult, you do not have to look at the inappropriate publications of A&F to understand how its ideology pervades the lives of almost every young person over the age of 13. Although A&F claims to market to the 18-23 demographic group, most of their customers are my age. I don't have to look at their *Quarterly* to understand what A&F is all about or to have opinions about the lifestyle they sell. There is no minimum age for discernment, or for thinking deeply about the culture that affects me from the moment I get up until the time I go to bed. I appreciate the way Professor Seel forces my theology class to wrestle with the issues of our culture so we may be better equipped to "Speak the truth in love" to a nihilistic generation. Oh, and for the record, I'm 15.

Amie Wilensky

Pottering About Potter

Bringing discernment to the controversy over Harry Potter.

The fourth novel in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, which hit bookstores in July, had the largest first printing (3.8 million copies) of any book in U.S. history. In comparison, John Grisham's best-selling *The Brethren*, had a first run of 2.8 million copies. It is not only the popularity of the Harry Potter books, however, which has generated attention. Numerous Christians have issued warnings about the series, such as this widely-distributed e-mail I received recently:

Warning via e-mail
[quote] >>This is the most evil thing I have laid my eyes on in 10 years, and no one seems to understand its threat. The Harry Potter books are THE NUMBER ONE selling children's books in the nation today. Just look in any bookstore window.
>>Harry Potter is the creation of a former

UK English teacher who promotes witchcraft and Satanism. Harry is a 13 year old "wizard." Her creation openly blasphemes Jesus and God and promotes sorcery, seeking revenge upon anyone who upsets them by giving you examples (even the sources with authors and titles) of spells, rituals, and demonic powers.

>>I think the problem is that parents have not reviewed the material. Let me give you a few quotes from some of the influenced readers themselves:

>>"The Harry Potter books are cool, 'cause they teach you all about magic and how you can use it to control people and get revenge on your enemies," said Hartland, WI, 10 year old Craig Nowell, a recent convert to the New Satanic Order Of The Black Circle.

>>And here is dear Ashley, a 9 year old, the typical average age reader: "I used to believe in what they taught us at Sunday

School," said Ashley, conjuring up an ancient spell to summon Cerebus, the three-headed hound of hell. "But the Harry Potter books showed me that magic is real, and that the Bible is nothing but boring lies."

>>**DOES THIS GET YOUR ATTENTION!!** If not, how about a quote from the author herself, J. K. Rowling: "I think it's absolute rubbish to protest children's books on the grounds that they are luring children to Satan," Rowling told a *London Times* reporter in a July 17 interview. "People should be praising them for that! These books guide children to an understanding that the weak, idiotic Son of God is a living hoax who will be humiliated when the rain of fire comes."

>>Please FWD to every pastor, teacher, and parent you know. This author has now published FOUR BOOKS in less than 2 years of this "encyclopedia of

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What is your initial reaction to the e-mail?
2. What would you identify as the "tone" of the e-mail? What impression might it leave on a thoughtful non-Christian concerning Christians and their faith? On a child?
3. Have you read the Harry Potter novels? Why or why not?
4. List the various objections to the Harry Potter novels that are raised in this e-mail, or in *World* magazine (October 30, 1999; pages 16-18), or that you have heard from other sources. Respond to each.
5. What reasons could you give for Christians reading the Harry Potter novels?
6. Read and discuss some of the positive reviews of Harry Potter published by Christians, including: *BreakPoint Commentary* #91102 by Charles Colson (breakpoint@lists.netcentral.net), or "Why We Like Harry Potter" in *Christianity Today* (January 2000; p. 37); or "Harry Potter's Magic" by Alan Jacobs in *First Things* (January 2000; pp. 35-38).
7. To what extent are the two sides of this debate open to truly listening and discussing the issues surrounding the Harry Potter books? What does this suggest about the community of God's people?

Permission to Disagree

An Excerpt from *Parenting without Perfection*

Satanism” and is surely going to write more. Pray for this lost woman’s soul. Pray also for the Holy Spirit to work in the young minds of those who are reading this garbage that they may be delivered from its harm. [end quote]

Warning via *World*

The warnings have also appeared in print. *World* magazine published a cover story on the books, warning that the “children’s literature sensation Harry Potter increasingly descends into darkness...Moral ambiguity and alienation of youth are strong themes in the series.” The stories blend a fantastical world of magic with the more mundane aspects of life, *World* says, which “may create a problem by putting a smiling mask on evil.” The magic introduces “a relativistic curve ball” into the stories. “The implicit message is that your friend may be your enemy, the person you are talking to might be someone else, and even your pet cannot be trusted.” *World* identifies several “trail-markers,” truths in the stories which they encourage parents to use to teach older children to think critically. However, they go on to warn that “Ms. Rowling depicts [non-magical characters] as clueless irritants, the way an alienated child sees parents.” *World* says, “Harry Potter’s topsy-turvy moral universe is confusing. That confusion, however, may make the series a hit in a confused culture. Harry Potter is a perfect modern hero for alienated youth. He is an orphan who hates, and is hated by, his adoptive parents.”

All of which provides an interesting exercise in discernment. ■

~Denis D. Haack

Editor’s Note:

Early in 2001, *Critique* will publish an extended treatment of the Harry Potter books.

