

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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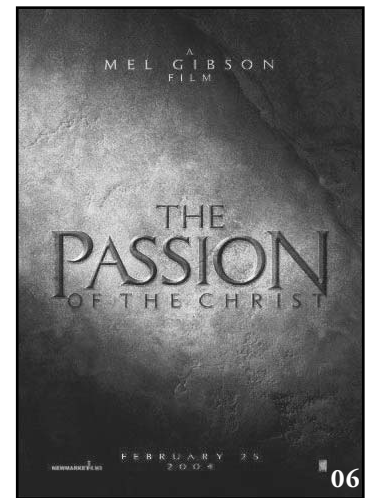
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Critique considers unsolicited manuscripts only for poetry. marsena@ransomfellowship.org or mail with SASE to: *Critique* Managing Editor 23736 S. Lakewood Lane Lake Zurich, IL 60047

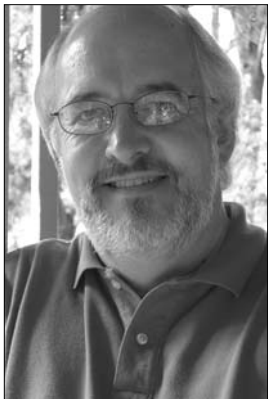
Correspondence

All other correspondence and changes of address: Denis D. Haack 1150 West Center Rochester, MN 55902 info@ransomfellowship.org

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Editor's Note



Learning off balance.

You may have noticed that in these pages we tend to ask more questions than we answer. For those readers who wonder if this is intentional, the answer is Yes. Our reason? It promotes learning.

The technical word for it is *disequilibrium*. It comes from the work of Jean Piaget (1896-1980), a Swiss psychologist who researched how children learn. People develop best, he concluded, when they wrestle with challenging questions in community. Even disagreements in such a setting can deepen understanding, allowing us to think through what we believe and why. The discussion stimulates us to reflect, and introduces perspectives which might be very different from our own. Thus, learning is an ongoing pilgrimage of disequilibrium and re-equilibrium. And to the extent it is empowered by God's Spirit and ultimately bounded by the truth of God's word, it flows into spiritual faithfulness and increasing discernment.

If this learning is to be nurtured, we must be sure our community is a safe place. A shelter where people can explore ideas freely and express doubts without being judged. Our community life must be centered around Bible study. Even if the question we are exploring is not directly addressed in any particular text, the truth of God's word remains the only reliable light by which to make our way in this dark world.

Some have objected to this approach. If you don't provide answers, they say, people might assume no answer exists. Or they might come to the wrong answer, which means you led them, inadvertently, away from truth. The answer to these objections is four-fold. All of life is risky. We provide enough answers to model faithful-

ness. Failing to provide disequilibrium means people won't be as stimulated to learn and develop. And most important of all is the example of Christ. His teaching repeatedly threw his listeners off balance, forcing them to deal with issues they would have preferred to avoid.

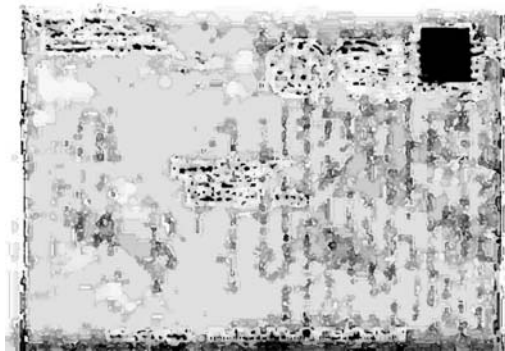
It's worth noting that disequilibrium can be counterfeited. I attended a Christian school, for example, where challenges to faith were deemed dangerous so we were presented with easily managed questions in place of the issues which truly needed to be addressed. The answers required by these questions were simple, and the entire process self-satisfying. This did not train me to address the questions as they are actually posed in a fallen world. When I finally faced those questions in college, I felt I had been lied to. My faith, sincere but built on sand, was lashed by storms I was unprepared to face. Soon I began to wonder whether Christianity was plausible.

There are hard times when comfort is needed, and when discernment exercises should be set aside because the hard times are a sufficient challenge. But at other times, because learning is hard work and developing to maturity is costly, we will need the stimulation of disequilibrium.

Life is messy, and the challenges we face in our postmodern world do not resolve simply. Answers rich enough to address the questions we face are birthed slowly, and with great effort. But as people of hope and good humor, we can proceed with the quiet confidence that though we may not yet have found much of an answer, every disequilibrium is ultimately resolved in Christ. ■

~Denis Haack

Dialogue



Re: Amy Grant and forgiveness

Send e-mail to:

letters@ransomfellowship.org

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

Marsena Konkle
Critique Managing Editor
23736 S. Lakewood Lane
Lake Zurich, IL 60047

or e-mail:
letters@ransomfellowship.org

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

Wow. Amy Grant's new album must be a clunker. Instead of a review of the music, Mr. Seel's discussion [*Critique* #8 - 2003] of forgiveness and the church implies we need to buy the album to show we forgive her so God will forgive us. Talk about a hard sell!

Amy Grant's forgiveness is God's business. Not mine. I never met her, nor do I ever expect to. Ms. Grant has not trespassed against me. I see no biblical necessity incumbent on me to forgive her. I hope she has asked [her children's] forgiveness (Matthew 18:6).

Ms. Grant has been the Christian music poster girl for decades. It is sad and disheartening to find her so selfish and immature; able to release an album that garners sympathy only for her identification with others who have made poor choices.

Johnny Cash sang "Because you're mine, I walk the line." His life and music held hard and mature themes and choices. In his life as in his music, his brokenness and sin did not negate his responsibility to God and man. He did not sentimentalize. Even though he was considerably older, Cash is more my contemporary than Ms. Grant.

The broken-world people I interact with seem hungry to have a friend broken by God whose home life does not mirror their own. Forgiveness should lead to redemption, not just a new album. Thanks for lots of thought food.

Deborah Miller

John Seel responds:

Thank you for participating in the ongoing conversation about things that matter. My writing on musical artists is frequently an opportunity to address matters that are central to their lives and music. Such was the case in Grant's CD. I do not listen to much "Christian" music, but this CD ministered powerfully to a divorced friend. She could relate to the crushing sense of shame, the lasting sense of failure, and

the promise of forgiveness that Amy sings of. Perhaps one needs to have been in such a place to fully appreciate the power of this CD. Amy does not sentimentalize her sin or cheapen God's forgiveness. If I gave this impression, then I did not do her justice.

