

# Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

## In This Issue

### 04 Death in the City Revisited

A review of the movie, *The Hours*.

### 07 Understanding the OT

Careful study of Scripture is essential to the Christian world and life view. Denis Haack provides a starting point with study questions.

### 08 Listening to Babylonian Stories

An exploration of the ways we can (and should) open our ears to hear our neighbors' hopes and groans. An installment in the Babylon series.

### 12 Signs of Life in Music & Culture

Review of *Paste* Magazine.

### 12 Paste Music & Magazine

Websites worth bookmarking.

### 02 Editor's Note

### 03 Dialogue

### 14 Religious Good of Bad Religion

A review of *Bad Religion*, in which John Seel explains the reasons why Christians need punk rockers.



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# Editor's Note



## What about us?

I was sitting with several Christian friends recently talking about faithfulness. It wasn't a disciplined conversation, just friends talking over a cup of coffee, but the camaraderie was real. Though our settings differ, we have

much in common. We know how hard it is to be a believer, yet we do believe. We believe in Christ's Lordship over all of life, and want that conviction to define how we live.

The conversation ebbed and flowed, finally touching on the church and its role in our lives. Every friend at that table is a member of a church whose commitment to biblical orthodoxy and to Christ's Lordship is unquestioned. Yet all agreed there is a disconnect between what they hear on Sunday and what their lives include the rest of the week. "If you judge by the sermons," one commented, "you would never know that my pastor realized that those who are listening to him are called to vocations different from his."

Our churches profess Christ's Lordship over all of life, yet they rarely address what that means in practical terms for the people in the pew. Our vocations are never examined biblically as legitimate expressions of Christian obedience. It's not that the sermons are unhelpful. They help us to believe properly, encourage us to live moral lives, to be better church members, to be effective witnesses, and to worship with deep gratitude for God's grace.

Still, the part of life which consumes the vast majority of our time and effort is rarely if ever addressed by the church. Rarely are we told what faithfulness looks like in the world of our vocations, with all its pressures, tensions, and challenges. There is little opportunity to reflect with fellow believers on the complex issues that

we confront day by day. We may even wonder if our shepherds have eyes to see those issues and the toll they extract as we try to chart the way of faithfulness through the fast-paced labyrinth which is daily life. Christ's Lordship is as broad as creation, but in practice seems so narrow as to miss much that faithfulness actually embraces.

As I listened, I was grieved at the disconnect so many experience. A disconnect between our calling and vocation, and the spiritual nurture we receive as part of the covenant community. It was all the more grievous knowing that every one around the table that day were members of Reformed churches—which means these churches have no excuse.

So, what to do if you find yourself suffering the same disconnect?

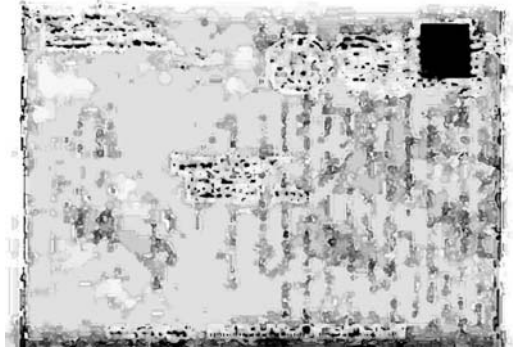
There is no point in whining and a complaining spirit is contrary to righteousness. Nor is church-shopping the answer: my friends represent a variety of denominations, so if the grass looks greener somewhere, it is probably a mirage. Nor can we dismiss the church, since biblical faith is not individualistic.

We can raise thoughtful application questions during Q&A periods. Or suggest appropriate topics for small group discussion and Sunday school classes. We can gather like-minded friends for dinner and work on applying the text and sermons to our vocations. We can form groups of believers with similar callings to work through the issues.

And we can pray for Christ's church. That such disconnects will be mended, by grace, because Christ is, indeed, Lord of all. ■

~Denis Haack

# Dialogue



## Re: Godawa, Kate Campbell, Sharing *Critique*, and Website

Note our new Dialogue e-mail:  
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You are invited to take part in *Critique's* Dialogue. Address all correspondence to:

Marsena Konkle  
*Critique* Managing Editor  
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[letters@ransomfellowship.org](mailto: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.

**E**ach issue brings so much I would love to discuss...I wanted to just briefly note your very insightful and wise reflections on the movie website [www.godawa.com] that is on your newest back cover [*Critique* #2 - 2003]. Yes, you've said it exactly, offering just a bit of a critique to Godawa's too-easily-labeled and dismissed approach. Still, I think his approach is helpful and good, but your kind and gentle warnings were just right. Thanks.

**Byron Borger**  
Hearts & Minds Books  
Dallastown, PA

**T**hank you for your article on Kate Campbell [*Critique* #2 - 2003]. I heard her about a year ago on NPR. She said in that interview that she made *Wandering Stranger* to honor her Baptist roots and her father who, as you pointed out, was a Baptist minister. I thought there were a number of excellent tracks, and the traditional tunes she renders with feeling and ownership. They are her beliefs that she is sharing. And they are godly.

**Scott Barnes**  
Denver, CO

**T**hank you so much for publishing the review by John Seel of Kate Campbell's music [*Critique* #2 - 2003]. I am a transplanted Southerner now living in Minnesota, so I can relate to her songs. I was interested to see at her website that she does house concerts for anyone who can seat a minimum of 40 people comfortably (she needs to sell at least 40 tickets). She'll be in Des Moines on April 25. I wonder if she'll ever make it to MN?

Thanks, too, for *Critique* and *Notes from Toad Hall*. We look forward to each issue.

**Marsha Shelton**  
Cold Spring, MN

**M**y cousin, Kris Engle, recently tipped me off to *Critique*. I co-own a coffee shop/late night hangout/venue named Jacob's Well in Traverse City, Michigan, dedicated to the misfits of society; the lost, the broken, the hurt, the scared, the blind, the dead. We exist because of Jesus, and no other reason. Our mission is to be the church in action, and not just on a Sunday morning in an elaborate building.

I would like to receive *Critique* for the main purpose of strengthening the people that work and volunteer at Jacob's Well. I think they would benefit from your publication because it would/will help them to discern, and identify, against the dark side a little more clearly.

