

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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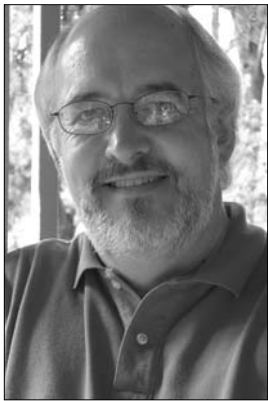
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Editor's Note



The Discerning Life

In the November 2002 issue of *Perspectives*, Nicholas Wolterstorff gave his definition of a "Reformed lifestyle." That's not a term we use in these pages, but the concept is something that is at the heart of the vision

animating Ransom's ministry. We would prefer to use terms such as a discerning lifestyle, or a biblically faithful lifestyle, but Wolterstorff's definition is worth pondering with care:

"It's a style of life that gives prominence to the conviction that God is creator; hence it is that we give thanks to God for the goodness that surrounds us. Secondly, it incorporates a deep and powerful sense of the fallenness of all things, understood in such a way that there is a strong impulse to resist all attempts to draw lines in the sand, with the explanation that human fallenness occurs on this side of the line and not on that side of the line. Fallenness runs throughout our entire existence—indeed, through the cosmos. Corresponding to this comprehensive view of sin is then an equally comprehensive view of faith and salvation... In short, I think that at the heart of the Reformed tradition is a passion for totality, for wholeness, for integrity, for not allowing life to fall into bits and pieces but to constantly ask, 'What does my faith—what does the gospel of Jesus Christ—have do with this and what does it have to do with that?' And then never being content with the answer, 'Nothing!'"

This is a bracing vision, an exciting calling, but it is also daunting. If nothing lies outside the realm of Christ's Lordship, if everything in life tends to fall into bits and pieces, and if there is so very much in life and culture about which we must ask how it relates to the gospel, we can be easily overwhelmed by the pure extent of what a

discerning lifestyle includes. Life is busy, and growing busier, and in the midst of that busyness we can wonder if a discerning lifestyle is possible in any meaningful sense of the term. It can feel like trying to swim when we've been caught in the undertow.

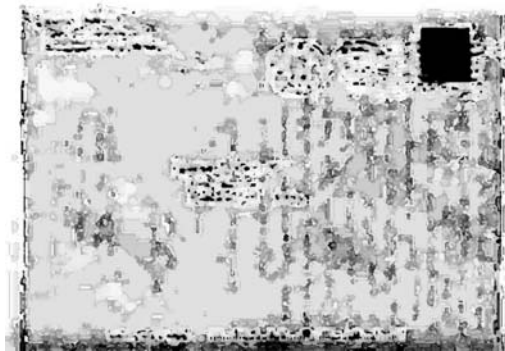
Truth be told, it is only God's grace that is sufficient to keep us from becoming cynical, or burned out, or discouraged. Thankfully, a discerning lifestyle is to be lived in community, which means I am not responsible for everything, but merely to be faithful in my particular calling. Learning from one another, hearing a word of encouragement, being accountable, and knowing we aren't all alone is a precious gift. And a living community of grace, even though never perfect, is also the most powerful argument for the existence of God.

And thankfully there is prayer. In the press of busyness and the challenge of one more bit to engage with the gospel, prayer can be one of the first things that is pushed out of our schedule. Yet, of what value is our gospel if we do not demonstrate a commitment to spend unhurried time before the face of the personal God whose existence we wish to demonstrate? The task of being discerning in an increasingly pluralistic world will overwhelm us if we don't know what it means to live, day by day, in active dependence on God.

Both community and prayer are costly. They are also indispensable parts of what we mean when we commend a discerning lifestyle. And they are precious graces in an overwhelming world. ■

—Denis Haack

Dialogue



Re: Theater and Epistemology

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

I was intrigued by an article on technologyreview.com re: Christians doing media, and it pointed me to your site.

Taproot Theatre Company is a theatre founded by Christians but working in and serving the mainstream theatre going public in Seattle and the region around us. A good portion of our audience are believers, but our marketing is in the daily press and we're a professional theatre alongside the many in Seattle.

We publish an e-letter to pastors for each mainstage production. After years of letters from people who react to language and other trivial issues, we decided to create a piece that would prompt discernment skills, intelligent conversation, growth in arts appreciation and a better integration of biblical concepts applied to a contemporary world.

I'm sure this sounds familiar to you—glad to see someone else taking on the rest of the culture.

Scott Nolte
Taproot Theatre Company
Seattle, WA

I wanted to tell you a fun story related to a book reviewed in the last issue of *Critique* [#2 - 2004]

I was at a brunch a few weeks ago at our kids' school and was engaged in a discussion with another parent and one of our middle school teachers about the International Baccalaureate program at one of Pittsburgh's city high schools.