Broken people are easier to take when their public sin comes before their conversion rather than after. We expect better things of those indwelt by Christ. And yet, high profile Christian leaders do fail and their failures, though it is theirs to deal with, do have an impact on the wider church—the family of faith. Cheap forgiveness and easy restoration discounts the seriousness of sin. Moreover, forgiveness never mitigates the consequences of sin. Adultery can be forgiven, but it always leads to a breach of trust and often leads to divorce. Augustine wisely noted, "Sin becomes the punishment of sin."

It is appropriate in our highly tolerant and therapeutic age to consider that some sin should have a lasting stigma. Some failures might disqualify one for church leadership, for example. I personally believe that as I am divorced and remarried, I do not qualify for church eldership as I am no longer the husband of "one wife." Intact first marriages should be celebrated and honored in the church. It just seems helpful to remember that sin, though forgivable, has lasting consequences. We tend to take the tragedy of sin too lightly. You don't, which I greatly appreciate.

It is only in Grant's role as a "Christian music poster girl" that our attitude toward her bears reflection. *Christianity Today* asked her to take stock of her life and choices. This CD is the fruit of this process; it's truly helpful, honest, and human. She is not advocating sin. She is modeling soul work. She is celebrating forgiveness. We can share in her celebration and learn from her experience—for it gives us hope as we examine our own hearts. ■

On Being Offensive

All things considered, there's plenty a Christian can do, say, or believe which some other Christian will find offensive—perhaps even deeply offensive. A few of the offenses I've heard about recently include: reading Harry Potter books; giving Harry Potter books as gifts; inviting people to discuss an R-rated movie; while on vacation staying at the home of a relative who is cohabiting with a lover; attending a baby shower for a gay couple; mentioning an R-rated movie approvingly in public; being conversant about the music of Eminem;

declining having a fish bumper sticker; suggesting the days of Genesis 1 might not be 24-hours long; disagreeing with the opinions expressed in *World* magazine; preferring public education over Christian and home schooling; and being against the war in Iraq.

In each case two issues are of importance: the specific issue involved and how to respond to the offended sister or brother. It's the second of the two that we'd like to raise here. Of course it is tempting to simply dismiss the offended party with some label (liberal or funda-

mentalist; weak or legalistic), but surely that is less than fully faithful. Our Lord's concern for unity among his followers (John 17:20-21) and insistence that the world's view of him is tied to our treatment of one another (John 13:34-35) requires us to take seriously the charge that we have offended a member of God's family.

Which suggests a number of questions worth discussing. ■

~Denis Haack

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What other offenses could you add to the above list?
2. Why is it that one Christian's freedom can be so offensive to another Christian? Do you tend to be one of the more easily offended Christians, or are you one of those who tends to offend others? Why is this? Is all this related to the fact that, all things considered, we tend to be most comfortable with people who are just like us? Is this good or bad? How do you know?
3. What biblical texts provide practical instruction about having offended someone else? About having been offended by someone else? To what extent do these biblical instructions tend to be followed in the Christian community? Describe an instance in which you observed them in operation.
4. One argument raised by Christian parents involves modeling offensive behavior before their children. "If you want to watch R-rated films," they say, "that's your business. But when you mention a movie like *Magnolia* approvingly in public, or invite people to discuss it in your home, you make my parenting more difficult. So, don't." How would you respond?
5. Under what conditions should we give up our freedom for the sake of another? Under what conditions are we not biblically required to do so? What arguments rooted in which biblical texts would you use to develop your position? Under what conditions might it be wrong (i.e., dishonoring to the Lord and detrimental to others) to give up the freedom we have in Christ?
6. How much diversity should the church be able to include? A Sunday school class? A small group? A family?
7. In seeking reconciliation after an offense has occurred, how important is it to agree about the behavior or statement that caused the offense? Should we ever apologize for something about which we honestly believe we bear no guilt?
8. Reflect on the offenses you might provoke in the circles in which you tend to be at home. Are they important enough to risk causing offense to someone? Do you have good, thoughtful, biblical, and sufficient arguments for each one?
9. Consider/discuss this: A mark of maturity in a Christian adult is that they are seldom offended and difficult to offend. The reason is that they know their own deep sinfulness and are realistic about themselves, and about all other sinners. They are patient with people who don't meet their expectations because they know how much they need forgiveness themselves. They don't take pleasure in causing offense, but they know that some are too spiritually immature to rest in quiet confidence in the grace of God...

(Questions continued on next page...)

From Math to Songs

QUESTIONS CONT.

... Parents that are offended when behavior they forbid for their children is exhibited by believers are mistakenly trying to raise their family in a temptation-free utopia which doesn't exist. When the offended party is a young believer who might stumble in faith, they gladly give up their freedom. When the offended party is an older believer who is fearful, legalistic, or self-centered they seek reconciliation without setting aside the freedom that is legitimately theirs in Christ.

10. What tends to occur within the Christian community when being (easily) offended is considered a mark of spiritual maturity? How can we help one another grow in grace?

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Quotes from Marty, Bono, Wilson, & Cash.

Einstein & Math
“Suzanne Bloch, 94 years old. Born in Geneva in 1907, she moved with her family to New York in 1916 when her father, Ernest Bloch, began a series of conducting and teaching posts...



Ms. Bloch often played chamber music with prominent scientists. One participant was Albert Einstein, who sometimes irritated the other musicians by not coming in on the beat. ‘He couldn’t count,’ Ms. Bloch once said.”

Quoted: *The American Organist* (May 2002), quoted in *Context: Martin E Marty on Religion & Culture* (8/15/02) p. 8. Copyright © 2002 Martin Marty.

Globalization & Princess Di
“An English princess with an Egyptian boyfriend crashes in a French tunnel, driving a German car with a Dutch engine, driven by a Belgian who was high on Scotch whisky, followed closely by Italian paparazzi, on Japanese motorcycles, treated by an American doctor, using medicines from Brazil.”

Quoted: *Context: Martin Marty on Religion & Culture* (1/1/03) p. 7. Copyright © 2003 Martin Marty.

Bono’s calling
“I write songs, I’m a musician. I just hope that when it’s all over, when the day is done, that I’ve been able to tear a little corner off of the darkness.”

Quoted: “History will not Alter: On Students, Stalin and Slovakia” by Steven Garber in *BreakPoint Worldview* (Prison Fellowship; October 2003) p. 15. Copyright © 2003 Prison Fellowship.