**Joshua Schmidt**  
Traverse City, MI

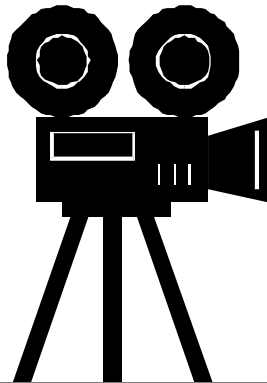
**I**n my search for the answer to a trivia question I came upon the website for your ministry. I read through your home page and statement of faith. Thanks for what you are doing. I pray God's blessings on your ministry.

I spent 23 years in the Lutheran ministry as a teacher, youth leader, organist, and assistant to the pastor. I now am an active member of a LCMS congregation and sell investments and insurance. Because of my background and interests, questions that your home page posed are often part of the discussions I get into. I identify with the personal issues that come up when people are dealing with the death of a loved one—native indian ritual or lodge ritual?—as well as the frequent inability of people to deal with a world in which evil happens to the innocent and kind.

**Rich Steinbrueck**  
Valrico, FL

# The Darkened Room

## Death in the City Revisited



by Drew Trotter

### A review of The Hours

Critics often speak of the layers of a film, but I don't believe I've ever understood what they were talking about until I saw *The Hours*. The more one thinks about its themes, the more connections one makes with life, art, people, and literature. The experience is like that of digging into a mine of meanings, and being more and more rewarded with richer veins of ideas the deeper one goes.

This is not to say that *The Hours* is a picture that portrays reality in all its fullness. For a Christian, whole crucial elements of life as it is in a universe where God exists, creates, and redeems are completely absent. No one in the film goes to church, no one professes faith, no one even seems a likely candidate to profess faith, if the subject were brought up. There is but one reference to the transcendent in the film, and that is in a sarcastic mention of omens. Everything in the film rotates around the human condition, and in portraying that, it has no peer. The film renders almost perfectly the alienation humanity suffers in a world without significance, the loneliness and separation felt by the best and the brightest—in this film, the “poet... the visionary”—who, as one of the main characters, says “has to die in order that the rest of us should value life more.”

*The Hours*, to put it mildly, is not easily categorized. The film is structured as three separate but parallel stories, connected by the relationship three separate women have to Virginia Woolf's novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*. After a brief opening in

which we see Woolf, played in an Academy Award winning performance by Nicole Kidman, commit suicide by walking into the river Ouse, the film moves back and forth between single days in the lives of the women: Woolf herself in 1923, a housewife named Laura Brown in 1951, and Clarissa Vaughan, an editor living in New York in 2001. Woolf, living in Richmond, England, feels trapped by the boring, sterile life of the suburbs. Brown is similarly distraught by her existence as a mother and housewife in the “perfect” life of 1950's Los Angeles. Vaughan, in contrast, lives in bustling Manhattan, but has the same feelings of distress brought on by what she perceives to be the triviality of much of her existence.

This variation of both time and place, while unifying the stories by the similar theme of alienation, supported by comparable characteristics of each woman's life like the difficulty in their spousal relationships, their explorations of homosexuality, and the angst each feels in making decisions, makes the film a deeply philosophical one. *Hours* explores the idea of a single day encapsulating all of life; as Woolf puts it in musing about her heroine, “Just one day... and in that day her whole life.”

But this movie is anything but a pure, philosophical abstraction. With massive complexity and verisimilitude to life, the characters are fully drawn by the script and the magnificent actresses who portray them. Kidman's performance, though tragically overshadowed in the press by far too much discussion of a prosthetic nose she wears to simulate the noble, but tortured, features of Virginia Woolf, pounds discomfort and anxiety into the audience's perception of this sad woman as she struggles with her genius and her madness. Julianne Moore is brilliant as the ultimate foil in the film, the beleaguered and cowardly (though

#### Film Credits

##### Starring:

Nicole Kidman  
(Virginia Woolf)  
Julianne Moore  
(Laura Brown)  
Meryl Streep  
(Clarissa Vaughan)  
Stephen Dillane  
(Leonard Woolf)

##### Director:

Stephen Daldry

##### Screenwriter:

David Hare

##### Based on the novel by:

Michael Cunningham

##### Producers:

Robert Fox  
Mark Huffam  
Ian MacNeil  
Scott Rudin  
Marieke Spencer

##### Original Music:

Philip Glass

##### Cinematographer:

Seamus McGarvey

##### Costumes:

Ann Roth

Runtime: 114 minutes

Rated PG-13 for mature thematic elements, some disturbing images and brief language.

the film makes no moral judgment of her decisions) Laura Brown who abandons husband and children because she is unable to bear the sterility of her existence. Meryl Streep plays Clarissa Vaughan as the piteous worrier she is, desiring to feel significant but too overcome by past regrets and present feelings to find the meaning she seeks by finding a way “always to look life in the face, and to know it for what it is, to love it for what it is. And then to put it away.”

These words, the final voice-over from Virginia Woolf’s suicide note to her husband Leonard which we hear as the film concludes, summarize its view of life. Life can be lived, but only with the realization that it has no ultimate significance, and for those who are not able to live with that fact “it is possible to die”. The poet, the visionary—in *The Hours* Woolf and the poet Richard, friend of Clarissa’s—is driven to suicide just because

his gift for that which most mocks man’s meaningless existence, art, forces them to confront regularly the disconnect between the apparent nobility and value of man and his actual hollowness.

What a true tragedy this film is. Though its distributors put on a desperate campaign to convince potential audiences through its trailers that *The Hours* was an affirmation of life, the movie seethes and roils, tosses and turns through the lives of three dejected and agitated women, all of whom either contemplate suicide, fail at attempting suicide or actually carry it out. All three are lesbians, but this is almost extra-

neous to their stories and only highlights their sense of not belonging in the world. At its deepest level, *The Hours* is a study of life lived from hour to hour in fear and anxiety that man will never find rest, never be at ease in the world as he or she know it. What could be more tragic in a world we know to be significant because He is. ■

