

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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Editor's Note



Ordinary grace.

Kathleen Norris, author of *Cloister Walk*, talked about poetry in an interview in *The Other Side* (Sep/Oct 2002): "I remember the poet Jean Valentine, who is a Christian, once said, 'All poetry is prayer. What

else could it be?' There is some truth to that. So many of the poets I know are deeply spiritual people. Often they are fleeing from the religion they were raised in, or they are uncomfortable with a lot of churchy stuff, but you certainly wouldn't say that they are spiritually dead, or trivial people. They take things in; they meditate on little things that happen in life—like changing a baby's diaper—and suddenly they're comparing it to the third day of creation when God created the earth and the swamps and the fleshy stuff. (That's in a Kate Daniels poem.) Poets make a great deal out of those little things, these ordinary things. And that is a spiritual process that makes us look deeper at the meaning of things we do every day. It's like Jesus saying, 'Wake up!' He's saying: Pay attention, don't fall asleep. Poets demand that we pay more attention to all sorts of events in our lives—birth and death and love and just the ordinary things that people do. If you do that, you're going to be led to something greater than yourself—and maybe other than yourself."

Which reminded me why I need to make poetry more a part of my life.

One of the reasons I don't read more poetry is that it takes more time (per word) to read than does prose. To muse on surprising connections and unusual metaphors, and to let the sound of the words, each carefully chosen, sink into my imagination. It's quicker to whip through an essay, note the point, and move on. To the next

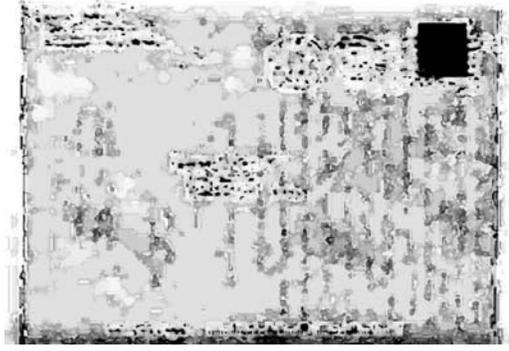
essay, the next point, so that at the end of the day I can tally up the points. Seems functional, useful, efficient—and so many other things which aren't exactly wrong, but which are poisonous to so much that really matters. To things like love and meaning and relationships and true spirituality and faithfulness.

Norris' statement also confirms a recurrent theme that weaves its way through Ransom's ministry, website, and publications. Namely, that the essential calling we have from God as his children is to be faithful in the ordinary things of daily life. He is God, and so does extraordinary things in history, but our concern is primarily and properly with the ordinary and the routine. This is what we were made for and is the slice of reality that glows with glory before us, if we have eyes to see. Of course, when the ordinary is shot through with grace it's quite extraordinary, but being aware of that takes patient seeing, and so, naturally escapes all who are moving too quickly. Who don't have unhurried time, even one day a week, in which to look closely enough at reality to see through surface things to a deeper level. To read a poem. To give the gift of time to listen to someone. To sit under a tree and pray, and then be silent and wait. To read the poem again.

Which makes me wonder how much of the ordinary—and how much of God's grace—I never see. ■

~Denis Haack

Dialogue



Re: Kate Campbell, Smoking, and Catching Up

Note 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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Madison, WI 53716

or e-mail:
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 just read John Seel's review of the music of Kate Campbell in the latest issue of *Critique* [#2 - 2003]. Thank you for introducing me to Kate's wonderful music. I had not heard of her. I am listening now to clips from her website and will probably order one or more of her albums. Having grown up in Mississippi—but now living in Minnesota—I know exactly what she is singing about.

Marsha Shelton
Cold Spring, MN

Thank you for your essay on smoking [*Critique* #1 - 2003]. It has always bugged me that the Christian culture in America thinks smoking is a sin but not gossiping (although the Bible specifically mentions the latter). Jesus was seeking a relationship with men and among men, we should also.

Lynn Pisaniello, M.D.
Lowville, NY

Good word from Jeremy Huggins [*Critique* #1 - 2003]. I must confess my anxiety as I read with great interest Jeremy's thoughts. What a relief to know cigar smoking escaped his scrutiny. Did Jesus smoke? Of course he did. What would top off a long day of being the Messiah better than sitting on the seaside, lighting up a fine hand rolled cigar and watching his Father paint another priceless sunset?

Bill Hamilton
Phoenix, AZ

I was recently able to catch up on some previous issues of *Critique* and wanted to let you know what a valuable ministry you have. I've listened to a few Mars Hill tapes and read a few other newsletters of a similar nature but have never found one that I enjoy as much as *Critique*. We receive so much reading material that we have to be discerning in what we read. Both John and I think *Critique* is always worth reading.

We both have struggled with our role as Christians in the world but not of the world which Part 8 in the Babylon [*Critique* #8 - 2000] series covered so well. We can't wait to read *Parenting without Perfection*. I also appreciated your review of *Harry Potter* since I've not had time to read the series yet and with so much controversy surrounding them, I wasn't sure if it was worth my time. Now I know it is. *Chronicles of Narnia* are at the top of my favorites list and I suspect I'll enjoy the imaginary world of *Harry Potter* as well.

I look forward to the newly designed *Notes from Toad Hall*. You give us such a wonderful window to look through, Margie! Thanks for ministering to us and sharing the wisdom that God has given both of you.

Jenny Walsh
Columbia, SC

The Value

It's a common belief among Christians that piety for show is impiety. Jesus railed against hypocrisy, as did Paul (Galatians 2:11). Hypocritical Christians "love to pray...that they may be seen of men" (Matt. 6:5), and they are good fault-finders (Luke 6:42). One of the odd things about hypocrites is that they are good at spotting hypocrisy in others. And is there hardly anything more hypocritical than a person who pretends not to be, in one way or another, a hypocrite?

In the United States, hypocrisy has often been associated with traditional Christian forms of worship and ritual. To keep up appearances, parents who couldn't care less about religion nevertheless have their babies baptized. Dysfunctional families pray regularly at meals. Sunday school teachers decry the unraveling of the moral culture on Sunday morning and immerse themselves in televised debauchery the rest of the week. Upper-class drunkards and crooked lawyers still kneel (or bow) and cross themselves coming and going from their pews at the local Episcopal church. Many Christians can say that they've visited churches where rituals were esteemed and Christian virtue was shunned.