Avoiding poverty
“You need only do three things in this country to avoid poverty—finish high school, marry before having a child, and marry after the age of 20. Only 8 percent of the families who do this are poor; 79 percent of those who fail to do this are poor.”

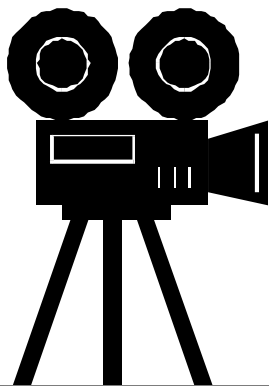
Quoted: James Q. Wilson in *Family Ministry* quoted in “Select Items” (#195; 10/31/2003), an email newsletter by Covenant Seminary Library Director James Pakala.

Cash on songs
“I love songs about horses, railroads, land, judgment day, family, hard times, whiskey, courtship, marriage, adultery, separation, murder, war, prison, rambling, damnation, home, salvation, death, pride, humor, piety, rebellion, patriotism, larceny, determination, tragedy, rowdiness, heart-break and love. And Mother. And God.” ■

Quoted: Johnny Cash quoted in *Take the Cannoli: Stories from the New World* by Sarah Vowell (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster; 2000) p. 11. Copyright © 2000 Simon and Schuster.



A Brutal Redemption



A review of The Passion of The Christ

by Denis Haack

Film Credits

Starring:

James Caviezel
(Jesus, the Christ)
Maia Morgenstern
(Mary)
Monica Bellucci
(Mary Magdalene)
Hristo Jivkov
(John of Zebedee)
Hristo Naumov Shopov
(Pontius Pilate)
Rosalinda Celentano
(Satan)
Francesco Cabras
(Gesmas)
Claudia Gerini
(Pilatus Wife)

Director:

Mel Gibson

Screenwriters:

Benedict Fitzgerald &
Mel Gibson

Producers:

Bruce Davey
Mel Gibson
Stephen McEveety
Enzo Sisti

Original Music:

Lisa Gerrard

Cinematographer:

Caleb Deschanel

Costumes:

Maurizio Millenotti

Rating and length not yet
available.

Over the months prior to the release of *The Passion*, Mel Gibson arranged for a number of screenings of the film. This allowed him to receive feedback before the final editing process, and to discuss the controversy swirling in the media concerning the film's alleged anti-Semitism and lack of historical accuracy. The one I attended, at Charlie and Andi Peacock's Art House in Nashville, included evangelicals who were active in the arts.

The film opens with Christ agonizing in prayer as his disciples sleep, and follows him through the final twelve hours of his life, through his arrest, trial, torture, crucifixion, and burial. Watching the violence depicted in *The Passion* was almost beyond my endurance. I have watched some very violent movies over the years, and believe there is a place for artists to depict violence in ways that unsettle us. In fact, violence and death should unsettle us in this sad world. Sanitized depictions where the bad guy falls down neatly after being shot may be pleasant, but those who love truth should find such depictions objectionable. Violence and death are great horrors, so horror is the appropriate response to them.

The Passion is not difficult to watch because it is about Jesus' death, but because of the way Gibson has chosen to make the film. There are cinematic techniques which directors can use to achieve a level of realism while softening the horror. The camera may shift away during the beating, as in *Glory* when the character played by Denzel Washington was flogged, so we see not the

entire beating but the faces of onlookers, sharing their horror. Or the scene may cut away and return later, so we only watch the beginning and the end of the violent encounter. In *The Passion*, however, Gibson wants us to watch as if we were there, and to sense the full horror of what Christ endured. The Roman flogging goes on and on, and then on some more. The crucifixion is shown in excruciating detail. Never again will I be able to mention the death of my Lord without flinching inside. Nor will I be able to take the bread and wine of the sacrament without a sense of dread for the cost of my redemption.

The dialogue in the movie is all in the languages of the first century—Aramaic, Hebrew, and Latin—which lends a sense of historical authenticity. The screenplay is crafted so as to provide the theological meaning of the events being depicted. So, for example, as Jesus is nailed to the cross there is a flashback where Christ takes the bread and gives it to his disciples saying "This is my body." The few extra-biblical scenes do not undermine the truth of the gospel but enhance it. This is not a recitation of the narrative of the Gospels but a remarkably thoughtful and creative cinematic depiction of that story.

My response to *The Passion* as a Christian is first and foremost one of worship. I would hope churches consider encouraging their people to see the film together, and to gather at the church for the Eucharist afterwards. Certainly I desired that after the film ended far more than I desired talking about it.

My second response is to look forward to asking my non-Christian friends what they think of it. I imagine their responses will vary widely, and the discussion should be fascinating. I suspect that many unchurched viewers will wonder why Christians make so much of the cross, and

we would do well to discuss among ourselves how we can speak of it in terms that people in our pluralistic world might be able to understand. And since there is an offense to the cross, I will not be disappointed if other thoughtful films provoke better discussions.

My third response involves the charge of anti-Semitism. This is an opportunity to make clear that we believe that we are all responsible for Christ's death. This fact is expressed by Mel Gibson in *The Passion*, but in a cinematic technique that casual viewers might miss. Gibson does not appear in the film, except once. When Christ is nailed to the cross, it is his hands which wield the hammer and drive the spikes home. "Mel Gibson's hand is the one that puts the nail in Jesus' hand," it says on the film's website, "symbolic of the fact that he holds himself accountable first and foremost for Christ's death."

After one of the advance showings, a Christian in the audience told Dennis Prager that he wished he could take a gun and shoot the people who had so mistreated Jesus. "I couldn't blame him," Prager, a practicing Jew, said. That is a gracious response, but since

the man in question claims to be my brother, I would like to respond. And my response is unequivocal: Christ forgave those who crucified him, so your desire is wicked, your speaking it

aloud inexcusable, and your failure to identify with a sinful humanity a reason to doubt your acceptance of grace. Jews have been persecuted repeatedly by Christians over the past 2,000 years as "Christ-killers." We must use this opportunity to repent and promise, Never again!

The Passion begins with a black screen on which the words written so many centuries ago by the prophet Isaiah appear: "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities, and by his stripes we are healed." When the film ended one of the first questions asked of Gibson was why he had made the film. "I grew up in a reli-

gious home," he answered. "A Catholic home, but I grew up wild and became a monster. When you are a monster you end up being deeply wounded. All I can tell you is that because of his wounds, my wounds have been healed—and if you think that sounds corny, you should know that I don't really give a damn."

