

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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Critique

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Editor's Note



www.ransomfellowship.org

Over the years we've often been asked if Ransom has a website, and it's good to be able to finally answer, Yes we do. It was launched last month—this is the first official announcement in any of Ransom's publications—and I invite you to log on, check it out, and take advantage of the resources we have posted there for your use.

Marsena Konkle, who designed and edits both *Critique* and *Notes From Toad Hall*, also designed and manages the site. She's taken time from working on her novel for this, which makes us all the more grateful for her imagination and patient, hard work. We believe she has captured something of what Ransom seeks to stand for in her designs of the newsletters and the site.

We've taken our time on this, but the wait has been worth it. What the site looks like is as important to us as its content, and we've wanted to consider the design as carefully as we do the ideas expressed in the materials posted there. We've wanted it to be attractive, creative, and easy to use. Serious, but with a sense of humor. Thoughtful, but for ordinary believers like us who are simply seeking to live faithfully under Christ's Lordship in a postmodern world. Orthodox and biblical, but with a cutting edge. A site that people find interesting and useful enough to visit not just once, but often.

Which will be important—visiting the site often, that is—because only a fraction of our material is posted there. It takes time to format pieces, arrange the graphics, and log them onto the site. Marsena's hard drive is stuffed with material awaiting her attention, and so each month new articles, reviews, and discussion

guides will be available. (It'll take most of this next year to just get caught up.)

Past issues of *Critique* will also be posted there, eventually, but only after a period of time has elapsed—people will need to be on our mailing list to receive current issues. And as you will notice when you visit the site, there are numerous articles and movie discussion guides available there that will never appear in these pages. There are also introductions to us, to the ministry of Ransom and its Board of Directors, to *Critique's* Contributing Editors, and a number of pictures that will allow you to see that there are real people behind the names that appear in these pages.

I want you to know that we do not take such things for granted. We are praying that the Lord will use the site—and *Critique* and *Notes From Toad Hall*—to his glory. That because it exists, his people will more winsomely read the world in light of reading the Word. If you would join us in praying for this, I would be appreciative.

And please let us know what you think.

2002 Critique Index

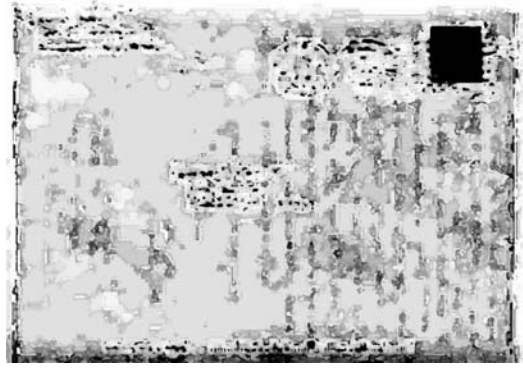
We've included an index for everything that has appeared in these pages in the issues dated 2002. We occasionally hear from readers who tell us they carefully save each issue, and we're pleased they would want to do so. Hope you find the index helpful. ■

~Denis Haack

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Dialogue



From the Phillipines to D.C.

Our new Dialogue e-mail:
letters@ransomfellowship.org

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

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letters@ransomfellowship.org

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 want you and Margje to know how much I enjoy your writing (both *Critique* and *Notes from Toad Hall*, each with its own "flavor") and how much I have been helped by the way the two of you share from your minds and your hearts. By way of citing a couple of examples, the University of the Phillipines faculty member with whom my wife and I are teamed up in ministry (we are Navigators staff) and I were recently discussing the appeal of legalism. Imagine my surprise to find an article on that subject in a back issue of *Critique* provided me by the friend to whom I recommended *Critique* many years ago. And secondly, I was happy to discover that you slightly expanded your article on discernment and republished it in issue #6 - 2000. I will be using your outline with the students I am meeting with at University of the Phillipines. All are bright, and several are majoring in the arts, so we particularly enjoy and are helped by the subject matter *Critique* takes up.

Greg Haskell
Philippine Islands

We just talked to our daughter, Steph, on the phone tonight and she was saying she and her school buddies visited a Presbyterian church in the D.C. area last Sunday that she had not been to before. A woman who was greeting visitors had a *Critique* under her arm. Steph mentioned that she knew the magazine and read it. The women said, "I asked a friend to tell me if there was one publication that you would read, what would it be? The friend told me *Critique* and gave me a copy. I haven't looked at yet. What do you think of it?" Steph was blown away by this and of course told the woman it was the best thing since sliced bread or something like that.

Keep up the good work!

Terry Opgenorth
Racine, WI

Did Jesus

I remember three things about the church I attended from 1976-1979. The first involves scary pastor-portraits in the hallway. The second, roller skating to impress a girl named Tina. And the third, the one I can't get out of my head, involves lepers. Every Sunday after church, shuffling behind my family through the parking lot, I saw Them. Always the same ones, huddled in a close circle, their circumference dictated by temperature: the colder the air, the tighter the circle. Always, a pillar of steam rising from their center, regardless of temperature. No one talked to them, and no one went close enough to touch them, taking long-cuts to their station wagons to avoid them. Parents gathered their children in close, slowly folding them into their coats, shutting their eyes to the show. My parents never caught me looking, and, though I waited, terrified and delighted, nothing bad happened to me. I became infatuated with the mystery, and I began looking forward to Sunday. I daydreamed about Them, and, in terms of firing my curiosity, they ranked right up there with reproduction and how could there be so many ramps in Hazzard County.

One morning in Sunday school, Mr. Goode gave us a lesson on lepers; he apologized for not having any felt board characters for us to see. So he sketched a leper colony on the blackboard, and when he moved out of the way, my breath caught, and my lungs began to burn. We had a leper colony outside our church, and my delight in Them was snuffed out. I was afraid.

A few years later, after I read *Where Did I Come From?* and discovered the workings of television car chases, I also

realized that those weren't really lepers outside my church—they were smokers. Here was my first lesson in mystery, fear, stigma. I've learned since that the church labels its vices well, and, rather than stepping into sordid circles, we tend to colonize our offenders and rope them off with Bible verses and voices of concern.