One reaction to this among Christians has been to abandon ritual for the sake of faith from "the heart." Thus some Catholics and Episcopalians trade high, formal liturgies for guitars and praise songs; written prayers are abandoned in favor of prayers prompted only by the spirit within the heart of the individual; and rote memorization of creeds is frowned on. I wonder if one reason for the explosion in the number of Bible translations available to Americans is the belief (at least among marketers) that

every person should have the Bible presented to him just as he or she likes it. There is, after all, something ritualistic and snooty about the language of King James.

The problem with this kind of reaction is that it misses a basic point about human life, namely, that in actual human practice, Christian rituals have less to do with the dull present than they do with momentous events in the unforeseen future. I know a Protestant who once thought that an airplane he was on was going to crash and who, upon concluding this, grasped the cross he had hanging around his neck and recited the Lord's

Evangelicals who don't attend liturgical churches often see liturgies as ritualistic (which is bad) and more beholden to tradition than to Scripture.

Prayer repeatedly, "without thinking." Consider also the graphic and accurate opening battle scene in the film *Saving Private Ryan*, where young men, many of whom weeks before had probably been drunk carousers, were now saying memorized prayers, kissing Christian symbols strung around their necks, crossing themselves and reciting the Rosary.

Of course, in the everyday world, Christian rituals point people to Christ. But, being routine, rituals often become acts void of meaning in the present: the minister renders a perfunctory greeting to visitors and, as the organ starts up, I shake the hands of everyone near my pew and say something nice—and a minute later the whole ritualistic episode has slipped from my mind. All along, I may have been thinking about retirement or lunch or a favorite song. But the point is

that, even if my mind wasn't in it, the value of that particular ritual remains: it promotes the idea that friendliness is worthwhile and that churches are places where one should expect to find friendly people. And twenty years from now, I may find myself in need of a hand to shake or of the greeting of a stranger who will smile and say something pleasant. Rituals are worth keeping up because, no matter how dull they are to you or me right now, they could mean a great deal to someone across town.

Evangelicals who don't attend liturgical churches often see liturgies as ritualistic (which is bad) and more beholden to tradition than to Scripture. It's true that liturgical services took shape over time—the basic creeds cited at my Anglican church were formulated well over a thousand years ago. But, in a way, the Southern Baptist church I grew up in, and the Methodist church my wife and I attend with family during our annual sojourns in Alaska, are just as ritualistic. The orders of service—a few worship songs, followed by greetings and announcements, followed by the offering collection, followed by "special music," followed by the sermon, followed by an altar call, followed by the minister shaking hands at the church's exit—are predictable and can be navigated as indifferently as can any other worship style.

There is also much in those services that doesn't seem to enjoy direct biblical support. The altar call, for instance, is an early nineteenth-century American innovation. That isn't to say altar calls are bad; I was born again partly as a result of one! But it is to suggest that the common evangelical assumption that "non-ritualistic" practices are more inherently biblical than ritualistic ones isn't necessarily true.

of Ritual

Non-liturgical evangelicals are right to warn against the mindless repetition of prepackaged prayers (Matt. 6:7), but we know that prayers are repeated in the kingdom of God day and night, endlessly (Rev. 4:8). So it seems that repetition is a problem only when it's mindless.

How about the other “trappings” one finds in liturgical churches? The robes ministers wear, for example, symbolize many things. One of these is the status God grants to unbelievers, or to those who have lost their faith and regained it, when they turn to him (Luke 15:22). The “holy water” you can cross yourself with in many liturgical churches symbolizes, among other things, the Christian's association with the Church, which has been “washed” by Christ (Ephesians 5:26). As for incense, the Scriptures say it best: “And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne” (Rev. 8:3). And candles in worship remind Christians that they are to be lights to the world (Matt. 5: 15-16).

The point isn't that rituals in worship, and ritualistic trappings, are better than other forms of worship. As the widely varying personalities of the Apostles suggest, God created genuine diversity—he has created a world in which different people worship him in different ways.

The fundamental point, regardless of worship style, is that Christ has come into the world to save sinners. Billy Graham makes the point one way, the *Book of Common Prayer* makes it another way. But the essential point is constant.

Rituals can bring us out of ourselves and into an awareness of something God wants us to recognize. Rituals learned as a child can resurrect the faith of a wandering adult.

Rituals remembered can provide desperate people with something to grasp as they make their way back to faith or toward death. (“He'll live half in, half out of, the community,” says Cordelia of her brother Sebastian in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. “Everyone will know about his drinking....Then one morning...he'll be picked up at the gate dying, and show by a mere flicker of the eyelid that he is conscious when they give him the last sacraments.”)

As C.S. Lewis put it, rituals prevent a chapel leader from having to come up with original things to do and congregants from wondering, “what on earth is he up to now?”

Ritual bears its fruit silently, secretly and in moments of distress, anxiety, and concern.

Tried and tested rituals that spring from tradition help to prevent worshippers from making idiosyncratic religions. Ritual provides order and routine in a to-and-fro world. (As *The Book of Common Prayer* in Canada puts it, “All Priests and Deacons, unless prevented by sickness or other urgent cause, are to say the daily Morning and Evening Prayer either privately, or openly in the Church. In the latter case it is desirable that the bell should be rung, in order that people may come to take part in the Service, or at least may lift up their hearts to God in the midst of their occupations.”)

Schools and church youth groups interested in Christian tradition and in the spiritual health of their students, not only for the moment but for the future, cannot afford to make light of rituals. So far as I know, there is nothing magical about the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, or ancient prayers committed to memory, and, yes, their frequent repetition can make them seem almost trivial. But Christians know that these tools are

family heirlooms. They have been passed on to us by and through the household of faith. They aren't ephemeral. Save for updated punctuation, spelling and vocabulary, they haven't changed. Perhaps it would be better for a creed or the Lord's Prayer to be memorized and recited in Latin or Greek so as to preserve a sense of the document's age. Perhaps it would be good if all Scripture passages memorized by students in the school came from the King James Version of the Bible so as to resist the idea that all things spiritual should be immediately “accessible.”

Whatever the case, it should be borne in mind that ritual does not usually bear its fruit in the mundane present, and for that reason it will not immediately seem very “useful.” Ritual bears its fruit silently, secretly and in moments of distress, anxiety, and concern.

Rituals buried deep in the soul can sprout into renewed faith. They can point wanderers to the way back to faith. And, in Evelyn Waugh's words, people whose lives have been reduced to shambles can, perhaps to their surprise, find old, neglected rituals “burning anew among the old stones.” ■

—Preston Jones

Preston Jones teaches at The Cambridge School of Dallas.

