

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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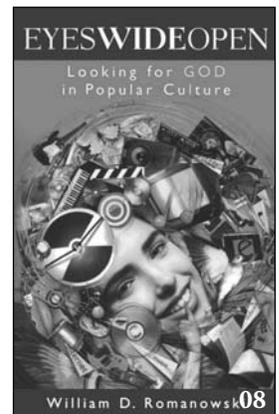
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Editor

Denis Haack

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Marsena Konkle, MFA

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Donald Guthrie, John Mason
Hodges, David John Seel, Jr.,
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*Director of Communications
for Coalition for Christian
Outreach*

Henry Tazelaar MD
*Professor of Pathology,
Mayo Medical School*

Submissions

Critique considers unsolicited manuscripts only for poetry.

E-mail: marsena@itis.com
or mail with SASE to:

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

Correspondence

All other correspondence
and changes of address:

Denis D. Haack
1150 West Center
Rochester, MN 55902
**Ransom Fellowship@
compuserve.com**

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Editor's Note



Best isn't always good enough.

Life has a funny way of sneaking up on you," Alanis Morissette sings. "When you think everything's okay and everything's going right... / A traffic jam when you're already late. / A no-smoking

sign on your cigarette break. / It's like ten thousand spoons when all you need is a knife / It's meeting the man of my dreams. And then meeting his beautiful wife. / And isn't it ironic... / Life has a funny way of sneaking up on you."

She's right—life can be like that. Sometimes it even sneaks up on you when you're trying your best to sort out some problem.

I thought of that song—it's called "Ironic"—when email began to arrive from folk who wondered if they were on our mailing list because they hadn't received any mailings. They had been introduced to *Critique*, liked what they saw, sent a donation to Ransom, and awaited the arrival of the next issue. A month passed, but none appeared. Two months. Nothing. So, they wrote wondering if some mistake had occurred. Perhaps their name hadn't been entered into the mailing list? Perhaps their copy had been lost en route?

It turns out there was a problem, but it wasn't what they imagined. The problem was that we had changed my sloppy approach to publishing this newsletter—only to introduce a new difficulty. In the past I've produced *Critique* around my travel and speaking schedule. I've managed to publish nine issues each year, but the final issue (#9) of some years has occasionally appeared in January of the next calendar year. No one complained about this—thank you, patient readers—but it was, I agree, a rather sloppy way to manage a publication. When Marsena Konkle took over

as Managing Editor, she established a publishing schedule, and for the past two years we've kept to it. (Give or take a few days, usually due to me. Old habits die hard.) Last year, for example, *Critique* #9-2001 went to the printer in November, and to the post office by Thanksgiving. The sloppiness of olden times had been solved.

However, what didn't dawn on me was that this neat schedule meant that a bunch of people who were added to Ransom's mailing list mid-November wouldn't receive an issue of *Critique* until this issue arrived. And since the first two months of 2002 were very busy in terms of speaking and travel, this one (#1-2002) wouldn't be distributed until March. Thus a 3+ month gap, during which a number of you wondered if you had been forgotten or missed.

Hopefully your reading this will allay those misgivings.

And yes: we've changed the schedule for this year so that a gap won't open again.

And isn't it interesting how even our best efforts backfire sometimes? Life has a funny way of sneaking up on you. As Dr. Schaeffer was fond of repeating: we're not only fallen, we're finite—and both can cause problems.

Critique 2001 Index

You'll find a copy enclosed. Hope it's helpful. If you can think of ways it can be improved, please let us know.

Correction

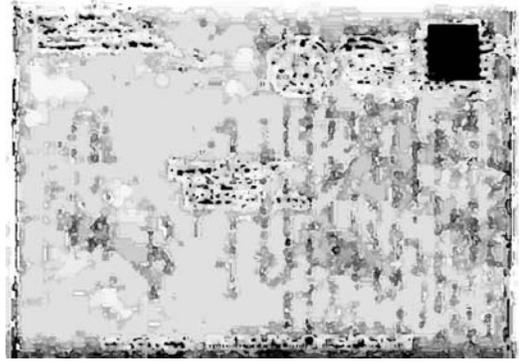
In *Critique* #9-2001, I called attention to Jonathan Edwards' *Resolutions & Advice to Young Converts* (p. 14) but neglected to note the publisher: Presbyterian & Reformed. ■

~Denis Haack

Source:

Alanis Morissette on *MTV Unplugged* (CD #47589-2).

Dialogue



Abstinence education, thanks, and OT law.

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 would like to counter John Seel's arguments against abstinence education a bit [*Critique* #8 - 2001]. I used to work for a Christian organization that did abstinence education in public schools. They were a fresh reality to many young adults, who often responded, "No one ever told me I was worth waiting for. I don't have to have sex?" We must not forget the law of God written on the hearts of people and His image imprinted on them. In public schools there is much room to appeal to the hearts of young people, and in doing so appeal to them with respect and dignity. They are unique persons with an ability to be responsible. They are worthy of our trust. Many never know there may be anything more than the lifeless and loveless culture of sex they see all around them.

No, scare tactics are not the answer. But talking about what is true in a winsome and caring way and appealing to their longings for love, beauty, and truth, is a relief for many—and a necessary counter of hope to presentations like those of Planned Parenthood that tend to diminish the value of people and turn teenagers into sub-humans that need condoms and freedom from guilt. It is so important that kids are talked to in ways that communicate their worth as human beings and their worth to engage in right relationships. Abstinence education can be a good thing.

JoEllen Borgos
St. Louis, MO

I want to thank you for *Critique*. My wife, my children, and I read it almost cover to cover when it arrives. We have found more refreshing insight into real life and how to relate to our culture than almost anywhere else we go for information. Thank you for the effort you put forth to produce it, and the heat you sometimes take in your pursuit of truth.

Jim Brown
Danville, VA

I continue to be intrigued by so many Christians' inability to admit the grace and usefulness of OT law [*Critique* # 6, 7 - 2001]. 'Grace' because it is like much clarity in the confusion of our own imagination; we are told what kind of reality God had in mind and made at the beginning. 'Usefulness,' because it tells us practically what is initially involved in loving God. We show that we love by giving pleasure to the other and affirming the other's choices and personality. Placing a wedge between Old and New Testament, between law and grace, is an old trick to seemingly free us from a burden. It turns what is supposed to be Christianity into kind of a Greek mystery religion of the inner life. A better way to deal with the peevishness over OT law is to read the text more carefully. Pharisees failed to do that. Jesus did not abolish the law, but the superficial reading of it. He challenges us to comprehend (=to consider, hold together) and do the law, not to abolish it. Greater righteousness is not found in less submission and better intentions, but in greater fidelity to what is said to us.