Should parents make their teenage child participate in the activities of faith—family devotions, youth group, church attendance, and Christian camps—when they have decided against God? In a word, no. Christianity is not about outward conformity but about freely following Christ. If one is uncertain, confused, or uncommitted to Christ, nothing is worse than being forced to pretend otherwise. Dallas Willard warns, “Forcing religion upon the young even though it makes no sense to them is a major reason why they ‘graduate’ from church about the same time they graduate from high school and do not return for twenty years, if ever.”

As we have seen in preceding chapters, our teenage children need to begin to assume greater personal responsibilities for their beliefs. This means that we must respect their decision if they, for whatever reasons, choose against our beliefs. This does not mean we shun them from family activities or stop talking to them about our points of disagreement; rather, we do not force them into situations that violate their consciences. As we continue respectful dialogue and debate, we also allow them to live with the consequences of their decisions.

At issue is whether we believe God can work in the lives of our children, whether we believe Christianity is able to withstand the harshest scrutiny, and whether we accept that our children will have to choose their own destiny. Dick Keyes writes, “Christian parents will want to encourage their child to trust in Christ, but the trust must be the child’s trust, not the parents’ imposed veneer. That means that parents must encourage freedom of thought, welcoming questions, doubts, and difficulties by taking them seriously. Taking them seriously means hours

of listening, admitting when they do not know an answer, and trying to discover answers together.”

Christian philosopher J. P. Moreland even goes further, adding, “I once told my children that if they ever got to the point where they thought it was unreasonable to believe that Christianity was true, then they should abandon the faith.”

This was the approach Francis Schaeffer took with his children at L’Abri. In the midst of the intellectual ferment of the sixties, the Schaeffer children were exposed in the home and in their Swiss classrooms to the alternatives to orthodox belief. When one of his daughters announced that she no longer believed Christianity was true, Dr. Schaeffer calmly respected her decision. She was told that she would still be treated as a member of the family but would not be expected to attend the family devotions at home or the worship at church. Faced with the weight of her own convictions, she wrestled with her questions and eventually returned with a deepened personal conviction of the love and truth of Jesus Christ. ■

~David John Seel

Source:

Parenting without Perfection by David John Seel, Jr. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2000) pp. 170-171.

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Reacting: When We

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

Living in a pluralistic culture in a fallen world means that our neighbors, coworkers, and friends do not necessarily share our deepest convictions and values. Our situation is similar to the time that the Old Testament people of God found themselves in exile in Babylon. In Jerusalem God's word was the final authority, while in Babylon a wide variety of world views and religions competed for acceptance. This is why we find ourselves—at least occasionally and perhaps far more often than we'd like—in uncomfortable situations which require choices. Choices about which we feel uncertain, unsure, and unprepared. And because we are uncomfortable, we tend to simply react. We don't exactly plan on things unfolding this way, of course. Reactions, after all, tend to just happen. Like what might transpire when we're giving a coworker a drive home after work and they insist on being dropped off at a porno theater, instead.

In his book *Chameleon Christianity*, Dick Keyes points out that Christians tend to react in two distinct ways. We tend to either accommodate or to withdraw; to either compromise with our post-Christian culture or to isolate ourselves from it; to either blend in or pull back. And though these are the ways we tend to react as individuals, they can also be identified corporately in the church at large. Among God's people are pockets of both groups, each certain their reaction to the world is correct. So certain, in fact, that they look at the other tendency with deep suspicion, if not open hostility.

This two-fold pattern is not unique to Christians, but can be observed in any minority group which senses itself at odds with the wider culture. "Sociologists tell us," Keyes writes, "that dissonant groups within a larger society react to reduce the potential for friction in two predictable ways. One is to compromise their distinctive beliefs and way of life and so reduce their conflict with society.

Our situation is similar to the Old Testament people who found themselves in exile in Babylon.

The other is to keep their dissonance and tribalize, retreating within their own group and thus losing contact with society." Some ethnic groups, for example, have quickly sought to disappear into the melting pot which is America, while others have formed little enclaves in an effort to maintain their cultural distinctiveness. Regardless of how natural this two-fold pattern seems to be, however, we must ask whether either accommodation or tribalism demonstrates Christian faithfulness in a pluralistic world.

Accommodation: The Chameleon Reaction

The first reaction is to tend to accommodate as much as possible, to go with the flow, to blend in so as not to make unnecessary waves. Christians who accommodate, Keyes says, act like chameleons in our post-Christian culture. They seek safety by blending in so as not to attract notice, by never doing anything that would cause them to stand out from

the crowd. They want to be left alone by a hostile world, to live and to raise their family (if they have one) in relative peace and security.

So, for example, since intolerance is not tolerated in our pluralistic society, it's easy for us to react to the pressure by quietly downplaying the radical claims of Christ. So we say Jesus is "my Savior," and "my Lord," but seldom if ever "Lord of all." And it works; we find that not only do non-Christians not object to this limited claim, they may even be happy for us. "Glad Jesus works for you," one man said enthusiastically when he learned I was a Christian. "What does it for me is being a Druid."

Like all reactions, the process of accommodation is not very difficult once we begin down that path. Since divine judgment and hell are also not tolerated, they too can go unmentioned. Sin is on the taboo list also, of course, along with any mention of God's law or absolute truth, since both are so closely related to judgment. So we talk of love, God's love, and what our faith brings us, of personal peace, or fulfillment, or the comforting sense that we aren't alone in this lonely and fragmented world, and we let it go at that. People aren't turned off, and since many churches are accommodating as well, no one need be offended.