~Drew Trotter



***Everything in the film rotates around the human condition, and in portraying that, it has no peer.***

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What is the role of the characters’ lesbianism in the development of their distinctive characters? Do you think the filmmaker was sympathetic to their lesbianism or not? Why or why not? What does the Bible have to say about sexual orientation? Can one be a homosexual and a confessing Christian?
2. There are two husbands in the film, both played brilliantly as caring, compassionate men. How do they contribute to the angst their wives feel about life? Why is this so? Trying not to attribute blame in a one-dimensional fashion, discuss where the “failures” are in the two marriages. Are you able to do so? Why or why not?
3. There seems to be a connection in the mind of the film’s creators—novelist Michael Cunningham (who declared himself in “an enviable if slightly embarrassing position as one of the only living American novelist[s] happy about his experience with Hollywood”), screenwriter David Hare and director Stephen Daldry—between the homosexuality and suicidal tendencies of Laura Brown and those of her son. Is this accurate? How should we think about that, given the warnings in Jeremiah and Ezekiel against attributing to the fathers the sins of the sons?
4. What is the center of the film’s hope? Is it valid or not?
5. What is the view of the impact of cities on the lives of people in this film? At one point Virginia Woolf characterizes the suburbs where she lives as driving her mad, but acknowledges that to return to the city of London would probably kill her. She opts for the city. Why do you believe she thinks that? How much of a role does New York and Los Angeles play in the development of Richard, Clarissa and Sally on the one hand and Laura on the other?

Questions continued on next page...

*Dr. Andrew H. Trotter, Jr., is the executive director of the Center for Christian Study in Charlottesville, VA, where he teaches and writes on theology and culture, focusing on modern American film. Copyright © 2003 by Andrew H. Trotter, Jr.*

# The Darkened Room cont.



## QUESTIONS CONTINUED...

6. To what extent did you identify with the three women in this narrative? Why? To what extent does your faith alleviate your feelings of alienation in this sad world? To what extent are the issues faced in this film independent of sexual orientation?
7. What feeling(s) were evoked by this film? Are you comfortable with them? How do you think you should respond? Why? If time has passed since viewing the film, how did your feelings/responses change over time? Why do you think that is so?
8. How would you seek to engage these characters with the gospel, if you had the chance to become their friend?
9. How have your non-Christian friends responded to *The Hours*? Your Christian friends? Compare and contrast this to your own response.
10. "If this progression of the three stories shows anything," Roger Ebert writes in his review of *The Hours*, "it demonstrates that personal freedom expanded greatly during the decades involved, but human responsibilities and guilts remained the governing facts of life. It also shows that suicides come in different ways for different reasons." Do you agree? Why or why not?

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## Understanding the OT

**W**hen visitors log onto Ransom's website they are greeted with some nifty animation. Scrolling across the top of our home page are a few phrases which we use to capture something of our vision. One of those phrases is also reflected in columns that appear in *Critique: Reading the Word and Reading the World*. The idea is simple. Christian discernment involves viewing life through the "spectacles of Scripture" (as John Calvin put it). The Bible doesn't just give us data about God, history, and salvation, it provides a way to view the world. Which means that regular Bible reading and serious Bible study provide an essential foundation for Christian discernment.

Reading and study may seem to be such obvious skills as to require little attention, but such is not the case. It's easy, for example, to unconsciously absorb study habits merely because they are popular—even though we know popular isn't necessarily best. One example that comes to mind is the tendency to interpret the Old Testament primarily in moralistic terms. As in seeing the book of Daniel as primarily about being courageous, remaining true to our convictions even if thrown to the lions. Or seeing the story of Ruth primarily in terms of loyalty, since Ruth refused to abandon her mother-in-law Naomi. This is how *Veggie Tales* tend to view such Old Testament texts: as stories that provide a moral to be learned.

Courage and loyalty are good things, and not entirely unrelated to the stories of Daniel and Ruth. But they are *secondary* lessons, *not* primary ones. Our emphasis in studying the Old Testament should be to read it as the revelation of God concerning himself. As about Christ. "The Bible is essentially a revelation of God," John Stott says. "It is, in fact, a divine self-disclosure. In the Bible we hear God speaking about God." When Jesus read the Old Testament, we are

### *Regular Bible reading and serious study provide an essential foundation for Christian discernment.*

told in Luke 24:27, 44, he taught they were about him. "The Scriptures," he insisted, "bear witness about me" (John 5:39).

This means that if we are to follow Christ as we read and interpret the Old Testament, we will need to train ourselves to see first how they reveal him. Secondary moral lessons, though not entirely unimportant, must be considered only after we have seen the primary message, which will be God-centered and Christ-centered rather than merely moralistic.

With this in mind, what follows is a series of interpretive questions we can use as we study an Old Testament text. First, observe carefully and in detail (see [www.ransomfellowship.org/B\\_Observe.html](http://www.ransomfellowship.org/B_Observe.html) on Ransom's website). Then, as you wrestle with analyzing the text, use the following questions to reflect on its primary meaning and significance. ■

~Denis Haack

#### Sources:

Stott from *Understanding the Bible* by John Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books; 1972, 2001) p. 111. I am grateful to Dr. Doriani, who winsomely emphasized seeing Christ in all of Scripture in his class, "Bible Application Seminar" at Covenant Seminary, and to my pastor, Dr. Max Rogland, who encouraged a theocentric reading of the Old Testament in an adult Sunday School class—both of whose ideas are reflected in this piece.

### **STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. What does the passage reveal, implicitly or explicitly, about God's nature and being?
2. What does it reveal, implicitly or explicitly, about God's actions and word?
3. What does it reveal, implicitly or explicitly, about God's covenant relationship with his creation and people?
4. What does it reveal, implicitly or explicitly, of the mystery of God that remains beyond our comprehension?
5. What does it reveal, implicitly or explicitly, about humankind's fallen condition and thus its need for the redemption of Christ?
6. In what way(s) does the text anticipate, prepare the way for, or picture, implicitly or explicitly, Christ's life, work, and glory as redeemer, prophet, priest, and king? For more on this see chapter 12, "Reflecting on the Redemptive Thrust of Scripture" in *Getting the Message* by Daniel Doriani (Presbyterian & Reformed; 1996) pp. 170-186.
6. How should I worship as a result? What are the practical implications of this self-disclosure of God for my life—my thinking and feeling and doing?
7. What secondary, moral lessons might this text contain? How does Christ demonstrate these virtues? How does Christ's demonstration run counter to the values and ideas of our postmodern world?

## Listening to

*The story does what no theorem can quite do. It may not be 'like real life' in the superficial sense, but it sets before us an image of what reality may well be like at some more central region.*

—C. S. Lewis in “On Stories.”