The case of the man gathering sticks on the Sabbath evidently presented such complications, beyond the visible 'facts,' that it went through three appeal instances until God himself declared the man guilty: not of picking wood or doing acts of mercy, but of defying God who made us in his image. As He rested from his work so we should see our differences from all nature by not living each day the same way, but celebrating the freedom of the Sabbath from the drag of life in a world now fallen. The Sabbath was a mark of distinct affirmation of being people, not trees, animals. That is what the man was denying and why there was no room for him in the state of the people of God.

continued on page 16...

A Great Spirit Blessing

Living in a pluralistic culture does not mean that we live among unbelievers; it means we live among people who believe in things other than Christianity. And since secularism has been found wanting, many are adopting a variety of spiritualities and religions. This is what the first-century church faced, and is why the New Testament writers addressed whether Christians should eat food that had been offered to idols. The only way that we will escape such intersections with our pluralistic world is if we isolate ourselves from our neighbors and withdraw from our culture. This we dare not do since we are called to follow Christ into the world.

Often the issues we face aren't specifically addressed by Scripture so we need to be discerning, to creatively chart a godly

path through the maze of choices and options that confront us.

Should we get blessed?

A Christian professor taught a continuing education course in New Mexico. He was an older, experienced teacher, committed to his vocation, a thoughtful, creative educator whose course was well received. One of his students was a bright, eager young Navajo woman who, though educated at a university far from her home, had returned to teach at a school on the reservation. She was committed to her tribe, and culture, spoke Navajo fluently, and was part of a growing number of Native American young adults who are deeply interested in the traditional beliefs, religion, and rituals of her people. Before the last class, with

great respect she thanked him for teaching the course, and told him some of what she had learned as a result of taking it. She said he had "blessed" her—her choice of words—and being grateful, wanted to bless him in return by performing a traditional Navajo blessing over him, invoking the spirits of her ancestors and the spirit of the land. It would only take a few minutes, she said, but she would be honored to bless him, since he had blessed her.

The situation raises questions that discerning Christians will be eager to address. ■

-Denis Haack

Source: I am grateful to Bryan Charlton who told me the basic facts around which I wrote this discernment exercise.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How is the growing religious pluralism in society most obvious to you? In what ways does it impact you?
2. What similar situations have you faced personally in our religiously pluralistic culture? How did you respond to them? Why? How satisfied are you with your response? Did you feel prepared to be discerning when the situation first presented itself? Why or why not? If you have never faced such issues personally, why do you think you have been spared?
3. Since it seems clear situations like this will likely increase as time goes by, why don't Christians discuss them together ahead of time? Why are such discussions often so emotionally charged? To what extent is agreement about such things a measure of spiritual maturity or biblical fidelity? Why? What are the implications of Romans 14 in this regard?
4. Discuss the case study. What would you have done, were you the professor? Why? What texts and principles from Scripture would you identify to justify your conclusion?
5. Let's assume the professor allows the blessing to occur. Discuss the reaction of a fellow believer who criticizes the professor, claiming that he has intentionally been involved either in the worship of a false god or in an invocation of demonic forces. Worse, he did this in front of other students, which certainly ruined his witness. He should have refused to participate, just as Daniel's three friends refused to bow before Nebuchadnezzar's gold image (see Daniel 3). Also, since it is unlikely that a Christian would have been allowed to give a biblical blessing in the class, he should have suggested that the Navajo student's offer, though thoughtful and kind, was inappropriate in such a setting.
6. Is it biblically necessary that all Christians respond identically in this situation? Why or why not?
7. What legitimate reasons—from a Christian perspective—might be given for refusing the blessing? For allowing the blessing?
8. Regardless of the professor's response, is he obligated to talk about it with the Navajo student? With the other students? Is he obligated to identify himself as a Christian? Is he obligated to present the gospel? Why or why not?

Questions that Matter

Have you ever been asked a question that lodges deep in your memory, slowly agitating like a splinter under a fingernail?

At the 2002 Rochester L'Abri Conference, Dick Keyes led a workshop on "Jesus the Questioner." As he moved through the numerous questions Jesus posed, it quickly became apparent that the questions probe us as much as those who talked with Christ. Steven Garber, gifted teacher that he is, poses questions repeatedly throughout his book *The Fabric of Faithfulness*. They are woven into his prose like a bright thread, and copying each one out—which I did as I read the book—was a profound exercise in learning.

It is tragic, Sharon Parks writes in *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, that "too many of our young adults are not being encouraged to ask the big questions that awaken critical thought." Few people bother to ask questions, preferring to lecture instead. "Swept up in religious assumptions that remain unexamined (and economic assumptions that function religiously), they easily become vulnerable to the conventional cynicism of our time or to the economic and political agendas of a consumption-driven yet ambivalent age."

The big questions that prompt worthy dreams cannot simply be raised as part of a curriculum. Since they probe to the heart, they must be asked in the context of trust and relationship. They should be asked by mentors and in covenant community. In her book, Dr. Parks lists some of the big questions that young adults ask:

- "Who do I really want to become?"
- "How do I work toward something when I don't even know what it is?"
- "Am I lovable?"
- "Who will be there for me?"
- "Why is suffering so pervasive?"
- "What are the values and limitations of my culture?"
- "Who am I as a sexual being?"

- "Do my actions make any real difference in the bigger scheme of things?"
- "Do I want friendship, partnership, marriage? If so, why? With whom?"
- "What is my society, or life, or God, asking of me? Anything?"
- "What is the meaning of money? How much is enough?"
- "Is there a master plan?"
- "Am I wasting time I'll regret later?"
- "What constitutes meaningful work?"
- "How have I been wounded? Will I ever really heal?"
- "What do I want the future to look like—for me, for others, for my planet?"
- "What is my religion? Do I need one?"
- "What are my real talents, preferences, skills, and longings?"
- "When do I feel most alive?"
- "Where can I be creative?"
- "What am I vulnerable to?"
- "What are my fears?"
- "How am I complicit in patterns of injustice?"
- "Will I always be stereotyped?"
- "What do I really want to learn?"
- "Do I want to bring children into the world?"
- "How do I discern what is trustworthy? Who and what can I trust? Can I trust others? Can I trust myself? Where is the heart's resting place?"
- "Where do I want to put my stake in the ground and invest my life?"

