

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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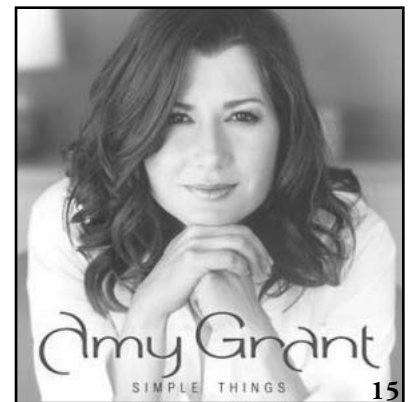
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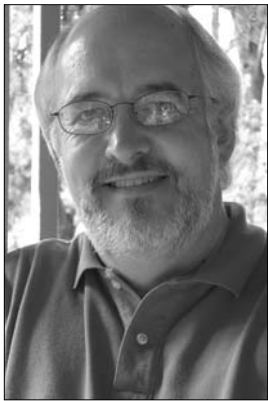
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Editor's Note



Mel Gibson

Last month I was scheduled to lecture at The Art House in Nashville, the home and studio of Charlie and Andi Peacock. My flight arrived earlier than necessary so I could spend some time with them, but that was

not to be. The young woman who met me at the airport flew down the highway, because she had to get me to The Art House in 30 minutes since that was when Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion*, would be shown. He would be there to answer questions and solicit feedback on the film.

Yes, I did shake hands with Mel Gibson, and no, I do not usually have such experiences. And yes, I enjoyed it. Meeting Gibson, I mean. *The Passion*, in contrast, though a remarkable film, is not exactly enjoyable.

The copy we were shown is unfinished, but that isn't what I'm referring to. Gibson explained that editing still needed to be done. Some of the color needed retouching, the sound track was incomplete, and special effects had to be added. This actually made the viewing more enjoyable to me, since it was the first time I viewed a film before the final editing had been done.

Nor when I say it was not exactly enjoyable am I referring to the charge that *The Passion* is anti-Semitic. It is not.

Nor do I mean that it is not artful. On the contrary, *The Passion* sets a new standard for depictions of Christ in the arts. Only in the paintings of Ed Knippers have I experienced as powerful an artistic expression of the crucifixion.

The Passion is not exactly enjoyable because it is so truthful about the cross.

The film opens with Jesus' arrest in the Garden, after wrestling in prayer over the task his Father has set before him. Like an unblink-

ing eye, the camera forces us to watch, moment by agonizing moment, the torture Christ endured on our behalf. This is not the first flogging I have watched on the screen. The whipping that the character played by Denzel Washington endured in *Glory*, for example, remains seared in my memory. But there the camera blinked. We saw a few lashes, and then to our relief the camera panned away. In *The Passion* the lashing went on, and on, the Roman soldiers wearing themselves out in the effort, and then on some more. Like we were there.

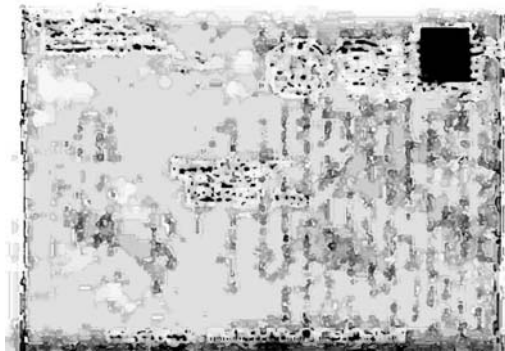
I have warned more than once in these pages that Christians today tend to sentimentalize the faith. We brush over embarrassing parts of Scripture, and speak of the cost of salvation lightly. Sentimentalizing the gospel is to gut it of its power, its relevance, and its attractiveness. Before the final credits of *The Passion* rolled I was filled with a deep horror about how I have sentimentalized the cross and what my Savior went through so he could be my elder brother. It was hard to pay attention to the discussion that followed.

Mr Gibson said that his goal in making the film was to help people feel regret. "We don't feel enough regret," he said.

I can't speak for the others in The Art House that afternoon, but this is one viewer for whom that goal was realized. And though it wasn't exactly enjoyable, I am more grateful than I can possibly express. ■

~Denis Haack

Dialogue



Re: *Bruce Almighty* and Thinking Christianly

Send e-mail to:
letters@ransomfellowship.org

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

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letters@ransomfellowship.org

Unfortunately, we are unable to respond personally to all correspondence received, but each one is greatly appreciated. We reserve the right to edit letters for length.

Finally, in "Almighty Sins," [*Critique* #6 - 2003] Marsena Konkle has given us a movie review that is not trying to judge a film by whether it matches the standards of a Sunday sermon. Or that complains about what the film failed to give as a Christian message. Congratulations.

I always found it strange that Christian reviewers tell you where a film failed to do without strong language or sexual content. They somehow expect it to describe real life without real people. By that measure believers also should be warned against reading the whole Bible. They should leave out the sections rated PG-13 by some self appointed prophet of the latter days. Victorian parents reduced the Bible to appealing passages and thus kept much of reality from their children.

A film is not, in most cases, meant to be a sermon. But neither are the Old or New Testaments exclusively that. They describe what is true, what took place and who said what, all included, and not only of what is moral or right or from God. A film portrays a slice of reality, to be measured against that reality. Edification comes as much from knowing what is true, good and right as well from recognizing the faces of evil, why reality is distorted and where such brokenness surfaces. Without it both film and Bible would be wrong and a lie. A good film will give an honest, realistic understanding; it will also show what is true, including what people do to others and how they speak. The trouble does not start with sexual content or foul words, but when these are shown as gratuitous, harmless, without consequences towards a smooth or happy ending; for such has never yet occurred in real life. Any film shedding light on our understanding of reality is a work of art and service. I will have seen something I needed to recognize.

With the focus on reality, truth and morals in the Bible are always tied together.

For that reason a marriage is not a matter of a license, but of a reality of commitment in love. When Isaac called Rebecca into the tent he did not also invite a justice of the peace as witness. The flaw is in living together and yet pretending to be free to walk away, or having a marriage license without commitment to love, honor and to serve each other for good.

When will we see another review that treats the film for its honesty about the real world rather than for its failure to replace the preacher's sermon preparation?

Udo W. Middelmann
The Francis A. Schaeffer Foundation,
Gryon, Switzerland

Thank you for a resource from which I will be able to peruse, digest, and relay my gleanings. Our youth group will be benefactors of your labors.