The church was/is/will be full of smokers. Some of them are regarded as kings (C.S. Lewis, Charles Spurgeon, R.C. Sproul), some of them are considered "normal"

We see a Christian hold a three-inch cylinder packed with dead leaves, set it on fire and suck on it, and we pronounce "sin."

(the regular number outside my church in St. Louis), and some of them are filtered out, quietly vanishing from the church like wisps of smoke. They have these things in common: they love Jesus, they like to smoke, and they leave themselves open to criticism.

All Christians, truly, are open to criticism; when we become children of God, we also become his representatives—his hands, eyes, ears, mouth. What we do with those hands and mouths must faithfully represent their creator. We are responsible for representing him faithfully, which means we must be open to criticism and be willing to criticize unfaithfulness. We are called to community for this reason. Our criticism must be warm, gentle, winsome, thoughtful; otherwise, unfaithfulness adds to unfaithfulness. Though some criticize smokers warmly and gently, few of us do so winsomely, fewer still thoughtfully.

We see a Christian hold a three-inch cylinder packed with dead leaves,

set it on fire and suck on it, and we pronounce "sin." The Christian blows smoke from his mouth, and we back up and say, a bit louder, "Sin." We watch this happen again and again, twenty times per pack, and, without thinking, we cry "SIN," effectively cutting smokers off from meaningful dialogue, from biblical criticism.

Over the last few years, I've been spending time with Christians who smoke, sitting in circles of Christians' smoke. Many of these people have left the church, refugees from rebuke and subtle disregard. Some of them are addicts, some of them are just smok-ish, but all of them have been treated poorly. And they still smoke, huddling in their circles, cut off from the corporate worship of the living, breathing God.

The church is called to be God's hands and mouth: warm, thoughtful, compassionate. We are called to evaluate our behavior with discernment (prudence rather than prudishness) rather than mere reaction. When we find our knees jerking in reaction, we must question ourselves—the Kingdom does not operate on the basis of jerks.

During my praying, thinking, questioning, interacting, I have yet to find a way to support from Scripture that smoking itself is sinful. Addiction, yes. Underage smoking, yes. Causing a brother to stumble, yes. Smoking itself, no. This is no black-and-white matter, where we're either Pro-Lung or Pro-Choice. To our lessons in mystery, fear, stigma, let us add discernment.

Last Sunday morning, as the offering plate drew near, my pew-mate confessed that he had spent the few dollars he had

Smoke?

set aside for the offering—he ran out of cigarettes Saturday night. The gas station is on the way to church. Cigarettes add up; they can be costly financially and physically. Cigarette smoke offends most people. Secondhand smoke hurts babies. So, is it a sin to spend money on the things we like? To expose our bodies to physical harm? To smell bad? Put another way: smoking is the leading cause of cancer, and the Fall is the leading cause of sin. So, are cigarettes a result of the Fall? Is smoking a cigarette a sin?

To at least approach an answer, we must examine our hermeneutics: our understanding of Scripture and our application of compassion.

Last month, my roommate asked me to promptly return some videos for him. I told him I would. I did, but not last month. My roommate now has a nasty late fee. Have I sinned? Fundamentally, sin is a transgression of the law of God, a prohibition committed or a command omitted. I searched Scripture, thinking surely that the apostles didn't have time to rent movies. I was right—no specific command to return movies on time, and no specific prohibition against keeping movies too long. While I was at it, I searched and found a similar absence of references to smoking cigarettes. So, are the smoker and movie procrastinator free from sin? (Reader: my intent is not to insult, but carefully to punctuate our agreement.) By this hermeneutic, they have not sinned. But this is a strictly literalistic hermeneutic, and were we to adhere to such, I would be forced to forego my hatred for neo-Nazi hate crimes, as the Bible doesn't address them (and, thus, condemn them) specifically. If smoking isn't denounced on these grounds, then which?

I told my roommate I'd return the videos on time. I had the opportunity, and I didn't. I did not fulfill my commitment, and I acted unfaithfully, both principles that Scripture clearly enunciates. Deprived of specifics, we look for principles. Rightly so. Lacking specifics, then, what principle do most people raise against smoking? This is the part, frankly, where my ashy skin tightens and I strap on my anti-mantra helmet, hoping to avoid the near-inevitable Scripture-grenade: "The body is the temple of the Lord." Plucked from I Corinthians 6, this passage tends to be the champion of those who label smoking sinful. And the principle infusing the passage? That exposing the body to physical harm is a sin. Here is the point of contention.

And here is the point. First, this passage certainly refers to believers and their bodies,

We do not have the right, from Scripture, to see a Christian smoking and, on the basis of the cigarette alone, call his behavior sinful: sin resides in the heart, not in the tobacco.

but Paul isn't addressing physical harm to the body. I Cor. 6:15-20 describes the believer's body as a figurative temple, the union-house of Christ (6:15) and the vessel of the Holy Spirit (6:19). In this passage, Paul speaks exclusively of sexual immorality. Because of the believer's union with Christ and, thus, his union with other believers, sexual sin, the only sin against the body (6:18), and thus, against this union, affects, mysteriously and differently than other sins, everyone who is united to Christ: the Church. This, the unique peril of sexual immorality, is Paul's contention with Corinth. Certainly, from this passage, we can infer that our bodies are important, possibly moreso than we realize, and we must treat them well, but we cannot, from this passage, conclude

that exposing the body to physical (non-sexual) harm is a sin.