Add to this list the questions Dr. Garber raises, and the questions Keyes gleans from the pages of Scripture, and we have a list worthy of the most careful reflection and discussion.

Asking questions is not something that comes naturally to me. It is a skill that must be learned, practiced, and nurtured. Often I covenant with my wife before leading a dis-

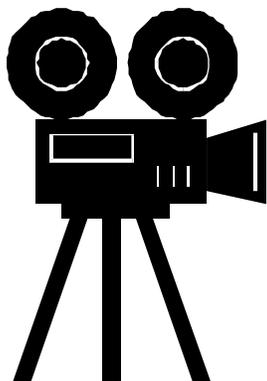
cussion to try to teach primarily by raising questions. We plan always to leave at least one unanswered question during each discussion—we want people to continue to learn and think after they leave. And we pray that our lives express an authenticity and openness so that even the most troubling questions can be raised. We want our home to be a place where such questions are honored, where answers are humbly thoughtful, and where listening and hospitality open the door to mentoring relationships that provide a safe haven for asking the biggest questions and for dreaming godly dreams. ■

~Denis Haack

Sources: *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose and Faith* by Sharon Daloz Parks (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; 2000) pp. xii; 137-138. *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years* by Steven Garber (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1996); "Jesus the Questioner" a taped workshop by Dick Keyes at the 2002 Rochester, MN L'Abri Conference, "Many Gods & Many Lords" (www.soundword.org).

The Darkened Room

It's All In Your Head



A review of A Beautiful Mind

by Drew Trotter

We've all heard the criticism: "Oh, come on; you're making that up. It's all in your head." For many of us whatever the "it" was, was indeed often only in our heads, and we knew it. Multiple Academy Award nominee *A Beautiful Mind* is about when it is all in your head...and you don't know it.

The film is a powerful look at the life of John Nash, a Nobel Prize winning theorist who struggles with schizophrenia. Based loosely on real events, it chronicles the association of genius with mental illness but in the context of the value of human relationships. Real and imagined, merely friendly and deeply committed, the human interactions in this movie take center stage, and their portrayal are what make this not just a good film, but a great one.

Criticized often for its blandness of technique and thoroughly upbeat ending, *Mind* in fact not only does not suffer from these elements, it positively requires them. Nash did largely overcome his troubles, and with just the result portrayed in the film. While there was much more darkness to his personality and to the process by which he regained functionality as a faculty member at Princeton and a Nobel laureate, Nash did in fact reach that point and did so largely through the love and help of his wife, Alicia, as the movie recounts. Even if that were not historically true, what's wrong with a fictional art form, i.e. a

movie, having a happy ending anyway? But that's a topic for another whole essay...

Similarly, Ron Howard's directing and Roger Deakins' cinematography are superb, if not innovative. Far too few filmmakers are as humble as Howard. Too often the rule of thumb in Hollywood is to scream with every shot: "Notice what a genius you have before you." Howard does not give in to that temptation but lets the surprisingly magnificent script by Akiva Goldsman (whose previous screenplays, e.g. *Practical Magic*, *Batman & Robin*, *A Time to Kill*, have shown little of the promise realized here) and the perfect acting of Russell Crowe (Nash) and Jennifer Connelly (Alicia Nash) carry the film. The score, casting and acting of the rest of the ensemble also deserve mention, giving the film a substance and weight worthy of movie greatness.

But enough of technique; what of the issues the film engages? There are so many, all of them important and interesting, that we are forced to choose among them for discussion. None is more central for the Christian than the portrayal of psychiatric illness.

Christians have always had a love/hate relationship with psychology. Ever since the extraordinary but erratic Sigmund Freud brought psychotherapy, the Oedipus complex and the id to prominence in the early twentieth century, Christians have wondered afresh about everything from the nature of the soul to the place of psychology in the church. No one can doubt that professional counseling has largely replaced the advice of clergy, friends or family or even the lonely struggle to overcome that



Film Credits

Starring:

Russell Crowe
(John Nash)

Ed Harris
(Parcher)

Jennifer Connelly
(Alicia Nash)

Christopher Plummer
(Dr. Rosen)

Paul Bettany
(Charles)

Adam Goldberg
(Sol)

Director:

Ron Howard

Writers:

Sylvia Nasar
Akiva Goldsman

Producers:

Brian Grazer
Todd Hallowell
Ron Howard
and others

Original music:

James Horner

Cinematographer:

Roger Deakins

Costume Designer:

Rita Ryack

134 minutes

Rated PG-13 for intense thematic material, sexual content and a scene of violence.

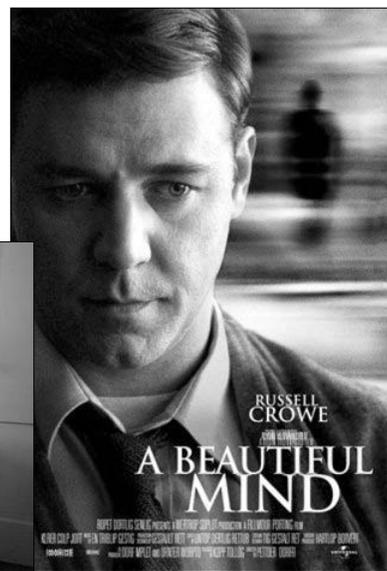
many Christians viewed as their primary sources of divine help in earlier centuries.

In spite of their relative acceptance in the culture at large, psychiatry and mental illness have both gotten a bad rap from the film industry. Psychiatrists usually appear in movies as more in need of help than the clients they serve. The successful psychiatrist (as in *Good Will Hunting*) is often portrayed as successful by contrast to the majority of his colleagues or by eschewing more mainstream techniques for those considered “outside the box.” Christians have sometimes applauded this perspective, sometimes lamented it, depending on their own attitudes toward the hubris, or lack thereof, of the profession that can appear to supplant the need for God in trying to solve very human problems of mental distress.