What we're actually doing, of course, though we may not realize it, is reducing the gospel to what the culture finds comfortable and acceptable. We're accommodating to the world, even though our motivation may have seemed pure: a desire to gain a hearing, or to guard ourselves and our families from needless hostility. "Saltless salt pictures the

Aren't Discerning

Christian blending in with the surrounding society,” Keyes says, “just as a chameleon changes its color to blend in protectively with its surroundings. This is the Christian individual or group that adapts, accommodates, compromises, and is diluted. Like salt that has lost its taste, the Christian is useless to carry out Jesus’ purposes because dissonance with the world has been reduced to resonance or sameness. A distinctive Christian identity is lost, and there is nothing to offer the world that the world does not already have.”

Tribalism: The Musk Ox Reaction

The second reaction Christians tend to make is to withdraw from the culture, to pull back into the safety of home and church, and thus protect ourselves and those we love from a hostile world. We act like musk oxen, Keyes says, which rally around in a tight defensive circle when the herd is threatened by wolves. Our pluralistic culture is not only post-Christian, it is offensive and dangerous, so we pull back our lives into the circle of family and church where God’s word is still honored. Where we feel safe, confident, and at home, sheltered from both the temptations of the world and the onslaught of a decadent and immoral culture that has turned its back on God. Within the circle we maintain our distinctiveness with great vigor, but we maintain security by erecting a barrier between us and the society outside.

“Hidden light,” Keyes says, is the metaphor Jesus used for “Christian tribalism—the protective containment of Christian distinctiveness within a Christian ghetto or subculture. It entails Christian tribal dialects, tribal education, tribal music, tribal television, and even the Christian tribal yellow pages—all mystifying to those uninitiated into the tribe. Much time is spent reassuring the membership of the superiority of their beliefs and traditions over the terrible

evils lying outside the fortress walls. The psychology of tribal life demands proscribed answers for most of life’s questions. The New Testament, however, does not give us enough of these rules to hold a tribe together; it allows far too much freedom. So when a church or Christian group becomes tribal, part of the process includes adding many rules and prohibitions to the ethics of the New Testament.” Rules about how children are to be educated, perhaps, or what movies are allowed, what music can be enjoyed, or any of a number of other issues in which faithfulness is reduced to legalism.

Since the tribe isolates itself, engaging non-Christians and the wider culture with the gospel becomes increasingly difficult. “Typically,” Keyes notes, tribalized Christians “will not know others socially who are not already Christians. Evangelism then becomes artificial and contrived, if not insensitive and belligerent.” One time, for example, after speaking at a weekend conference in a church a woman told me she had been shocked at some of what I had said in my messages. My

Being reactionary reflects poorly on us as Christians, on our faith, and ultimately on our Lord.

goal had been to identify and clarify some of the challenges we face as Christians in our pluralistic culture. To show from Scripture how we can be discerning, developing skill in thinking, speaking, and living so that we communicate the truth of the gospel in a way that can be understood. “I was shocked at what you said about what non-Christians believe and do,” she told me. “I couldn’t figure out why I was shocked, until I was listening to your sermon this morning. Then it dawned on me. I don’t know any non-Christians. We’re so busy home-schooling our children, plus all the activities at

church—I simply don’t have time for non-Christians.”

Reacting to Reacting

Being reactionary in a fallen world—whether we accommodate like chameleons or withdraw in a protective circle as musk oxen—may seem so natural, so unplanned, and so utterly commonsensical as to be hardly worth much consideration. The truth is, however, that being reactionary reflects poorly on us as Christians, on our faith, and ultimately on our Lord.

For one thing, being reactionary makes us appear defensive and fearful. Both musk oxen and chameleons are reacting to a threat. We may have tasted hostility towards our faith, or a sense of shame at not having sufficient reasons for our convictions, or we may feel so deeply uncertain about what to say or do as a Christian that we react either by trying to disappear from view or by lashing out as a sort of cultural warrior for Christ.

Consider, by way of example, the e-mail detailed in this issue’s *The Discerning Life*

column warning Christians about the Harry Potter novels by J. K. Rowling. Set aside for the moment the errors of fact in this e-mail. Set aside also the foolish claim that “sources” for sorcery are included in the stories, since the books of magic used by Potter consist of such titles as *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* by Phyllida Spore, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* by Newt Scamander, and *A Beginner’s Guide to Transfiguration* by Emeric Switch. Set aside the fact that the quote by Rowling is not from an interview in *The London Times*, but from *The Onion*, a national satirical newspa-

per which publishes fictional spoofs on topics appearing in the news. Set all that aside for the moment, and consider instead merely the tone or flavor of this e-mailed warning. Reflect on the impression such a reaction might leave on a thoughtful non-Christian. Or on a child who overhears the warnings being passed around in Christian circles. Would the impression be one of quiet confidence that Christ is risen from the dead, and is therefore triumphant over death and Satan? An assurance that the gospel is the power of God who is bringing all things to their appointed end in Christ? An eagerness to discuss the world view of neo-paganism in light of the claims of the gospel? Or is there something of fearfulness here, a bit of defensiveness?

We need to train our children to respond to the claims of neo-paganism, but surely we should begin that training by demonstrating a quiet confidence in the claims of Christ. We would be wiser to applaud the interest in spirituality which is sweeping the culture, and invite a closer examination of the Book which reveals Jesus in all his glory. Though the author of this e-mail means well, the hysteria surrounding the Harry Potter books is simply another instance of Christian tribalism. As a reaction to a set of children's books it makes us appear both fearful and defensive, when we have no reason to be either. In this regard, we should be willing to learn from the mistakes of previous generations. The tendency of early Fundamentalists to withdraw from the culture and the life of the mind similarly cast Christian faith in negative terms. "Withdrawal encouraged

fanaticism and paranoia in them," Jewish scholar Alan Wolfe says, "and confirmed to others a sense that if this was religion, they were better off without it."