Next Page:
Questions for reflection and discussion by Denis Haack

The Impact

THE VALUE OF RITUAL CONT. **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION** **AND DISCUSSION**

1. What tends to be your instinctive reaction to the term “ritual”? Why do you respond as you do? Trace your spiritual pilgrimage in terms of your experience of liturgy and ritual. How has this affected your views and practice?
2. What rituals (religious, secular, familial, etc) or traditions are important to you? Why did they gain this significance? What rituals or traditions do you wish were a part of your growing up? Your life now? Why?
3. Jones includes some biblical reasons and texts to support his argument that ritual can be a good thing within the worship of the church. Did you find this compelling? Why or why not? What other reasons for ritual can you think of?
4. What rituals—whether they are recognized as such or not—are a part of your church tradition? How helpful are they? How creative? What role do they play in the service? What reasons are given for their use? To the extent they seem lifeless and rote, what is the proper Christian response? How would you explain them to an unchurched friend?
5. Jones argues that “in actual human practice, Christian rituals have less to do with the dull present than they do with momentous events in the unforeseen future.” What does he mean? Do you agree? Why or why not? Revisit question #4 with this in mind.
6. Do spontaneous prayers seem more sincere than read or recited prayers? Why or why not? Under what conditions might reading a prayer be more sincere or helpful for a believer?
7. What rituals or traditions seem important to your non-Christian friends? How did they achieve this significance in their life and thinking?
8. Since many non-Christians who yearn for spirituality are interested in finding rituals and traditions to adopt, what might this suggest to the Christian concerned with demonstrating a vibrant and winsome faith before a watching world?

An excerpt from Belmonte’s

Noted historian F. K. Brown has described Britain during the fifty-year period preceding the start of the Victorian era as the “Age of Wilberforce.” During this time (1787-1837), and under the leadership of Wilberforce, there was probably no benevolent project that was not brought to his attention, and “probably not a week of his life passed without appeals for help from private persons he had never heard of. His name was on the contribution lists of some seventy evangelical societies, his private charities were constant, and there were not many biographies of evangelical clergymen of the day who needed help that do not mention gifts from him. How much he gave beyond this to build churches and help such projects as Hannah More’s schools will probably never be known.”

The most important aspect of Wilberforce’s legacy is the power of his moral example. He touched the hearts and minds of his contemporaries in profound ways. At times he did so individually, as with the emperor Alexander of Russia (Wilberforce’s selfless abolitionist labors impressed him) or the young men of humble means whose education he supervised late in his life. On other occasions, his moral example had a profound impact on groups of people, as through the writing of *A Practical View of Christianity*.

The lasting significance of Wilberforce’s success can be stated in the phrase used earlier: he made goodness fashionable. However, this phrase does not capture fully the whole story of the reforms that did so much to change British society. Wilberforce was profoundly aware that true lasting reform took place in the hearts and minds of individuals, one person at a time. Each of these persons then became an agent of change and renewal in his or her own right. Wherever they found themselves within society—rich, poor, or middle class—and with whatever gifts or talents they had been given, they could and should unite their energies with those of their fellow citizens and follow through on their duty to work toward making the good society. The change in individual hearts and minds was what created the

of a Moral Person

biography of William Wilberforce.

underlying and indispensable moral consensus that informed such a duty.

Historian John Pollock has written that Wilberforce's life is proof that a man can change his times, though he cannot do so alone. Wilberforce understood this. As he wrote in *A Practical View*:

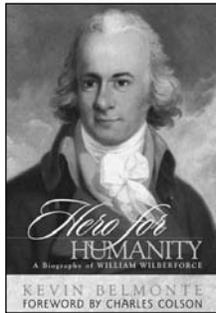
If any country were indeed filled with men, each... diligently discharging the duties of his own station without breaking in upon the rights of others, but on the contrary endeavoring, so far as he might be able, to forward their views and promote their happiness, all would be active and harmonious in the goodly frame of human society. There would be no jarrings, no discord. The whole machine of civil life would work without obstruction or disorder, and the course of its movements would be like the harmony of the heavenly spheres.

Four central ideals are set forth in this passage: stewardship, respect for the rights of others (a key concept for a pluralistic society), forwarding the views of others, and the promotion of the happiness of others. It should be remembered that these ideals were not utopian flights of fancy; they produced tangible results and ultimately the rich legacy of moral renewal and philanthropy associated with Wilberforce's name. Each of these four ideals is a foundation pillar of Wilberforcian political thought. By themselves, they are potent agents of a social ethic, but taken together they are keys to achieving the reformation of manners.

Stewardship, as defined by Wilberforce, meant that each person was endowed by the

Almighty with "means and occasions... of improving ourselves, or of promoting the happiness of others." To whom much was given, he also believed, much was required. So he concluded, "[W]hen summoned to give an account of our stewardship, we shall be called upon to answer for the use we have made... of the means of relieving the wants and necessities of our fellow-creatures." It was, then, a sacred duty to use the gift of life well, striving to improve oneself and promote the happiness of others.

For Wilberforce, respect for the rights of others meant the application



Wilberforce...made goodness fashionable.

of the golden rule to every area of life. It was the basis for his abolitionist labors and for every other human rights and philanthropic issue with which he was involved in public life. As he wrote: "Let every one... regulate his conduct... by the golden rule of doing to others as in similar circumstances we would have them do to us; and the path of duty will be clear before him, and I will add, the decision of [a] legislature would scarcely any longer be doubtful."

The golden rule also was directly linked to the third of Wilberforce's ideals: forwarding the views of others. In his abolitionist writings, he stated directly that it was the golden rule that informed his opposition to the slave trade.

As to the arguments in favour of the slave trade, deduced from the Holy Scriptures, [I am] not much disposed to enter into a discussion of them, because [I] can scarcely believe they are urged seriously... [H]e who can justify the slave trade from the practice

of Joseph, might justify concubinage and capricious divorces from that of the patriarchs. With regard to the passages referred to in the New Testament, our blessed Saviour's grand practical rule, of doing to others as we would have them do to us, as it is the shortest, so it is perhaps the best refutation of all such laborious sophistry.

Of the four Wilberforcian ideals, the promotion of the happiness of others is in some respects the most striking. It neatly turns Jefferson's ideal of "the pursuit of happiness" on its head. Wilberforce believed that when individual citizens promote the happiness of others they are most truly promoting or pursuing their own. Every individual becomes a powerful agent of social change in this sense, and the power for positive social change is multiplied to the extent that more people pursue, or more properly, promote the happiness of others. This fourth ideal is a ringing affirmation of our common humanity and of the ties that bind us together as fellow citizens.