Second, supposing that the other 1,188 chapters of Scripture might have something to say, let us grant, for the sake of discernment, the proposed principle that exposing the body to physical harm is a sin. I returned my roommate's movies at 5:15 on a Monday afternoon. St. Louis had just received a carton of snow, and, on the way to the car, I slipped on the ice and bumped my bum. I scraped my knuckles on the door handle trying to de-ice the lock. I almost lost control on Delmar Avenue. On the way home, to soothe my nerves, I picked up some MSG-laden General Tso's Chicken. Once home, I washed the General down with Coca-Cola. Two states away, a dear friend of mine, who labels smoking a sin on the "physical harm" principle, was having his fourth cup of coffee

for the day. Two countries away, a missionary was dealing with dysentery. My friend in Los Angeles was breathing smog, and a cab-

driving Christian in New York was doing his everyday cab driving in New York. Across town, a Christian was delivering a baby. Even the recluse hypochondriac, who decided to avoid the perils of the world, was experiencing muscular degeneration from sitting on the couch all day. We live in a fallen world, and the only guarantee we have, save the second coming, is that we will die in a fallen world, certainly a physical harm. Truly, some exposure to physical harm is necessary, some of it voluntary, some of it part of calling; in all of these examples, though, physical harm, either actual or potential, is unavoidable, exposing our bodies to harm is inevitable, and it measures itself in degrees. And who of us has the right to legislate degrees? We cannot say, absolutely, generally, or consistently,

The Discerning Life cont.

that exposing the body to physical harm is a sin.

We do not have the right, from Scripture, to see a Christian smoking and, on the basis of the cigarette alone, call his behavior sinful: sin resides in the heart, not in the tobacco. We do have the right to require prudence, and we are obliged to evaluate each other's behavior with discernment.

Smoking can be expensive, offensive, and addictive, and it is mostly not a good idea. But if we make judgments beyond that, we must ask ourselves why. What is the origin of our judgments? Is it Scripture, society, tradition, a mixture of them all?

Of all the things I hoped I would never hear a Christian say, "Kirk Cameron was soooo hot in *Left Behind, The Movie*" tops the list. A close second: "Don't smoke, don't chew, don't go with girls who do." For all of us who had grandmothers who turned snuff into a beautiful art form, let us be grateful that this dictum didn't sway our grandfathers. For my part, I'm not necessarily looking for a girl with a dip-can ring worn into the back pocket of her Wranglers, but I can't, on biblical grounds, rule her out. On cultural grounds, it's worth discussion, but on biblical grounds, no. When we seek to evaluate our behaviors, we must not allow culture to inform our decisions more than Scripture. In India, a smoker is considered a non-Christian; in Holland, an elder; in Mississippi, a backslider; in California, a Republican. How much of our views on smoking is dictated by culture rather than Scripture?

As we must be critical and discerning of culture (and our own views regarding it), we must be the same with

smoking. But we cannot equate critique with prohibition. Much of what we critique (music, film, politics) we also enjoy, and are at liberty to enjoy. We may not be able to parcel out the particulars, to draw the line between degrees, but that is the difficulty, the responsibility, and the privilege of being a discerning people. You may not think it prudent to be a Democrat, or to watch *Magnolia* repeatedly, but can you call it sinful?

From my experience, the smoker receives less patience, compassion, and sympathy than others who "struggle" with a traditional vice.

I doubt if Jesus smoked or watched *Magnolia*, but I know he engaged in much that was considered culturally sinful. Were he to stand outside one of our churches today, I have no doubt he would gladly engage with the smokers, the modern-day leper colonies. In his own day, lepers were considered culturally unclean, sinful. The Pharisees refused to touch lepers, lest that touch make them unclean in the process. Jesus was born to touch lepers. And in his touching, Jesus' point was that sin resided not in the leprosy itself, but in the heart. Those who stigmatized lepers, especially the Pharisees, were criticizing the form rather than the substance; they were condemning people based on culture rather than Scripture. We cannot make strict parallels between leprosy and smoking, but we become Pharisees when we condemn a smoker on the basis of cultural grounds rather than biblical standards. We must be careful, lest we strain the gnat and swallow the Camel Light.

Jesus, while touching lepers with compassion, extended little to Pharisees. We, too, like the Pharisees, are in danger of becoming selective with our compassion if we allow culture to direct our judgments. Ask yourself: were you on a panel to select a youth worker, the applicants being equally qualified in all other areas, would you be more inclined to hire the smoker or the coffee addict? The shopaholic? More willing to invite over for dinner the smoker or the Christian struggling with alcoholism?

From my experience, the smoker, whether addict or occasional inhaler, receives less patience, compassion, and sympathy than others who "struggle" with a traditional vice. My fear is that the church has become selective with her compassion, and we select based on potential burden. The drug addict, the church member who struggles with pornography, and the alcoholic don't make our clothes stink, don't pollute our air, and our differing treatments reveal that we are often concerned for ourselves more than others: "As long as your smoke, your 'sin,' doesn't get into my fibers, welcome. We touch you in the name of Jesus."

Recently, on my morning walk to the coffee shop, I noticed a button on the ground. I leaned over, picked it up, and wiped off a thin layer of dirt. Underneath, the slogan: Fight Homophobia. I decided to keep the button, proud of my compassion for "sinners," and as I reached to put the button in my satchel, the pin on the back pricked me, and the thought flashed through my mind: "Those activists planted this thing to give me AIDS." I became aware of two things at that moment: One, I should be careful with buttons. Two, until it became a bur-

den to me, I was glad to practice compassion, but once pricked, I realized the true depth of my concern. If patience, compassion, and understanding aren't coupled with sympathy, the willingness to enter another's world, to get dirty, to smell bad, to hurt personally, then we might as well hang a letter on the necks of sinners and rope them off.

My friend Winston (yes, go ahead, laugh) is a deacon in his church, a gracious husband, and a playful father of three. Every once in a while, after a long week of church meetings and work and dirty diapers, he puts the last whining child to bed, pours two glasses of wine, sits on the deck, and enjoys a cigarette with his wife, the wine and the nicotine making his heart glad.

A friend of mine spends a lot of time sitting inside a coffee shop, writing. After starting at a sentence for 45 minutes, he likes to take a break and sit outside and have a smoke. The coffee shop is near the local university, and almost every time he sits outside and smokes, a student approaches him and asks to "bum a smoke." He obliges, offers a light, and they talk, smoker to smoker, image

of God to image of God. And the only reason for the discussion, the spark that ignites it, is that in his smoking, he has created a safe haven, instant hospitality, unabashed freedom from judgment that smokers crave. He is gifted and called to write and to befriend and respect unbelievers; smoking isn't a necessary part of his calling, but it is a valuable one, and, according to Scripture, if he can pack smoking into his calling responsibly (without addiction, e.g.), then he is at liberty to do so.