The chameleon reaction also makes Christians appear afraid and defensive. Shying away from certain topics, or

We need to train our children to respond to the claims of neo-paganism, but surely we should begin by demonstrating a quiet confidence in the claims of Christ.

talking about only parts of the faith, or deflecting questions that make us uncomfortable all give the impression of fearfulness. The impression is given that perhaps what we believe won't stand up to close scrutiny after all, or that there aren't good and sufficient reasons to believe in Christ. That's not what we intend, of course, but that doesn't change how those around us view our evasiveness.

The second problem with reacting, at least in the accommodating or chameleon variety, is that it weakens the very faith it sets out to protect. Blending in so that the gospel has nothing new to say to a lost and dying world is not faithfulness but cowardice. Diluting the gospel until a post-Christian culture is comfortable with it is to dilute it until it becomes something less than the gospel. No thoughtful unbeliever will take our message seriously if we have nothing radical or worthwhile to offer. With nothing distinctive to say, we have no reason to be heard.

The third problem with reacting, particularly in the tribal variety, is that it

makes us seem negative and judgmental as Christians. It's in the nature of reacting to zero in on areas of disagreement rather than agreement. After all, if we didn't disagree, there would be no need to react in the first place. When my wife and I host discussion groups and seminars, for example, in order to help people develop skill in discernment, we always insist that before we disagree with the film or article (or whatever), we first identify where we agree as Christians. Not only does this lend balance to the discussion, it transforms the tone of the interaction and changes the atmosphere in the room. Many believers are so used to reacting negatively to things that being asked to first agree comes as something of a shock. Repeatedly we've been told that this simple discernment exercise has revolutionized how they see and respond to things. It's not that we shouldn't disagree when necessary, but that there is a profound difference between disagreeing and merely being disagreeable.

Discernment, not Reaction
Faithfulness for the Christian involves more than simply reacting to things, which only makes us look defensive and fearful, weak and negative. Because God has revealed himself in the living Word who is Jesus, and in the written word, the Scriptures, our minds and hearts and imaginations can be renewed so that we are discerning, able to see things increasingly from God's point of view. An ability to think and talk about the issues and questions that arise about what we believe, and why. An ability to respond winsomely to those who see things differently than we do, instead of merely reacting to the ideas, values, and behavior of the non-Christians around us. An ability to think and live biblically

even when we're confronted with situations that are not specifically mentioned in the Bible.

Unlike reacting, which merely happens, discernment is a skill that must be learned and practiced until it becomes a habit of the heart. It changes not only our posture in a fallen world, but the impression we leave as well. We are called to be neither chameleons nor musk oxen, but the people of God. We need not accommodate the world nor withdraw from it for the simple reason that someone far greater than the world has promised to never leave nor forsake us. ■

~Denis D. Haack

Editor's Note:

This is the eighth 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:

Keyes from *Chameleon Christianity: Moving Beyond Safety and Conformity* by Dick Keyes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books; 1999) p. 15-16.

Books of magic from *Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone* by J. K. Rowling (New York, NY: Scholastic Press; 1997) pp. 66-67.

Wolfe on Fundamentalism from "The Opening of the Evangelical Mind" by Alan Wolfe in *The Atlantic Monthly* (October 2000) p. 76.

A Poem

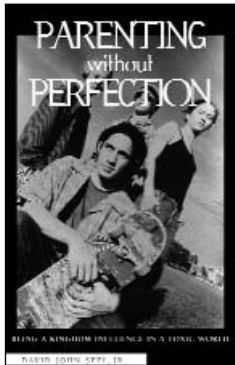
Of Bananas and Hitler a narrative

In 8th grade we learned
to put condoms on bananas.
It is very dangerous to eat
an unsafe banana, I said to my
teacher. She was not amused, and I
was called to a conference later.
I told her that a child development
class was not the place to learn
how to keep from developing a child
and asked why we hadn't practiced
abstaining from bananas.
She told me she was not allowed to teach
values to students.
But my history teacher had told us
that morning
that Hitler had been an evil man.
And she did teach me a value when she
said that no, teachers were not there
to teach students to think for themselves
but to impart information, the same information
to each child.
And I was sad, because she thought she had
failed as a teacher, all because I do
not like bananas.

~S. Brady Shuman

*S. Brady Shuman is a student at Belhaven College in Jackson, MS.
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Parenting in Babylon



Few topics are as popular today—or as controversial—as Christian parenting. Perhaps this is natural, given the importance of raising children in today’s post-Christian world.

Sadly, though, the cacophony of competing approaches has become divisive among God’s people, leaving parents without the wise counsel they desire and need. Most of the seminars, books, and video series available in the Christian marketplace that I have examined are less than helpful because they are based far more on a model of authoritarianism rooted in modernism than on biblical reflection. They sound good since they are littered with proof texts, and they sometimes result in compliant children, but they are by and large devoid of grace. Some believers react against this unhealthy overemphasis on authority, but permissiveness is equally problematic.