Wilberforce did not refute the individual pursuit of happiness in the Jeffersonian sense. He readily acknowledged the importance of improving ourselves, which is a pursuit of one's own happiness. But he also felt that when it comes to promoting a good society, there should be more to achieving true happiness than the Jeffersonian model affords. In doing so, Wilberforce made an original, uniquely Judeo-Christian and sadly overlooked contribution to Anglo-American political thought. ■

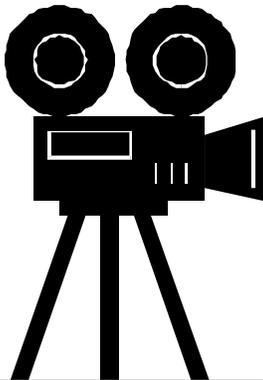
~excerpted, Kevin Belmonte

Excerpted from: *Hero for Humanity: A Biography of William Wilberforce* by Kevin Belmonte (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress; 2002) pp. 174-177.

Note: Read the review on page 13.

The Darkened Room

When Life is Show Business



by Denis Haack

A review of Chicago

Judged by traditional values, criminals are objects of reproach and scorn. But judged by the values of entertainment, which is how the media now judge[s] everything, the perpetrator of a major, or even a minor but dramatic, crime, [is] as much a celebrity as any other human entertainer.

—Neal Gabler in *Life the Movie*

It's all a circus, kid. This trial... the whole world... it's all... show business!

—Billy Flynn in *Chicago*

Recently I received a letter in an envelope with no return address. Before reading it, I turned the letter over to see who had written. I could have read it cold, I suppose, waiting until the very end to discover who had sent it, but I never do that. Knowing who has written helps me read with more understanding and provides a sense of context which can change how I interpret what they wrote. After all, “Hey stupid!” can be either a warm greeting from a close friend, or the beginning of a migraine from the surly neighbor threatening to sue.

Watching a film with understanding includes a similar process: identifying the movie’s point of view (POV). Whether revealed explicitly or implicitly, every film has a POV, just as every letter has an author. In some films, for example, there is a narrator, as in *American Beauty*, an omniscient voice which explicitly establishes whose perspective reigns supreme. In some cases a character addresses the cam-

era—and thus us—directly throughout the film, as in *Wit*. In other films the POV isn’t communicated by a narrator, but is revealed in the action, or in the movement of the camera. For example, the director can use repeated close-ups of a particular character so that we essentially see the action from their perspective, and thus interpret what’s going on in light of their response. However it is revealed, identifying the POV of a film deepens our understanding of the story, our appreciation of the film as art, and can keep us from misinterpreting the film’s message.

In the opening moments of *Chicago*, director Rob Marshall uses the camera to establish the film’s POV. Though it lasts only a few seconds on the screen, it is vital for understanding the film. In case we missed it, Marshall uses some other cinematic techniques throughout the movie to remind us of what he established in those opening moments. (A good thing, apparently. Of all the people I’ve asked to describe the opening moments of the film only one mentioned the POV shot.) Even if *Chicago*’s sets, costumes, and action were not so stylized, signaling the realm of the imagination, the POV shots tell us that we are seeing things not “as they are,” but through the eyes of Roxie Hart, played by Renée Zellweger. And since Roxie’s values are entirely defined by the demands of celebrity and the glitter of show business, all that transpires is filtered through her consciousness. It is as if the director is saying, “Imagine with me what life would look like if the horizons of reality are bounded by the values of show business. Imagine what society would be like if the judicial system, the news media, and even relationships were defined not by truth, law, love, and commitment, but were instead reduced to merely another form of entertainment.”

Film Credits

Starring:

Renée Zellweger
(Roxie Hart)
Catherine Zeta-Jones
(Velma Kelly)
Richard Gere
(Billy Flynn)
Queen Latifah
(“Mama” Morton)
John C. Reilly
(Amos Hart)
Taye Diggs
(bandleader)
Christine Baranski
(Mary Sunshine)

Director:

Rob Marshall

Screenwriter:

Bill Condon

Based on the play staged
by Bob Fosse

Producer:

Martin Richards

Original Music:

John Kander

Cinematographer:

Dion Beebe

Costumes:

Colleen Atwood

Runtime: 113 minutes

Rated PG-13 for sexual
content & dialogue, vio-
lence

Sadly, that is not so hard to imagine in our fallen world. And *Chicago* reveals that it would look sad beyond imagining.

Chicago burst noisily into our cultural consciousness, elbowing into conversations even of people who didn't see it. Being nominated for 13 Academy Awards and winning 6 (including Best Picture) helped of course, as did the advertising blitz that accompanied its release. As did the high energy of its song and dance numbers, its glittering sensuality, and the high quality of the production. A person would have to be tone-deaf not to tap their toes as they watch. Good musicals are rare, and *Chicago* is a superbly crafted one, laced with a highly charged irony which appeals to our cynical age.

There is another reason for *Chicago's* impact, however, which explains I think both why the film receives so much attention, and why it deserves it. At a time of economic, spiritual, and moral uncertainty, *Chicago* taps into the dis-ease felt by many—the fear that there is a great deal of rot eating away at the heart of our world, but the film exposes the rot with irony rather than with a scolding. We are tired of reading news reports about lawyers using courtroom antics in the miscarriage of justice. In *Chicago* we meet Billy Flynn, an utterly corrupt attorney, but in place of a drama that deepens our despair, we are allowed to smile, sadly, as he tap dances in the court room, manipulating the evidence to win the case, freeing an obviously guilty murderer. We are weary of a media we don't fully trust, but in place of one more solemn editorial on media bias, we can't help but laugh, sadly, when the press in *Chicago* are transformed into marionettes, dancing dangling at the end of strings. *Chicago* sweeps us up in bright songs, highly energetic dance numbers, and gorgeous, stylized sets designed to overload the senses. It entertains, but then when we least expect it, reveals how life is far richer than mere entertainment by telling us the story of a woman for whom entertain-

ment is all there is. Swept up into her world, we share her point of view and see the rot in the media, the judicial system, in covenant-less relationships, even in show business itself.

Chicago is effective as social commentary because rather than rubbing our faces in the problem, it seduces us with a bright musical to reveal the shallowness and depravity of a society in which celebrity trumps everything. There is only one character in *Chicago* who borders on true goodness, and that is Amos, Roxie's big-hearted lug of a husband, played to perfection by John Reilly. From Roxie's point of view, however, he is there merely to be used and then discarded. In what has to be one of the saddest numbers in musical history, Amos sings and dances through "Mr. Cellophane," in which he recognizes his invisibility in a world defined by celebrity, glitz, social power, and the applause of show-biz success. When the song is finished, Amos, dressed as a clown, quietly backs off stage and out of sight. "Hope I didn't take up too much of your time," he says.