Daniel E. Burrow
Selah Bible Baptist Church
Selah, WA

I am very interested in receiving a sample of *Critique*. The things you discuss on your website (about engaging culture with the gospel) are also things we discuss here at Dallas Baptist University. I first heard of and became interested in "engaging culture through thinking Christianly" from Dr. David Naugle, professor at DBU, and author of *Worldview: The History of a Concept*. Dr. Naugle has encouraged everyone on our campus to "think Christianly." I was so pleased to learn of your website (through *Internet for Christians* online newsletter) as it will provide me with another source of important information.

Sandee Smith
Midlothian, TX 76065

Baby Shower Controversy

Here is a case study for discernment, based on a true story.

Your small group includes a woman—let's call her Mary—in her early 60s who came to Christ a couple of years ago. Her enthusiasm for Bible study, sharing Christ, and faithfulness in all of life is both refreshing and infectious. Unlike the Christians in the group, however, most of her closest friends are non-Christians, many of whom she has known for decades. Mary lives in a quiet neighborhood, and a natural extrovert, knows her neighbors well and interacts with them easily and naturally. A very hospitable person, she has for years hosted annual block yard sales, parties, and often has neighbors in for dinner. Two doors down from her live a lesbian couple who have been together for eight years

and who take their relationship seriously. Though it was not a legally binding ceremony, five years ago they exchanged vows "until death do us part," and have remained faithful to one another. After the ceremony, Mary hosted a reception for them in her home. The couple is estranged from their extended families, who as Christians do not approve of their relationship.

Now, Mary extends an invitation to the small group, all members of your church, whom she considers her best Christian friends. Her lesbian friends have decided they want children, and so one has been artificially inseminated and is due to give birth in four months. Mary is hosting a baby shower for them, and wants the small group to not only attend, but to help with decorating and

the refreshments. Mary sees this as not only an opportunity to introduce her Christian friends to her non-Christian friends, but a chance for the people of God to join her in demonstrating love in a practical way to a couple who are too often maligned and shunned.

Mary was not expecting the stunned silence that followed her invitation, and was taken aback when two members said not only would they not attend, they thought her wrong to host the baby shower. The discussion—such as it was—went on from there.

All of which implies questions for reflection and discussion, a few of which I've listed here. ■

~Denis Haack

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Would you attend the baby shower? Why or why not? Would you help Mary with the planning, decorating, and refreshments? What explanation from the Scriptures would you give to justify your decision?
2. To what extent should you take into account the fact that Mary is a young believer? If this matters to you, why does it?
3. If you would not attend the baby shower because of the couple's sin, what sins can a couple be openly guilty of which would be acceptable to you? List the various types of non-Christian couples for whom you would attend or refuse to attend a baby shower. On what biblical basis is the list based?
4. Most of Mary's friendships are with non-Christians. To what extent are you like her in this? What percentage of your close friends are non-Christians? How content are you with your life in this regard? To what extent does it follow Christ's example?
5. How would handle the dispute that broke out in the small group over Mary's invitation? If the evening progressed so that you were pushed into a corner and try as you will, it appeared that someone would have to be offended—Mary or members who were considered long-term, mature believers—which of the two should you offend?
6. Some members of the small group—older, long-time Christians—decided that since Mary refused to cancel the baby shower they could no longer fellowship with her and so would have to leave the group. What would you say to them? Should Christians who disagree over such things be able to remain in the same church? The same small group? Why or why not?
7. Are Christians who attend the baby shower affirming the couple's lifestyle? Why or why not? What difference does it make?
8. To what extent should the possibility of being misunderstood by fellow Christians figure into these decisions?

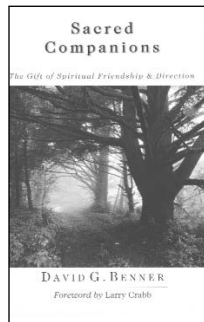
Questions continued on next page...

Prayer & Poetry

QUESTIONS CONTINUED...

9. The members of the small group who plan to attend say they cannot believe Christians would hesitate over this invitation. We should be as eager to go to this shower as we would to one given for a Christian couple—who also are sinners. Couples having a baby can use help; this couple, estranged from their families, needs friends; and Christians should be eager to not only attend but to be faithful friends over the long-haul of raising the child. Refusing to extend help and friendship if we dislike their choices or their moral or religious beliefs effectively cuts us off from those who most need the grace of the gospel. No wonder the world doesn't take our claims to truth and faith seriously. How would you respond? Why?
10. We should expect Christians to disagree at times, especially over issues that require discerning choices. What should that disagreement look like? Or to put it another way, what does it mean for Christians to disagree Christianly?
11. Some months after the shower Mary reports that she is now considered the lesbian couple's child's "grandmother." To what extent would the evangelical Christian community better reflect God's grace if more Christians were in such relationships?
12. To what extent are Matthew 6:12-15, Matthew 18:23-35, and Luke 7:36-50 relevant to this discussion?

Words from David Benner and Steven Faulkner



Spiritual Direction “Spiritual direction is a prayer process in which a person seeking help in cultivating a deeper personal relationship with God meets with another for prayer and conversation that is focused on increasing awareness of God in the midst of life experiences and facilitating surrender to God.”

Quoted: *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship & Direction* by David G. Benner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2002) p. 94.] Copyright 2002 David Benner.

Necessary Poetry “Our modern poetry is in pieces. This makes a defense of poetry difficult. But defend it we must, for poetic knowledge is an essential kind of knowledge. Without it, our understanding of the world suffers a severe distortion. It is as if we have grown up in an age of one-eyed men who have heard rumors that people could once judge distances, depths, and colors by the use of two eyes, but are now reduced by this flat, prosaic information age that relies on scientific analysis as virtually our only source of knowledge. We are a century of Cyclops.

“Poetry as a way of knowing is essential to the human being. Modern thinkers, the heirs of Immanuel Kant, have come to depend almost entirely on discursive reasoning, packing journals and academic books with complex analysis, deduction, demonstration, abstraction, and argumentation.

This is necessary in its place, but it is not the only necessary knowledge.

“Sir Philip Sidney, in his *Defense of Poetry*, written when Shakespeare was young, said the poet ‘yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description, which doth neither strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soul so much’ as poetry does.