Is the typical cigarette-smoking Christian addicted? Yes. Must the Christian smoker, addicted or not, be sensitive with his smoke? Yes. Must he be regarded or treated differently than others with behaviors that we don't like? According to Scripture, no. Does this mean our churches are required to build smoking rooms inside our churches so the smokers don't have to shiver outside while everyone else is shaking warm hands? Probably not, though it's worth considering. What is required of the church is that she think through her criticism before stigmatizing people. That she be willing to offer the

benefit of the doubt first, and to seek understanding accordingly, before she cast judgments. We have lost many gifted and beautiful saints because of our lack of discernment and biblical thinking on this issue. Regardless of whether fewer or more people are smoking now than last year, or ten years hence compared to now, the church will always have her smokers. Will we continue to make them feel that their "temples of the Lord" aren't as valuable or healthy as the rest, or will we treat them respectfully, winsomely, warmly, thoughtfully? I hope for the latter. I can't quit praying for the latter—I hope to become addicted. ■

~Jeremy Huggins

Jeremy Clive Huggins, 28, says he's a freelance writer/teacher, but his mom hears that and chuckles, as always, at his nice euphemisms. "Call it what you will, honey, but there's nothing wrong with being unemployed, as long as you love what you're doing," she says. In addition to his mother, Jeremy loves his Dodge Dart, likes the color brown, and is obsessed with Franka Potente. If you know her, e-mail him at <eprentiss@aol.com>.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial or immediate response to this article? Why do you think you responded this way?
2. Go through the piece again and note the key statements, arguments, and reasons that the author uses to make his case. State the author's thesis, as clearly as possible and without editorial comment, in your own words.
3. How have you understood and applied 1 Corinthians 6:15-20 prior to reading this article? Study the passage in detail, taking care to read it in its literary and historical context. Compare your interpretation with that found in several commentaries (choosing at least two which were written in previous periods of history). Did anything surprise you as you examined this text? How has your understanding of the passage been changed or deepened as a result of this study?
4. Do you agree with Huggins' use of the metaphor of "leper" in his discussion of smoking? Why or why not?

Continued on next page...

QUESTIONS CONTINUED...

5. “All Christians, truly, are open to criticism; when we become children of God, we also become his representatives—his hands, eyes, ears, mouth... We are responsible for representing him faithfully, which means we must be open to criticism and be willing to criticize unfaithfulness... Our criticism must be warm, gentle, winsome, thoughtful; otherwise, unfaithfulness adds to unfaithfulness. Though some criticize smokers warmly and gently, few of us do so winsomely, fewer still thoughtfully.” Do you agree? Why or why not? How would you characterize the way you have criticized smokers?
6. “I have yet to find a way to support from Scripture that smoking itself is sinful. Addiction, yes. Under-age smoking, yes. Causing a brother to stumble, yes. Smoking itself, no.” Do you agree? If not, what texts would you use to make your case?
7. Why might non-smoking Christians feel threatened or angered by this article? What would you say to them? Should Christian parents try to keep this article from their adolescent children? Why or why not? Should they at least use a magic marker to first blot out a few lines (e.g., “I’m not necessarily looking for a girl with a dip-can ring worn into the back pocket of her Wranglers, but I can’t, on biblical grounds, rule her out.”)?
8. Huggins writes: “If patience, compassion, and understanding aren’t coupled with sympathy, the willingness to enter another’s world, to get dirty, to smell bad, to hurt personally, then we might as well hang a letter on the necks of sinners and rope them off.” To what extent is this true of you? Since this is precisely how Jesus acted toward us in the Incarnation, why do we find it difficult to faithfully follow him? Though Huggins uses AIDS as an example here, what specific examples could we list where we fail to live incarnationally?
9. “Jesus, while touching lepers with compassion, extended little to Pharisees. We, too, like the Pharisees, are in danger of becoming selective with our compassion if we allow culture to direct our judgments.” To what extent is Phariseeism a problem in the church? A problem in our lives? How would you define Phariseeism? How can we become more sensitive to the problem in our own lives? What other ways does our culture tend to “direct our judgments” and “select our compassion?”
10. Would you be comfortable if your church attracted believers who, before and after each service, congregated on the front steps to smoke? If a church intentionally makes smokers feel unwelcome, what does this imply concerning the gospel it professes? How might a church inadvertently make smokers feel unwelcome?

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Cultivating True Leisure

Excerpt from *Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment* by Richard Winter.

Though we are tempted by the ever-present, seductive quick fix, most of us have discovered that lasting solutions to the serious problems of life usually take patience and require evaluation of some foundational principles and themes. In dealing with boredom we need to consider the importance of leisure, the pursuit of happiness and the problem of knowing what is good and beautiful in a world dominated by relativism.

There is a time to be lazy, a time to slow down, a time to play, a time to reflect on the world around us and the world inside us. Often we are afraid to “be still” because the endless distractions of busyness and entertainment keep us from having to face fundamental questions about our existence and about our deeper anxieties, insecurities and fears. We are literally running from ourselves. Josef Pieper wrote a book some years ago called *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. The jacket of the current edition carries this affirmation: “This book issues a startling warning: Unless we regain the art of silence and insight, the ability for nonactivity, unless we substitute true leisure for our hectic amusements, we will destroy our culture—and ourselves.” Pieper argues that leisure is not just distraction and entertainment but a time of withdrawal from the ordinary routines to renew our priorities and our perspective on life. Without it we will not see reality truly. Similarly, writer and lecturer Os Guinness distinguishes sloth

from idling, a state of carefree lingering that can be admirable, as in friends lingering over a meal or lovers whiling away

hours in delighted enjoyment. In W. H. Davies’s lines, “What is this life, if full of care, / We have no time to stand and stare?” Or as George MacDonald argued, “Work is not always required of a man.