The film will remain controversial because the story it tells is not neat and pleasant, but brutal and bloody. Who would have guessed that redemption could be found in something so utterly horrible? ■

~Denis Haack



The film will be controversial because the story it tells is not neat and pleasant, but brutal and bloody.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial or immediate reaction(s) to the film? Why do you think you responded that way?
2. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (lighting, casting, direction, script, music, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to tell the story, or to make it plausible or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused?
3. With whom did you identify in the film? Why? With whom were we meant to identify? What did you think of the way Jesus was portrayed? Discuss the various minor characters in the film: Satan, Judas, Mary, Pilate, the disciples, the Roman soldiers, the Jewish leaders.
4. Has the film changed your attitude about Christ's death?
5. How does *The Passion of The Christ* compare and contrast with other films which depict the death of Christ? Which is closer to the truth of the biblical text?
6. Note the various extra-biblical scenes included in the film. Do they add to the message of the film or detract from it?
7. How are your non-Christian friends responding to the film? How do they understand the events they saw depicted? To what extent does the movie provide an opening for discussion? How might we best prepare for such conversations?
8. Should Christians who decline watching thoughtful films chosen by their non-Christian friends because the movies are "too violent" invite those friends to see *The Passion*?

Reformed Iconography:

We were eating lunch when James Disney suddenly said, “I see a landscape.” We were not talking about landscapes at that moment, or about art, so his comment dropped into the conversation rather abruptly. We weren’t even talking about what we could see. In fact, Jim was seated at the table with his back to the window, which looks out onto the side of a neighbor’s house, in any case. “There,” he said in the silence, pointing to an old buffet that is against the opposite wall in our dining room. We looked, but it didn’t help.

The buffet is an old piece, probably dating from the 1930’s. It had belonged to friends who hadn’t liked it, so they sold it to us for \$40 when they moved. It has three drawers, two doors one at each end, and a small beveled mirror on top embedded in a raised section along the back. We have always liked it, primarily for the wood from which it was crafted. On the front a curved piece of vividly-grained maple adds richness to what is a simple piece of functional furniture. Though we had long appreciated the lovely swirls of the maple, we had never seen how the design which nature had produced in the woodgrain might include a hint of something other than the beauty of the wood itself.

“In that curved wood,” Jim said, getting up to point it out. “In the grain is an entire scene, a landscape, with trees, a lake, and workers in a field. I’ll show you later by painting a watercolor of it.”

Which he did, and the piece now hangs on the wall beside the buffet. It took an artist’s eye and gift to help us see—to really see—what we had been looking at for years.

It has been our pleasure to host Jim and Jennifer Disney at Toad Hall, and

each visit is filled with laughter, conversation, and proof that dear friends are a precious gift in this broken world. Our conversations are about art and faith, about culture in a fallen world viewed through the lens of a biblical world view. The two paintings by Jim which grace our walls are not just



“Refined by Fire,” watercolor

It took an artist’s eye and gift to help us see—to really see—what we had been looking at for years.

lovely pieces of art, but sweet reminders of friends enjoying unhurried time together.

One of his simpler pieces hangs in my office, a shrouded figure against a sharply defined, dark sky. The solitary, haloed figure, painted in warm colors, seems to emanate quiet. The aloneness of the figure is absolute, yet it does not seem to be lost or adrift in the empty space which surrounds it, nor is it overwhelmed. If anything, the expanse is overwhelmed by the figure. Though nameless and faceless, it is someone in

holy communion with the Divine, someone wrestling with God, the painting a celebration of the astonishing paradox that unhurried seclusion before the face of God supplies precisely what is needed to cure our insatiable cosmic loneliness.

Jim’s art is not representational, yet not fully abstract. His artwork depicts landscapes, figures, and moments in time, yet they always manage to hint at more. Each painting is rather like an icon, though Jim’s evangelical convictions as a Lutheran pastor bring a Reformational rather than an Eastern Orthodox sensibility to his artistic expression. Backgrounds are flattened, figures are simplified, and though perspective is not absent, it is used to focus our attention rather than to craft a photo-like depth. Whether the work has a distinctly religious theme or not, each acts like a window into the depths of reality, a simple scene with a whisper of transcendence. I interviewed him recently.

DH: How would you describe your art?

JD: My art is a spiritual diary of revelations, insights, and prayers. My paintings are a kind of workbook that I have filled out with God looking over my shoulder. Working mostly in watercolor I always feel that I am still learning.

DH: What are you trying to express or communicate in your art?

JD: Often things start for me during some intuitive drawing. I might create an image that I do not fully understand. As I work out the parts of the painting some kind of personal message or moral seems to emerge. If a painting can be some evidence of this process then it has a personal significance for me. My painting can seem like a sermon delivered specifically to address the needs of a person with exactly my set of problems. To me some

The Art of James Disney

of my paintings are direct evidence that God has woven himself into the things of this world.

DH: How did you arrive at your style? How would you describe your style?

JD: I feel like a kid who ran out of pages in his coloring book. Now I draw some pictures and if I like them I will fill them in with color. Art books have always surrounded me. The pictures in them are more real to me than the objects outside my house. The pure content of Iconography has influenced me. The tedious craftsmanship of the Netherlandish painters inspires and exhausts me. My style is personal and intimate. It is heavily based on line and color. It is literary, sometimes homiletic.

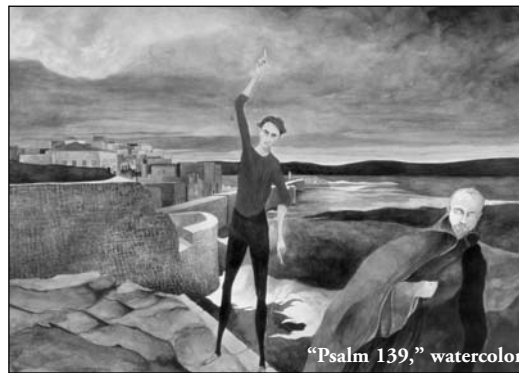
DH: How do people respond to your work?

JD: My painting usually requires a kind of Christian decoder ring. This leaves a lot of people adrift with only the image to respond to. At my last show in Minneapolis I was explaining to a young woman that my painting “The Coward” was based on the book of Jonah. She registered surprise at discovering that this tale was in the Bible. She thought it was a children’s story, like Pinocchio. I have enjoyed sharing the deep connection of faith with those who can decode my work. Christians seem to enjoy the twists and new perspectives I bring to basic truths of the faith.