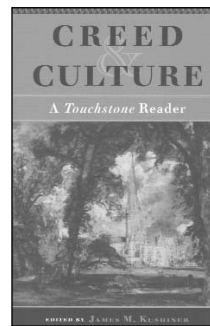
“Linear, rational discourse is the domain of philosophy and rhetoric. ‘The philosopher teacheth,’ said Sidney, ‘but he teacheth obscurely, so as the learned only can understand him; that is he teacheth them that are already taught. But the poet is the food for the tenderest stomachs; the poet is indeed the right popular philosopher.’ The reason for this is that poetry appeals to the whole person, not merely to reason. Even the young

and the uneducated can appreciate it. Jacques Maritain wrote: ‘Poetry is the fruit neither of the intellect alone, nor of imagination alone.

Nay more, it proceeds from the totality of man, sense, imagination, love, desire, instinct, blood and spirit together.’ Poetry can of course be highly intellectual, demanding much from the mind, but it is always more than intellectual; it is

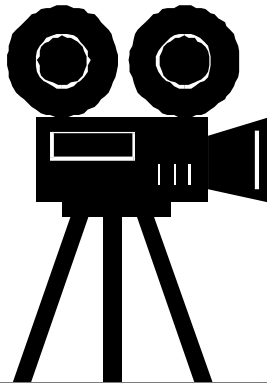
intuitive. It is a way of seeing and admiring the whole without taking it apart by analysis. It is a taking into the self that which cannot be fully explained, a way of observing with silent attention rather than active inquiry, what Wordsworth called a ‘wise passivity,’ or ‘passionate regard.’” ■

Quoted: “The Century of the Cyclops: On the Loss of Poetry as Necessary Knowledge” by Steven Faulkner in *Creed & Culture: A Touchstone Reader* (Wilmington, DE; 2003) p. 45.] Copyright © 2003 The Fellowship of St James.



The Darkened Room

Gone, I Don't Know Where



A review of **Lost in Translation**

by Denis Haack

*Lost in space, a bubble drifting
And I'm pretending to care
When I'm not even there
Gone, but I don't know where*
-Aimee Mann, "Lost in Space"

Film Credits

Starring:

Scarlett Johansson
(Charlotte)
Bill Murray
(Bob Harris)
Akiko Takeshita
(Ms. Kawasaki)
Kazuyoshi Minamimagoe
(Press Agent)
Catherine Lambert
(Jazz Singer)
Giovanni Ribisi
(John)

Director:

Sofia Coppola

Screenwriter:

Sofia Coppola

Producers:

Francis Ford Coppola
Sofia Coppola
Ross Katz
Fred Roos
and others

Original Music:

Brian Reitzell
Kevin Shields
William Storkson

Cinematographer:

Lance Acord

Costumes:

Nancy Steiner

Runtime: 102 minutes

Rated R for some sexual
content.

Few things are as demoralizing as being lost. Memories from childhood—when we looked up to find our mother was no longer in the store aisle with us—are easily dismissed but hard to forget. The exhilaration of hiking through deep woods in the autumn evaporates if we discover we have lost our way as nighttime descends. None of that compares, however, to being lost in life. We all know what that's like, yet find it difficult to describe, which is why artists manage it best. It is also a great horror, which is why we work so hard at being distracted by one thing or another. But face it or not, we find ourselves in Walker Percy's memorable phrase, lost in the cosmos, yearning desperately to be found.

There is nothing new in this, of course. Being lost is not a novel condition but has been the norm since things went badly awry in the beginning. The intimacy of relationship and the certainty of home has been fractured, and so alienation haunts our steps. What is new is to be lost in a world bursting with choice and noise and unlimited opportunity. Then the dark and unforgiving world seems to mock us, and hope becomes increasingly fragile until the yearning to be found is either buried in busyness, or killed, or perhaps by grace, satisfied.

Lost in Translation is a profoundly sad film with moments of humor about being lost in life. Written and directed by Sofia Coppola, it is surprising that someone so young can depict human lostness with such insight and creativity. Even the few scenes which drag on too long help us feel how stuck human beings are when lost. Bob Harris, played to perfection by Bill Murray, is a movie star in Tokyo to film a commercial. He is tired and jet-lagged and lonely, sick at heart at being reduced to filming commercials to make a living, and sadly disconnected from his wife and children. In the up-scale Japanese hotel where he is staying Harris happens upon Charlotte, a young woman whose husband has left her in the hotel "to have a good time" while he goes off with the bimbo he has been hired to photograph. Harris and Charlotte meet, and rather than go to bed (which too many films would have them do), they talk. "Those moments are so important," Coppola says, "when you connect to someone. People are always so busy, so distracted. When you can make a connection and find an understanding with someone, it's something you take with you forever."

The setting of Tokyo is strangely unsettling, full of things to do and see, a swirl of lights and people, yet symbolic of the globalization which makes so much so instantly available yet nothing permanent. People speak without understanding one another, and the humor of cultural gaffs is merely a brief respite in time spent painfully alone. Even sex in such a world has been rendered impersonal, reduced to either one night stands or a commodity to be purchased. Both Harris and Charlotte phone family in America, but the conversations, sadly realistic, only reveal how disconnected they are from any sense of being truly at home. In one of the most moving scenes in

the film we watch Charlotte cry on the phone after visiting a religious shrine. “I didn’t feel anything,” she says, “I don’t know who I married,” but the significance of the moment is lost on her listener. Her cry is not heard, and when the phone call ends, she is once again alone, looking down on a seething city from a room that is not home.

To some extent, the atmosphere of *Lost in Translation* is even more important than the ideas it explicitly explores. In scene after scene we see Bill Murray’s eyes, and the sadness they depict is beyond endurance. Even the humor—and there are some very funny scenes—serves to highlight the theme of lostness, rather than allow us to escape from it. Harris and Charlotte talk about marriage, about life, and about meaning, but their human contact is more healing than any

conclusions they draw.