Similarly, the person afflicted with mental illness is either thoroughly disassociated from society, as in *Rain Man* or *Charly*, or is a drooling moron with nothing more than a child-like intelligence, as in *Awakenings* or *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Those who more normally seek counseling are rarely shown responding to medicine or fighting over long periods of time to gain control of their lives, as most patients do in real life counseling situations. Again, Christians fall between two extremes: of relegating psychological need to sin that needs repentance not therapy, and viewing that need as a substitute for sin, accepting all sin as simply illness,

treatable by counseling.

A Beautiful Mind contributes to the great middle road that most Christians find themselves



This film offers a realistic portrayal of one of the most difficult challenges facing humankind and the hope that that challenge can be faced and, if not conquered, at least neutralized.

walking. On the one hand, the film clearly shows a disease that is complicated, slow to heal, but capable of substantial remediation. And this is not just my opinion; Dr. Glen Gabbard, practicing psychiatrist and author of the book *Psychiatry and the Cinema*, says the film is “one of the better portrayals, if not the best, of what the disease is like” (“A Rare Day: The Movies Get Mental Illness Right” *The New York Times*, Feb. 5, 2002). On the other hand, the profession of psychiatry, while sympathetically portrayed for the most part, is nevertheless demonstrated to have its limitations by showing treatment that may have some helpfulness but also have side effects that hinder the healing process.

A Beautiful Mind does not offer a thoroughly Christian perspective; John Nash tri-

umphs by purely human effort. There is no mention of God, church, Scripture, clergy, sacrament or any other source of spiritual strength or healing known in Christian tradition. But what *Mind* does do is offer a realistic portrayal of one of the most difficult challenges facing humankind and the hope that that challenge can be faced and, if not conquered, at least neutralized. And the film does so with excellence and grace, reward enough for a viewing. ■

~Drew Trotter

Dr. Andrew H. Trotter, Jr., is the executive director of the Center for Christian Study in Charlottesville, Virginia, where he teaches and writes on theology and culture, focusing on modern American film. Copyright © 2002 by Andrew H. Trotter, Jr.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

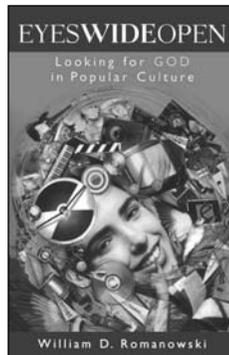
1. How would you describe the role of the psychiatrist in Christian healing?
2. The title of the film comes from the Nobel Prize speech with which the film essentially ends. What does it mean?
3. What can be learned from this film about psychiatric disease? What can we learn particularly from the character of Alicia Nash?
4. What is genius? How important is the discovery/creation of a new theory that may help thousands of people and solve many vexing problems if it is at the expense of a human being’s mind or his marriage?
5. What role does friendship play in this movie? How many different kinds of friendship are portrayed? Which is most important to you and why?

Sitting in the Dark,

I was speaking at a conference at Covenant Seminary recently when a participant raised a question that I am asked regularly: What books could I recommend that teach the reader how to be discerning? That demonstrate discernment as well as talk about it, and that do so by addressing the stuff of ordinary life? Unfortunately, the list of such books is a very short one. But there is one that fits that description and I recommend it highly: Bill Romanowski's *Eyes Wide Open*. This book grows out of a biblical understanding of life and culture, and is written with a deep passion for Christian faithfulness in a pluralistic and post-Christian world. And it is written, thankfully, by a man who writes well, who has done his homework, and who walks along with us to help us engage pop culture through the spectacles of Scripture instead of just telling us what to do.

Christian involvement in popular culture is hampered by two powerful, popular, yet badly mistaken, perspectives. The first is that Christian faithfulness is best defined as entering a "culture war," in which pop culture is the leading wedge of a deadly assault against the things of God. As a result many believers measure pop art solely in moral terms and urge withdrawal. Protesting the godlessness of Hollywood, these believers construct a ghetto, and imagine they are following Jesus. Others can't stomach that, and since they enjoy pop culture, they consume it as a form of entertainment. In reacting against those who withdraw, they accommodate to the prevailing culture, and hope that their involvement will

cause their non-Christian friends to think kindly of the faith. Dr. Romanowski addresses the error of both withdrawing and accommodating, and calls the people of God to a faithfulness modeled on the example of Jesus. "To be distinctive in our engagement with popular



"To be distinctive in our engagement with popular art, we need a different kind of Christian approach—an engaged, critical, and productive involvement with the popular arts—grounded in a faith vision that encompasses all of life and culture."

art," he writes, "we need a different kind of Christian approach—an engaged, critical, and productive involvement with the popular arts—grounded in a faith vision that encompasses all of life and culture."

The second mistaken perspective plaguing the Christian community *vis-à-*

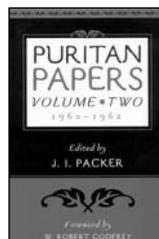
vis popular art is the argument that Christians must champion "Great" or "High" art—compared to "low" pop art which is then dismissed as "entertainment." It is a weary argument, and though it can be made to sound compelling, in the end it is simply the continuation of

an old debate which is humanistic in many of its primary assumptions. "It should be obvious,"

Romanowski writes, "that highbrow-lowbrow distinctions have as much, if not perhaps more, to do with class than the actual art in question." It is a debate unworthy of the Christian mind. Movies contain the stories of a postmodern generation, and the best ones are fine works

Briefly Noted: Puritans

by Denis Haack



For many years, Martyn Lloyd-Jones and J. I. Packer convened a conference of Christian thinkers in London to reflect on the work, theology and lives of the Puritans. They thought the Puritans important not just for historical purposes, but because the Puritans demonstrated strengths in areas in which modern evangelicals are weak. Now the papers read at The Annual Puritan & Reformed Studies Conferences during the years 1960-1962 have been edited by Dr. Packer. This series will not be of interest to every believer, but those interested in the Puritans and their rich theological heritage will be eager to add this collection to their library. ■

Book reviewed:

Puritan Papers (Volume 2, 1960-1962) edited by J. I. Packer (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed; 2001) 326 pp. + notes.

Living in the Light

of cinematic art. Much pop music is shallow and sentimental, but for those who have ears to hear, there is also much thoughtful poetry set to music which both fits the lyrics and nurtures the soul. The creativity of the people of God is richly graced and wild with possibility, and must not be imagined as limited to the achievements of the Western classical tradition.