There is such a thing as sacred idleness, the cultivation of which is now fearfully neglected.”

In this fast-paced culture we find it hard to slow down and be still. Even our leisure times often get packed with endless activities. “Perhaps you can judge the inner health of a land by the

capacity of its people to do nothing,” wrote Sebastian de Grazia in 1962, “to lie abed musing, to amble about aimlessly, to sit having a coffee—because whoever can do nothing, letting his thoughts go where they may, must be at peace with himself.” The biblical command to rest for one day of the week is an important God-given principle for our health and sanity. We neglect it at our peril. Some people feel very guilty if they are not doing something “worthwhile” with their time. They cannot rest with a clear conscience. The Christian understanding of the sabbath is that it is given by God as a symbol of our being able to rest in his presence with easy consciences. Knowing that we are forgiven and accepted by him, we do not have to work to earn our salvation because Christ has done all that was necessary for us to have a relationship with him. We can, as the Bible

says, “enter God’s rest” (Heb 4:1-11). We need to take time for our minds and bodies to re-create and recover from being driven so hard. This also allows time for a renewal of perspective.

Leisure time is often when we rest and relax, but it is also good for us to know how to play well. We live in a time when entertainment comes to us while we watch, and though that is not all bad, it is important for us to engage in active as well as passive play. We listen to music, we watch sports on television, we go to movies—but how often do we make music? How often do we get out and play a sport ourselves or go hiking, climbing, biking or sailing?

Some people think of Christians as being joyless and sober, suspicious of any earthly pleasures and preoccupied with spiritual things, of being too heavenly minded to be any earthly good.

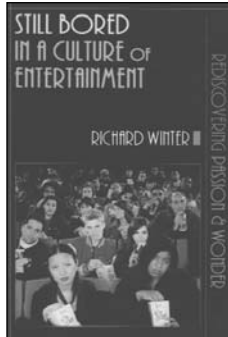
On the contrary, when truly understood, Christianity sets us free to enjoy leisure and pleasure in the way God originally intended. It affirms the goodness of the creation, of food, of drink, of beauty. ■

—excerpted, Richard Winter

Excerpted from:

Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment: Rediscovering Passion and Wonder by Richard Winter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2002) pp.126-128.

See book review on page 13.

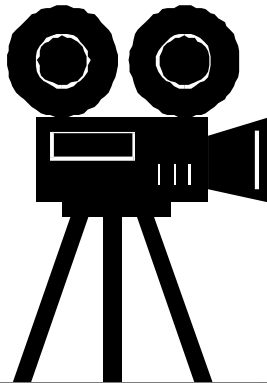


“Work is not always required of man. There is such a thing as sacred idleness, the cultivation of which is now fearfully neglected.”

Haunted by Happiness

A review of **13 Conversations About One Thing**

by Denis Haack



Film Credits

Starring:

Matthew McConaughey
(Troy)
Alan Arkin
(Gene)
William Wise
(Wade "Smiley"
Bowman)
John Turturro
(Walker)
Amy Irving
(Patricia)
Clea DuVall
(Beatrice)
Tia Texada
(Dorrie)

Director:

Jill Sprecher

Screenwriters:

Jill & Karen Sprecher

Producers:

James Burke
Michael Stipe
Peter Wetherell
and others

Original Music:

Alex Wurman

Cinematographer:

Dick Pope

Costumes:

Kasia Walicka-Maimone

Runtime: 102 minutes

Rated R for language and
brief drug usage

Very occasionally a movie comes along that raises so many important issues, so clearly, so compellingly, that discussing it with friends seems mandatory. *13 Conversations* is one of those films. It allows us to watch four groups of ordinary people pursuing the ordinary events of their lives. Though they don't know one another, their lives are intertwined. The film is divided by title screens into thirteen vignettes, each containing a conversation about one thing. The one thing we all talk about: about whether happiness, significance and meaningful relationships can be found in a world that is not only broken, but where life is finally beyond our control. The conversations unfold throughout the film, following the trajectory of each character's life. One person's answer prompts a question in someone else, good things do not always happen to good people, tragedy can strike when we least expect it, and contentment is fleeting in a world in which disappointment and suffering lurk just around the corner.

13 Conversations is a remarkable window of insight into the lives of people who are just like us, finite creatures who yearn for meaningful relationships in a world in which honesty compels us to face the fact that try as we might, very little in life turns out exactly as we had planned. There are no easy answers here, nor a tidy ending—as if the film's producers expect the 14th conversation to be ours.

We meet Troy, an attorney celebrating a court victory who will flee from an acci-

dent after the party. As a prosecutor it has been easy for him to assume the accused are always guilty, but now he discovers that he has far more in common with the felons than he had ever imagined. Though his involvement is never discovered, the guilt over his wrong choice slowly corrodes his soul. We meet Walker, an engineering professor whose marriage and life, unlike the tidy and predictable formulas which direct the cosmos, are spiraling out of control. We meet Gene, an insurance company manager who has, in Walker Percy's memorable line, achieved success but failed at life. Alienated and bitter, Gene lives alone and only sees his former wife when they meet in court at the trial of their wayward son, a petty thief and drug addict. His company is facing hard times, and the guileless happiness of one of Gene's employees seems to mock his very existence, prompting him to act.

And we meet Beatrice, an honest, simple, hard working maid whose optimism is shattered by suffering and distrust. She is the one who is cut down by Troy's car on a deserted street, and after a long and painful recovery discovers her former employer has falsely accused her of stealing. For all her life she has lived in light of a mystical experience she had when rescued from drowning as a child, but now she sees the world as a dark place. "You've changed," her friend tells her. "I'm just like everyone else," Beatrice replies.

We meet these characters in *13 Conversations*, listen to them talk, watch them live, and are drawn into their search for significance, for happiness, and for someone who in the end, will be there for them. Their choices and settings are unremarkable, but the film is compelling in the way it forces us to see ourselves, and our friends and neighbors, in the characters. The imaginary world conjured up in this film is the

world we live in. Broken, but full of people who yearn for redemption, even if they never use that term.