Though the superb acting is a delight to watch, and the moments of humor subtly done, *Lost in Translation* is not exactly an entertaining film—it probes too deeply into human hearts. It is eloquent evidence how postmodern people are haunted by feeling lost, how deeply they yearn for home, and for someone who will be there for them in the end. It is also an eloquent reminder of how fragile the human heart is, and how careful Christians must be when we touch on the deep things of the soul. After all, if we do not demonstrate deep compassion for being lost, there is no reason that anyone



Lost in Translation is eloquent evidence of how postmodern people are haunted by feeling lost.

should listen when we speak—as we must—of being found. ■

~Denis Haack

Source: Coppola from http://www.tech.mit.edu/V123/N38/lost_in_transla.38a.html

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial or immediate reaction to the film? Why do you think you reacted that way?
2. What is the message(s) of the film? Consider how the film addresses themes such as: what’s wrong with the world, and what’s the solution; the fragmentation of life in our busy, pluralistic world; the significance of relationships and love; and the significance and meaning of being human. 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?
3. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (acting, casting, direction, script, music, lighting, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film’s message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused?
4. What images and motifs were used as metaphors for deeper issues?
5. With whom did you identify in the film? Why? With whom were we meant to identify? Discuss each main character and their significance to the story.
6. How or when have you most felt “lost” in life? Most felt “found” in life?
7. How is the film a useful window of insight for Christians to better understand our non-Christian friends and neighbors? To understand ourselves? Since Christians normally speak of being “lost in sin” and “found by Christ,” to what extent can believers feel lost?
8. Reflect on the relationship which develops between Bob Harris and Charlotte. Was it an appropriate relationship for two married people? Why or why not? If they crossed a line into something inappropriate, identify the line. To what extent are you compassionately, actively, incarnationally present in the lives of non-Christians?
9. What do you think Bob Harris whispered to Charlotte in the final moments of the film as they said goodbye? Why do you think Sofia Coppola kept us from hearing what he said?

Getting to

Since movies contain the stories of our culture, thoughtfully engaging them can prompt discussion about things that are otherwise almost impossible to raise in ordinary conversation. Movies such as *Wit*, *13 Conversations about One Thing*, and *Magnolia*, for example, seriously explore the Big Questions of life—in the case of these three films: death & eternal life, meaning & significance, and guilt & redemption. To invite our friends to discuss such movies invites them into a conversation already under way, begun by the artist making the film. Though everyone won't respond to every film in the same way, movies can raise such topics so compellingly that we must either enter the conversation, or find some way to be distracted by something else.

"In an increasingly privatized, secularized society, people will not listen to the gospel from strangers," Tim Keller says. "Not to people who come to their door, not to strangers who call them, mail them, or even advertise to them." Our world is pluralistic, and our neighbors are not "unbelievers," but believers in things other than Christianity. We need an entrance into their lives, a way to join their ongoing conversation about things that matter, since most of them are hesitant (for good reason, sadly) to join ours.

"The question young people around me are asking," Andy Crouch writes, "is not 'Is Christianity true?' but 'Is Christianity worth believing?' It is a subtle difference. The first question can be answered by marshaling the evidence, which is a job for lawyers. The second requires the demonstration of an attractive vision, which is a job for artists."

And for those who may not be artists but who nurture, through a love of Scripture, a sensitivity to creativity and a delight in engaging the art popular with their friends.

Unlike "evangelistic encounters" which require us to insert the Big Questions into the conversation, discussing a movie allows the film to raise the Big Questions. Since most people love to talk about movies, the setting provides a safe context for conversation. Perhaps we have watched *Wit*, and so are talking about death, and the possibility of eternal life.

"In an increasingly privatized, secularized society, people will not listen to the gospel from strangers."

Or we watched *Whale Rider*, and people are wondering whether every belief—whether of the Ancestors who speak through the whales, or Jesus—is not equally valid. One thing is certain: talking about such things would have been almost impossible except for the catalyst of the movie.

But there's a question I often hear when I speak on using film as a point of contact with non-Christians. The question is this: "If the film prompts people to talk about the Big Questions, does the discussion ever get past that to actually presenting the gospel?"

Consider "The Gospel"

For many Christians, "presenting the gospel" means presenting a specific summary of the gospel, perhaps one they learned in a training course on evangelism. It may even be the presentation that was helpful in bringing them to faith. Making this presentation lets them feel they've been faithful as a witness

while failing to do so often raises a specter of guilt and failure.

But where in the Scriptures do we see Jesus using a summary presentation of the gospel? We're told this approach is "guaranteed" to produce results, but is efficiency or being like Jesus our goal? We are free in Christ from the need to conform to the expectations of others, or to some program. It is true that practicing how to talk about our faith can be a helpful exercise. It can help us think about how to explain things clearly, to anticipate possible misunderstandings,

and to talk in terms non-Christians can understand. Still, if Jesus wasn't constrained by having to insert some presentation in order to

keep his encounters with people from being a failure, neither should we.

Besides, while these summary gospel presentations might have made sense when most non-Christians shared many of our values, they are counter-productive in a pluralistic culture. A couple of generations ago, when these evangelism programs were developed, the vast majority of non-Christians shared basic Christian beliefs. Most believed in right and wrong, that Jesus had died for sins, and that heaven and hell were real places. So, inviting them to trust Christ as their personal Savior made sense.

But today we live in a pluralistic world. What sense does it make to invite someone to receive Jesus if they are not sure Christianity is plausible, or worth believing? If someone cannot imagine how one crucifixion 2000 years ago in an entirely different culture can possibly have significance for them personally today, will not an invitation to believe Jesus died for them merely convince

the Gospel

them that Christianity has no relevance?

Perhaps we should begin thinking of “being a witness to the kingdom” instead of “doing evangelism.” Our responsibility is not fulfilled simply because we have made some presentation. Insisting on that without first being certain the person we are talking to is ready to hear it is to treat them with disdain instead of as people created in God’s image.

From Big Questions to Gospel

With that in mind, let me return to the question: “Do these film discussions ever get past the Big Questions to the gospel?” The short answer is Yes, but the longer answer is important.

A conversation. I see film discussions about an ongoing conversation, not a chance for me to achieve some evangelistic agenda. Which means that sometimes I never get to “the gospel” and still see the evening as an unqualified success. Many non-Christians have had such negative experiences with Christianity, for example, that I am eager for them to experience the hospitality of my home. I want them to feel cherished, and to know that I take them and their beliefs seriously, even if those beliefs are antithetical to my faith. I want them to know that I listen, and am eager to give them the gift of unhurried time. I want to demonstrate that I believe they are of infinite value, created in the image of God—even if they happen to deny his existence.

And when I do these things, I am witnessing to the grace of God.

Questions beget questions. I ask a lot of questions in these discussions, and that almost always prompts questions in return. As we talk about the film and as the Big Questions are raised, I ask what people think about them, and why they believe what they do. Why their convictions are attractive to them, and what difference it makes in their

life. Whether they have considered any alternatives, and how their convictions and values compare to their parents’. I ask because I am interested, because they are people worth knowing, and because their answers open a window, at least a crack, into their hearts. And I ask because I want to know how I can speak to them of the grace of God in terms that they might be able to understand.