Eyes Wide Open covers the basics, and does so in an appealing, accessible way. William Romanowski is a professor of communication arts at Calvin College, but does not write like a professor. Or, better yet, writes like the professor we all wish we had sat under in college. He is concerned for both Christian witness and personal holiness, and helps us engage popular culture from a Kingdom perspective under Christ's Lordship. And he does so not just in theory but with a practical approach that allows us to learn skill in discernment. He walks us through numerous films and songs, allowing us to listen in as he thinks about them Christianly. He surveys the cultural landscapes of both Hollywood and the Christian community, and addresses many of the most

common questions which arise when evangelicals talk about pop art and culture. And though you may not agree with every conclusion Romanowski draws as he talks about specific works of pop art, you will find even the disagreement helpful. The reason is that he invites us to enter a conversation rather than pontificates like an expert having the final word on the topic. And he equips us with the correct questions to ask so that we can think and live clearly, deeply, and most important, Christianly.

Two more things about *Eyes Wide Open*. First, notice the superb set of questions we have included from the book in this issue of *Critique*—in the Paper & Canvas column on pages 12-13. I hope this extract will not only encourage you to read the book, but that this set of questions will become something you use regularly. And second, if you log onto the publisher's website (www.brazospress.com), you can download a free study guide for the book. Each chapter is summarized, the key points identified, and questions for discussion and reflection on that chapter are listed.

Please read—and use—*Eyes Wide Open*. It will help you develop skill in discernment.

It is a Christian guide into the world of pop art and culture. It models what it means to have a mind and imagination shaped by the contours of the biblical world view. Use it in small groups and give copies as gifts. And if you have young people in your life, make it a priority to go through it with them. Take time to watch some of the films Romanowski addresses and to listen to some of the music he mentions.

If some measure of *shalom* is, by God's grace, to come to our broken and postmodern world, the people of God must break out of our captivity to fear and begin living as if we truly believed that Jesus is risen from the dead. By God's grace, may it be so. *Eyes Wide Open* can help in that renewal. ■

~Denis Haack

Book recommended:

Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture by William D. Romanowski (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press; 2001) 154 pp. + appendix.

Briefly Noted: Making Room

by Denis Haack



“Hospitality is a way of life,” Christine Pohl says, “fundamental to Christian identity.” In *Critique* #2-2000 I called attention to her book, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, recommending it as essential reading for all Christians who take the gospel seriously. This is an important book, because I am convinced that opening our homes as a place of safety, welcome, and listening is crucial if we are to live faithfully in our fragmented and post-Christian world. Now Dr. Pohl has published a study guide for her book, and we recommend it to you. Read and discuss *Making Room* in small groups and Sunday school classes. And then open your home, not just to friends who are like you, but to those who push you out of your comfort zone. “By God's grace we can grow more willing,” Dr. Pohl writes, “more eager, to open the door to a needy neighbor, a weary sister or brother, a stranger in distress. Perhaps as we open that door more regularly, we will grow increasingly sensitive to the quiet knock of angels.” ■

Book recommended: *Study Guide for Making Room* by Christine Pohl and Pamela Buck (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2001) 67 pp.

Time as a Gift

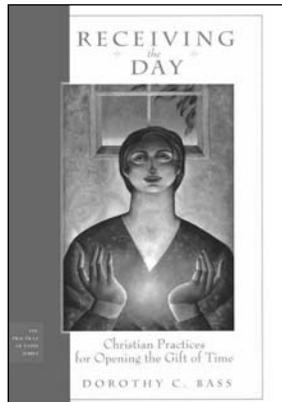
Growing up in the church meant that I heard the stories recorded in the Old Testament, including the ones which told of how the people of God were repeatedly seduced by the false religions, myths, and values of their pagan neighbors. I remember wondering how they could be so dumb as to fall for such obvious nonsense. I no longer wonder that. The reason, of course, is that I, too, have been similarly seduced.

The cultural myths and false values of an unbelieving world are seductive not simply because we are gullible (though there is that), but because they rarely come labeled as false. Often they are deeply attractive. They seem to make sense of life. They work. No one really thinks that much about them—instead, they are assumed to be true, accepted as common sense, and believed by all the best people. So we believe them, too, and attach Scriptural proof texts, though their source is not God's word, but a world in rebellion against him.

Some cultural myths are even contradictory to Scripture, such as some of the ideas our frantic, busy world holds about time. "It's an enemy," we say. "And there's not enough of it."

Constantly pressed, surrounded by need, we end each day with the knowledge that much has been left undone. We may even be falling behind—and time marches on relentlessly. We may have promised to accomplish more than we did, but if not, we know people who did accomplish more, and so feel guilty in

either case. There is a time famine and we sense the shortage keenly. If only we had more time, we say. Or were released from its relentless grip. "The seasons come and bring no sweet relief," Emmylou Harris sings. "Time is a brutal but a careless thief / Who takes our lot but leaves behind the grief." Trained to measure time as units of productivity, we manage it with ever greater intensity, and still are not satisfied. Efficiency must be maximized, and then maximized some more.



We may have promised to accomplish more than we did, but if not, we know people who did accomplish more, and so feel guilty in either case.

The Christian view of time, of course, is quite different. There is no shortage, no time famine. And rather than being an enemy, time is a gift given by a gracious God.

God created us to live in time, and called the arrangement "good." If he made us to live in 24 hour days, how dare we suggest his creation is insufficient? It was the Industrial Revolution, not the Scriptures, that gave birth to the idea that efficiency and productivity are the bottom line. As Christians we believe that faithfulness to God's call is what truly matters. Redeeming the time is not finally about efficient productivity, but about faithfully living to God's glory—and Christian faithfulness includes regularly setting aside our work to rest quietly in his presence and word. We can rest because we believe he is at work bringing all things to their appointed end in

Christ. He uses us, but does not need us, and in this we find both the delight of service and a freedom from anxiety. We can sleep and take our Sabbath rest knowing that needs remain—not because we are callous, but because we believe that redemption does not depend on us.

"I remember very clearly the moment when I first glimpsed the possibility that my Christian faith might be a source of guidance through the time crunch that was my life," Dr. Bass writes. "It was a Saturday night, and a few teachers were sitting around a dinner table.