In our postmodern world the values of entertainment infiltrate every part of life, in ways we are only partially aware. Even those Christians who react most negatively, pulling back into carefully constructed ghettos to live for safety and personal peace are, ironically, allowing the world of entertainment to mold their lives and families. They end up being shaped more by their sense of offense than by the gospel. We are not untouched by the culture of which we are a part. Our goal must be sanctification, not seclusion, for only then is faithfulness possible.



When the values of celebrity, power, and entertainment replace virtue and begin to shape the institutions of civilization, truth is jettisoned, love becomes coupling, and justice is perverted.

Chicago tells the bad news, and in terms an unchurched world can understand. Adopt the wrong values—Roxie's values—it tells us, and things fall apart. Adopt an insufficient world view and even murder becomes nothing more than a self-serving ticket to success. And when the values of celebrity, power, and entertainment replace virtue and begin to shape the institutions of civilization, truth is jettisoned, love becomes coupling, and justice is perverted.

"*Chicago's* simple, smart idea," writes a British film critic, "is that celebrity trumps even sex and money, and the cuts by Marshall and screenwriter Bill Condon whittle down this cool take on American drive even further. Characters are reduced to limelight-seeking missiles: as she prepares to give evidence at Roxie's trial, Velma clears her throat and apologizes 'I haven't worked for a while.' Roxie is menaced by the prospect of a shrinking spotlight: a terror as great as death is that of falling so low even 'J. Edgar Hoover couldn't find your name in the papers.'"

In *The Gravedigger File*, Os Guinness reminds us that the Scriptures define sin both as rebellion against God, and as folly. Pre-evangelism thus is often best done not with an intensely serious sermon, but with the smile of the fool-maker who uses gentle wit or biting satire to reveal truth that people

The Darkened Room cont.

would prefer to ignore. This is part of the enduring appeal of G. K. Chesterton, who evokes smiles while wielding the scalpel of truth. This is the way of the “jester, building up expectations in one direction, he shatters them with his punch line, reversing the original meaning and revealing an entirely different one... he turns the tables on the tyranny of names and labels and strikes subversively for freedom and for truth.”

The church needs such jesters, fool-makers for Christ who can strike a blow against the emptiness of worldly values



while inviting their audience to hum along to the melody of their revelatory song. Jesters like the prophet Nathan, who confronted David not by accusing him of adultery and murder, but by telling a story

that drew David in and when he least expected it, laid bare his guilt (2 Samuel 12). It's too bad, in other words, that Christians aren't producing films like *Chicago*. In the meantime, we can enter into the conversation *Chicago* is provoking.

“Who then is wise enough for this moment in history?” Guinness asks. “The one who has always been wise enough to

play the fool. For when the wise are foolish, the wealthy poor and the godly worldly, it takes a special folly to subvert such foolishness, a special wit to teach true wisdom.” ■

~Denis Haack

Sources:

Gabler from *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality* by Neal Gabler (New York, NY: Alfred Knopf; 1999) p. 181; British critic from review of *Chicago* in *Sight & Sound* (volume 13, number 2) p. 42; Guinness from *The Gravedigger File: Papers on the Subversion of the Modern Church* by Os Guinness (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1983) p. 230.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How does director Rob Marshall identify *Chicago's* POV in the opening moments of the film? What other techniques does he use to remind us of it in the remainder of the film?
2. What was your initial or immediate reaction to the film? Why do you think you reacted that way? What would you say to a Christian who enjoyed it but feels guilty as a result? Is there a point beyond which our enjoyment becomes problematic? If you didn't enjoy the film, or find it entertaining, why didn't you?
3. Remembering that *Chicago*, though based loosely on a sensational murder in 1924 is meant to be a metaphor for life rather than a realistic “slice of life,” how would you summarize its theme(s) or message(s)? What is attractive here? How is it made attractive? 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? What does *Chicago*—and its popularity—reveal about our society? How does it compare to some of the films awarded “Best Picture” in previous years?
4. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (casting, direction, script, music, sets, action, lighting, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film's message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? In what ways were the techniques ineffective or misused?
5. To what extent is the fact that *Chicago* is a musical important? How effective are the songs and dance?
6. Examine each character in turn. What is their place in the story and their significance? With whom did you identify in the film? Why? With whom were we meant to identify?
7. Most stories actually are improvisations on a few basic motifs or story-lines common to literature. What other films come to mind as you reflect on this movie? What novels or short stories? What Scriptures?
8. What insight(s) does the film give into the way postmodern people see life, meaning, and reality? How can you use the film as a useful window of insight for Christians to better understand our non-Christian friends and neighbors?
9. Might the film be a useful point of contact for discussion with non-Christians? What plans should you make?

A Study of Songs

There are several things we can do to study the Bible in order to keep from having to really deal with the text. One is stream-of-consciousness-musing, where the text functions merely as a catalyst to prompt us to think (or say in discussion) whatever happens to come to mind, even if that has precious little to do with the actual text. Or we can omit Application so the study is a safe, intellectual exercise which never requires commitment or obedience. Or we can skip the hard work of wrestling with the meaning of the passage by depending instead on what we heard in some sermon or read in some commentary. The discussion involves endless quotes, which may be interesting and helpful, but which still keeps us at arm's length from the Scripture itself.

The danger of using commentaries as a shortcut to true meditation and study, however, must not deter us from their proper use. God has graced the church with gifted teachers for our good, and using their work helps ground our Bible study within the community of God's people. We should check our understanding of the text with what has been taught over the centuries. And the historical, cultural, and literary insights which scholars provide can allow us to transcend our narrow cultural perspective and read with deeper understanding.

A good example of how scholarship can deepen our appreciation for and understanding of the biblical text involves studying the Song of Songs. We may not be used to reading poetry, and Hebrew poetry has unique literary characteristics which affect its meaning. Insight into the original language can open up new vistas unavailable in an English translation. And since Songs uses metaphors and images from an ancient culture, insight from history can render opaque texts more intriguing.

Tremper Longman's new scholarly yet accessible commentary on Songs is particularly worth mentioning in this regard. In a fascinating introduction he helps us understand the form of Hebrew poetry, traces how the book has been interpreted, and reflects on its history, canonicity, language, cultural setting, theology, and significance. Then he translates the book, verse by verse, and comments on it line by line in light of what biblical scholars, Jewish and Christian, have said about it over the centuries.