Almost without fail, asking questions of people prompts them to ask questions in return. About what I believe, and why. About why I find those beliefs plausible, and whether I am not merely reflecting the indoctrination of being raised in a Christian home. I try to answer creatively and in ways that might resonate with their deepest yearnings and fears.

Sometimes I never get to “the gospel” and still see the evening as an unqualified success.

Meeting and moving. These ongoing conversations are an opportunity to meet someone where they are, and by God’s grace find a way to move them towards faith in Christ. It is a process. Many people have never considered such things, or have suppressed the yearnings and questions of their heart.

We need to invite our non-Christian friends to tell us where they stand in relation to Christian faith. The answer to “Where are you with Christianity?” Timothy Keller says, can be discovered if we are willing to prove that we will not get defensive. By and large, Keller says, non-Christians tend to fall into one of four possibilities:

“Dissatisfied—Do you find aspects of Christianity unacceptable, distasteful? What is your trouble with Christianity? Where is your beef?”

“Indifferent—Do you find Christianity simply unappetizing or irrelevant? Where

does Christianity fail to challenge you? What would be relevant to you?”

“Cautiously interested—Are you in a learning mode, interested, gathering information, and yet not completely understanding? What still does not make sense to you?”

“Actively seeking, yet hesitant—Are you really searching for Christ, but find some fears hold you back? Does it seem to cost a lot and you are wondering about that? What costs give you pause?”

Obviously, where a person is on this continuum will make a difference. Mistaking where they are means providing answers to questions they aren’t asking and that they find neither relevant nor interesting. And on the other side, learning where they are gives us the opportunity to walk beside them as they make their way along their spiritual pilgrimage.

Spiritual pilgrimage.

Sometimes the movie discussion ebbs and fades, and if people are comfortable, the conversation still continues. If people feel safe, they might be open to being invited to tell the story of their spiritual pilgrimage. (Obviously word choice matters here: Christians have “testimonies,” but everyone has a “spiritual pilgrimage.”) I have found that non-Christians, once I have earned their trust, are pleased to tell their story, and are amazed anyone would care. Listening provides the opportunity to ask more questions, and at times they have asked me to share my own story.

Often their story hints of pain or yearning (as ours should, too) that we need to have ears to hear. The story of loss, of fragmentation, of broken dreams and realized fears. We must touch such precious things with compassion, so that we share in their suffering. Simple responses about how Jesus “solves” such things can trivialize their pain and serve to only convince them that

Reading the World cont.

Christianity skates over the surface of life instead of addressing their deepest needs.

Invitation to Bible study. We have led many movie discussions with non-Christians, and prayed that God would be at work. Sometimes a film prompts intense discussion, while the next time it falls flat. Whatever the case, we try to be faithful, intentionally offering hospitality, our ears, and unhurried time to those who sit in our living room.

Over time, some begin to see our home as a safe place. We have not flinched when they challenged our faith, or debated our ideas, nor have we judged them for how they live. And when we sense we have earned their trust, we invite them to join our Bible study. “It’s an opportunity

The conversation movies prompt is an opportunity for us to witness to the kingdom by both what we say and how we act.

to study the ancient documents which tell the Christian story,” we tell them. “Even if you don’t believe it, at least you’ll know you gave the Bible an honest try.”

A surprising number have accepted our invitation, and have become active participants in our Bible study group. And by God’s grace, some have come to faith.

Movie discussions aren’t the only way to launch discussions about the things that matter most, but they are a good way. And the conversation they prompt is an opportunity for those of us

who love Jesus to witness to the kingdom by both what we say and how we act. And that’s an opportunity that’s simply too good to miss. ■

~Denis Haack

This is Part 12 in the Babylon series, on being in the world but not of it.

Sources:

“Zarathustra Shrugged: What apologetics should look like in a skeptical age” by Andy Crouch in *Christianity Today* (September 3, 2001) p. 101.

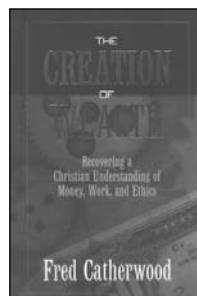
“Evangelism Through ‘Networking’” by Timothy Keller (July 1992).

Briefly Noted: Thinking About Wealth

by Denis Haack



The existence of rich Christians is not new, but not until the modern era have there been cultures of affluence. “In ancient cultures, where poverty was widespread” John Schneider says, “theologians naturally stressed the questions that arose when people had to deal with poverty. But we do not inherit a similarly advanced tradition on what it means to be rich.” Which is the lack that Schneider, a professor of theology at Calvin College, seeks to fill in *The Good of Affluence*. Too much of the church’s thinking in this area, he believes, has been rooted less in the Scriptures than in the assumptions and values of Karl Marx and Max Weber. Which means, in turn, that Schneider’s argument will challenge the entrenched positions of evangelicals on both the Right and the Left.



Sir Fred Catherwood has inhabited both the world of high finance (spending 11 years as CEO of international companies) and the world of parachurch ministry (as chairman of British InterVarsity Christian Fellowship). He argues in *The Creation of Wealth* that the biblical world view is essential for a healthy view of work, money, and the ethics required for just and equitable business life in a fallen world. If nothing else, Christians can use his book as a beginning point in the important task of thinking biblically about how we make our income, how we use it, and how we participate in the global economic system in which we are called to live faithfully. ■

Books reviewed: *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth* by John R. Schneider (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing; 2002) 220 pp. + bibliography + indices. *The Creation of Wealth: Recovering a Christian Understanding of Money, Work, and Ethics* by Fred Catherwood (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books; 2002) 197 pp. + index.

Writing Lives, Seeking Souls

The figures we meet in the Bible are eternally compelling not because we know much about what they did but because we are given glimpses of who they were. “I believe; help thou mine unbelief,” says the demoniac’s father to Jesus, and thereby provides us with a brief but powerful look into the soul of a man who, given the circumstances, had reason to think that God would pass him by. And while I have never admired or felt sorry for Samson the way my Sunday school teachers encouraged me to, the portrait we have of that troubled young man—that tormented soul—has led me to understand that God will sometimes use even the rowdiest hooligans to achieve what are, ultimately, worthy ends.

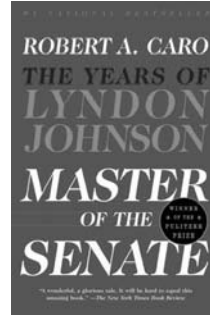
The modern biographer’s task is, of course, different from the scriptural author’s. The former are tied to archived documents and pinning down quotidian minutiae; the latter were obliged to know what God was doing in, with or to a person’s soul—turf, rather obviously, that is never trod at the meetings of the American Historical Society.