Tomorrow we complained, would not be a happy day. Great piles of papers needed grading, and we had promised our students that we would return them on Monday. And so we whined, and as we whined our complaints gradually shaded into boasts. Someone listening in might have thought that we were competing to see who had to grade the most, who worked hardest, and who was most put upon by the demands of his or her job.

"That's when it hit me. 'Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.' This was a commandment, one of the ten laws in the basic moral code of Christianity, Judaism, and Western civilization, and here we were, hatching plans to violate it. I could not imagine this group sitting around saying, 'I'm planning to take God's name in vain'; 'I'm planning to commit adultery'; 'I think I'll steal something.' Yes, we might occasionally break one of the other commandments ('You shall not

covet' is an especially hard one for me), but if we did, we would hardly boast."

Dorothy Bass, director of the Valparaiso (Indiana) University Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, is convinced that time is a gift and should be received as such by God's people. She wrote *Receiving the Day* out of her own struggle with time, reminding her readers not just of the Christian view of time, but of the practices around Sabbaths, days, and years which have been used by believers over the centuries to be faithful in time. This is a helpful book, a reflection on time written not merely for evangelicals, but for anyone interested in learning what Christianity has to say on the topic.

We recommend *Receiving the Day* to you. Use the Study Guide in a small group to help prompt discussion. Supplement your reading with Bible study. And pray that God would help us identify how we have been seduced by a fallen world into seeing time not as the gracious gift it is, but as a relentless taskmaster. Time is good, not bad, and there is enough of it. Imagine if God's people demonstrated that before our harried, driven, never-satisfied world. ■

~Denis Haack

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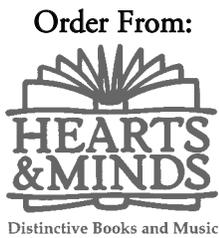
"The Pearl" from *Red Dirt Girl* (Nonesuch CD#79616-2; 2000), words and music by Emmylou Harris.

"Receiving the Day the Lord Has Made: A Day of Rest

is God's Gift to Us" by Dorothy Bass in *Christianity Today* (March 6, 2000) pp. 62-67.

Books recommended:

Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time by Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; 2000) 122 pp. + references + index. *Receiving the Day: A Guide for Conversation, Learning, and Growth* by Dorothy C. Bass, Lani Wright, & Don C. Richter (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; 2001) 33 pp.

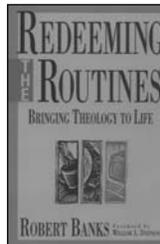


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234 East Main Street
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(717) 246-3333

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Briefly Noted: Faithfulness



by Denis Haack

When *Redeeming the Routines* was originally published in 1993, we called attention to it in these pages. It's reappearance, after having gone out of print, is a chance to recommend it again. Dr. Banks is concerned with helping ordinary Christians think biblically about the ordinary stuff of life—all those routine things we seldom reflect on but that take up a great deal of time and energy. Things like shopping, waiting in line, hobbies, fitness, daily planners, leisure, sports, housework, gardening, dress and fashion, cars, even sleep. Banks raises questions rather than supplying all the answers since his desire is to equip us to flesh out our beliefs rather than provide a formula for life. You may not agree with every point (I don't), but you will be challenged to see Christian faithfulness as extending to every square inch of life. Including all the square inches that seem so ordinary, so routine, so unspectacular that we rarely notice them—to say nothing of giving them careful thought. ■

Book recommended:

Redeeming the Routines: Bringing Theology to Life by Robert Banks (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker; 1993, 2001) 150 pp., + discussion questions + appendix + notes.

Paper and Canvas

Questions: Let

An excerpt from Romanowski's *Eyes Wide Open*.

On a practical level, being discerning has more to do with asking questions than it does with knowing all the right answers. The first time I saw the movie *Magnolia*, for instance, I felt a wild mix of emotion, and wondered how I should respond to it as a Christian. I didn't need some "Christian expert" to provide a response; I needed to engage the film with thoughtful questions from the perspective of my faith.

One of the best set of questions designed to help us engage popular art like film is found in an appendix in William Romanowski's *Eyes Wide Open*. Please read this book—it's simply too good to miss. And please use these questions—they are a thoughtful tool to help us grow in cultural discernment.

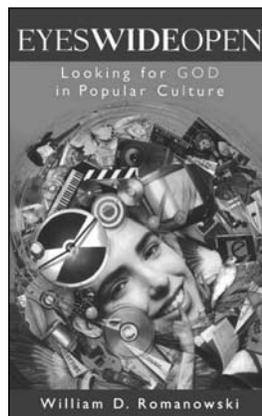
—Denis Haack

Excerpt from Appendix: Cultural Product

- Was this artwork a box-office or commercial success? To what elements can you attribute its success or failure (for example, star power, artistic quality, marketing)?
- Who is the intended audience? Is this artwork aimed at a particular group (for example, age, race, class, gender, religion)?
- What might people from these different groups take notice of in this artwork? How might they interpret it? How would this compare with your understanding?

Main Features of the Cultural Landscape

- What ideals, values, beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions are displayed? Which ones are glamorized or denigrated?
- What kinds of representations exist in this popular artwork?
- Who or what is being glorified?
- What does it glamorize or sensationalize? Make fun of? Put down?
- What is of value in life? Worth experiencing? Sacrificing or even dying for?



Being discerning has more to do with asking questions than it does with knowing all the right answers.

- What are the keys to success and happiness?
- Who are the heroes or villains? What makes him/her a hero or a villain?
- To what extent is the artistic portrayal faithful to the contours of a Christian cultural landscape?

Key Aesthetic Features

- How does the artwork deliver its message? Consider dialogue, narrative features, casting, acting, lighting, cinematography, musical or visual style, and so forth.
- What key symbols, metaphors, or

images are used? What do they suggest about the meaning communicated in this artwork?

- Does the inclusion of a particular event or information contribute to plot or character development? If so, how? If not, why?
- Identify emotions that the artwork excited—anger, delight, sadness, and so forth. How did the artwork bring out these feelings? Evaluate these means.

The Matter of Perspective

- From whose perspective is the story told?
- What key issues, concerns, problems, or questions are addressed? How does the song or story address these issues? How are they resolved?
- What constitutes good and bad conduct? According to the artwork? According to the viewers?
- Are people punished or rewarded for wrongdoings?
- Can you discern a political perspective or agenda?
- How does your own perspective affect your understanding and appreciation of this artwork?