That being the case, I was enthusiastic when I learned that Dr. David John Seel—no stranger to the readers of *Critique*—was writing a book on the topic. When a copy arrived, I began reading it with both eagerness, and to be honest, with just a touch of nervousness. That always occurs when I read something by a friend whom I respect highly, since there is, after all, some small chance I will disagree. The more I read, however, the more my enthusiasm grew, and soon I was doing something I never do: I began recommending it even before I finished reading it myself.

Parenting without Perfection is a wise and biblically informed book. I even recommend it to non-parents, since it is such a fine example of thinking biblically about what Christian faithfulness looks like in our deeply fallen and profoundly pluralistic world.

Parenting without Perfection is divided into three parts. In the first, Dr. Seel provides an introduction to his topic by defining Christian parenting. “I have come to question some of the common assumptions held by many Christian parents and parenting books,” he writes. “One is that certain choices will isolate one’s children from the effects of today’s youth culture; another is that following a specific set of guidelines will produce ‘perfect’ children.” Seel argues there is no formula, and identifies eight provocative questions that inform his thinking in this book: How does God treat us as children? And how is our approach to parenting affected if...

...the goal is children who are apprentices to Jesus?

...discipleship is understood as more than an intellectual affirmation or outward behavior, but a life lived in, for, and by the resources of the kingdom of God?

...we come to understand our teenager as a young adult rather than an overgrown child?

...we respect the self-determining nature of our child and acknowledge the priority of motivation—the direction and loves of his or her heart?

...we acknowledge that youth culture is spiritually toxic but inescapable by our teenage children?

...we understand that the choices our teens make outside our context or

control actually influence them the most?

...we recognize that parenting is a temporary stewardship with no guarantees?

In the second part of *Parenting without Perfection* Dr. Seel gives a careful explanation of how spiritually toxic youth culture is today. It isn’t particularly pleasant reading, but essential if we wish to

Parenting without Perfection provides no techniques, lists no formulas, makes no guarantees, and more radical still, it argues that none are possible.

understand clearly the context for our faithfulness as parents in this fallen world. Whether we are parents, grandparents, or simply love young people, this section of the book is must reading. And contrary to those who desire to safeguard their children by isolating them from the world, Seel is correct in insisting that this toxic youth culture is an inescapable part of our children’s lives. It might have been good for Dr. Seel to have included a bit more on why it is so inescapable, since so many parents appear to believe otherwise, but perhaps their commitment to tribalism is not open to examination. It is a “deathwork culture,” Seel argues, far worse than most Christian parents realize, and desperately in need of the gospel of Christ.

In the final section of *Parenting without Perfection*, Seel explores ten priorities for Christian parents, which actually apply to far more than just parenting:

1. To be apprentices of Jesus.

2. To live our lives with integrity for that which matters.
3. To be students of our teenager's world.
4. To advocate our child's constructive interests.
5. To establish limits for our teenager based on the objective truth of reality.
6. To encourage our teenager to become a passionate seeker of truth.
7. To focus on influencing the beliefs, not the behavior, of our teen.
8. To respect our child's self-determination.
9. To recognize that our teenager's friends and neighborhood will influence his or her heart's direction.
10. To pray for our child as our first responsibility.

In a real sense, as this list indicates, this is a book on the nature of Christian faithfulness; it just happens to be addressed to parents.

I suspect many Christian parents will dislike *Parenting without Perfection*. It provides no techniques, lists no formulas, makes no guarantees, and more radical still, it argues that none are possible. It argues instead that we walk by faith, that "parenting adolescents teaches us the requirement of love, of letting go of our children in order to entrust them to God."

We recommend *Parenting without Perfection* to you. Read it through carefully on your own, and then form a discussion group to work through it together. Place a

copy in your church library. And please: give a copy to every Christian parent you know. ■

~Denis D. Haack

Book reviewed:

Parenting without Perfection: Being a Kingdom Influence in a Toxic World by David John Seel, Jr. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress; 2000) 199 pp. + notes.

Order From:



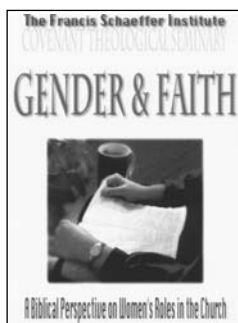
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All books mentioned in *Critique* may be ordered directly from Hearts and Minds. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to Ransom Fellowship.

Gender and Faith



by Denis D. Haack.

This set of seven audio cassettes from Covenant Seminary are like a drink of cool water on a hot, humid day. It is not uncommon to find this issue addressed in evangelical circles, but it is distinctly uncommon to find it addressed with such humility and such a deep desire to know, understand, and obey the Scriptures. Jerram Barrs' chapel sermon on Mary will challenge most Protestants. Dan Doriani's careful Bible exposition moves through both Testaments. And Judy Dabler's creative message on "The Proverbs 31 Man" causes us to hear God's word in a fresh way. Besides the messages and chapel sermons, there are question and answer periods, and a helpful panel of women in ministry who reflect on God's work in and through them.

We recommend *Gender and Faith: A Biblical Perspective on Women's Roles in the Church* to you. ■

Tapes reviewed:

Gender and Faith: A Biblical Perspective on Women's Roles in the Church. A set of seven audio tapes available from Covenant Seminary Media Ministries, 12330 Conway Road, St. Louis, MO 63141. Or contact them by phone (800.264.8064) or by e-mail (media@covenantseminary.edu).