But for contemporary biographers, the soul isn’t a hidden thing. Not that I, being neither a theologian nor a philosopher, know just what the soul is. In church I’ve learned that it’s the part of people that lives for ever, the part that is inherently warped apart from divine fixing. I also think it’s what makes my toddler daughter’s eyes shine. It’s what’s absent from the eyes of the wantonly cruel. When we say that a person has no soul we mean that he has ceased, in a fundamental way, to be human. When we say that a person is “good” or “kind” or “pleasant,” we are saying something about his soul.

It seems, then, that biographies—the writing of lives—should stand or fall partly on what they do with souls. Some biographers, like Robert Caro, employ empathy, responsible imagination and ordinary fellow feeling to help readers see something of the

essence of the person they are writing about—in Caro’s case, the unlikely yet huggable crass Texan Lyndon Baines Johnson.

But other biographers, however gifted academically, seem to lack imagination and empathy, and their subjects come across as lifeless, as soulless. One is confronted by a “this happened, then that happened”



Biographies—the writing of lives—should stand or fall partly on what they do with souls.

approach to life. Since that really isn’t what most people are looking for when they ask you to “tell” them about someone, this way of approaching life, and biographical writing, is boring. Such, frankly, is the case of *An Unfinished Life*, Robert Dallek’s much-hyped biography of John F. Kennedy.

I admit to a bias in favor of good writing, and I don’t know of another biographer whose writing is as consistently good as Caro’s. (Edmund Morris’ first volume on Teddy Roosevelt is incredibly good, his second volume less so; and David McCullough is a fine writer, but he’s not quite in Caro’s class.) But it’s not just writing. Caro could write nonsense well and it would still be nonsense. But after over 1,000 pages covering Johnson’s years in the Senate (about a decade), one finds oneself regretting that the book has ended so soon. Like all good biog-

raphers, Caro leaves the reader with a sense that, even after all the pages have been dutifully noted and turned, there is still much to be said.

Caro’s biographies of Johnson—this is the third in a projected series of four—comprise a profoundly human *oeuvre*. Johnson is really Caro’s excuse for studying people and the ways they accumulate, hold onto and dispose of power. (“The very ruthlessness with which Lyndon Johnson used his power helped him to amass more of it.”)

As with all good history teachers, Caro makes his subject come alive—you almost feel Johnson’s big arms and hands wrapping around your shoulders. Events and actions are interesting to Caro mainly to the extent that they tell us something about LBJ’s inner man. The Civil Rights Act of 1957, for example, had little political impact and was superseded within eight years; history textbooks habitually pass it over or deride it as ineffectual. But Johnson’s management of the Act in the Senate gives us a window into LBJ’s thoughts, schemes, feelings and desires, so Caro’s entire book—even the stage-setting, hundred-page history of the Senate—orbits around it. The effect is profound.

To its credit, Dallek’s book exemplifies fine scholarship. The reader learns a lot; it will come in handy when I revise my lecture notes on the Cold War. The problem lies in the fact that, for Dallek, Kennedy isn’t so much a human being as he is an academic subject.

Dallek’s book is full of good facts. It’s also void of moral and psychological depth. Dallek might respond that his is a “political biography” and doesn’t, therefore, need to plumb moral depths. But, even if that were so (and it isn’t), the book still wouldn’t satisfy. The broad context of the events Dallek chronicles is rarely described—the story of Kennedy’s assassination, for instance, is

Resources cont.

summed up in a few paragraphs. At the same time, I wonder if Dallek ever found a curse word attributed to Kennedy that he could bring himself to pass up for quotation. On page 484, the “f” word is produced four times in a single paragraph. (Caro quotes Johnson’s vulgarities, too; but, as expected, with much greater artistry.)

I had the pleasure to hear Robert Caro give a public talk about Johnson and I couldn’t but notice his enthusiasm and obvious interest in the rabid, vulnerable, needy man of the Texas Hill Country. I have also heard Dallek discuss his book, and I couldn’t help but note that, on this occasion at least, his main interest seemed to be in shaping the course of scholarly Kennedy-ana.

And there’s nothing inherently wrong with that. Dallek has done a service (as they say) by revealing the extent to which Kennedy suffered from sundry physical ailments, though he also notes that these don’t seem to have had an adverse affect on JFK’s work in the White House. Dallek also makes a good case for the

logical lechery with words like “escapades” and “dalliances.” Both writers trace their subjects’ “womanizing” to psychological insecurity born in childhood, but only Caro, who really cares about how people work, is convincing. Both write of the pain the power-hungry, grasping presidents caused others, but only Caro is able

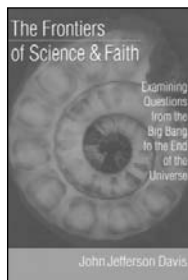
Language is not only important for narrowly educational reasons. It’s also significant for theological reasons.

thesis that Kennedy would have prevented the Vietnam disaster from happening—though the value of might-have-been history is limited. But where Caro makes the reader feel the humiliation Lady Bird Johnson suffered at the hands of her rude and graceless husband, Dallek effectively euphemizes Kennedy’s patho-

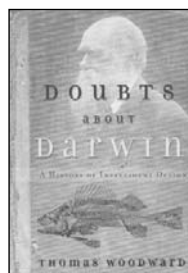
logical lechery with words like “escapades” and “dalliances.” Both writers trace their subjects’ “womanizing” to psychological insecurity born in childhood, but only Caro, who really cares about how people work, is convincing. Both write of the pain the power-hungry, grasping presidents caused others, but only Caro is able to transmit something of those feelings to the reader. At one point we’re told that Kennedy found comfort in his Catholic faith; but other than recording that JFK jotted down a semi-theological Lincoln quotation, Dallek gives us no insight into this supposed comfort or even into the substance of Kennedy’s faith. JFK was ignorant of elementary theology, had a disgusting mouth, and the idea that he would ever put a Papal

Briefly Noted: Science, Intelligently Designed

by Denis Haack



John Jefferson Davis is a seminary professor (Gordon-Conwell) who reflects on science from the perspective of biblical theology. *The Frontiers of Science and Faith* is a collection of his essays touching on a wide variety of topics, including chaos theory, quantum indeterminacy & God’s omniscience, AI, the search for extraterrestrial intelligence & the doctrine of redemption, Gödel’s Proof, the Big Bang, and some implications of quantum mechanics for the doctrine of predestination. “A basic presupposition of these essays,” Davis writes, “is that the results of modern science, properly understood, are no threat to Christian faith.” Not exactly bedtime reading, but stimulating stuff for those who take both theology and science seriously.