I love movies—I enjoy watching them, discussing them, reading about them. The cinema is an art form of great power, grace, and liveliness. Like all of human culture, it is a good gift of God, even in a fallen world. Perhaps that should be *especially in a fallen world*, since fallenness sharpens our desperate need for God’s gracious gifts. Created in God’s image means creativity is essential to who we are, which means that we can not live fully human lives without the grace of art. Art is not a luxury of questionable value in a lost world but an expression of who we are as God’s creatures.

In his *Institutes* Calvin warns the people of God to not be disdainful of truth “wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God.” That is a very sobering idea. Just as all truth is God’s truth, so all expressions of grace, creativity, and beauty must be embraced as good gifts of God, even if they arrive in packages that are flawed. All art, like all of life is tainted by the fall. Unless we wish to dishonor the Creator, however, we dare not dismiss art, creativity, and culture, even if doing so makes us feel righteous. The movies of Babylon depict Babylonian ideas and values, but because Babylonians are made in God’s image, their films and stories also express creativity and insight into life and reality which is molded, in part, by God’s common grace. My love of film is increased as my eyes become more attuned to the glimpses of grace and glory that shine out in the art of our post-Christian world.

My love of movies, however, is not the primary reason Ransom emphasizes film. Rather, we emphasize movies because they represent the stories of our postmodern world. Every culture and generation has stories which are told, retold, and discussed. Created by the word of God means we were created for story, to be part of The Story that is revealed in Scripture and centered on Jesus, the living word. As Charlie Peacock is fond of saying, we are called to storytelling and storied living. We find well-told stories attractive because we were

***Art is not a luxury of questionable value in a lost world but an expression of who we are as God’s creatures.***

made for them. Which is why children so often ask for stories to be repeated and books to be reread, over and over again.

Sometimes the stories of a generation are told by parents, or read in books, or told by storytellers as people sit under the stars around a fire—but the stories are always present. Stories which entertain, certainly, but which also do far more. They also both reflect and mold the ideas, hopes, and values of those who listen to and identify with them. “Story, in whatever form it takes, is our pilot,” novelist Larry Woiwode says. “We are headed somewhere and it’s our story that carries us forward in its wake. If I weren’t heading toward eternity (as I see it at times), I wouldn’t have a story to tell. And you are headed the way you are because your story is bearing you in its direction.”

We may not be aware of it, but it is story which shapes our values, ideas, and perception of reality. Christians should find this obvious, given that Scripture is not merely an endless list of propositions.

The Bible weaves a richly textured narrative of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation, proclaims the good news that this Story can be our story through Christ, and in the process reveals propositions to our minds, hearts, and imaginations that are both credible and plausible in the world God has made.

All of which implies an important question for Christians who desire to be faithful in our fast-changing world: Where can we find the stories that are shaping the imaginations, hearts, lives, and minds of the postmodern generation?

Finding them matters because it is in and around the stories of a generation where an ongoing conversation about the things that matter most takes place.

Now, we live in a pluralistic world, so there may not be one single, simple answer to my question—this generation has lots of stories. On the other hand, the essential answer is not that difficult to discern. *For the postmodern generation, one of the primary places—I would argue the primary place—where their stories are told is in popular culture, especially in the movies.* Which explains why just like children asking for the same story again and again, young adults flock to the movies that resonate within their souls, often watching the same film repeatedly.

If we want to understand our times, and our friends and our selves, we need to listen to the movies. This is our world, whether we like it or not, and as Christians we are called to engage this world, this generation, and their stories, with the gospel. We do not have the luxury of being blind to the common grace expressed in film (and the rest of popular culture), unless we are content to be deaf to the postmodern generation.



# Babylonian Stories

This much seems obvious to me—so obvious, in fact, as to be uncontroversial, if not self-evident. However, whenever I say such things (and I say them often) objections are raised by good people for whom these ideas seem new, or radical, or even dangerous. Since the same objections keep coming up, I thought it might be good to address some of them. And as you will see, addressing these objections require us to reflect on far more than merely the cinema. In the process we will have to think about some of the foundational issues of what we believe as Christians.

## **Objection #1: Hollywood is depraved.**

“Hollywood is the prime example of what is wrong with this sick world,” this objection says. “Dedicated to mere entertainment, it churns out lewd movies that celebrate depravity. It’s the sort of moral cesspool that Christians need to avoid.”

A visitor to my church raised this objection as we talked over coffee after the service a few weeks ago. I thought of how G. K. Chesterton was once asked by a magazine to submit an article on “What’s Wrong with the World.” His piece consisted of two words: “I am.” Which is part (alas, only part) of the reason I was tempted to respond with sarcasm. “Hollywood *is* a prime example of what’s wrong with this world,” I was tempted to say, “but then *you* are a good example, too.” (As am *I*—I would have added, if they were still listening.)

We live in a fallen world, which means the effects of the fall are evident in film. That is no reason to disdain film, however, any more than the sordid existence of pornography requires us to disdain photography as a moral cesspool. There are lewd films that celebrate depravity, as there are businesses that do so, books that do so, and people that do so. This reality calls us to a life of discern-

ment, not to an excess of rhetoric which perverts the truth.

Although this objection is raised as a declaration of moral concern, it fails as such for the simple reason that it fails to speak truthfully. This sort of rhetoric may cause social conservatives to cheer, but Christians should be discerning enough to see past the rhetoric to the truth. We must speak truthfully if we expect our listeners to take our message of the Truth seriously. Some films are lewd, but many are not. Many are intelligent, creative, truthful, beautiful works of art. Some even portray Christian faith attractively and with clarity.

In Athens Paul quoted a pagan thinker his audience considered authoritative (Acts 17:28). More than that, Paul agreed with him, since he said something true about God,

***For the postmodern generation, one of the primary places where their stories are told is in popular culture, especially in the movies.***

without launching into rhetorical excess over the fact that the pagan was referring to Zeus. Even many Greeks were distressed at the myths about the gods, since so many were scandalous, showing the gods to be petty and immoral—Zeus included. Yet Paul saw this pagan literature not as a moral cesspool to avoid but as a point of contact to begin a discussion about the things that matter most.

This objection tries to claim the moral high ground, but fails. Sadly, in choosing rhetoric over truth, it is remarkably similar to the shallow entertainment it set out to denounce.