Since many of our students go on from PUCS to this particular high school, my ears perked up as this mom described the IB program (www.ibo.org) and a certain class the kids have to take called "Theory of Knowledge." Basically, the class is a mini-philosophy class that explores the topic "how do we know what we know?"

Admittedly, I was a little nervous just

thinking about my kid participating in a class about a topic loaded with as many land mines as this one. (Not to even mention the possibility that it could be led by some "enlightened" teacher with hostile, anti-Christian beliefs in his / her arsenal of rhetoric.)

I often think that these types of opportunities are great for kids to process through while still at home, BUT we often feel ill-prepared to guide them in the process (particularly in a topic area such as "theory of knowledge"!)

Well, I didn't have to wait long for an answer as one came FOUR days later when I received *Critique* in the mail. WHAT did my faithless eyes behold, but a review by you on a book about developing a Christian perspective on ... of all things ... PHILOSOPHY OF KNOWLEDGE!

The book? *Longing to Know* by Esther Lightcap Meek. (I also very much enjoyed Dr. Meek's article called "Longing to Know ... and Movies.")

Truly, He hears my concern before I even voice it. This wonderful parenting resource was on its way to my mailbox before I ever knew that I had need of it.

I just wanted to offer some encouragement to keep doing what you do!

Becky Wimer
Pittsburgh, PA

Low Prices at

The need to be discerning is not limited to certain topics, but must be pursued into every nook and cranny of our lives. The reason is that the pernicious effects of the Fall have permeated all of life and culture, so nothing can be taken for granted or assumed to be pure and undefiled on this side of the Consummation. Christ asserts his Lordship over not just part of created reality, but over all that was, is, and is to be.

It is easy to recognize the need to be discerning when something in our pluralistic world surprises or shocks us, or when a challenge or question is raised for which we are uncertain how to respond. Still, there are all sorts of things that aren't shocking or surprising, and about which we might feel quite certain, but about which we still need to be discerning. An example would be the assumptions and values that we haven't so much adopted

consciously, as absorbed unconsciously from family, friends, or culture. We may rarely examine these assumptions and they usually seem so self-evident as to appear obviously true. Examining them can be threatening, and can also provoke strong reactions in our friends since culture warriors on both the left and the right have laid claim to the various assumptions, so that anyone who raises questions about them is automatically identified as being in the enemy camp. Still, if we are more interested in being faithful as Christians than in preserving our liberal or conservative credentials, we will insist on the need to reflect biblically on all of life and culture.

One cultural assumption that seems so self-evident as to be beyond question is the notion that finding the lowest price for a product is always the best strategy. Assuming no difference in quality, the company offering the lowest price is the

company which should get our business. It may take time to find the lowest price, but on larger purchases it is always worthwhile, and stores which consistently offer the best price deserve our loyalty. Though we may not be able to find a text of Scripture which directly teaches it, that hasn't stopped Christians from providing biblical support to this notion. Saving money by shopping at such stores is good stewardship, so that our resources are used wisely, and more will be available to serve our needy world. Paying more than we need to pay is wasteful, and when the Lord returns we'll be asked to account for how we stewarded the limited and precious resources with which he blessed us.

The lowest price always represents the best purchase. Seems self-evident—but is it? Consider this: in a fallen world, brokenness permeates the economic system in which we live as readily as it per-

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial reaction to this exercise? What does this say about your cultural assumptions? About your understanding of your faith and its implications?
2. How would you define the evangelical left? The evangelical right? Where do you tend to find yourself on this political/economic continuum? Why? What difference does it make?
3. To what extent do Christians in the same small group need to come to identical conclusions on an issue like this? How much diversity is possible on such issues before the fellowship of the community is disrupted? How should we cherish such diversity? How can we remain sensitive to one another's conscience and convictions while continuing to disagree?
4. What further information do you need to gather about Wal-Mart before you would be justified to reach conclusions on this issue? What plans should you make?
5. To what extent are you confident that you hold a distinctly biblical perspective on economics? On social justice? How do you know? When was the last time you read a thoughtful, scholarly book on the topic? What plans should you make?
6. Since it is true that Wal-Mart provides goods at a price the poorest members of society can more easily afford, does this outweigh any negative effects that their policies produce? Why or why not? Since outsourcing production overseas increases employment in some of the poorest countries in the world, could the grief of lost jobs in America be offset by a greater good when jobs leave the country? How should we respond to this economic reality?

Questions continued on next page...

a High Cost?

meates every other sphere of cultural life. Is it possible in a fallen world for the lowest price to come, at least at times, at too high a cost? Can the lowest price ever be unjust?