For example, consider this excerpt from Longman's comments on "I



Since Songs uses metaphors and images from an ancient culture, insight from history can render opaque texts more intriguing.

compare you, my love / to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots" (1:9, NEB), or "To a mare among Pharaoh's chariots / I liken you, my darling" (his translation). "The man describes the beauty of the woman," Longman says, "beginning with a simile drawing comparison between his beloved and a mare. To our modern tastes this analogy does not immediately impress us as complimentary. We might imagine, though, the mare's sleekness, and certainly the evocation of Pharaoh calls to mind opulence." Longman then notes a historian who "puts forward an attractive hypothesis for the meaning of this verse. He first reminds us that chariot horses were usually stallions, not mares. He then describes an attested defensive strategy against chariot attack. As the stallions rush toward their intended target, a mare in heat is let loose among them, driving them to distraction so that they cannot proceed with the attack."

Now, being married to a woman who grew up riding, training, and loving horses

means I have some appreciation of their grace and beauty. (At least from afar.) Still, what Longman provides here is information which I can not know apart from the work of scholars like him. It's as if the poet is "saying she drives all the men crazy with her attractiveness, with the implication that she drives him to distraction as well," he says. All of which conjures up images that are delightful, indeed.

So, please read this as a reminder and a recommendation. A reminder to use Bible study resources appropriately, but to use them. And as a warm recommendation of Tremper Longman's commentary, *Song of Songs*, which deepened my understanding of this wonderful, mysterious, surprising, and remarkable book. It is interesting, by the way, how rarely Songs is studied today.

Though always essential reading because it is part of God's word, wouldn't you agree that this erotic psalter takes on added significance when God's people live in a sensually-charged culture? ■

~Denis Haack

Resource recommended: *Song of Songs* by Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2001) 222 pp. + indexes.

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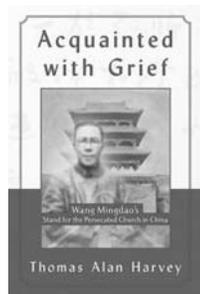
Clouds of

The author of Hebrews evokes a striking image after walking us through a list of historical figures that stood out from the crowd by being faithful. They lived and died in another period of history, the author says, but they are also very much present. Not just in memory, but as spectators lining the route of a great race. The image is that of a relay, and having completed their heat, they are now a “great cloud of witnesses” along the racetrack as we run our heat (Heb. 12:1-2). Sarah, Abraham, Rahab, Moses, and so many others now witness to Jesus (the goal of the race), and the faithfulness of God as we take our turn in striving by God’s grace to be faithful in a fallen world.

The list of faithful people in Hebrews 11 is obviously incomplete, and as the centuries go past more names can be added to it. People who lived faithfully, whether in obscurity or to great acclaim, and who are therefore remembered by God if not by us. Which is why biographies are of value, telling us the stories of fellow runners who had clay feet but who loved Jesus, even at cost. I will mention three biographies here, from very different historical and cultural settings. They are written with affection, and though the prose sometimes drags, the stories are worth reading. All three are worth knowing, not because we agree with all their choices or theology, but because they ran with faithfulness.

Faithful in Red China

It was a conceit of the Enlightenment that as education and science progressed, religion would slowly wither away. Marxism



There is a great cloud of witnesses along the racetrack as we run our heat.

determined to help eradicate religion, so Communist rulers have consistently persecuted believers, even to this day. Religion has not withered away, however, and the growing Christian church in mainland China is a prime demonstration of how persecution often

serves to deepen faith. China is a vast land, filled with a vast sea of people,

and Christians there now number in the millions, yet believers in the West are by and large unaware of their stories. That is sad, for a multitude of Chinese Christians now are part of the cloud of witnesses that surround us.

Acquainted with Grief tells the story of Wang Mingdao, a name every Christian should know and honor. When the Communists came to power in 1949, it is estimated that Protestants in China numbered about 100,000; estimates today are between 50 and 70 million. The Communists sought to control the church by corralling all believers into state-sanctioned churches loyal to the regime. Wang was a minister from a humble background who resisted, languished in prison for twenty years, and came to be known as the “Dean of the House Churches.” He resisted not only Marxist ideology but theological modernism as well, and so was marginalized by many in the church as well as outside it.

Wang is a hero, a Christian who suffered for his faith and proved faithful, but he is also a saint we can identify with. At

one point he did as his persecutors insisted, writing a “self-examination” in which he listed his “crimes” against the state. “This [confession],” Harvey writes, “was not a matter of assent but of subjugation; his contrition confirmed the utter futility of resistance. His liberty was assured so long as in word and deed he behaved as if his penance was sincere. Once his actions, however, denied his confession, he was rearrested and imprisoned.”

This is suffering I cannot even begin to imagine, and it continues in the dark prisons of China today. *Acquainted with Grief* is a story of courage, of deep and simple faith, and of the impact one faithful—faithful, not perfect—person can have by God’s grace.

Biography recommended: *Acquainted with Grief* by Thomas Alan Harvey (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press; 2002) 162 pp. + appendices + notes + bib.



Faithful in a Segregated South

In the late 1930s, in Louisville, KY, a group of angry black men decided to take action after another incidence of white violence against blacks. “Just like the whites kill a Negro,” one of them said, holding a length of pipe, “I’m going to kill a white man.” A white man, the only one at the meeting spoke up. “If a white man must die for this, let it be me.”

The white man was Clarence Jordan, a Southern Baptist preacher and pacifist who read the Bible and believed human beings were created in the image of God. Determined to live out his faith, he established an integrated Christian community named Koinonia Farm in the heart of the segregated South. Jordan scandalized Christians with his *Cotton Patch Version* of the Bible, but whatever can be said for its

Witnesses

integrity as a translation, it got his point across. Here's his translation of the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37):

A teacher of an adult Bible class got up and tested him with this question: "Doctor, what does one do to be saved?"

Jesus replied, "What does the Bible say? How do you interpret it?"

The teacher answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your physical strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself."

"That is correct," answered Jesus. "Make a habit of this and you'll be saved."

But the Sunday school teacher [asked], "But... er... but... just who is my neighbor?"

Then Jesus laid into him and said, "A man was going from Atlanta to Albany and some gangsters held him up. When they had robbed him of his wallet and brand-new suit, they beat him up and drove off in his car, leaving him unconscious on the shoulder of the highway."