## **Objection #2: “Why watch sin?”**

This objection is similar to the first one. “Just as we don’t need to visit a brothel to understand prostitution,” it states, “so we don’t need to be exposed to other sins to

understand they are wrong. Why should we set out to intentionally watch sin being portrayed in the movies?”

What I find interesting about this objection is that I usually hear it raised as a “discussion stopper,” a trump card for which no response is possible. In fact, it’s imagined potency is so great that it is rarely raised as a question, but instead simply asserted. Since no Christian can be in favor of being entertained by depictions of wickedness, and since movies contain such things, the discussion is deemed over.

*A contraire.*

To repeat the obvious, but to begin at the beginning, we live in a fallen world. Everything in creation is exposed to sin and its effects. Even our worship falls short of God’s holiness, apart from God’s grace in Christ. Since art is a creative expression of life, it will reflect something of what it means to live in a fallen world. Artists who shy away from such honesty produce works that may be pretty, but feel artificial or sentimental.

Still, I don’t go to the movies to see sin, any more than I read the Bible with that in mind, though sin is depicted there. Read again the story of David, a story which includes seduction, adultery, the cruel misuse of power, murder, and deception. Or the story of Lot, about incest in an alcoholic stupor. I go to these texts not to see sin, though they depict it, but because they “are able,” as Paul says, to make me “wise for salvation” (2 Timothy 3:15).

Good films depict reality in a fallen world truthfully, but they also portray much of God’s common grace. If we aren’t careful we become like the father who always sees the flaws first. When his children show him a picture they have colored, he immediately places his finger on the spot where they failed to color within the lines. “For their own good,”

such fathers always say, but before long the child will stop showing him their work.

Some films depict both sin and its consequences in ways that parallel the biblical teaching precisely. Some do not. Some even seek to glorify it. If it is a question of our own weakness and areas in which we are tempted, then we must recognize our weakness, refrain from sin, and seek to grow in grace. What I am urging is not that everyone see the same films, but that we all enter the conversation which swirls around the films of Babylon, a conversation which will include a discussion of right and wrong. As we enter that conversation we must not be blind to sin, but we must not be blind to grace, either. Always seeing the sin first suggests a mind set in the wrong direction. It also fulfills an accusation often made against Christians, namely, that we tend to be negative and judgmental.

This objection is troubling because it suggests eyes that are trained for sin instead of for grace. We must never forget the world is fallen, but shouldn't our love for our Father foster a thirst to see his glory? Are we sensitive to the glimpses of grace that appear in this dark world? Or are we so intent on and impressed by the darkness that it overwhelms our ability to see the light of God's glory in the ordinary things of life and culture?

### **Objection #3: "Are they noble?"**

"Do movies fulfill the biblical standard of Philippians 4:8?" this objection asks. "Finally," Paul writes there, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

I've written about this at length, so won't go into detail here (see "Finding the True, Noble, & Pure in Babylon" at [www.ransomfellowship.org/R\\_Babylon7.html](http://www.ransomfellowship.org/R_Babylon7.html)). Suffice it to say here that this objection represents a misunderstanding of what Paul is saying. He is not arguing that we can engage only those things which fully fulfill this standard, since that would rule out coming into contact with everyone and everything in this fallen world. Rather, he is insisting that we must be rooted in that which is holy, so

***"Withdrawing from certain cultural texts and replacing them with others will not render the audience less sinful."***

that we can live godly and faithful lives in the midst of the fallenness. This text is not an excuse to withdraw from a fallen world, but the necessary instruction we need if we are to faithfully engage that world with the gospel. Rooted in the grace of God, having minds, hearts and imaginations steeped in the truth of God's word, we are prepared, by the power of God's Spirit to be his ambassadors in a world that does not acknowledge its rightful King.

### **Objection #4: "Aren't reviews sufficient?"**

"Life is short," this objection reminds us, "time is tight, and we are busy. Why should I sit through a two hour movie when I can scan a few reviews in a couple of minutes and get all the information I need?"

Well, perhaps you are too busy. At least be willing to consider the possibility. I don't mean to suggest that you need to see every movie, since no one can manage

that, nor should we try since not every movie is worth viewing. What seems necessary, however, is that we have a keen window of insight into our world, a point of contact for discussing the things that matter. If not film, then find another. If we are so busy that all such windows are squeezed out of our schedule, then I suggest we are too busy. Doing lots of good things is not the same thing as Christian faithfulness.

Remember that we are discussing engaging the stories of a postmodern generation with The Story of the gospel. Consider what you are saying in this objection from the perspective of your non-Christian neighbor. If we express interest in our neighbor, but say we haven't the time for the stories which express their deepest fears and hopes, why should they take us, or our Story, seriously? I have known a number of non-Christians who gained their knowledge of my faith primarily from articles on Christianity in newspapers or news magazines. From my perspective their understanding is well informed but highly inaccurate and incomplete. Our discussions have been, as a result, rather frustrating. More importantly, I have never felt they took me or my faith all that seriously.

What I am arguing for in all this is not gathering a few sound bites that we can drop into the conversation to spice things up. I am arguing that the postmodern generation is talking about the things that matter, and like every generation that conversation revolves around their stories. I am arguing we need to enter that conversation with integrity and compassion. Reviews can be helpful. They can help us determine which films are worth seeing. They can help us see how those who do not share our most basic convictions and

values see and interpret those films. But stocking up on sound bites is not the same thing as being part of a living, ongoing conversation. Using them the way this objection suggests is to treat our non-Christian neighbors with less than full integrity. The gospel permits no shortcuts. Thankfully, Jesus did not take any shortcuts when he entered our world.

### Reflecting on sin

If you think about it, a lot of what we're addressing here involves our understanding of sin. To think rightly about these things, in other words, we need to think rightly about sin. And in a recent article on popular culture, Theodore Turnau warns that unfortunately, many Christians hold a view of sin that is less than biblical:

"Many evangelicals seem to be guided by a semi-Pelagian heritage that views sin as discrete acts that can be, in a sense, isolated from the person. When someone becomes a Christian, he or she turns from his or her sinful acts. Sanctification, therefore, is seen as a process where these acts happen less and less (and one seeks environments where one is less liable to do these sinful acts). The dominant American popular culture, then, is seen as a willful and public act of sin and an enticement to others (especially to children) to follow in the sin of the sinful culture-makers. Such an approach to sin localizes the problem as something 'out there,' something we can control if only we are careful enough. So, for many, the approach to popular culture has been a strategy not of engagement but of withdrawal."