Lessons from the



Making the Most of Marshall Mathers

It is impossible to understand youth culture, particularly contemporary pop music culture, without addressing the significance of 27-year-old, white-rap-MC Marshall Mathers. Mathers is known by the stage-name Eminem as well as by his angry alter-ego alias, Slim Shady. Two short years and two albums later, few musical artists of recent memory have created more controversy and public outcry for lyrics that celebrate misogyny, rape, murder, and drugs.

In fact, his lyrics were specifically addressed by Lynne Cheney, former chairman of the National Endowment of the Humanities and the wife of vice presidential candidate Dick Cheney at a recent Senate Hearing on violence in motion pictures, music, and video games. Mrs. Cheney stated to the Senators assembled, “In ‘Kill You,’ a song from his recent album *The Marshall Mathers LP*, he begins by describing the satisfaction of raping and murdering his mother and then goes on to imagine the joys of murdering any woman he might come across. ‘Wives, nuns, sluts,’ whoever ‘the bitches’ might be, he will kill them slowly, leaving enough air in their lungs so their screaming will be prolonged. He will paint the forest with their blood. ‘I got the machete from O.J.,’ he raps, ‘Bitch I’ll kill you.’”

This is not the half of it. Profuse profanity aside, the lyrics tell stories of his five-year old daughter, Hallie, assisting in the disposal of her mother’s corpse; his wife, Kim, attempting suicide; musicians and celebrities having oral sex on MTV, gay bashing, robbing a liquor store, schoolyard violence, and an assortment of other anti-social fantasies and rages. In his lyrical mission statement, he boasts, “God sent me to piss off the world.” He is succeeding. Marshall Mathers is the Pied Piper of the Bad—the street philosopher of generalized depravity. Eminem is the fusion of midwestern trailer park white trash and urban hip-hop cul-

tures—Jerry Springer meets Montel Williams. Here lust and violence are depicted with graphic perversity.

And Eminem is wildly popular. His first album, *Slim Shady LP* (released February 23, 1999), sold more than 3 million copies. He won three MTV music awards, including the Best Male Artist; two Grammy Awards; and a big screen biopic is in the works. His second album, *The Marshall Mathers LP* (released May 23, 2000), sold nearly 2 million copies in its first week of release, becoming the second fastest selling album of all time. It has sold over 4.5 million copies. He has been on the cover of every music and youth-oriented magazine from *The Source* to *Teen People*. His bad boy antics, which have him facing gun charges as well as a legal battle with his mother, have only increased his sales. He boasts, “Every time a critic tries to slam me in the press, I sell more records.”

Eminem is an in-your-face mirror of the state of the American soul. We have made him a *cause celebre*. He’s an easy target for a Christian critic. Perhaps too easy. Our automatic response is to rush to judgment, rather than examine our own behavior. Our response is to decry the morality of his life and lyrics, rather than to pray for the holes in his soul as well as our own. Too often we turn to political solutions whether censorship or record labeling to address what are clearly cultural and spiritual problems. What lessons can we learn as followers of Jesus from Slim Shady? Here are four possibilities.

Misogyny of the Fatherless Boy
Eminem—like a growing number of other boys in American society—grew up fatherless. Born Marshall Bruce Mathers III on October 17, 1972, in Kansas City, Missouri, he claims to have never met his father. A single mother raised him in the midst of poverty. His mother, Debbie Mathers-Briggs, moved frequently and never maintained a steady job during his formative years. His life is a common story of many young adults. David Popenoe observes in *Life Without*

Shady Side

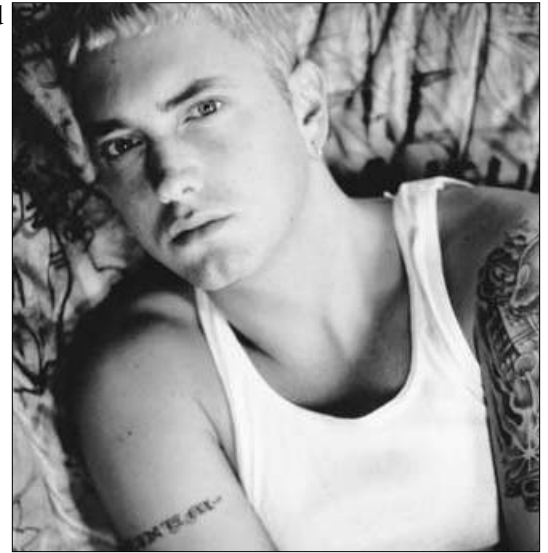
Father, “We have been through many social revolutions in the past three decades—sex, women’s liberation, divorce—but none more significant for society than the startling emergence of the absent father.” Close to 40% of all children do not live with their biological fathers and if trends continue, nonmarital births will outpace divorce as the chief cause of fatherlessness. Nationwide, more than 70% of all juveniles in the state reform institutions come from homes where there is no father present. *Fortune* writer Myron Magnet concludes, “Ominously, the most reliable predictor of crime is neither poverty nor race, but growing up fatherless.” Men who are not simply abandoning a particular spouse, but the institution of marriage and the children born to it are fueling the divorce culture.

Research shows that a fatherless boy is more likely to grow up a misogynist. Boys need to break psychologically from their mothers. Without a father to legitimize this break, sons either become over-attached to their mothers or flee attachment to women in general. Both options evidence a deeply insecure masculinity. David Gutmann, Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry at Northwestern University, writes, “Physical distance boys achieve by flight: from the mother’s home to the streets, to the fighting gangs that rule them, and, at the end of the day, to the all-male fraternity of the penitentiary. Social distance they gain through violence: unable finally to split from mother, they provoke her—through criminality, addictions, sexual exploitations, and physical threats... They use violence to drop out of the mother’s cultural world, and off her scale of values; and, once evicted to the streets, they turn to booze and drugs for the transient comfort that they can no longer take from their mother’s hand.”