Consider the case of Wal-Mart. It is the largest retailer in the world, and the largest company. In 2002, Wal-Mart had \$244.5 billion in sales—which is more business than Target, Sears, K-Mart, J. C. Penney, Safeway, and Kroger combined. The second largest retailer is Home Depot, but Wal-Mart does more business in three months than Home Depot does in a year. On the one hand, being this huge means that Wal-Mart can buy and sell in such huge quantities that it can offer lower prices. On the other hand, lower prices are Wal-Mart's goal, so the store's vendors are required to lower their prices each year, even if their costs rise. "There is no question," Charles Fishman writes, "that Wal-Mart's relentless drive to squeeze out costs has benefitted consumers... There is also no question

that doing business with Wal-Mart can give suppliers a fast, heady jolt of sales and market share. But that fix can come with long-term consequences for the health of a brand and a business... Wal-Mart wields its power for just one purpose: to bring the lowest possible prices to its customers. At Wal-Mart, that goal is never reached. The retailer has a clear policy for suppliers: On basic products that don't change, the price Wal-Mart will pay, and will charge shoppers, must drop year after year. But what almost no one outside the world of Wal-Mart and its 21,000 suppliers knows is the high cost of the low prices. Wal-Mart has the power to squeeze profit-killing concessions from vendors. To survive in the face of its pricing demands, makers of everything from bras to bicycles to blue jeans have had to lay off employees and close U.S. plants in favor of outsourcing products from overseas... Of course, U.S. companies have been moving jobs offshore for decades, long before

Wal-Mart was a retailing power. But there is no question that the chain is helping accelerate the loss of American jobs to low-wage countries such as China." (In 2002, Wal-Mart purchased \$12 billion in goods from China, representing almost 10% of all American imports from that country.)

All of which raises a discernment exercise for Christians: is it possible for low prices to come at too high a cost in social justice? If the answer is Yes, what should we then do? And if we say No, where does injustice enter our understanding of our economic life? ■

~Denis Haack

Sources:

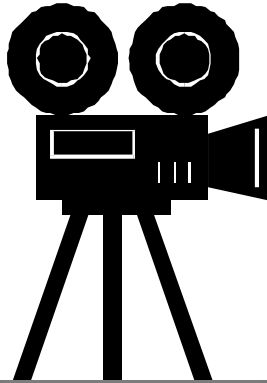
"The Wal-Mart You Don't Know" by Charles Fishman in *Fast Company* (December 2003) pp. 68-73. "The High Cost of Wal-Mart's Low Prices" by Martin Marty in *Context* (April 2004, Part B) quoting from the January 2004 *U.S. Catholic*.

...QUESTIONS CONTINUED

7. *Forbes* regularly lists the world's wealthiest people, and according to them 5 of the top 10 richest Americans are members of the Walton family (Sam Walton was the founder of Wal-Mart). *Forbes* figures the Walton family fortune at more than \$102 billion. Yet, many full-time Wal-Mart employees are paid a low enough wage that they qualify for welfare. Many new stores are built only after Wal-Mart has received tax incentives by both state and local governments, and it is not uncommon for smaller stores in a community to go out of business once Wal-Mart opens its doors. Is there anything in this that is unjust? Why or why not? If Wal-Mart increased the pay of its 1.4 million employees by merely \$1/hour, the total cost represents 1/40th of the Walton family's 2003 net worth. Would such a thing be too much to ask?
8. If you conclude that Wal-Mart's policies are unjust, how should you respond? If you decide they are not unjust, are you comfortable with your brothers and sisters taking actions in the name of Christ with which you do not agree?
9. If you conclude that business cycles are a natural part of the flow of economics in a fallen world, what responsibility do we have as Christians towards neighbors who lose their jobs or businesses when Wal-Mart comes to town? Do we have a greater responsibility towards those who claim to be Christians in this predicament? Why or why not?
10. Since the world of business, economics, and the marketplace plays such a huge role in our lives—in terms of finances, time, and energy—is sufficient attention given it in the church? In our small groups? Why or why not?
11. Can Christian stewardship require us to choose to spend more on purchases at locally owned family businesses rather than at outlets of large corporations? Why or why not? When church members disagree on this issue, can the community give them the freedom to follow their conscience without feeling guilty while spending church funds?

The Darkened Room

What's In a Name?



A review of *Mystic River*

by Drew Trotter

In the opening frames of *Mystic River*, the most recent in a long line of philosophical films by Clint Eastwood, three boys, looking for something to do after losing their street hockey ball down a Boston south side storm drain, bend over a block of wet cement. Their ringleader, Jimmy Markum, eggs on his two companions, Sean Devine and Dave Boyle, in order to get them to join him in writing their names. “Our names will be there forever,” he says. An idle comment, made in a moment of aimless wandering by boys too young to know what matters, defines three trajectories in life that will reap huge consequences for all three, and forces us to reconsider our own lives and the moments that at the time seem so common and unexceptional, but in fact mark out the separate roads we journey forever, and irreversibly.