Those following the Intelligent Design movement will be interested in *Doubts About Darwin* by Thomas Woodward, who teaches at Trinity College in Florida. He traces a history of the movement especially in light of the debate ID has prompted over evolution both within the scientific world and in the church. And those who know little of the ID movement or of the work of Phillip Johnson, Michael Behe, and William Dembski will find this a convenient and easily accessible introduction to a group of creative thinkers whose ideas about science, evolution, and the nature of reality warrants careful consideration. ■

Books reviewed: *The Frontiers of Science & Faith: Examining Questions from the Big Bang to the End of the Universe* by John Jefferson Davis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2002) 177 pp. + bibliography + indices. *Doubts About Darwin: A History of Intelligent Design* by Thomas Woodward (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books; 2003) 248 pp. + notes + bibliography + index.

directive above his own ambition must have been hilarious to anyone who knew him.

The trouble, as I have suggested, is that Dallek is a bad writer—and this, I think, is what prevents him from penetrating the surface of the myriad documents he has faithfully and seriously examined. In itself, bad writing is no moral failure. But, from a literary standpoint, what's unforgivable is Dallek's dependence on clichés and stock phrases that habitually stand where thought or interesting analysis might have been. Sometimes Dallek manages to cram multiple clichés into a single sentence. "Any sign of weakness or hesitation to answer the communist threat," he writes, "would encourage Soviet hopes that America lacked the resolve to stand up for itself and its allies."

And so it goes: "While the French and Germans busied themselves pointing fingers, [Kennedy] would leapfrog them and take care of the real business at hand."

"Kennedy saw little hope for a breakthrough unless there were some new departure or fresh impetus to get the genie back in the bottle..."

"Holy cow," I wrote in a margin. "This is bad."

Which reminds me that command of language is not only important for narrowly educational reasons. It's also significant for theological reasons. For the more a person possesses a command of language, the more he or she is able to detect, appreciate and describe the nuances and other tough-to-pin-down phenomena that arise in this interesting life God has given us. To think deeply about life is to shun sloganeering and cliché-mongering.

Of course, in the end, no soul—whatever exactly that is—can be captured by paper and pen, though the biblical writers, Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky and our superior authors and biographers let us peek, as it

were, into that great, vast domain. And they remind us that the pursuit of the soul is never dull. Nor, one suspects, is it easy. But it is worthwhile. ■

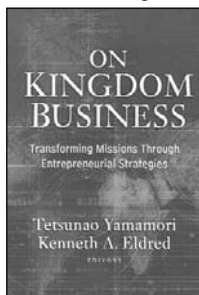
—Preston Jones

Preston Jones teaches history at John Brown University. Copyright © 2003 by Preston Jones.

Books reviewed: *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate* by Robert A. Caro (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf; 2002) 1167 pgs. *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* by Robert Dallek (New York, NY: Little, Brown & Co.; 2003) 838 pgs.

Briefly Noted: Lord of Wall Street

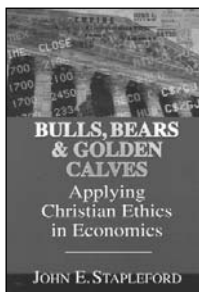
by Denis Haack



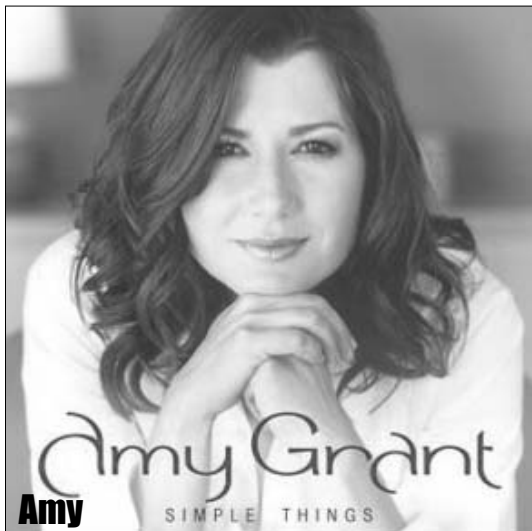
In October 2002 a group of leaders in business and missions met in Virginia to explore the fact that though the unreached peoples of the world "care little for Jesus Christ, they spend a lot of time thinking about Adam Smith." In other words, countries that are officially closed to missionaries are increasingly open to entrepreneurs—and this suggests a strategy for missions. *On Kingdom Business* includes the presentations at Regent University, and includes case studies, essays probing various aspects of this worldwide opportunity, and a series of proposals on what might be done. The church has long sent physicians, educators and church planters as missionaries, and now it needs to add businesspeople to the list.

Bulls, Bears & Golden Calves identifies the issues confronting the world of business and finance today, and responds Christianly to them in light of the various theories of economics that compete for acceptance in the marketplace. Stapleford, a professor of economics at Eastern College, ties his discussion intentionally to the standard economic textbooks most widely used in college courses. He is convinced that economics, like the rest of life, is not neutral and must be brought under Christ's Lordship. Thus every economic theory is a world view rooted in beliefs about life and reality, and can be scrutinized in the light of the biblical world view. Christians concerned to think Christianly about economics, business and finance will want to work their way carefully through this book. Each chapter includes discussion questions. ■

Books reviewed: *On Kingdom Business: Transforming Missions Through Entrepreneurial Strategies* edited by Tetsunao Yamamori and Kenneth Eldred (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books; 2003) 339 pp. + notes + indices. *Bulls, Bears & Golden Calves: Applying Christian Ethics in Economics* by John E. Stapleford (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2002) 208 pp. + notes.



The Miracle



Grant's Simple Things

Life is a process of discovering yourself, your purpose and what really matters. Nobody can do it for you—you can't do it for anybody else.

—Amy Grant

Amy Grant grew up in a solidly Christian home with a solid Christian faith. With honest transparency, she became the icon of Christian music, taking her gift to audiences

never before reached by other Christian artists. She was the first Christian “cross over” artist with her album, *Unguarded* (1985). After unparalleled commercial success, she divorced her husband of 16 years, Gary Chapman, and with three children, promptly married Country and Western artist Vince Gill. The golden girl of Christian music filled the tabloids with the stigma of scandal and divorce. Only Amy knows the whys of her decision that flew squarely in the face of biblical norms.