Marshall Mathers is the poster child of the misogynist fatherless boy. Tattooed on his belly is a tombstone that reads KIM: ROT IN PIECES. Kim Mathers is his wife of two years and mother of his daughter. It is no surprise that his lyrics celebrate violence toward women or that he has found the patronage of Dr. Dre, his surrogate father. Like O.J.

Simpson whose strong and devoted mother was abandoned by her cross-dressing, homosexual husband when O.J. was three, Marshall Mathers also evidences the pattern of insecure masculinity.

His disdain for homosexuality and violence toward women follow a common psychological profile. Surely he is responsible for his attitudes and actions, but they do not emerge in a psychological vacuum. Here we see in spades the biblical warning that the sins of fathers are passed down from one generation to the next. What is the lesson here? Eminem reminds us that “The presence of fathers matters—especially in adolescence, particularly for boys.”



*I'm steaming mad
And by the way when you see my dad?
Tell him that I slit his throat in this dream I had*

Mainstreaming of Resentment

Eminem’s popularity, in part, reflects a growing cultural polarization. Mainstream America is no longer middle class nor does it reflect its bourgeois values. The gap between the haves and the have-nots is growing. In the last twenty years, America has experienced what MIT economist Paul Krugman calls, “a seismic shift in the character of our society.” We are drifting towards an economic pattern that exists in countries such as Mexico, India, and Brazil. Nor is this only a liberal analysis of the facts. Conservative Kevin Phillips writes, “What we are witnessing in the United States today is a broad transition toward social and economic stratification, toward walled-in communities, and hardening class structures.”

by
David
John
Seel,
Jr.
Ph.D.

There are two consequences to this shift. One is the rise of a culture of resentment. Eminem sings on his song, “Rock Bottom:”

*This song is dedicated to all the happy people
All the happy people
That have real nice lives
That have no idea whats like to be broke as f--k
I feel like I'm walking a tight rope
Without a circus net
I'm popping percuset
I'm a nervous wreck
I deserve respect
But I'm working sweat for this worthless cheque*

The postmodern poverty of which he sings has created a growing underclass, many of them white. Eminem gives voice to their frustration and anger. Our society contains a double truth—within our borders an opportunity society and a caste society coexist. The lifestyles of the rich and famous fill the television screens in the rural trailer parks and urban ghettos of our nation. It offers an unfulfillable promise. The gap between the religion of consumerism and reality of poverty is being filled with apathy, frustration, hedonism, and nihilism. With some honesty, Hillary Rosen of the Recording Industry Association of America observes, “For each person who believes rap lyrics portray a foreign world, there is another who finds them deep and powerful because that world is all too real.”

And this world is a growing con-

sumer market, even if poor. It has caught the attention of Madison Avenue. Without any moral scruples it panders to the lowest common denominator of social tastes to make a fast buck. In case one hasn't noticed, there is a growing coarseness in popular entertainment. There is nothing unusual about Eminem for those who have grown up with a diet of WWE, MTV's Celebrity Deathmatch, Faces of Death, Jerry Springer, Jenny Jones, Beavis and Butthead, South Park, The Greaseman, Howard Stern, RuPaul, slasher films, porn, and No Limit records. We are witnessing corporate sponsored versions of the Roman orgy—drugs, sex, and violence. Whether it is the CEOs of Vitacom or Seagram, wealthy men in pin-stripped suits are financing our cultural decay. The Medellin drug cartels have nothing on them. This is consumer-driven nihilism, free-market capitalism without a conscience. And when

“For each person who believes rap lyrics portray a foreign world, there is another who finds them deep and powerful because that world is all too real.”

the Republican National Convention has WWE's “The Rock” introduce vice presidential candidate Dick Cheney on national TV, one wonders where one looks for cultural *gravitas*. This much is certain, one is hesitant to immediately point the finger at a struggling white rapper from the corner of Van Dyke and Nine Mile Road, a blue collar Detroit suburb. Scapegoating is to miss the point of our culture-wide systemic crisis. Eminem reminds us that “cultural context matters.”

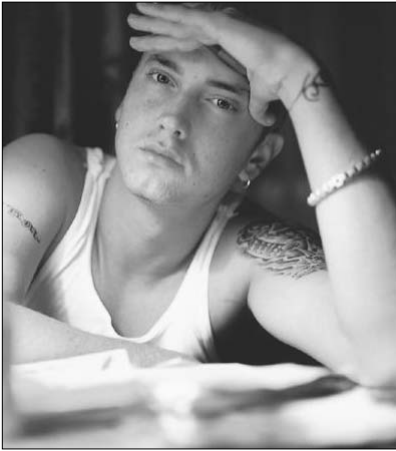
Logic of Therapeutic Catharsis

Eminem also reflects the therapeutic ideal of verbal catharsis. Says his manager, Paul Rosenberg, “He's still got tons of anger in him. His records are psychotherapy for him. He works out his problems in the recording booth.” Eminem has been on tour with LimpBizkit, the band that incited the Woodstock '99 riots, a 2000 tour named the Anger Management Tour. Its name is more than ironic; it is part of a wider rationale for lyrical combat as a palliative for physical violence. The same argument is sometimes made for violent video games. They help boys release aggression. And yet such arguments belie common sense as well as a host of scientific and anecdotal evidence. This fall the FBI released a two-year study conducted after the Columbine school shootings concluding that students who have a “preoccupation with themes of violence” are more

likely to be perpetrators of violence.