Jim Disney’s work hints at stories and elicits questions because he somehow manages to make them simultaneously very simple, and yet strangely allusive. His images are always clear, yet always symbolic. They capture in paint the reality of spiritual mystery, not simply by depicting it but by evoking it.

Sometimes he incorporates symbols into the work itself. “The Magdalene,” for example, is of a woman against an abstracted land-

scape. Her hair is brown, her dress ochre. The figure dominates the canvas, and Mary looks out at us, holding with great care in both hands, in a way that can’t be missed, an egg. Even if we have no idea what it means or have never heard of the woman from the pages of the New Testament, we know there



Art that invites us to slow down and reflect is a gracious surprise in our busy world.

is some sort of significance in this egg. Chances are we will either know what this symbol means—or we will want to know.

Sometimes, as in “Refined by Fire,” the painting implies a story which implies a hidden meaning. A woman holding a diapered baby stands out on a vast prairie, while in the background a fire rages on the horizon. We wonder how she came to be there, who she is, and whether she has already been refined or whether the purifying flames are yet to sweep over her. And whether the moment captured on the canvas symbolizes something that brings meaning in hard times.

This allusive quality in Disney’s work invites us to stop, to look more closely, to reflect a bit. To walk by too quickly is to merely see the surface, though that is lovely enough with his beautiful watercolor washes,

subtly rich colors, and freely drawn lines. To not take the time would be like discovering an ancient chest in a forgotten attic, but never bothering to break open the rusty lock and look inside. His paintings invite questions, almost demand them.

And since we are asking questions, why is “The Coward” a coward? What hints are we given in this painting as to its meaning? The moon seems to look over the man’s shoulder, his back to the world, his attention centered on his own concerns. In the background a boat sails across the water, while the man sits at a table looking at a book which depicts a whale. Who is this character? Am I like him? And what do the items arrayed on the table represent?

Even Disney’s simple images are not only about the specific object that he has depicted. He painted “The Lamb” on Good Friday as a meditation on Jesus’ sacrifice. The dark background of doom seems to weigh down the animal. Although no knife is visible, the lamb seems to offer its neck. If you are a Christian, a myriad connections and stories come to mind. Images of death, sacrifices, and blood, of altars—and the fact that in Scripture we are the ones likened to helpless, doomed sheep. It would be interesting to ask a non-Christian what the painting means.

Art that invites us to slow down and reflect is a gracious surprise in our busy world. It is equally surprising that such thoughtful, painstaking work is produced by a man whose schedule is relentless as he pastors a church of over a thousand believers. Jim’s images always suggest something deeper, as if the piece were a window instead of a canvas, a way through which or in which we see something beyond. Some quality in them makes us wonder, and evokes a sense of mystery.

DH: What is the relationship between your art and your evangelism or worship?

JD: The painter George Roualt said that his

Paper and Canvas cont.

ambition was to paint one image of the head of Christ such that anyone who looked at it would immediately come to faith. After 17 years of being a Lutheran preacher I have had most of that sort of mysticism crowded out of me. If my paintings are a kind of spiritual diary of my search for God then perhaps they can be companions for others who travel the same path.

It has been really exciting to see my art in the context of the secular gallery scene. It almost feels subversive. But paintings cannot convert people; they can only whisper the truth.

The process by which I make my art is certainly a kind of personal worship. The use of icons in worship and personal devotion interests me. I used to dream of making images that could serve in liturgical spaces. But for now my style seems too personal for corporate worship.

DH: Most Christians can attend church for a lifetime without hearing a positive sermon on art. Why is this?

JD: To search for God with all 5 senses is a hard thing in itself. To begin to try to formalize that search into reasoned thought is even harder. The thing that is great about painting is that it creates spirituality without words. Most preachers don't want to touch something so hazy. When I have used visual images in sermons I have talked about decoding the picture and people seem to understand



[Owning original art] was a way for Christians to remind one another that life had meaning even when their circumstances seemed so meaningless as to be beyond hope.

JD: People like looking at paintings a lot more than they enjoy buying them. This is unfortunate because living with a painting can be a very rich experience. One of the exciting ideas from the world of iconography is that paintings can be a living presence. The eyes of a saint might gaze out of a painting into your home. A painting can be like a living prayer on your wall. I like to work details into a painting that will enable it to endure a long scrutiny; I hope that those details could lead to meditation. Of course that would take more than a 5 second glance, which is all that most people will give to a picture.

If a painting costs as much as a two-week vacation most people are going to take the vacation. If you make 60 thousand and you walk into a gallery that is selling paintings for 2 thousand, you are

that. They can take that skill and even apply it to nature: what is God saying with this mountain, or this animal, that He made?

DH: Original art tends to be the province of the wealthy. Should Christians who are starting out in life budget for art?

not going to buy anything. The problem is that if someone wants to commit himself to being just a painter they have to sell 30 paintings at that rate just to make 30 thousand, since the gallery gets half of the sale. That is why I have given up on the dream of ever being just a painter. That also means I will make far fewer pictures over the course of my career.

I think every Christian needs some art on their walls.

I agree. Every Christian needs some art—original art, I would add—on their walls.

In 1982, the year after the Communist regimes in Central Europe collapsed, I had the opportunity to lecture at a conference which drew Christian leaders from Hungary, Romania, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, and Slovakia. Though I was one of the presenters, I have always felt that I received far more than I was able to give. One of my fondest memories from that trip was being welcomed into the homes (usually a flat) of Christians, often jammed with people eager to talk long into the night. The hospitality was generous and warm. The flat was often simple and, by American standards, small. It would be one of a myriad identical apartments in a huge, gray cement tower, one of many huge complexes of identical towers which are so characteristic of the housing provided by Marxist regimes. I found the towers ugly, a view shared by the people who lived in them. And depressing. Depressing, that is, until one of the identical gray, steel doors was opened to us. Inside there would be laughter, serious conversation, and art. Lots of art.

Time and again I was impressed with the original art that decorated the walls.

Often there was so much art that the walls were literally crowded with it.

I asked about it, and my hosts told me that the Marxists outlawed religious art, which was fine, they said, since much religious art sacrificed depth of meaning and aesthetic quality in order to get some agenda across. But art that tended to mystery, to the abstract, which used symbols provocatively, that was a different story. For one thing, it was beyond the Marxist censors, who often approved it because they didn't want to admit they didn't understand it. It was a way for Christians to remind one another that life had meaning even when their circumstances seemed so meaningless as to be beyond hope. And such art prompted conversations with non-Christians.