13 Conversations was a labor of love. Sisters Jill and Karen Sprecher (who directed and co-wrote it) went deeply into debt to produce this film. Jill studied literature and philosophy at the University of Madison, and some of the movie's most poignant scenes are inspired by true events from her life. Soon after arriving in New York in 1985, she was mugged, hit over the head, and less than a year later was mugged again. Alarmed and despondent as she tried to make a living in the world of independent film, she was cheered one day when a stranger on the subway made simple human contact—by smiling. These extraordinarily ordinary events, along with Bertrand Russell's book, *The Conquest of Happiness*, gave birth to this thoughtful and sensitive film.

"Movies are finally, centrally, crucially, primarily, only about story," Brian Godawa says. "And those stories are finally, centrally,

crucially, primarily, mostly about redemption." *13 Conversations* is not sentimental, but insists we see life as it truly is in this fallen world. It is also not unremittingly dark. Each character receives some measure of grace, some

The one thing we all talk about: whether happiness, significance and meaningful relationships can be found in a world that is not only broken, but where life is finally beyond our control.

kindness, some insight, which allows them at least a glimmer of hope while they continue to walk through a world which is simultaneously broken and glorious.

You will need to watch the film more than once to keep all the details straight—I certainly did—but it is well worth the effort. Watch it, and then use it as a point of contact to discuss with friends, Christians and non-Christians, the one thing

that matters most. ■

~Denis Haack

For downloadable discussion guides on *13 Conversations* visit Ransom's website <www.ransomfellowship.org>.

Source:

Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment by Brian Godawa (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2002) p. 54.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How realistic are the vignettes—and the conversations—depicted in this film? Is your manner of life and conversation such that the different people depicted in the film would seek you out to talk about such things? Why or why not?
2. What character(s) do you identify with most? Why? What is attractive in this film? Why is it attractive? Is the film a metaphor for life? A slice of life?
3. Do you ever face similar questions, yearnings, and doubts? If no, why not? Why do some Christians believe that true believers never have such struggles? Do the Scriptures provide stories of believers who wrestled with such issues?
4. Could a Christian screenwriter and director have made *13 Conversations*? Why or why not? Does the film tell the truth? What minimal change(s) would you require to produce this film as a Christian? Why would you insist on the change(s)?
5. When people are facing tragedy and disappointment, even true answers to the big things in life can appear to trivialize the situation if they are given too glibly. What might we as Christians want to be careful to do—and not to do—if we find ourselves drawn into lives and conversations similar to the ones depicted in this film?
6. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (casting, direction, script, music, sets, lighting, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film's message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling?
7. Do the Sprechers somehow reveal their own world view in *13 Conversations*, or does the film merely raise questions? How do you know? To the extent you believe the film contains a specific perspective, where do you agree? Where do you disagree? Why? In the areas in which we might disagree, how can we talk about and demonstrate the truth in a winsome and creative way in our pluralistic culture?

On The Heavier End

Pedro the Lion, *Whole EP* (1997)
Although Pedro the Lion was already mentioned in these pages, they deserve to be mentioned again. This 6 song EP grabbed me because of its ability to portray the deep inner struggle of a battle with addiction. Listen especially to “Fix” and “Almost There.”



Built to Spill: *Ancient Melodies of the Future* (2001)

From the opening moments of “Strange,” you’re hooked by the melodic buzz and fuzz of this guitar sound. Its unique sound is then combined with the equally unique voice of frontman Doug Martsch. Built to Spill is over all a mellow, melodic indie-rock power trio. The emotion of the lyrics blends well into the mood of the layers of guitars, synths and drums. My favorite song is “Strange” with the chorus: “And it’s strange, but nothin’s all that strange \ Yeah it’s strange, but what’s so strange about that \ Yeah it’s strange, but what isn’t strange \ Yeah it’s strange, but oh well...”



Queens of the Stone Age, *Songs for the Deaf* (2002)

I started following QOTSA because the singer/guitar player Josh Homme came from one of my favorite bands, Kyuss, which is now broken up. QOTSA is another band on the heavier end of the spectrum, and has even been called “the new Nirvana.” I wouldn’t call them the new Nirvana myself, but Dave Grohl of Nirvana happens to play drums on this new album. *Songs for the Deaf* is a bit heavier and louder than their previous efforts, and in my opinion their best album yet.

NOTE: strong lyrics that some may find objectionable. To readers: if you’re interested in talking with a committed Christian who is also a committed hard-music lover (which often involves strong lyrics) feel free to contact me.

~Kevin Hilman

Kevin Hilman lives in Seattle, WA, with his wife Ann where they are members of Bethany Community Church. He enjoys sharing good food with good friends, skiing, studying Christianity, brewing beer, and works as a software developer. He can be reached at <kjh@hilman.org>.

Other bands in current rotation: Clutch, Faith no More, The Streets, Helmet, Phish, Weezer, Bruce Cockburn.

Tom Waits, *Mule Variations* (1999)
It’s difficult for me to describe the wide diversity of Tom Waits, so I’ll defer to *Rolling Stone*, but my favorite song on this album is “House Where Nobody Lives” which is a refreshing view on what makes a house a home.

“What Tom Waits does to the blues is something like what newspapers do to bright colors—in the way that a picture of the Sistine Chapel’s ceiling ends up looking like roast beef in the morning edition, Waits’ arty, seasick imagination turns a rural American song form into a garish, surreal fantasy.” ~*Rolling Stone*



Low, *Things we lost in the fire* (2001)

My musical tastes lean towards the thick and heavy end of the rock spectrum, but there is something moving about the emotion, slowness and simplicity of Low. Listen to “Closer” when you’re feeling down and needing the closeness of a loved one. Low is considered one of the leaders in the “slo-core” genre, and perhaps one of the slowest as well. They’re also from my hometown of Duluth.