This view of sin is "thin," Turnau says. "First, it oversimplifies the way sin works in the world and in human beings. Sin can be identified and avoided too easily. Second, it is overly optimistic." In contrast, the biblical

view is that sinfulness permeates the depth of our being, so that our hearts are "compulsively idolatrous and rebellious." Our need for grace is therefore total, a view which transforms our understanding of the relationship of sin and popular culture. Turnau is worth quoting at length:

"Producers... of popular cultural texts work out of idolatrous hearts. Then those sinful patterns are, to some extent, replicated within the structure of the popular cultural texts (perhaps as enticements to idolatry). This is what many evangelicals react to (and rightly so). Further, these popular cultural texts are appropriated in sinful ways, feeding the idols of individual (or groups of) audi-

***"Perceived sin[s] in popular culture should cause...a positive and apologetical engagement with them rather than withdrawal from them."***

ence members, even in *rejecting* them (out of Pharisaical pride or self-protective fear). However we respond, our own hearts serve as collaborators, and the truth is, our hearts need no enticement to idolatry because our hearts are artesian wells of idolatry, to use Calvin's memorable image (see Mark 7:14-15,20-23). One could even say that popular cultural texts are a pretext rather than an enticement to sin. It is not as if these texts pulled neutral or good people toward sin they would otherwise avoid... Withdrawing from certain cultural texts and replacing them with others will not render the audience less sinful. Rather, the compulsive and organic nature of sin means that in eschewing certain cultural idolatries by disengaging ourselves from the surrounding culture, we are probably only setting up more socially acceptable idolatries that will be harder to detect and repent of (e.g., materialism, or the family, or pride in our own holiness).

"This 'thick description' of sin as rebellion that permeates all that we do... ought to drive us to repentance, not withdrawal... Perceived sin in popular culture should, therefore, cause us to reflect on these idolatries in biblical perspective, that is, cause a positive and apologetical engagement with them rather than withdrawal from them. The radical and pervasive nature of sin ought to drive us to the radical nature of grace where sinners can be restored and renewed again and again and where real growth (though not sinless perfection) is possible. Parents who have taught their children how to abide in Christ and drink deeply of his grace need not be afraid to engage popular culture (as wisdom guides) with their children. The depth and pervasiveness of sin ought to force evangelicals to recognize the depth and pervasiveness of grace as well."

There is great irony here. The view that sin is "out there" in the culture appears to assert the moral high ground, but in the end is found wanting. The more robust view of sin presented by Scripture may make the question of cultural engagement more richly complex, but it also opens the door to a robust understanding of grace. And that is precisely what discerning Christians need at every step if we are to have ears to hear and engage the stories of Babylon. ■

~Denis Haack

**Sources:** *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by John Calvin, II.2.15; Charlie Peacock in personal communication via email; Woiwode from *What I Think I Did: A Season of Survival in Two Acts* by Larry Woiwode (New York, NY: Basic Books; 2000) p. 54; Turnau from "Reflecting Theologically on Popular Culture as Meaningful: The Role of Sin, Grace, and General Revelation" by Theodore A. Turnau, III, in *Calvin Theological Journal* (Volume 37, 2002) p. 276-278

## Signs of Life in

**W**hen I checked my inbox this morning, I learned a nephew has begun a band. Wish I could hear them play, but geography intervenes. In the meantime, I wonder what CDs he is listening to, and what music has sparked his imagination and resonated in his soul. Music has always been important, of course, but never more so than for the postmodern generation. I am always grieved when I hear from young people that their parents are “too busy” to listen to their music with them. It doesn’t require a word from the Lord to know that those parents are too busy. When a young person brings me a



*I am always grieved when I hear from young people that their parents are “too busy” to listen to their music with them.*

here too, the fall is evident, for blessing and for curse. There is much to choose from, and not all is worth choosing. But thankfully, by God’s grace we aren’t left

CD they have burned, I know they are doing more than merely sharing their music; they are sharing their heart. And that is a precious thing, a moment which should not be missed.

The world of popular music is vast, however, and it doesn’t take much listening to know that

alone to endlessly wander the aisles of music stores wondering what we should buy. There is help available, in something called *Paste* (both a magazine and a website), and the two “co-conspirators” (their term) behind *Paste*, Nick Purdy and Josh Jackson. The various tag lines they have used captures something of their vision and passion:

- Connecting music to the soul.
- Go beyond pop culture.
- Gospel leaven in the cultural loaf.
- Signs of life in music & culture.

Purdy and Jackson are thoughtful Christians who have been shaped by a Reformed world and life view. When asked how they see their calling, they don’t hesitate; “we’re crap filters, gatekeepers for good music,” they say. “We promote artists that deserve to be heard, and that you’ll be glad to discover. The big corporate music machine tends to pass over some of the best art for the sake

<http://www.pastemagazine.com>



### Paste Magazine

“*Paste* is a quarterly, glossy, spectacularly-written and -conceived consumer print magazine,” Nick Purdy and Josh Jackson say, shyly but correctly, about their publication, “packaged each issue with a full-length sampler CD. *Paste* looks for what we call ‘signs of life in music & culture’ and shines our little spotlight on them. That usually seems

to mean the best of a wide variety of music, somewhat concentrated in what ‘the industry’ calls adult-alternative (Triple A), Americana and ‘indie rock.’ We also seem drawn to intelligent hip-hop, world, jazz, film and even some books (hey we can read more than rock journalism!). *Paste* is about the artists, not about the artists’ bodies. We’ve even been accused of being the ‘thinking person’s *Rolling Stone*’ but don’t tell anybody we said that.”

### Ransom Ratings

**Design:** Simple, yet attractive.

**Content:** Subscribers to *Paste* magazine can login to Pastemagazine.com for information about their subscription, *Paste* news, exclusive MP3s, concert reviews, FAQ, back issues, and more.