As the boys are writing their names, two men drive up, and, posing as police, accuse the boys of vandalism. Within moments they have taken Dave with them, terrorizing him with four days of sexual abuse, before he escapes. The film flashes forward twenty-five years where Markum (Sean Penn), Devine (Kevin Bacon) and Boyle (Tim Robbins) all still live in the working-class neighborhood. Markum, once a small-time hood, now owns a neighborhood grocery, has three daughters and a wife, and, though filled with a nervous anger, appears to have gone straight. Devine, a homicide detec-

tive whose marriage has recently crumbled, receives strange phone calls from his wife in which she simply sits on the other end of the line, waiting for him to speak. Boyle, “marginally employed” as one reviewer put it, still shows the signs of his brutal, childhood experience: with hunched shoulders, he ambles through life, hearing the wolves.

The three friends have drifted apart over the years, separated by either guilt for not being the one taken, or shame at being the one who was. The murder of Markum’s older daughter throws them back together, and events unfold that force them to deal with the horror which continues to haunt each of them. Full of questions and devoid of answers, *River* broods and boils with rage, anxiety, helplessness and despair. Critics uniformly recognize its lyrical despondency. David Edelstein, writing in *Slate*, relates that the movie’s mood and tempo suggest “a certain tragic inevitability that flows grimly, relentlessly, toward us.” Roger Ebert is equally bleak: “The movie is about more than the simple question of guilt. It is about pain spiraling down through the decades, about unspoken secrets and unvoiced suspicions.”

Eastwood has forged a reputation as a “daring auteur with a strong moral vision” (Edelstein, though in disagreement with this prevailing sentiment). His thrillers (*Play Misty For Me*, 1971), mystical westerns (*High Plains Drifter*, 1973; *Pale Rider*, 1985; and the Academy Award winning *Unforgiven*, 1992), war movies (*Heartbreak Ridge*, 1986) and crime capers (*A Perfect World*, 1993) never stray far from the edge of Kierkegaard’s abyss. In *Mystic River*, from the opening helicopter shot, he takes us down into a commonplace neighborhood of Irish urban Boston and

Film Credits

Starring:

Sean Penn

(Jimmy Markum)

Tim Robbins

(Dave Boyle)

Kevin Bacon

(Sean Devine)

Laurence Fishburne

(Whitey Powers)

Marcia Gay Harden

(Celeste Boyle)

Laura Linney

(Annabeth Markum)

Kevin Chapman

(Val Savage)

Director:

Clint Eastwood

Based on the novel by:

Dennis Lehane

Screenwriter:

Brian Helgeland

Producers:

Bruce Berman
and others

Original Music:

Clint Eastwood

Cinematographer:

Tom Stern

Costume Designer:

Deborah Hopper

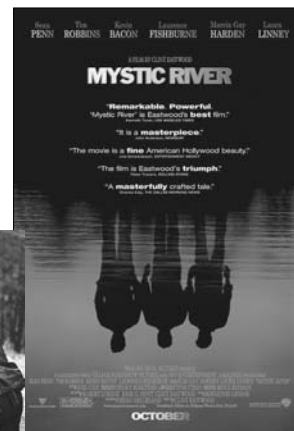
Runtime: 137 minutes

Rated R for language and
violence

shows us life in America, the complex land of lofty, immigrant dreams and dark, tragic realities.

Perhaps the theme lying closest to the surface in *River* is that of the awful inevitability of life. When the boys write their names, Dave's is never finished; the camera comes back to this spot at the end of the film, reinforcing the idea that some experiences never reach the end of their terrible consequences, robbing some people, for reasons known only to God and fate, of ever having a whole life. With passionate performances by the entire cast, the characters, who are sometimes fully formed in only five minutes of screen time, bleed the inevitable tragedy of life in a meaningless universe onto the screen with an emotional power not seen since *Chinatown*. Sean Penn and Tim Robbins deserved their awards, but Kevin Bacon,

Laura Linney, and Marcia Gay Harden just as fully merit applause for their contributions to Eastwood's vision, as do Brian Helgeland for his imaginative script and those responsible for



With passionate performances by the entire cast, the characters, who are sometimes fully formed in only five minutes of screen time, bleed the inevitable tragedy of life in a meaningless universe onto the screen with an emotional power not seen since Chinatown.

the cinematography, lighting, sets and music of this nearly perfect film.