I asked how they could afford it, when life had been so hard under totalitarianism, and when often even the necessities of life were priced beyond their reach. They said they couldn't not afford it. For one thing, they were supporting fellow believers who had been called into the arts. For another, art nurtured the soul and so was not a luxury. It was a necessity, especially in a materialistic society.

DH: Judging by the "art" displayed in religious bookstores, your work will not achieve much popularity among Christians. Care to comment?

JD: Taste is a conditioned response. In high school I liked to read *Mad Magazine* until a teacher got me to read Herman Hesse. But being the pastor of people who sport Thomas Kinkade Bible covers has taught me that piety is not given in equal proportion to aesthetic preference.

Sadly the value of some truly great paintings has been diminished by the proliferation of that image. After marketing some of my paintings on cards and posters I have

heard from people who treasure them. But I never want to see one of my images on an umbrella or tote bag. Having the technology to reproduce imagery in any form is one of the most profound developments in the history of art. How we decide to use that technology will deeply affect the future of the human soul.

DH: Who were your mentors (models, heroes, etc) as a Christian? As an artist? What books or writers most shaped your imagination, thinking and life?

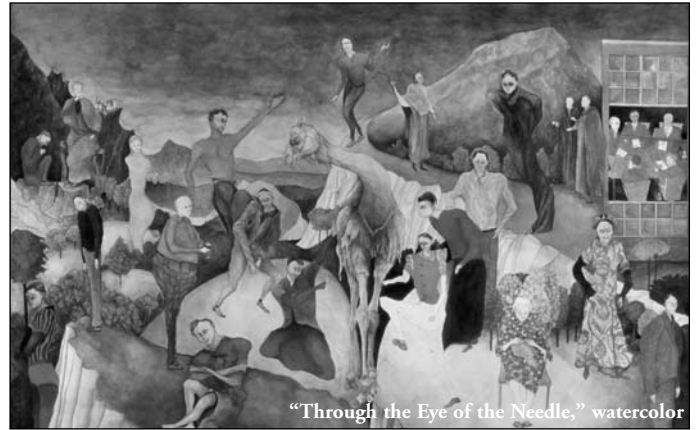
[Christians under Marxist regimes believed] art nurtured the soul and so was not a luxury. It was a necessity, especially in a materialistic society.

JD: I have never had a mentor; sounds like a great idea. Had it not been for Kant, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche I might never have read the Bible. St. Augustine impressed me with the honesty and depth of his writing. Reading his *Confessions* and *City of God* was what sent me on to seminary. The poetry of T.S. Eliot, the short stories of Tolstoy, *Doctor Faustus* by Mann, and *Zhivago* by Pasternak, all convinced me that the Christian faith had power.

As a painter, Klee, Picasso, and Chagall set me on my course.

DH: Many believers see the postmodern world as a dangerous place; what would you say to the parent whose artistically-gifted child yearns to pursue the arts?

JD: Every parent who gives their child a hockey stick puts them into danger. Life is a



"Through the Eye of the Needle," watercolor

risk. I think being an artist might be safer than being a lawyer. But anyone can betray themselves and God. Just like the parent who encourages their child to get good at baseball, the family that produces a budding artist needs to talk about a safety net. Very few are going to make it on art alone.

DH: Over the past several decades much work has been done in trying to encourage the development of a Christian mind among the people of God. What can discerning Christians do to nurture a Christian imagination?

JD: They should read the publications of Ransom Fellowship. I have used your ideas to get people thinking about discernment when they listen to the radio or watch TV. Personally I spend a lot of my post-modern life rejecting things that don't work. It's a lot of effort to fend off all the stuff that wants to suffocate our spirit. When by God's grace I find art and artists that trigger my imagination I feed on them like a starving man. There are prophets among us; it's just a lot harder to hear them.

continued on next page...

Paper and Canvas cont.

Christians who wonder how to address explicitly Christian themes without preaching would do well to attend a showing of Jim Disney's art. Here is a preacher whose art never preaches, yet it includes profoundly religious images without repulsing non-Christians. His paintings prompt people to stop, to think and wonder, while displaying a quiet authenticity which is deeply attractive. He is unabashed about the spirituality he holds dear, and his art is infused with a proper mysticism which speaks to the heart.

Margie and I attended a showing of Disney's art in Minneapolis. It was in a gallery tucked in an old building in the warehouse district of the city. Jim's work was hung in a hallway and central room, with another artist's work displayed in a room next to it. The other artist, a young postmodernist, painted "from within himself." Each canvas depicted a nightmare. The work was done competently—



"The Coward," egg tempera

the gallery owner is no slouch—and as I looked at it I was struck by the truth he portrayed. Indeed, within each of us, are nightmares birthed in the fallenness that permeates our being and which touches all we touch.

In the gallery that evening, two artists displayed their work. Both faced life with integrity, but only one helped us see beyond the brokenness. I thought the juxtaposition was perfect, and that Jim's work was displayed exactly where it

should be. Not in a safe, religious place, but in the middle of a broken world, where it can whisper of hope, hint at transcendence, and provoke us with symbols that get us thinking about the mystery and promise of spiritual reality. ■

~Denis Haack

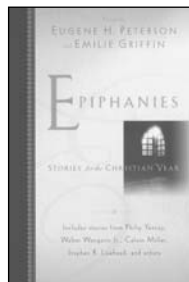
Editor's Note:

Those interested in contacting the artist about purchasing his art can do so by writing Rev. James Disney, P. O. Box 238, 302 Second Street NE, Buffalo, MN 55313 or by email (jdisney@bwig.net).

It goes without saying that the black and white images of Disney's work shown here do not do justice to his work. I hope you will take the time to log onto Ransom's website (www.RansomFellowship.org/R_Disney.html) where we have posted 18 images of his paintings, in color. You need to see his use of color, the subtle details worked into each painting, and the way he uses washes over such large portions of his canvas to such good effect. When you do log on, please don't hurry.

Briefly Noted: The Christian Year

by Denis Haack



We all mark time somehow. Perhaps our perception of the year is shaped primarily by the academic calendar, or by the demands of our work. As we read the Old Testament we hear God instructing his people to be sure that their perception of the year was shaped by grace, an ongoing series of feasts celebrating God's redemptive actions in history. Which is the same idea behind the Christian year, where time is marked by the grace of God in Christ and his Church. In this view the high point of the calendar is not vacation, but the resurrection celebrated at Easter.