The World Behind the Work of Art

- What beliefs, goals, convictions, and concerns can you find?
- To what extent is the vision represented in this artwork consistent with a Christian perspective?

God

- Does God exist in the world of the artwork? Or are the events and affairs of life directed by human effort alone? How do you know?

Discernment Begin

- How is God represented? Physically? Does God have a nonverbal or nonnarrative presence?
- What role does God play, if any?

Creation

- What beliefs and assumptions does the artwork represent about the world we live in?
- What is appealing or ugly? Enticing or repulsive? On what does the artwork lavish its most loving stare (for example, nature, sex, violence, people)?
- What is the nature of reality? How does it compare with the Christian view of the creation as good but stained by sin?
- Is this a moral universe? How are right and wrong determined?
- Is the universe ultimately material or spiritual? Is it indifferent, mean, or friendly? How does the artwork indicate this?

Humans

- How are humans portrayed? Are they inherently good or evil? Are characters one-dimensional, that is, all good or all evil?
- How does this view compare with a Christian understanding of human beings as created in God's image but fallen in sin?
- What motivates characters? Are they motivated by what they believe? What do they believe? What is the force of their convictions? How believable are these depictions?
- Which motivations are good, and which are bad? How does the artwork suggest approval or disapproval?
- Are individuals portrayed as anything other than self-centered? Are they motivated by a higher goal, belief, or concern?
- What are the characters' needs (material, social, spiritual) and how are they met?
- How are men and women portrayed? What ideals, beliefs, values, and assumptions define masculinity and femininity? Are men and women seen as equal partners in life?

- How are characters identified? Race or ethnicity, class, vocations, or sexual orientation? How are they portrayed along these lines?
- Are people, regardless of race or ethnicity, class, or gender, seen as sharing equally?
- Are minority groups seen as stereotypes or figures of fun?
- Which characters do we establish an allegiance with? How does the filmmaker create this allegiance? What makes the character attractive or unattractive?
- How could characters have been presented differently? What other courses of action could have been pursued in the narrative? What other possible outcomes are there?

Nature of Evil

- What beliefs and assumptions are embedded in this representation of evil?
- What is the source and nature of evil? Is evil personal, social, or cultural? How does the artwork explain the existence of evil?
- What would you identify as "sin" in the story? Does the narrative designate it as such and how? If not, how does the narrative treat it?

Nature of Redemption

- What beliefs and assumptions does the artwork represent about hope and redemption?
- What are the means and nature of redemption?
- What are the possibilities for redemption in the world of the artwork?
- What elements or possibilities for "grace" exist in the story?
- Does genuine forgiveness or reconciliation take place between people? Between God and humanity?

Authority

- What authority if any exists other than the self?
- To what extent do social institutions—family, school, church, business, government—wield authority?

- Does the artwork affirm a belief in absolute individual freedom? How does it depict social institutions?
- Do you get a sense that there are creational laws, or is the source of law from within the individual?

Sexuality

- Does the inclusion of an erotic scene deepen our understanding of the characters and their situation?
- How does this scene contribute to the meaning of sexuality?
- What do these two people really feel and think about one another?
- Do they love in the romantic sense? Is each escaping from the idea of a more personal relationship? Is this a purely sexual arrangement?
- Are sexual relationships portrayed in a way that you find acceptable? Why or why not?
- How do the beliefs and attitudes in the portrayal compare with a Christian understanding?

Violence

- Is violence the only possible or acceptable solution to problems? How does the narrative establish this situation?
- Is violence glorified? How are acts of violence justified in the narrative?

Map of Reality

- Does the artwork invite us to transfer its meaning to the real world?
- In what ways does the artwork resonate with your life experience and perspective as a Christian?
- How would you evaluate the map of reality this artwork represents? ■

~William Romanowski

Source:

Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture by William D. Romanowski (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), Appendix I, pp.156-161.

What is this



The Music of Emmylou Harris

“If there’s no heaven, what is this hunger for?” *Red Dirt Girl*

Age and the Gospel have something in common: realism. Illusions evaporate. Like a mirage in the desert or the dew at dawn, both disappear. Reality is designed this way. T.S. Eliot observed, “No one can stand too much reality.” It’s true. We prefer diversion and our illusions. In the end, however, these modes of escape will catch up with us.

Life will win out—and death. Our worldviews will be put under pressure and our levels of commitment put to the test. It was said of Jesus that he was “a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering” (Isaiah 53:3). Life sobers one up. Post-September 11, this is a fact for more and more people.

Few artists capture this aspect of truth more poignantly than 55-year-old country singer Emmylou Harris. Her thirty-year career spans my adult life and captures the quiet sadness of a life entering its autumn years. This is adult music. This is music for those who listen to NPR and identify with the world of Garrison Keillor. This is music for the person who can feel the mournful nostalgia of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s lines from “A Fire of Driftwood:”

*We spake of many a vanished scene,
Of what we once had thought and said,
Of what had been, and might have been
And who was changed, and who was dead*

Many will not understand this language of loss, remorse, regret—and, yes, hope. Harris’ music portrays a tragic view of life.

*That’s how the story goes
Our chapter’s coming to a close
We are history
But I will always think of you*

*Every day until my days are through
You made me believe
In tragedy*

Gordon MacDonald calls these wounded ones “broken-world people.” My wife, Kathryn, says she doesn’t trust anyone unless they walk with a limp. Most people have a limp. Few talk about them. Sadly, even fewer will allow themselves to feel its pain. Most prefer the romantic illusions of Disneyfied pop artists to the gritty realism of Emmylou. “She’s a downer.” “Pass the Prozac and turn on the TV.”

This is music for those who have known loss: a divorce, a prodigal child, the death of a parent, the betrayal of friends, the collapse of a career, or the pain of chronic disease. “I’m entrenched in middle age, and I’ve endured some dramatic losses. I don’t have answers, but I do have questions. I guess that’s why I like the two Annie’s so much... Annie Dillard and Annie Proulx.” In another interview she explains, “They say you are what you eat. Well, you are also what you live through... Music helps us get through those bleak times, not by telling us that everything is all right, or going to be all right, but by acknowledging the suffering that is pretty much usual fare for everyone.”