Now it just so happened that a white preacher was going down that same highway. When he saw the fellow, he stepped on the gas and went scooting by.

Shortly afterwards a white gospel song leader came down the road, and when he saw what had happened, he too stepped on the gas.

Then a black man traveling that way came upon the fellow, and what he saw moved him to tears. He stopped and bound up his wounds as best he could, drew some water from his water jug to wipe away the blood and then laid him on the back seat. He drove into Albany and took him to the hospital and said to the nurse, "You all take good care of this white man I found on the highway. Here's the

only two dollars I got, but you all keep account of what he owes, and if he can't pay it, I'll settle up with you when I make a payday."

Now if you had been the man held up by the gangsters, which of these three—the white preacher, the white song leader, or the black man—would you consider to have been the neighbor?"

The teacher of the adult Bible class said, "Why, of course, the nig—I mean, er... well, er... the one who treated me kindly."

Jesus said, "Well, then you get going and start living like that!"

The need for racial reconciliation continues, and so learning from the tenacious example of Clarence Jordan is wise. I may disagree with some of his theology, but his faithfulness, good humor, and courage, even at cost, is inspiring.

Biography recommended: *Cotton Patch for the Kingdom: Clarence Jordan's Demonstration Plot at Koinonia Farm* by Ann Louise Coble (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press; 2002) 209 pp. + notes + bib + index.

Faithful in British Parliament

William Wilberforce (1759-1833) was born into wealth, well educated, and apparently headed for a life of ease, privilege, and if he wanted it, political power. When he converted, he sensed the call of God. In 1787, 28 years old and a year after becoming a Christian, Wilberforce wrote in his diary: "God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners [morals]." He would work faithfully on both for the rest of his life, and would not see an end to slavery until 1807.

On the night Parliament abolished slavery, members rose one after another to support Wilberforce's motion. This was not the first time for such a debate, but each time pre-

viously he had been disappointed when the final vote was tallied. Economic interests in support of slavery were powerful, and the slave trade had numerous supporters. Over many years Wilberforce had worked and talked and written, proving himself to be a politician of integrity, and knowledgeable about the full range of issues and problems facing the Parliament. His patience, hard work, and faithfulness finally bore fruit, as this time, speech after speech supported abolition.

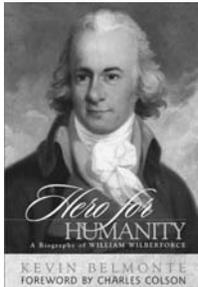
"The House of Commons rose to its feet, turned to Wilberforce, and began to cheer. They gave three rousing hurrahs while Wilberforce sat with his head bowed and wept. Then at 4 A.M., the Commons voted to abolish the slave trade by an overwhelming majority, 283 to 16. From start to finish this fight, led so nobly by Wilberforce, had taken twenty years."

William Cowper wrote *Sonnet to William Wilberforce*, in his honor. Frederick Douglass, the great American abolitionist called it a "stupendous achievement," and urged that no American forget Wilberforce's faithfulness. It had been far from easy. Wilberforce was witty and kind, but had many political opponents who would use any means at their disposal to discredit him. He made mistakes, suffered from a myriad health problems, and had a seemingly endless series of demands on his time, energy, and wealth.

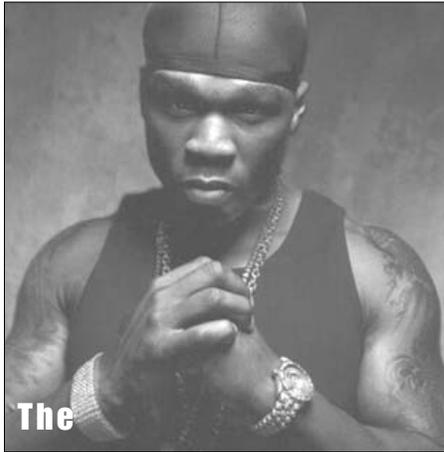
Although *Hero for Humanity* might have been an easier read if Belmonte had traced Wilberforce's life chronologically rather than thematically, this is a story worth knowing. Few of us may be granted Wilberforce's gifts and opportunities, but all of can be encouraged to be, by God's grace, as faithful. ■

~Denis Haack

Note: Excerpt on pp. 6-7. **Recommended:** *Hero for Humanity: A Biography of William Wilberforce* by Kevin Belmonte (CO Springs, CO: NavPress; 2002) 327 pp. + sources + notes + index.



The American Dream



The

Thug

as

Self-

Made

Man

*Ladies and gentlemen, welcome
to the 50 Cent Show
This is my life, my pain, my
night, my gun
Now that I'm back, you can't sleep
I'm a nightmare huubhh...*
-50 Cent

Hardcore rap MC 50 Cent (aka Curtis Jackson) is the unquestioned candidate for the music industry's 2003 artist-of-the-year. Since the release of his album *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* and its hit single "In

Da Club," 50 Cent has topped the charts and set records in sales and air play demand. The album has sold more than four million copies since February 6, 2003. "In Da Club" broke a *Billboard* magazine record as the "most listened-to" song in radio history within a week. The momentum of success shows little sign of slowing. 50 Cent is currently on a worldwide fifty city tour, which will end this summer. In April *50 Cent The New Breed* (CD and DVD) will be released. Gangsta rap is back with a vengeance. VH1.com writes, "50 Cent has become the most sought after newcomer in almost a decade. Not since the summer of '94, when radio would play absolutely anything Notorious B.I.G. related, has hip-hop seen buzz like this."

The success of the 27-year-old rapper is due to luck, resilience, street-wise hustle, and a mythic story of beating the odds. Curtis Jackson was born in Jamaica, Queens, Long Island, to a fifteen-year-old drug-dealing mother. When Curtis was eight, his mother, Sabrina Jackson, died of mysterious circumstances (probably killed by rival dealers) and he went to live with his grandparents. By the age of twelve, he was dealing crack and heroin, building on the connections and reputation left him by his notorious mother. "My moms was hard," 50 told *Rolling Stone* magazine in his April 3, 2003, cover story. "She's real worse than me. She wasn't really feminine like that. My moms was tough-tough, like man-tough."

He dropped out of high school in the tenth grade and by the age of 18 was making \$5,000 a day selling drugs. Through intimidation and marketing savvy, he became a major force in the New York Avenue drug scene (now known as Guy R. Brewer Boulevard). Looking back on his drug dealing, 50 Cent has no regrets. In the hood it is the ticket to the American dream. "Try telling a kid that's twelve years old, 'If you do good in school for eight more years, you can have a car.' And let a kid's curiosity lead him through his neighborhood and find somebody who got it in six months on that strip. It don't seem like one of the options, it seems like the only option."