In *Epiphanies*, some of the best Christian writers at work today provide stories designed to be read on the various holy days of the Christian calendar. The authors, who come from a variety of Christian traditions, include Philip Yancey, Virginia Stem Owens, Walter Wangerin, Luci Shaw, Eugene Peterson, Madeleine L'Engle, and Stephen Lawhead. Each brief story is a chance to see God's grace in a fresh way, to reflect more deeply on the meaning of God's actions and word celebrated that day. ■

Book reviewed: *Epiphanies: Stories for the Christian Year* edited by Eugene H. Peterson and Emilie Griffin (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books; 2003) 251 pp.

Untaming Scripture

One of the hazards of becoming familiar with the Scriptures is feeling we have a handle on what it says and means. We read the well-known texts and recycle old ideas that we've collected from sermons or books or from previous studies. It's not an entire waste, since the old ideas might actually be good ones. Still, it does render the Scriptures rather tame, though by definition God's word should be surprising, and fresh, and unsettling.

It is a great grace, then, when God raises up teachers who are able to help us see in fresh ways. Gifted interpreters who open our eyes with surprising insight into the Scriptures, especially into passages that we know best of all. Which is precisely what we find in *A Scandalous Beauty* when Thomas Schmidt allows us to listen in as he meditates on the death of Christ. He is a good storyteller, never preaching, yet allowing wisdom to surprise us in each of the ten brief chapters of this book.

One of the things I like best about *A Scandalous Beauty* is the way Schmidt uses insights from history to shed new light on the biblical story. For example, in "The Man Who Would be God," he shows how the narrative of the crucifixion recorded by Mark parallels the pagan procession that Nero and the other Caesars staged so that their subjects would consider them to be divine. Schmidt suggests the parallel is so tightly crafted that it can not be a coincidence. Mark is not only intentionally contrasting two alternative claims to divinity, he is casting the story of Christ's death in a form which would be readily recognized by his readers, and so would mock the empty pretensions of Caesar. This means that Mark 15:16-39 is not only an accurate record of the historical event around which all of history moves, it is also an imagina-

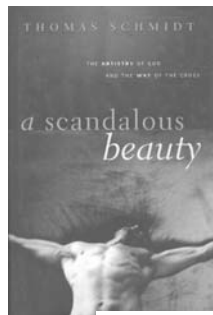
tive and subversive example of cultural engagement.

"Jesus Goes to Therapy" is a revealing and witty transcript of an encounter between a psychotherapist and Jesus. The conversation reveals how the modern mind can so easily miss the significance of Christ's life and death.

Psychotherapist: Let's move ahead to the climactic moment of pain for you, your famous cry from the cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' It surprises me that your followers would record this moment of weakness.

Jesus: Why? They recorded their own.

P: Yes, I suppose that was difficult for them, to show themselves as stumbling so much when, by the time the Gospels were written,



Schmidt is a good story-teller, never preaching, yet allowing wisdom to surprise us.

they were big shots.

J: They never acted like big shots. That is how they and those who followed them conquered an enormous police state without the use of force. Or even television.

P: Do I detect a little sarcasm?

J: Yes. I don't like television, especially around Easter when they show reruns of bad movies about me. Television is only a slightly dumber way than the Crusades and the Inquisition to keep millions of people from paying attention to the truth.

Another thing I like about this book is Schmidt's ability to recast old ideas in new forms in order to help us see with greater

clarity. In "God in the Garden," he muses on how God's voice might be heard in the very parts of life that we most ignore, in the interruptions which disappoint, or even inflict pain. That perhaps it is here that the still small voice can be heard. "He is speaking your name, calling you," Schmidt writes of such hard times, "whispering about peace and following and that something's got to give... to give... to give. You can't see him, and you can't hear him, maybe because he is so much larger and louder than your physical senses can comprehend."

It has been a long time since I have read anything which so moved me to worship and to want to spend unhurried time in Bible study. Only one chapter in *A Scandalous Beauty* raised questions in my mind, one in which Schmidt seeks to sketch a profile of the apostle Paul. Still, that is a minor criticism of a book that fired my imagination and became the source of rich readings in my private devotional worship.

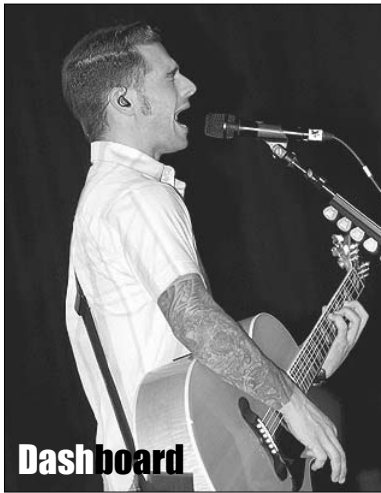
Schmidt is a scholar, a former professor of New Testament at Westmont College, who has mastered the ability to write winsomely for the average Christian. His explanations are clear and accessible, even when he helps us see something from the original Greek of the text. He is also someone for whom the cross represents not only the heart of Truth, but also the bright light of Beauty.

My suggestion would be to buy two copies. One to cherish, and one to give to someone you cherish. ■

~Denis Haack

Book reviewed: *A Scandalous Beauty: The Artistry of God and the Way of the Cross* by Thomas Schmidt (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press; 2002) 126 pp.

The Ghost of



My heart is yours to fill or burst or break or bury or wear as jewelry, whichever ever you prefer.

-Chris Carraba

Confes- sional's Straight Talk About Love and Loss

In a world without boundaries, relationships are leaving their scars. Sex has been disconnected from love. Living together divorced from marriage. Marriage no longer assumes heterosexuality. Traditional morality, as it bears on contemporary relationships, is rarely given a second thought. These are confusing times for teenagers, college students, and twenty-somethings. Only one constant remains: the longing and the loss.

Pop music has been filled with anger and lust. But a deeply personal and human side of music has emerged in an arty offshoot of hardcore punk called emo, which has emerged as an important force in underground rock. This past year emo went mainstream. It is today one of the most widespread and hottest musical genres in the contemporary rock scene. *Spin* magazine named emo the "Music Trend of the Year." Of their top 40 "Best Albums of the Year," emo-oriented bands had four of the top spots (The Jealous Sound at #39; Brand New at #35; Dashboard Confessional at #17; and Thursday at #7). It is, in the words of one music-critic, "post-millennial punk's very own version of Paul Simon."