Emmylou Harris has largely been known as an interpreter of songs—a musical stylist. Her bitter-sweet, haunting voice can capture the deepest human dimension in any song. She makes us believe in the power of music to touch the heart. She told *The Irish Times*, “I’m drawn to the sad songs. They’re the most evocative, they’re the ones that unlock that pool of emotion within us.” In addition, she has had a long career, beginning with Gram Parsons, of singing harmony on other artists’ records—some 283 tracks at last count. Her award-winning career has recently been featured in Warner’s release of “Anthology: The Warner/Reprise Years,” (Rhino, 2001). The 45-song double-CD features 23 top ten country singles (six of which reached #1 on the country charts).

But more important as an assessment of a mature artist is her thirty-first album, *Red Dirt*

Hunger For?

Girl (Nonesuch, 2000). This was the first studio-mixed album since 1995 and the first album in which Harris wrote the majority of the songs. It won a Grammy for Best Contemporary Folk Album. It also demonstrates that Emmylou is more than a country singer. Distancing herself from the likes of Shania Twain and Reba McEntire, she told *Newsweek*, “What I was doing has nothing to do with the white-bread appeal of country radio music.” Her music blends folk country and blues *cri de coeur* with a gentle touch of southern Gospel. *Red Dirt Girl* has been compared to both Bob Dylan’s *Blood on the Tracks* and U2’s *The Joshua Tree*. Backup singers on the album include Patty Griffin, Julie Miller, Patti Scialfa, Bruce Springsteen, and Dave Matthews. Aging sixties folk rockers who began their careers with Dylan in the bars of Greenwich Village and Jersey, take a hard look back on life and its losses.

There is behind the lament of her music a longing for home. The child of a decorated Marine aviator, she lived the life of a military vagabond. She was born in Birmingham, Alabama and was raised in Woodbridge, Virginia. She admits to being rootless. “I had no roots or real identity... [So] I adopted country music,” she explained to *Newsweek*. The lead song on *Red Dirt Girl*, “The Pearl,” explores the pain of an oyster with a grain of sand that eventually becomes a pearl. There is pain in Harris’ world, but there are also pearls. The “whats” are not without their “whys.” There are no simple answers or preachy clichés, but hope is not totally absent.

*So there'll be no guiding light for you and me
We are not sailors lost out on the sea
We were always headed toward eternity
Hoping for a glimpse of Galilee
Like falling stars from the universe, we are hurled
Down through the long loneliness of the world
Until we behold the pain become the pearl*

Harris understands that human longing points beyond itself. The answers to life are not found within oneself, but beyond. As Blaise Pascal observed, “We are full of things that impel us outwards. Our

instinct makes us feel that our happiness must be sought outside ourselves... Thus it is not good philosophers telling us: Withdraw into yourselves and there you will find your good. We do not believe them, and those who do believe them are the most empty and silly of all.” Harris, the good philosopher, knows better.

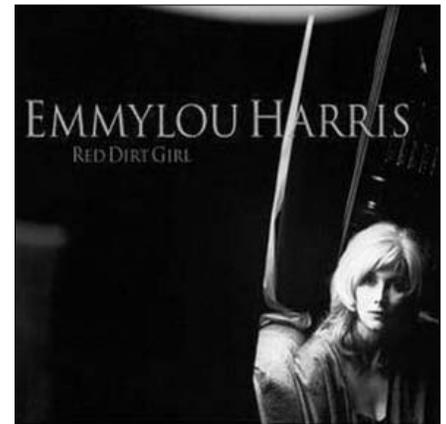
*We are aging soldiers in an ancient war
Seeking out some half-remembered shore
We drink our fill and still we thirst for
more
Asking, “If there’s no heaven, what is
this hunger for?”*

What Harris offers is no cheap solution—sex, drugs, or alcohol or fame, fashion, or fortune. These dead ends are self-evident. Like C.S. Lewis, she knows we are far too easily pleased. “What does not satisfy when we find it, was not the thing we were desiring.” The fool blames circumstances. The disillusioned repress the pain and deny the reality. It is the Christian who recognizes that we are not born with desires unless satisfaction for these desires really exists. Just as thirst implies water, so too our deepest hunger points toward heaven.

Does suffering have meaning? Does pain lead to pearls? Does longing suggest a resolution? Both the questions and the longing point in the right direction. Emmylou Harris writes music for those who have lived long enough to know that the questions are just as important as the answers. ■

~David John Seel, Jr.

David John Seel, Jr. is the headmaster of The Cambridge School of Dallas, a Christ-centered, classical college preparatory school in Dallas, Texas. He is the author of Parenting Without Perfection: Being a Kingdom Influence in a Toxic World (NavPress, 2000). Copyright © 2002 by David John Seel, Jr.



by
**David
John
Seel,
Jr.**

Dialogue cont.

continued from page 3...

Slaves (as we know them) were never allowed in the culture of the Bible that stressed the uniqueness of people made in God's image. Our recent experience of slavery influences our reaction to anyone being loyal by contract over time. We assume a right to walk away from the job, from neighbors and even from marriages. But there is nothing intrinsically wrong with a person choosing to bond himself to another for six years in return for agreed benefits. An apprentice does that to learn a trade. In marriage we bind ourselves until death (at least).

Any embarrassment comes from a failure to understand that the Bible speaks of

loving your neighbor as yourself as the foundation from the beginning. In such a context there is nothing of the 'slavery' connotation we fear. Instead all human relationships are to be created through the bond of love, respect, mutual help and the affirmation of dependencies. "It is not good for man to dwell alone." But then watch how you live together! The problem lies less with a legal tie than with the way the relationship is exploited.

I have never come across an OT law that causes genuine embarrassment. Most of the time any initial confusion is resolved when the text is seen as a whole, the context is considered and the questions are raised about what light is shed by that particular prescription on our larger under-

standing of God and Man, society and nature. We need to study the words more in order to get to the meaning. The Bible wants to bring us into closer relationship with the created historic reality, not take us away into personal perspectives, spiritual otherness or guilt feelings.

When Jesus prayed that we would be sanctified by God's word (John 17:17) he meant the whole text of the Bible. It is true to our real situation in time and space, it is informative, creative and alive.

Udo W. Middelman, President
The Francis A. Schaeffer Foundation
Gryon, Switzerland

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Critique is a newsletter (published nine times each year, funds permitting) designed to accomplish, by God's grace, three things:

1. To call attention to resources of interest to thinking Christians.
2. To model Christian discernment.
3. To stimulate believers to think biblically about all of life.

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