“Anybody who’s ever gone through a hard time—any outsider’s perception, no matter how much information they’re given, they have no idea what the person’s life is like. It’s two different worlds,” she explained later to *Christianity Today*. Only Amy knows the crisis of faith that paralleled her relational crisis. “It’s not that I stopped believing in God, but everything felt like a charade,” she confessed to ABC News. And only Amy knows the pain of sin and shame she endured in the ensuing years. “I know why God hates divorce because it rips you from stem to stern, and children are the total innocent recipients of a torn and shattered life,” Grant told *CCM Magazine*.

She has been roundly criticized, much like the Dixie Chicks this year. In early 2000, *Christianity Today* questioned the Christian integrity of her actions, “Whether Amy Grant and Vince Gill have

found happiness amid the pain of others is a matter between them and their families, their church communities, and the Lord. But her dressing up and propelling her public ministry, without taking the time for serious reflection, violates what should be the Christian conviction about the sanctity of marriage.” Three years later, the lessons learned are evident on her latest album. A broken but better woman emerges from the fire and ash of divorce.

*Slowly, slowly
We turn the page of life
Growing, knowing
It comes at quite a price*

*After the fire is over
After the ashes cool
After the smoke is blown away
I will be here for you*

It has been six years since Amy’s last solo album, *Behind the Eyes* (1997). Her latest album, *Simple Things* (2003), is a deeply personal gift to those who know the sting of brokenness.

*I can't relive my life
I can't retrace my tracks
I can't undo what's done
There is no going back*

*I chased a selfish dream
Did not survey the cost
Illusions disappeared
I've found my innocence lost*

She sings for her contemporaries. At 42, she sings for those who in midlife are processing the choices made and consequences experienced. She told *Southern Exposure Magazine*, “The theme of the record is that there is a process of moving through a place of shame and not being able to hold your head up...to being forgiven. Not just forgiven, but really being fully alive again, and being able to celebrate that. There are consequences for every choice that we make. Consequences for things like

of Forgiving

ending a marriage and going through a divorce, and they are heavy and profound. Whether you bring it on yourself or someone chooses that for you. That grieving and failing something...trying to start over...all the self-doubt...and all the loss of your sense of trusting yourself...and trusting God, all those things. Whatever process it takes and all those long, hard cries to get to the other side of it and say, 'That's just part of life,' being wiser for it and grateful."

*I know I've made some big mistakes
I learned the hardest lessons that await
So adios to foolish pride
I've got nothing left to hide
I stand here open wide
And everything inside of me is saying
Baby, I'm ready to dig in
Ready for more than skin to skin
This is where love begins*

It may be that brokenness is necessary to truly love another person. For only when we know forgiveness, not as a theological concept but a relational reality, can we offer forgiveness to others. "Operating from a place of feeling forgiveness and from being drawn to the mercy of Jesus in a real way, I feel like I relate to a lot of wounded people I have met," she told *CCM Magazine's* Chris Well.

We all have the opportunity to minister to wounded people. Dick was my brother-in-law from my first marriage. He died of AIDS in our home. Two days before he died, he accepted Christ and had his first communion. In recounting the story later, some well-meaning Christian asked, "But did he repent of his homosexuality?" It seemed like such an odd question. Almost rude. "I don't know," I responded. "I never asked. He was dying."

There is an important lesson here. The contours of our heart and the landscapes of our lives are often messy. They don't fit in neat little boxes of doctrinal political correctness. If one lives long enough one learns that sunny days are punctuated by storms: the death of a child, the collapse of a marriage, the loss of a job, the betrayal of a friend, the erosion of

health, a parent's loss of memory, a prodigal child. Life has its litany of losses. But then again we expect too much. Ours is truly a broken world. We are more broken than we imagine. And sin is more tragic and unrelenting than we think.

Ah, but too few churches have room for such messiness, brokenness, or sin realized. "Embrace the sinner, not the sin" is a cliché rarely experienced. Like Dimsdale in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, we hide behind our social standing and Pharisaical smugness and judge those most in need of grace. And women too frequently take the full onslaught of the latent misogyny of church leadership. The church is the only army that shoots its wounded. Behind the facades we offer to each other as the truth about our lives—"I'm fine"—are the broken worlds and the broken lives we actually live. Do we see ourselves as broken world people? Do we embrace broken world people? Do we know the reality of God's forgiveness? Are we willing to offer it to others?

If brokenness is a reality, so too is forgiveness. This is the meaning of the cross—the sacrifice of the One for another. Too often forgiveness is not the language of the church—except at the most abstract and doctrinal level. It's certainly not what most secular people think of when they think of Christians. "Judgmentalism." That pretty well sums it up. We live in a relativistic society, a culture of tolerance. Standing for moral principles can sometimes seem like one is being judgmental. But it is not either/or: relativism or judgmentalism. We must learn to stand for principle with an attitude of forgiveness. "You really screwed up and your choices have made a mess of things, but I love and forgive you. Come let me give you a hug." Forgiveness is not tolerance of sin. Forgiveness is not the abandonment of moral standards that costs nothing. The flippant "I'm sorry." Forgiveness always has a cost. Someone always bears the price of sin. "Forgiveness



**by
Dr.
David
John
Seel,
Jr.**



breaks the chain of causality because he who 'forgives' you—out of love—takes upon himself the consequences of what you have done. Forgiveness, therefore, always entails a sacrifice," writes former

U.N. Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld.

Forgiveness is one of life's most profound acts. It's a reflection of our Father's heart. Oh that the church would be more a witness to its power. There is a sense in which God's forgiveness is conditional, dependent on our readiness to forgive others. "If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:15). If this is so and the mark of the church is not forgiveness, then perhaps there are many who are claiming God's forgiveness who are not forgiven. The sinner must come to accept God's forgiveness. As a fellow sinner, I am called to mirror God's forgiveness—those once bro-

ken by sin now forgiving those who are being broken by it. Amy Grant provides an honest assessment of the process and the promise.

*But I will be a witness
That there's nothing in me dark enough
The power of forgiveness
Cannot rescue from the deep* ■

~John Seel

David John Seel, Jr., M.Div., Ph.D., is headmaster of The Cambridge School of Dallas and author of Parenting Without Perfection: Being a Kingdom Influence in a Toxic World. Copyright © 2003 by David John Seel, Jr.

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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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