This vision is not without its theological note. Over and over again, Eastwood's camera either tilts upward from a scene of heart-wrenching tragedy to a sun-lit sky, pleading with heaven to make sense of the senselessness of life's terrible contradic-

tions, or shoots from the abstract, bird's eye view, coldly observing the travails of men and women below, as their hopes are crushed and their certainties spun into powerless disarray. One scene, rapidly becoming the signature scene of the film, shows Markum being subdued by police as he struggles to get free to see if it is his daughter who lays dead in the park. As Penn wails at the skies, Eastwood cuts from a ground level, "normal" view to a high angle shot from directly above the teeming, chaotic scene. Zooming slowly away, as the police wrestle Penn to the ground, the camera presents God—and us, the viewers, in His place—as helplessly retreating, distantly examining the anguished writhings of the human condition. God, if He exists, just doesn't care.

And lest there be no mistake about the extent of Eastwood's despondency reaching to, if not focusing on, historic Christianity, the movie has a number of frontal assaults on that best image of the faith among Irish, working-class Bostonians—the Roman Catholic Church. From the opening scene where one of the two pedophiles is ostentatiously presented as a priest, through the mocking joy of the

continued on next page...

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Is the view of God that this reviewer has seen in *Mystic River* in accord with how you saw the film's vision? Why, or why not?
2. Where did you find artistic excellence most fully revealed in the film? What other technical achievements did you find exceptional? Why?
3. Which scene moved you most and why?
4. Roger Ebert wrote about this film that "it is very much about the private loyalties of husbands and wives." What do you think he meant? The Laura Linney character has been likened to Lady Macbeth (her name in the film is Annabeth). Do you think this association is valid? Why, or why not?
5. The review finds "inevitability" as a major theme of the film. What theological issues does this idea touch on? How are those portrayed in the film? What experiences in your own life have had a quality of "inevitability" about them? How do you understand these events from a Christian perspective?
6. With which character did you most fully identify? Why?
7. Some reviewers have remarked that the plot of the film seems almost secondary to its characterizations. Do you agree? Why, or why not?

The Darkened Room cont.

first communion of Markum's youngest daughter while his oldest daughter's murder is being discovered outside in the "real" world, through to the end of the film where Jimmy rages against the inevitability of his guilt resulting in violence, the Catholic communion is made to be the root of all evil, offering false hope and spreading violent cruelty to its helpless victims.

As if this visual and narrative condemnation were not enough, the dialogue of the film supports this sardonic view of life. Devine, when he is sure that the dead girl is Markum's daughter, muses "What am I going to tell him? God said you owed another marker, and came to collect?" and at another point simply shrugs and says, "I'm tired of wishing things made sense." Penn, who packs every scene with an intensity and largeness of purpose that makes his one of the great performances in recent memory, stands over his daughter's body in the morgue, and after vowing to get her murderer, says resignedly, "I know in my soul I contributed to your death; I just don't know how." In the climactic scene of revenge, he sprinkles confessional metaphors about penance and guilt into his rambling, distraught speech, as events move toward their dreadful conclusion.

So what do we as Christians take away from this two and a half hours



The excellence with which *Mystic River* accomplishes its artistic presentation should be a fierce, painful goad, prodding Christian artists...to set standards that are ever higher and higher and to endure the pain it takes to reach them.



plus of despair and hopeless gloom? First, as always with a film that offers no way of



escape, we can rejoice that false optimism is rejected. Christians believe that apart

from the stability and purpose we find in our redemptive faith, there is no other, and that the truth, which best helps one to find that divinely offered meaning, is that which proclaims humankind as alone and desperately lost without Christ. Secondly, a film like *Mystic River* can be a stimulus to us to weep afresh for the sins that have caused the alienation and disaster mankind experiences everyday, whether on the streets of Boston or in the mountains of the Sudan. We don't hate evil enough, least of all the evil resident in our own hearts. Lastly, the excellence with which *Mystic River* accomplishes its artistic presentation should be a fierce, painful goad, prodding Christian artists—and those of us

whose "art" is simply living beautifully before God—to set standards that are ever higher and higher and to endure the pain it takes to reach them. God help us as we seek to present His gift of joyful redemption as masterfully as the director, cast and myriad artists who contributed to *Mystic River* presented their vision. ■

~Drew Trotter

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

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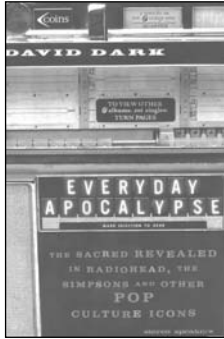
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Eyes Not Left Behind

David Dark teaches English in Nashville, Tennessee, and so is in a good position to tell us we don't know the correct meaning of "apocalypse." We think it means something about the future, predictions of how everything will end, and so is a story filled with fire and judgment and chaos. Not so, he replies. It's about "revealing," or an "epiphany" whereby the deeper meaning of things is suddenly made clear to us. It's when we have eyes to see past the mere surface of things to a deeper significance which comes from the fact that things are related to God's purposes in creation and redemption. "As a literary genre," N. T. Wright says in *The New Testament and the People of God*, "apocalyptic" is a way of investing space-time events with their theological significance; it is actually a way of affirming, not denying, the vital significance of the present continuing space-time order, by denying that evil has the last word in it."