**Ease of Use:** Very easy—even for those who rarely surf.



Denis Haack

# Music & Culture

of commercialism and ‘risk management’—well, we don’t. The styles you’ll find here are as varied as alternative pop, rock, electronic and traditional, with perhaps a concentration of modern singer-songwriter folk rock. While the vehicles may differ, the commonality is in the poetry, the stories, the truths, and the emotions of the artists.” The music highlighted by *Paste* and available on their web site is carefully screened. It’s “one of the few places on the Web,” they note, “where you can reliably find art (mostly music for now) that is always of high caliber—and what’s more, is just sorta good for you. We select each artist carefully.”

One warning, though: it’s going to cost you. Each issue of *Paste* magazine arrives with a CD sampler. Issue #4, for example, has 22 tracks including artists such as Lucinda Williams, Ben Harper, and The Thorns. As Margie and I listened to it, we jotted down

the title of each CD we needed to get—and the list kept growing. And growing. I don’t know how much crap Purdy and Jackson had to wade through to

***Connecting music to the soul.  
Go beyond pop culture.  
Gospel leaven in the cultural loaf.***

come up with this list, but they sure chose some gems.

*Paste Magazine* is published quarterly, and is filled with reviews, artist interviews, and articles highlighting and exploring some of the best music available. Please consider subscribing, and be sure to give a gift sub-



scription to the young people in your life. We recommend *Paste* to you. Both the magazine and the website. Highly. ■

~Denis Haack



**Subscription information:**  
To subscribe to *Paste*, go to [www.pastemagazine.com](http://www.pastemagazine.com) or send check or money order for \$22.95 (US) or \$30.95 (Int'l) to *Paste Magazine*, P.O. 1606, Decatur, GA 30031. A year’s subscription includes four issues of the magazine and four sampler

CDs. Just so you have a better idea of what you’re getting, issue #4 contained 130 pages.

<http://www.pastemusic.com>

**PASTEMUSIC.COM**  
GO BEYOND POP CULTURE

## Paste Music

“Music has a power over many of us in ways that can be hard to describe,” Nick Purdy and Josh Jackson write. “It can be fun, intoxicating, energizing, and sometimes even spirit-lifting. PasteArtists make music that awakens something deeper within us. Whether it stirs us with stories of hope, despair, charity, depravity, joy or destitution, it contains a thread of the common human experience that connects to our souls. This is PasteMusic.” When I heard Purdy and Jackson talk about *Paste* recently, I was impressed by how their commitment to Christ’s Lordship shapes their vision and work. Whether they are referring to the magazine, the website, or the *Paste* record label they are launching, their reformed view of art causes them to see in categories that are refreshingly at odds with most of what passes for the “Christian music industry” these days. They include music by believers (but not because the artist happens to be a Christian), and music by unbelievers (but not to be rebellious) for precisely the same reason: because in each case they think the music to be good music.

## Ransom Ratings

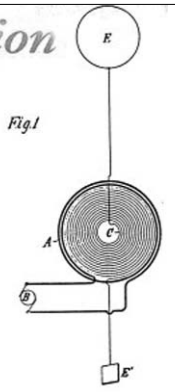
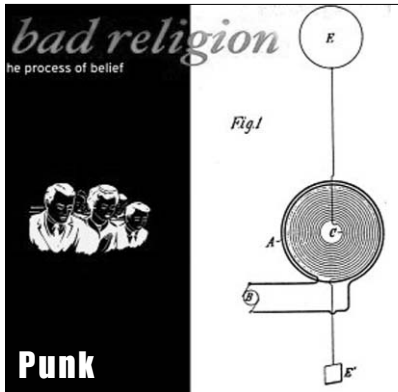
**Design:** Graphic rich, and attractive.

**Content:** Pastemusic.com is designed to order CDs, and should be bookmarked in your computer as the place on the web to visit for ordering music. And visit it often.

**Ease of Use:** Simple, clear, and easy—even on the first visit.



## The Religious Good



*The process of belief is an elixir when you're weak I must confess, at times I indulge it on the sneak.*

-Bad Religion

**Rock  
and  
the  
Questioning  
of  
the  
Given**

**C**ontemporary Christians need punk rock just as they need Marx's critique of religion, Freud's psychology, and Nietzsche's philosophy. All raise questions about our motives and expose our self-deceptions. Philosopher Merold Westphal writes, "We need Marx,

Nietzsche, and Freud as a protest against all forms of instrumental religion, the piety that reduces God to a means or instrument for achieving our own human purposes with professedly divine power and sanction." What unites these masters of atheism and punk rockers is their shared practice of the hermeneutic of suspicion, the deliberate attempt to expose the self-deceptions involved in hiding our actual motives behind our beliefs. The harsh point is this: atheism is closer to the truth than certain kinds of religion. Such critique is a needed spiritual discipline. Non-believers sometimes ask hard questions and keep us honest. They can be a blessing to the unthinking, self-righteous Pharisee in all of us.

Punk rock is a musical genre rooted in critique and skepticism. It has little tolerance for superficiality and hypocrisy. It has no patience for those whose convictions are based on unquestioning authority instead of the hard, honest work of pursuing truth as one understands it. Punk is characterized by musical simplicity that is melodic, fast-paced and hardcore. It is self-consciously anti-rock—a critique of the celebrity status of the rock star, the commercialization of music, and the glitz of cool. It tends to be provocative and profound, questioning dogmatism. It celebrates the individualist—the person who stands out from the crowd (even as they tend to copy each other). And finally, it promotes a social conscience in contrast to pop's brain-numbing hedonism. However, most punk groups fail to go beyond a generalized-anti-everything anger in their lyrics.

But there is one notable exception: Bad Religion. "The basic core of the Bad Religion message has been to provoke independent thought, to ponder life's complexities, to ponder bigger social problems, to realize that this is a global community," explains guitarist Brian Baker. Bad Religion seeks to turn a passion to question authority into constructive action. BR is less political than Rage Against the Machine, System of a Down, or The Boys of Propagandhi, but far more philosophical. They are a band that asks the questions that need to be faced.