Such observations are keen insights into the obvious. As Christians we must not fall prey to this catharsis psychobabble about releasing

male aggression. Giving up anger is the first step to learning to love like Jesus, for it involves giving up the right to have one's own way. Jesus observes in the Sermon on the Mount that anger, contempt for others, and verbal “dissing” of others is the root of violence. Jesus' warning is among his strongest in Scripture: “Anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ [an Aramaic term of contempt] is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell” (Matthew 7:22). Does any-



one truly believe today that the words one says to another person may put them in risk of hell? Our words uniquely reflect our heart. Jesus warns, “For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34). But on the receiving side, words have the unique power to destroy another person. Jesus’ high ethical bar is evidence of his respect for the personhood of others.

Yet today verbal anger is bracketed as therapy and disassociated from physical violence. And so the self-centeredness of anger and the studied degradation of others goes largely unchecked. For many, it is cool to use profanity. It’s cool to pack a gun. It’s cool to pick a fight. Power is the only morality that matters. Power, not love, is the measure of a man. In such a culture one would best examine one’s own heart before judging Marshall Mathers. For our culture is awash in anger—some of which stems from our own hearts in our own words and actions. Eminem reminds us that “Venting is rarely constructive.”

Disconnect of Responsibility

Finally, Eminem makes us realize that many do not believe in the power of words. Words are cheap today. Lying and spin control are our common experience. Everything is trivialized as a joke. Nothing is

serious. The discerning listener of Eminem, we are told, will understand that it is all intended as a joke. But one wonders whether a Black artist could get away with lines that read, “Got pissed off and ripped Pamela Lee’s tits off.” A decade ago, 2-Live-Crew outraged the adult public. Today similar lyrics are met with mainstream adulation.

Words and language are the building blocks of culture. They create a reality. And yet we discount them as “mere words.” Danny Goldberg, president of Artemis Records, defended the lyrics of contemporary music at the Senate Hearings with this advice, “We don’t have pictures. We don’t have nudity. We don’t have blood. All we have is words, and all we can do is label the curse words.” We can bemoan the contemporary use of the First Amendment. But isn’t the problem far deeper than judicial judgments or legislative warnings? We live in a world where words and actions are all disconnected from responsibility. Nothing is to be taken seriously and no one is responsible. “It’s just entertainment.” “We give them what they want.” “I say it the way I see it.” Or as Eminem intones:

*Look, I can't change the way I think
And I can't change the way I am
But if I offended you? Good
'Cause I still don't give a f--k.*

Whether Eminem cares or not, whether his words are meant as a joke or not, their power remains in their offensiveness. For one cannot long listen to such lyrics without desensitizing one’s mind to the feelings of others and their intrinsic value as persons. Eminem reminds us of this simple fact “that words are powerful.”

The importance of fathers, the impact of context, the violence of anger, the power of words—these are lessons we learn from Slim Shady. They are lessons we might miss if our

first response is to judge. Marshall Mathers is finally more about us than about a shock rapper from Detroit. Eminem reminds us of the breadth and depth of living in a nihilistic culture. ■

~David John Seel

David John Seel is the Headmaster of Logos Academy, a Christ-centered, classical college preparatory school located in Dallas, Texas. He is also the author of Parenting Without Perfection: Being a Kingdom Influence in a Toxic World, which is published by NavPress.

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Gays Address Scripture

<http://hometown.aol.com/dodgeboyzz/hc2.html>

Homosexual Christians

Christianity and Homosexuality

A website created to convince readers of Christianity's compatibility with homosexuality and to provide support for gays and lesbians. We note this website because we need to be discerning about our attitude toward the homosexual community. Remember that a vital step in discernment is listening to those we disagree with or don't understand.

Ransom Ratings

Design: A single page looking like a long report, but the headings make it easy to follow. The background design is irritating, so give your eyes a second to adjust.

Contents: The article, written by a minister, is a good summary of the arguments used to support the gay lifestyle amongst Christians. Most of the biblical passages used to condemn homosexuality are listed and refuted. Easy to read and an excellent example of how Scripture is understood by this community. This site also has links.

Ease of Use: Very simple and easy to scroll through.

<http://www.ecinc.org>

Gay and Lesbian Evangelicals

Evangelicals Concerned Inc.

This is a non-profit organization founded in 1975 by Dr. Ralph Blair dedicated to "proclaiming the good news of God's love for gay and lesbian people."

However, rather than proclaim the gospel, the site is dedicated to helping gays and lesbians reconcile their lifestyle with Christianity. We note this website as a way to better understand the homosexual community. An integral part of knowing how to respond to them is understanding their point of view.

Ransom Ratings

Design: Cluttered and not intuitive. Takes a few minutes to understand the organization and layout.

Contents: Especially interesting is the section on "clobber texts;" those bible passages that are used to condemn homosexuality. The texts are listed and refuted, though not very thoroughly.

Ease of Use: Minimal graphics make for quick navigation.

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.

Critique is sent as a ministry to all donors to Ransom Fellowship, which is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, tax-deductible ministry. Everyone on Ransom's mailing list also receive *Notes from Toad Hall*, a newsletter written by Margie Haack in which she reflects on what it means to be faithful in the ordinary and routine of daily life, and gives news about Ransom's ministry.