In *Everyday Apocalypse* Dark first corrects our understanding of the term, and then helps us, chapter by chapter, to look with opened eyes at selected parts of popular culture. It is obvious he has his finger on the pulse of our postmodern world, because his selections reveal an ability to ignore the spin of the marketplace and get to things that matter. He takes us to the fiction of Flannery O'Connor, the cartoon satire of *The Simpsons*, the music of Radiohead and Beck, films like *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show*, and the cinematic vision of Joel and Ethan Coen. In each case he helps us see why these artifacts



of popular culture resonate so powerfully in the hearts, minds, and imaginations of the post-modern generation. And in the process Dark teaches us to see.

Since our doing is always linked inextricably to the way we see things, Dark also warns that refusing to see doesn't just decrease our appreciation for

"When we refuse to look apocalyptically, our lives become bored, depressed, and mean."

things, but deforms our ability to be faithful. "When we refuse to look apocalyptically, our lives become bored, depressed, and mean," he writes. "We also find it difficult to think or imagine beyond ourselves or whatever we term the 'interests' of our own family, friends, and culture. Going to the trouble of wondering what it might be like to exist outside of the class or country within which we happen to have been born becomes a task we wouldn't

dream of undertaking even as we resent the suggestion that we should. This is what my colleague, Thomas Hayes, calls a 'selective fundamentalism.' We choose our die-hard stands to suit our lifestyles and our prejudices. Our absolute truths and values, our nonnegotiables, conveniently coincide with whatever lives we're already living and whatever decisions we've already made. The apocalyptic mind will resist surrendering to this tendency while noting that it's an imprisonment to which we are born. Being disabused of this surrounding insanity is a big part of what 'being saved' will mean."

Everyday Apocalypse is not always easy reading, but it is always worth reading. We recommend it to you, both for learning how to have eyes that see, and for the chance to listen in as David Dark looks at our world. ■

~Denis Haack

Book reviewed: *Everyday Apocalypse: The Sacred Revealed in Radiohead, the Simpsons and Other Pop Icons* by David Dark (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press; 2002) 156 pp. + notes.

Briefly Noted: Intelligent Design



The Intelligent Design (ID) movement has raised a host of questions, and *The Design Revolution* answers 44 of them. For those unfamiliar with it, ID is the science which argues that nature includes clear evidence of having been designed by some intelligence. It says, for example, that Mount Rushmore gives evidence of design which can be examined scientifically, so that even if we knew nothing of the site's history we would conclude the formation is not simply the result of erosion. Some of the questions Dembski addresses are: How does ID differ from scientific creationism? Why must any scientific theory that aims to detect design be probabilistic? Is ID testable? Is Darwinism testable? If nature exhibits design, who or what designed the designer? What's a scientist interested in ID supposed to do by way of scientific research? Those interested in the movement will be interested in this book, and those who have questioned ID's veracity will need to read it. ■

Book recommended: *The Design Revolution: Answering the Toughest Questions About Intelligent Design* by William A. Dembski (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2004) 325 pp. + bibliography + index.

by Denis Haack

Biblical Poetry

How is *The Matrix* similar to the 23rd Psalm?

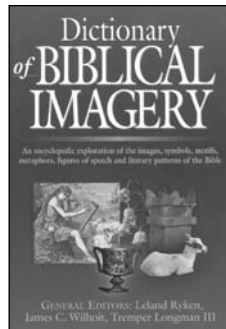
I do not mean to suggest that Neo, the messianic character in the film is similar to the shepherd of David's poem, nor that the sheep of the psalm are similar to Zion's huddling masses. I don't find either comparison very plausible or helpful. There is one way, however, in which Psalm 23 and *The Matrix* are so similar that understanding them correctly requires us to approach them identically. The similarity is not in their ideas but in their form as art. The psalm is a poem and the film is visual art, which means that both rely primarily on images and metaphors to communicate. Both communicate ideas, but not through tightly-woven arguments in which a series of premises and conclusions are presented in a carefully-constructed logical progression. Instead, David and the Wachowski brothers choose to communicate their ideas through images and metaphors which we are meant to inhabit and experience.