Started in 1980, Bad Religion is the granddaddy of punk bands. *Rolling Stone* described Bad Religion as "one of the most influential and commercially successful American punk groups of all time." Greg Graffin was raised in Racine, Wisconsin, but moved to California in 1977 when, at the age of twelve, his parents divorced. There in the midst of his stoned and shallow peers at El Camino High School, he was an instant outsider. Punk, he described years later, "is a form of music that appeals to people who feel that they don't fit in society and people who are skeptical about the world they live in." In the high school culture, like always finds like, and soon Greg befriended Brett Gurewitz and they set out to critique their surroundings. They chose the name Bad Religion and their crossbuster insignia because it was calculated to anger parents. "Religion," they explain is "any kind of social group that prescribes a certain way of thinking." Greg had been raised in the Church of Christ by his mother, but was alienated from religion by the age of fifteen. (Divorce and absent fathers during the early teen years have a long history of stimulating atheism, as Paul Vitz shows in *Faith of the Fatherless*.)

*Father can you hear me? How have I let you down?  
I curse the day that I was born  
And all the sorrow in this world  
Let me take you to the hurting ground  
Where all the good men are trampled down  
Just to settle a bet that could not be won  
Between a prideful father and his son*

The band got an early break when their self-titled EP received airtime on the popular local KROQ,

# of Bad Religion

on the punk program “Rodney on the Roq.” The group cut several albums (*Bad Religion*, 1981; *How Could Hell Be Any Worse?*, 1982; and *Into the Unknown*, 1983) with limited commercial success because Brett was siphoning off money for a growing heroin addiction. Personal problems among the band led to a group hiatus in the mid-1980s.

Bad Religion is described as the thinking person’s punk band because of the academic pursuits of singer/songwriter Greg Graffin. He completed a B.A. in Anthropology, a B.Sc. and M.S. in Geology at UCLA and is completing his Ph.D. at Cornell University in evolutionary biology-paleontology. His personal philosophy dominates the band’s persona and appeal.

Gurewitz is equally influential. After kicking his drug habit, Gurewitz went on to form Epitaph Records, the largest and best-known punk label in the world. In 2001, Graffin and Gurewitz reunited to produce their fifteenth CD, *The Process of Belief*.

*The Process of Belief* is not a concept album with a unified theme, but it is a call to question skepticism and taken-for-granted beliefs, and an appeal to rationality. In 1998, the scholarly publication, *The Wilson Quarterly*, asked two leading intellectuals, Richard Rorty at Stanford, and Edward O. Wilson from Harvard, to answer the question, Is everything relative? Rorty, ever the postmodernist philosopher, argues against any form of unified knowledge. In contrast, Wilson, a biologist, argues that science gives us the means to explain the world through a few basic natural laws, of which evolutionary biology stands supreme.

Bad Religion, as reflective of Graffin’s worldview, lies somewhere in between—rational and objective in its critique of others, but skeptical and subjective in its solutions. “There is no supernatural element in human life and there is no evidence to support a dual nature to the universe,” he writes a fan.

*(It’s easy) to confuse grand design with life’s repercussions  
Lament not your vanquished fantasy  
It’s only destiny  
Why do you consent to live in ignorance and fear?*

Bad Religion is a postmodern variant of materialistic humanism. If a belief cannot be proved by science, one best hold it loosely. Religion and other dogmatic beliefs, the band argues, are held by those committed to ignorance and fear, a point made earlier by Freud.

*I’m materialist, call me a humanist  
I guess I’m full of doubt  
So I’ll gladly have it out with you  
I’m a materialist / I ain’t no deist  
It’s there for all to see so don’t talk hidden mystery  
with me*

And yet, Graffin struggles with the persistent questions that haunt all materialists—particularly the question of determinism and human significance, and relativism and the problem of evil. Graffin’s doctoral advisor, a professor at Cornell writes to a troubled BR fan, “Like you, I first became an atheist, and then worried about human free will for a long time, more than 10 years, before becoming confident that it is a pernicious and destructive social myth.” In fact, everything Bad Religion disagrees with becomes the product of a “social myth.”

But materialistic determinism has ethical implications. “I do not believe there is any such thing as an absolute good in the universe. Essentially, each civilization has created their own unique ethical systems which have varied through time but haven’t shown any directionality.” But if morals are culturally derived (“we are the prey and culture is the predator”), passed to us through our parents, there is no ultimate standard to appeal to; only the determined outcomes of genes and society. How, then, can Bad Religion stand for anything? How can it critique consumerism, globalism, ecological neglect, cultural imperialism, and nationalism? Can its moral critique be based on these metaphysical assumptions?

*A new age of reason, bring treason to trick the mind  
What good is searching if nothing’s there to find?  
We arrive at this place of no return my brothers  
Only to discover that our minds have led us away*

continued on next page...



by  
**David  
John  
Seel,  
Jr.**

...continued from previous page

*So far from the painful truth of  
who we are  
What's right is wrong, what's  
come has gone  
What's clear and pure is not so  
sure / It came to me  
All promises become a lie, all that's benign  
corrupts in time  
The fallacy of Epiphany*



There is a certain irony in the intellectual framework Graffin has adopted—evolutionary paleontology, the study of fossils. For there is no aspect of evolutionary theory more in question today, even by staunch Darwinists. Harvard professor Steven Gould writes, “The failure to find a clear ‘vector of progress’ in life’s history is the most puzzling fact of the fossil record.” “We paleontologists have said that the history of life supports the

story of gradual change, all the while really knowing that it does not,” echoes paleontologist Niles Eldredge. Enormous leaps of faith are regularly made on the thinnest shreds of fossil evidence.

But science carries the prejudice of authority in our world. Evolutionary biology and its philosophical twin, metaphysical naturalism, are themselves taken-for-granted assumptions in the academy as well as pop culture. Religion ain’t mainstream here. So where is the hermeneutic of suspicion now?

*The scientist purported that there ain't no purpose  
And the theologian told me that it's all been  
designed  
And I'm trying to maintain objectivity  
The world won't illuminate what really matters  
And I'm an imperfect modal/moral meaning*

*extractor / Processing the complexity*

I suspect that Graffin and his colleagues have been isolated in a world of musicians and graduate students where certain political positions are accepted and certain philosophical assumptions unquestioned. It is doubtful that the members of this highly intelligent and provocative band have met Christians who are both capable of such dialogue and appreciative of their questioning the unquestioned assumptions of most believers. They pose both a challenge and a corrective. ■

~John Seel

*David John Seel, Jr. is the headmaster of The Cambridge School of Dallas, a Christ-centered, classical, college preparatory school (7-12). He is a frequent speaker on education and culture. His most recent book is Parenting Without Perfection. Copyright © 2003 by David John Seel, Jr.*

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

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

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