"I'm the drop out who made more money than these teachers / Roofless / Ruthless like the Coupe but I came with more features," he raps on his song, "If I Can't." It was after doing time in jail and the birth of his son, Marquise, that Jackson turned his business sense and raw determination away from drugs and toward music.

The music business has many parallels with drug business. There is a black market for bootleg tapes not released by major recording studios. 50 built a local reputation on a constant stream of bootleg discs and came under the tutelage of MC Jam Master Jay, who was establishing his own record company and looking for fresh talent. Like other gangsta rappers such as Tupac and the Notorious B.I.G., Jam Master Jay was killed execution-style last October.

50 had his own brush with death. In the hood, nothing makes one more of a celebrity than dodging a bullet. On May 24, 2000, 50 Cent was shot nine times outside his grandmother's home at close range by a 9 mm and lived to tell the tale. (Three weeks later his assailant was killed in the same manner.)

*In the bible it says, what goes round, comes around
Almost shot me, three weeks later he got shot down
Now it's clear that I'm here for a real reason
Cause he got hit like I got hit, but he ain't f***ing
breathing*

Gone Bad

Within weeks he quickly released an underground mixtape, smartly entitled, *Guess Who's Back?*, saturating the black market using business models he used selling crack, generating strong street buzz. Last summer, 50 was introduced to Eminem who signed him on his record label for a reported million dollars. The hip-hop stars were in alignment. With last summer's success of Eminem's film, *8 Mile*, on whose soundtrack 50 had two cuts, everyone anticipated the release of his new album produced in collaboration with Eminem and Dr. Dre.

*Take some Big and some Pac and you mix
them up in a pot
Sprinkle a little bit of yellow on top, and what
the f*** do you got?
You got the realist and illest killaz tied up in a knot
The Juggernautz of this rap sh** like it or not
Its like a fight to the top just to see who
died for the spot
You put your life in this there's nothing like
surviving the shot
Y'all know what time it iz az soon az Fifty
signz on this dot*

In the hip-hop world, 50 Cent has become the embodiment of "keeping it real." He is the man of the street, the antithesis of "studio gangstas," posers who ape the style without the rap sheet and bullet wounds. Here is a ready-made film script of gutter to glitter or bad boy wins. Of his thugish persona, he told *Rolling Stone*, "I think kids like me like the f***ing bad guy in a film. People love the bad guy. I watch movies all the time and root for the bad guy and turn it off before it ends because the bad guy dies. It's cinematic law: The bad guy has to die. But sometimes the bad guy gets a record deal and becomes a superstar like 50."

Get Rich or Die Tryin' is the story of the American dream in a culture of free market nihilism. It is the celebration of morality as power, love as sex, money as meaning. Its lyrics are filled with profanity, misogyny, and violence. He admits that anger is his dominant emotion. The album is a poem to the ethic of revenge. Some laughed at the violent lyrics

of Eminem. "Cartoonesque," they would say. 50 Cent allows no such facile interpretation. It's real. It's the world he lived and largely still lives. Surrounded by bodyguards and draped in a bulletproof vest, 50 is a prisoner of his celebrity status and his enemies' jealousy. "Control your jealousy," he warns other rappers, "cause I can't control my temper."

The album is his own story. This is what gives its songs authenticity. "I'm not the type to get knocked for D.W.I. / I'm the type that'll kill your connect when the coke price rise," he raps on the opening track. It's a story of rags to riches, of being saved from death for a special purpose.

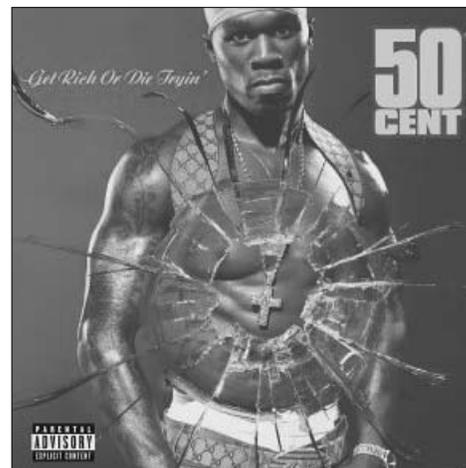
*If I can't do well, homey, it can't be done
Now I'ma let the champagne bottle pop
I'ma take it to the top
Fo sho I'ma make it hot, baby (baby)*

There is logic to the worldview of Curtis Jackson. It is the gansta rap version of postmodern nihilism where the only source of meaning is the accumulation of wealth by whatever means. It is free market capitalism without morals, street hustle entrepreneurialism without conscience. He is king of a morally bankrupt world.

*I'm bout my money you see, girl you can holla at me
If you f***ing with me, I'm a P-I-M-P.*

50 Cent is the role model of bad. His mega-celebrity status should give us pause as we think about youth culture and the state of American civilization.

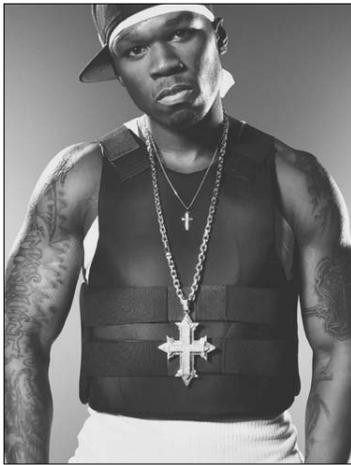
*Now who you know besides me who writes lines
and squeeze nines
And have hoes in the hood sniffin on white lines
You don't want me to be your kid's role model
I'll teach them how to buck them 380s and load
up them hollows*



by
**David
John
Seel,
Jr.**

continued on next page...

...continued from previous page



This is the American Dream gone bad, thugism as mainstream adolescent aspiration. It's ironic that just as we send men and women the same age as Curtis Jackson

to fight against the international thug Saddam Hussein, 50 Cent raps, "Now I'm ready to go to war like Saddam Hussein / Everybody in the industry know my squad's name."

Some might protest that 50 Cent doesn't wield weapons of mass destruction. But such naiveté fails to understand the significance of his soaring success as a bellwether of American cultural decay. 50 is not ignorant of what lies ahead. He has seen it all before. He knows how this story will end, even as he chooses not to watch. The only question is how many others will blindly follow. He may be able to turn off the movie. But 50 Cent cannot avoid the inevitable consequences of the life he leads. A wise man once wrote, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death" (Proverbs 16:25). ■

~John Seel

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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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