We've occasionally mentioned in these pages how Bible study skills and discernment skills tend to parallel one another, and this is a case in point. To state the obvious: Poetry is not the same as prose. We need to keep that in mind when we study the poetic sections of Scripture. And film, because it is a visual medium, is not the same as a philosophy lecture or a prose novel (even if it is based on the novel), and needs to be approached differently. Poetry and film share something in common: the use of metaphor and image as a primary means of creative expression.

For example, consider the well-known line from Ecclesiastes 1:2:

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanities of vanities! All is vanity.

Some translations substitute "meaningless" for "vanity," and others use "futility." The original Hebrew, however, is quite different: "Vapor of vapors." This is the language of poetry, an image which includes the notions of vanity, meaningless, and futility, but which also includes a great deal more. It is richer than the terms chosen by the translators, more nuanced and pro-



Treating poetry as if it were a prose argument, however, keeps us from entering into its full range of meaning.

found. "The poet expects us to let that image sink in," Leland Ryken says. "He wants us to recall our own experiences of vapor or mist. Then we transfer the meaning over to the subject of life, and when we do, the meanings are multiple. Vapor is transient and fleeting; it is insubstantial; it is elusive. All those meanings are important to the book of Ecclesiastes." Vapor is a term which requires us to meditate on the text, to live in it, so to speak, in order to make sense of it.

It can be tempting to reduce a psalm or other piece of biblical poetry to an idea or set of ideas, perhaps outlined as a series of propositions. Many of us tend to be more comfortable with prose than we are with poetry, partly because poetry takes time, which is something we have little of in our busy lives. Treating poetry as if it

were a prose argument, however, keeps us from entering into its full range of meaning.

Similarly, thoughtful films can not be reduced to an idea or even a set of ideas as if they were a journal article arguing for a particular position. Well-crafted films contain multiple layers and touch on themes in images that may only be hinted at in the dialogue. Reducing a movie to a "message" while failing to appreciate and receive the images which a film invites us to inhabit means that we will miss entering its world fully. In the movie, *13 Conversations About One Thing*, for example, glass and windows are repeated images throughout the film. Together with the lighting that is used, this image provides an added, crucial dimension to the questions raised by the characters whose lives we share in the unfolding story.

"Poetry is a *special* use of language," Ryken observes. "The first principle of poetry is the primacy of the image. An image is any word that names a concrete object or action. Poets speak in images and speak a language of images... Poets speak a language of images because they want readers to *experience* the content of their utterance *as image and concretion*, not simply as an idea. The meaning that literature conveys is affective, imaginative, and experiential as well as ideational. Literary critic Cleanth Brooks rightly claimed that a poem transacts its business of discourse 'by being an experience rather than any mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience.'" These images and metaphors in poetry—and in a visual form, in cinema—are powerful because they make us think; the fact that they may not be immediately comprehended

& Film

in a few simple words is part of their beauty and their effectiveness.

Ryken notes that “an image, metaphor, or simile usually embodies multiple meanings. Cleanth Brooks called the poetic image ‘a nexus or cluster of meanings.’ In Gerard Manley Hopkins’s line ‘The world is charged with the grandeur of God,’ the word *charged* has three simultaneous meanings: The world is *energized* by the grandeur of God, it has been entrusted with the task of declaring the grandeur of God as a *charge* or responsibility, and the grandeur of God presses itself upon the world like the forward thrust or *charge* of an army. It is the glory of the poetic image to compress multiple meanings in such small compass. I know of no literary scholar who would not reject out of hand an edition of Hopkins’s poem in which the opening line reads, ‘The world is energized with the grandeur of God,’ thereby eliminating the other legitimate meanings of the word *charged*.”

Christians are often uncomfortable with ambiguity, wanting truth that is clean, clear, and undisputed. Because we are concerned about objective truth rather than subjective impressions, we don’t like Bible studies where every member of the group takes something different away from the text. And there is something to be said for this desire, to the extent that we mean that the meaning of a text of Scripture (or that of a film, for that matter) isn’t entirely up for grabs as if every interpretation were equally valid. Obviously, every interpretation isn’t equally valid. On the other hand, we mustn’t allow this to keep us from appreciating and embracing the richly

layered nature of image and metaphor in both poetry and the visual arts. Because every interpretation is not equally valid does not imply that the correct interpretation does not include a rich multiplicity of meanings.

It might surprise Christians to discover that, taken as whole, “the Bible

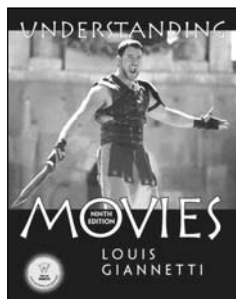
Christians are often uncomfortable with ambiguity, wanting truth that is clean, clear, and undisputed.

is much more a book of images and motifs than of abstractions and propositions.” As James Fischer notes, the Scriptures speak “largely in images... The stories, the parables, the sermons of the prophets, the reflections of the wise men, the pictures of the age to come, and interpretation of past events all tend to be expressed in images which arise

out of experience. They do not often arise out of abstract technical language.”