Yawning Frantically

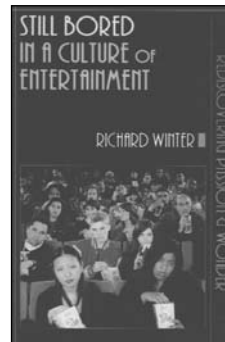
Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment, a new book by psychiatrist Richard Winter, should be widely read and discussed, but sad to say, it might not be read by all who need to read it. Those who know they are bored with life may not have the drive sufficient to pick it up and begin, while those covering their boredom with frantic busyness may think that they have neither sufficient time nor need.

There is, of course, the delicious boredom which comes when we've learned to truly rest, content to *be* for a time, rather than having to *do*. When we accomplish absolutely nothing, and thereby accomplish a rare and precious thing. Namely, to luxuriate in the chance to be quiet, to celebrate being made in the image of the Creator who rested and blessed resting as good, to cease working, taking a Sabbath in quiet confidence that we can trust the world to the God who loves, sustains, and redeems it. Which isn't really boring at all, of course, but only thought to be such by those who are consumed by their own work and busyness. It's the opposite of boredom, actually, and the fact the two are confused reveals just how much we need to think through the topic with care.

"Think of the synonyms for boring," Winter suggests. "Consider them slowly. Let them sink into your mind. Feel them. *Apathetic, drab, dull, colorless, humdrum, insipid, interminable, irksome, lifeless, lethargic, monotonous, mundane, repetitious, routine, stale, stodgy, tedious, tiresome, uninteresting, vapid, wearisome...* Now think of the opposite. Again, let yourself feel

these words: *interesting, absorbing, amusing, attractive, captivating, charismatic, compelling, delightful, engaging, engrossing, enthralling, entrancing, exotic, fascinating, gripping, riveting, stimulating—exciting.*"

As I read this list I found myself wondering which ones tend to pop up in conversations



Winter helps us distinguish between the temporary boredom that occasionally accompanies monotonous tasks from the plague that can eat at the integrity of our souls.

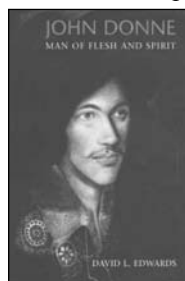
about me, when friends and acquaintances decide to be brutally honest, and are sure I can't hear. Or which ones I would apply to myself, if I was brutally honest and sure that God would hear. Or the ones my children and grandchildren will apply to me, when I'm gone.

Boredom is one of those subjects most of us feel confident we know something about—at least I know when I feel bored, and when you are boring me—but chances are we haven't studied it with any care. We are aware adolescents and the retired elderly often complain of boredom, but it's easy to assume that's just a phase they are going through. We hear lots of other people say they are bored with life as well, and wonder how that can be possible in a society which is so packed with organizations, opportunities, and entertainment. Occasionally Christians blame the phenomenon on lack of spirituality: people who are right with God are never bored, we are told. Told so often—dare I say it?—that it gets boring.

Richard Winter, former L'Abri Fellowship worker, and presently associate professor of practical theology at Covenant Seminary has lectured often on boredom, and now

Briefly Noted: Poet/Preacher of Wit

by Denis Haack



If you have seen the movie *Wit*, you will perhaps be interested to learn more about the 17th century Christian poet whose work is celebrated in the film. (If you haven't seen it yet, please do so.) John Donne was born in 1573, was ordained to the Anglican ministry in 1615, and died at the age of 58 in 1631. During his lifetime he wrote poetry which has endured the test of time, and now a new biography allows us to see something of the passionate man who so often surprises us with his earthy, biblical, and sensual metaphors for faith and life. "Batter my heart, three person'd God / ...Take me to you, imprison me, for I / Except you 'enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me." *John Donne: Man of Flesh and Spirit* is only one of a

number of works on Donne, but is particularly helpful because the author takes both Donne's poetry and his sermons with equal seriousness in crafting the biography and assessing his life and work. ■

Book reviewed: *John Donne: Man of Flesh and Spirit* by David L. Edwards (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2001) 350 pp. + index + further reading.

Resources cont.

offers the fruit of his research, clinical practice, and biblical reflection in *Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment*. He has listened with care to the culture, to students, friends, and clients, and to God's word, so that he can both diagnose the problem and offer hope that resonates deeply in our souls. He allows us to see past our surface impressions to the roots of the problem. He helps us distinguish between the temporary boredom that occasionally accompanies monotonous tasks from the plague that can eat at the integrity of our souls. His exposition of the problem is nuanced and careful, permitting us to identify the boredom with which we personally wrestle, rather than merely addressing the boredom *out there*, the social problem afflicting someone *else*.

I wish there were discussion questions for each chapter, because I would like to see *Still Bored* used in small groups

and Sunday school classes. Boredom relates, finally, to the big issues of life, and considering its causes and cures forces us to reflect on foundational convictions and values that animate our

Boredom turns out to be a predominant issue in our postmodern world, both within and without the church.

hearts, minds, and imaginations. There is no easy cure, and boredom will always be present in a fallen world, but that is not the end of the matter. Boredom turns out to be a predominant issue in our postmodern world, both within and without the church. It is, therefore, something which must be engaged courageously in light of the gospel, a task begun compellingly in *Still Bored*.

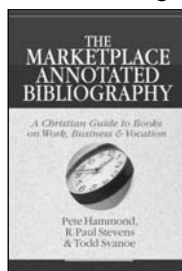
One of the saddest aspects of this entire problem, it seems to me, is when I hear non-Christians say that they are not

attracted to Christianity because Christians seem so boring. So restrained, so withdrawn and negative, so humorless, so fearful, so unimaginative. "We need to clean our windows," J. R. R. Tolkien

wrote in *Tree and Leaf*, "so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity." A Christian mind is passionately in love with truth, a Christian imagination is passionately in love with beauty, and a life can not be said to be fully Christian unless it demonstrates both. Thoughtful pagans who opposed the church in the first few centuries of the Christian era were forced to admit that the church cared for the poor and powerless in ways that were admirable. Imagine what it would be like if those who oppose the faith today were forced to admit that the church was a center of passionate and grace-full vitality, a haven attracting the bored into a community that infuses a vibrant and imaginative joy