"Emo" is short for emotional. Emo is emotionally-charged punk rock that focuses on the affairs of the heart or the personal situations that propel self-pity and melancholy. It's about loneliness, longing, and loss. "The newfound popularity of emo is most likely a backlash against the garbage being force fed to us by radio and the media. It's a perfect alternative for anyone who's sick of boybands, formula Hip-Hop, Alterna-Metal and/or Grunge," writes Chad Kempfert in *Alternative Music*. Groups such as Weezer, Get Up Kids, Jimmy Eat World, Thursday, and Dashboard Confessional are making human connections out of the shared experience of

relational heartache. And if their popularity is any indication, heartache abounds.

Dashboard Confessional's third album, *A Mark, A Mission, A Brand, A Scar* entered the charts this year at #2. Chris Carraba, songwriter/singer of Dashboard has become the poet laureate of emo. The name of the group, Dashboard Confessional, suggests two images: driving alone, thinking or driving with a friend and having a deep conversation. The child of divorce and an absent father, Carraba grew up in Boca Raton, Florida as an introverted, introspective, sensitive, cautious loner. Today at 27, he has overcome severe stage fright to give nightly performances of gut-wrenching vulnerability and honesty. In a world of corporate spin and image packaging, Carraba is the North Star of emotional authenticity. "After years of post-modern irony, camp, and nobody in rock 'n' roll meaning anything they say," writes Jim DeRogatis about emo, "these groups are not only daring to share what they feel are truths, they're striving to share them with poetic flair." Carraba's songs are autobiographical and poignant so that they are able to connect with similar experiences and emotions of his fans. "The feelings felt awkward and strange and lonely and mine exclusively, so I didn't think anyone would embrace it," he told Megan Finnerty. "Now I have to hold myself to that standard. It's pretty draining, but shouldn't it be? It's not easy for me to be so glaringly honest... which might be why I'm so passionate, because I really have to work to make that come across." Emo fans are in touch with their emotions. They cry at concerts. Those who are not in touch with their feelings despise them—"whining wimps" is a fairly common description.

What do we make of the commercial emo movement? First, we would have to say that it is an improvement over Hip-Hop's misogynist tendencies and hardcore's celebratory anger. "When people are devoting themselves to soulless pop, it's good to see something, anything, relating to kids on a gut level," writes Dan Miller, in his article "In Defense of Emo." Christian music critic Walter Mueller observes, "Dashboard Confessional never

a Good Thing

objectifies women. The music world is littered with artist and performers who virtually and lyrically denigrate women to the level of sexual objects. Absent is a respect for the personhood of individual females created in the image of God.” While this is true, and emo shuns the male-oriented booty shaking lyrics, Dashboard Confessional does expose the weaknesses of contemporary relationships. If pain is an indication that something is physically wrong with one’s body, then chronic psychological scars are indications that something is terribly wrong with contemporary dating. A closer look at Dashboard’s latest CD uncovers some telling contemporary attitudes toward sex, love and relationships.

First, love means more than sex. *A Mark, A Mission, A Brand, A Scar* begins with the song “Hands Down” with a couple musing on life and love after a night of lovemaking.

*Breathe in for luck, breathe in so deep
This air is blessed, you share with me.*

*This night is wild, so calm and dull,
These hearts they race from self-control...*

*The words are hushed, let’s not get busted.
Just lay entwined here, undiscovered.*

*Safe in here, from all the stupid questions.
“Hey did you get some?”
Man that is so dumb.*

Sex is more than a score. It is signal of transcendence. It points to the spiritual nature of our beings. These lyrics suggest that there is something more than mere appetites involved.

Second, sex does not wait for love. Just as “hearts race from self-control,” so too, sings Carraba, “there is no sense in waiting.”

*This is easy as lovers go.
So don’t complicate it by hesitating.
This is wonderful as loving goes.
This is tailor-made, what’s the sense of waiting...*

*You’ve got wits, you’ve got looks,
you’ve got passion,
but are you brave enough to leave
with me tonight?*

Sex has been disconnected from commitment—and unquestionably from the permanent, life-long commitment of marriage. Such a view is a foreign concept and even more a foreign experience to a growing number of young adults.

Third, love is qualified by distrust. The taken-for-granted assumption of relationships is that permanence is an impossible goal. All that is certain is loneliness and betrayal. In “Carve Your Heart Out Yourself,” Carraba decries the *a priori* assumptions of lovers. Afraid of being hurt, we guard ourselves against high expectations.

*Carve your heart out yourself.
Hopelessness is your cell.
Since you’ve drawn out these lines,
Are you protected from trying times?*

*Man it takes a silly girl
to lie about the dreams she has.
But lord, it takes a lonely one to wish
that she had never dreamt at all...*

*Oh you’re so sure
that I’ll be leaving in the end,
you’re treating me like I’m already gone.*

Our hearts are not designed for serial relationships. With each, we lose a part of ourselves, and with the ensuing scars make it harder to experience what God intended in sex and love. Without the boundaries of permanence, we cannot truly give fully of ourselves. There is always something that must be held back. In the end, we squander the expectation and reality of true love.

Fourth, true love is ultimately an illusive dream.



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

The longings are real, the expectations an illusion. There is in emo that which is truly human. There is also the awareness of the existential absurdity of relationships themselves. They come pre-packaged with pain. The cynic leaves the wounds to form scars. The romantic picks the scabs and lets them bleed. As Carraba sings, "If you can't leave it be, might as well make it bleed." Sadly, he acknowledges that seeking love is nothing more than chasing a ghost.

*Maybe it's love but it's like you said...
Love is like a role that we play.*

But you're chasing the ghost of a good thing.

*Haunting yourself, as the real thing
is getting away from you again,*

while you're chasing ghosts.

There is something deeply human in the words and music of Chris Carraba. He touches something in our hearts that is real. We dare not lose these longings for they point to the source of love. Our problem is not that we are too romantic, but that we are not romantic enough. Such was C.S. Lewis' warning that we are too easily pleased. True love orders its longings within created boundaries and grounds its expectations in the One who is Love Himself. Casual sex, serial relationships, a community of shared heartbreak—are all symptoms of true longings. It is best to acknowledge first that which is truly human before pointing to the problems and solutions. This is worth remembering the next time

we are driving with a friend who begins his or her dashboard confession. ■

~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 © 2004 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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