Briefly Noted: On Faith & Work

by Denis Haack



Over the past several decades a renewed interest in thinking Christianly about what faithfulness looks like in the modern marketplace has given rise to a host of conferences, study groups, and resources. In *The Marketplace Annotated Bibliography*, a group of scholars involved in this movement briefly review over 700 publications that might be of interest to believers whose calling is to the world of business. The resources noted in this book come from a wide variety of theological and practical perspectives, so discernment is needed. Still, those who find themselves living day by day in the world of business need to reflect carefully and biblically on what it means to live under Christ's Lordship in the marketplace. Our management style, business ethics, advertising strategies, and understanding of business are not neutral in a fallen world, and serious Christians will want to flesh out the truth in these areas to God's glory. *The Marketplace Annotated Bibliography* can identify resources that will help in that process. ■

Book reviewed: *The Marketplace Annotated Bibliography: A Christian Guide to Books on Work, Business & Vocation* edited by Pete Hammond, R. Paul Stevens & Todd Swanoe (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2002) 191 pp. + indexes + helps.

in living. One wonders why this is not so. Surely it is not a deficiency of the gospel.

In a fallen world all of us are bored some of the time, many of us are bored much of the time, and a few are bored to death, literally. That is one reason to read *Still Bored*. Dr. Winter has written a book that demonstrates how the gospel addresses a very human problem, and addresses it not superficially, but substantially, with grace and hope. *Still Bored* is thus a model of Christian discernment, of reading the world in light of reading the Word. That is another reason to read it. I suspect that thoughtful readers will be better able to speak meaningfully past the “generation gap” that divides the modern generation from postmoderns. Which is another good reason to read it. And some readers will be surprised to discover that they are bored, coming to see perhaps for the first time that their frantic busyness is a cleverly maintained dodge designed to keep them from having to face themselves, reality, and God in light of the things that matter most.

“The sole cause of man’s unhappiness,” Pascal wrote—in what many will find a gross exaggeration—“is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room. In busyness we have a narcotic to keep us from brooding and take our mind off these [ultimate] things.” If you need it, one more reason: though *Still Bored* is written from a distinctly Christian perspective, it is pre-evangelistic in its approach, and so is designed to be attractive to non-Christians. Winters commends the Christian faith warmly, explains it clearly, and demonstrates how the gospel speaks profoundly to our dilemma as broken human beings, but without using religious language or making assumptions which unbelievers would find implausible. He appeals not simply to Scripture, but like Paul speaking in Athens, to the authorities held in honor by our society, whether they be philosophers, or social scientists, or the insights of popular culture.

We recommend *Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment* to you. Read it, give it as a

gift to your Christian and non-Christian friends, and discuss it with everyone who is willing to sit and talk. On this side of the Consummation we cannot do away with boredom, but we can discover that God’s grace allows us to transcend boredom with a measure of glory. It is a fruit of the gospel, and something our very bored world is dying to see. ■

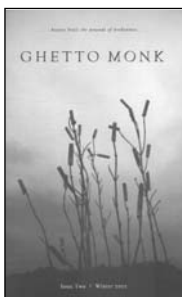
~Denis Haack

Sources: Tolkien quoted in *Imagine: A Vision for Christians in the Arts* by Steve Turner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2001) p. 91.

Book recommended: *Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment: Rediscovering Passion & Wonder* by Richard Winter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2002) 142 pp. + notes + index.

Briefly Noted: Ghetto Monk

by Denis Haack



“The sound of things is important,” Jeremy Huggins, editor of *Ghetto Monk* writes. “This is why *Ghetto Monk* exists. We can talk and write theology and respect until hell freezes over, but if our good words are divorced from good sound, we are clanging cymbals, hermeneutical windbags.” *Ghetto Monk* is an occasional, lively, creative journal of prose, poetry (which we are instructed not just to read, but to read aloud), reviews, and a CD with readings and music. It is lovingly produced by Huggins and a circle of people willing to be identified as his friends. If you liked Huggins’ piece on smoking in this issue of *Critique*, you will appreciate *Ghetto Monk*, in which Christians who are serious about truth express that truth in ways that show they are equally serious about beauty and creativity. For a copy (complete with CD and a match—it’ll make sense when you see it) send \$5.00 to Editor, *Ghetto Monk*, at the address below. By the way, the CD includes “Forgiven,” by Denison Witmer, for those who know and care about such things. Get a copy and leave it on your coffee table—it’s sure to generate discussion. ■

Journal reviewed: *Ghetto Monk*, 5906 McPherson Avenue, Apt 3E, St. Louis, MO 63112.

Our Students' World

<http://www.Beloit.edu>

The Mindset List

Each year Beloit College distributes "The Mindset List" to its faculty to help them understand some of the ways that incoming students "see the world differently from their professors, coaches, and mentors. The list is a reminder that the world view of today's new college students is significantly different from the intellectual framework of those students who entered only a few years earlier." Lists from the past 5 years are available.

Ransom Ratings

Design: A simple list.

Content: For incoming 17-18 year-old students: "A Southerner has always been President of the United States... Weather reports have always been available 24-hours a day on television... 'Big Brother' is merely a television show... Cyberspace has always existed... George Foreman has always been a barbeque grill salesman... Afghanistan has always been a front page story... China has always been a market-based reforming regime... The U.S. and the Soviets have always been partners in space... Males do not carry a handkerchief in a back pocket... Ozzy's lifestyle has nothing to do with the Nelson family... Women have always had tatoos... Vanessa Williams and Madonna are aging singers... A 'hotline' is a consumer service rather than a phone used to avoid accidental nuclear war... Hip-hop and rap have always been popular musical forms... They grew up in minivans." And the year they were born (1984): "Technology analysts questioned the need for briefcase-sized computers... Videotape technology was said to be killing the film industry and slowing cable network development... The U. S. Supreme Court declared sleeping to be a form of free speech."

Ease of Use: Easy to surf and print. Free. Beloit College includes "The Mindset List" as a link on its home page.

Denis Haack

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Everyone on Ransom's mailing list also receives *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.

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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