Developing skill in identifying, meditating on, and living in images and metaphor, then, is a skill that will deepen both our discipleship as students of Scripture and our discernment as those who can engage film creatively with the gospel. Two books that can help us grow are the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* and *Understanding Movies*. We recommend them both, and encourage discussion groups to intentionally set out to develop these skills together as the people of God in community. ■

~Denis Haack

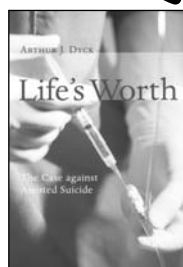


Sources:

The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation by Leland Ryken (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books; 2002) pp. 246-249. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* edited by Leland Ryken, James Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1998) p. xiii. *Understanding Movies, 9th edition* by Louis Giannetti (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall; 2001).

Briefly Noted: Helping to End it All

by Denis Haack



If you listen to the news with even one ear, you’ll know that physician assisted suicide remains a lively debate. When patients afflicted with clearly terminal illnesses request that their doctor help them die, is it not compassionate to grant them their wish? What is the point of refusing, if there is no possible hope for recovery, especially for those who find themselves alone and suffering in the final days of their lives? And if a physician refuses to help, should a friend do the deed? Arthur Dyck, an ethicist at Harvard, explores this difficult issue with thoroughness and great care, and says No to assisted suicide. Pain can be managed, thanks to modern medicine, and life must be cherished as precious. In *Life’s Worth* Dyck argues his position both in terms of philosophy and law, as well as in terms of Christian morality. The book is part of a series from The Center of Bioethics and Human Dignity (www.cbhd.org) and we recommend it. ■

Book reviewed: *Life’s Worth: The Case Against Assisted Suicide* by Arthur J. Dyck (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2002) 107 pp. + index.

Overfed but



"In many ways, Reality TV may be the best example of many characteristics of television in the future."

-Herb Terry¹

Reality TV is a major cultural phenomenon. Henry Jenkins, Director of the Comparative Media Studies

Program at MIT, describes Reality TV as "the 'killer app' of the age of media convergence." He means it integrates commercial TV with the internet, documentary with drama, tabloid journalism with hard news, and passive viewing along with audience participation. It is the most interesting thing to happen to television since the launch of MTV in the 1980s.

Reality TV is also wildly successful, described by media insiders as "Ratings Crack." Shows like *Survivor* and *The Bachelor* have achieved enormous commercial success garnering blockbuster ratings. Historically, Reality TV has cinematic roots in cinema verité as well as shows such as *Candid Camera*. But few expected the success or staying power of this TV format. It is now described as the "bellwether" of TV programming.

Reality TV exploits the petty desires of average people. Fame, fashion, and fortune are creatively packaged in modern versions of the Cinderella story. The average Joe marries the princess. The ugly duckling is transformed into a swan. The dragon is vanquished and the maiden saved. There is in their appeal both something deeply human as well as truly troubling. Our desires are real, powerful, and purposeful. Their aim is to point beyond to the source of all desire. And yet, like so much of modern life, Reality TV short cuts the process and makes the petty fulfillment the metaphysical goal of life. Theologian Cornelius Plantinga notes, "Human desire, deep and restless and seemingly unfulfillable, keeps stuffing itself with finite goods,

but these cannot satisfy. If we try to fill our hearts with anything besides the God of the universe, we find that we are overfed but undernourished, and we find that day by day, week by week, year after year, we are thinning down to a mere outline of a human being."

Overfed but undernourished. This is the essence of Reality TV and why its appeal is insatiable and its formats ever changing. Here are ten reasons why Reality TV has caught on with audiences and producers worldwide.

Appeal #1: Large audience, cheap costs.

First and foremost, Reality TV makes money for producers and delivers audiences for advertisers. TV in America is a commercial enterprise and the bottom-line is the bottom-line. A successful TV drama, such as *ER* or *Alias* cost approximately \$1 to \$1.5 million dollars per episode. In contrast, Reality TV programming ranges from \$150,000 to \$250,000 per episode. Gone are expensive scriptwriters and celebrity-filled casts. The cost/benefit ratio is skewed in favor of multiple Reality TV formats and controversial formats because the downside risks are greatly reduced.

Appeal #2: More airtime = more programming.

The second reason for the success of Reality TV is the dearth of good dramatic TV. Network TV is caught in a double bind. On one hand, the cost of producing a successful dramatic series is increasing, while the expansion of media outlets requires more and more programming. Faced with rising costs and the growing need for programming, Reality TV is a perfect fit. Moreover, with the ability to advertise a network's Reality TV show on other network programs, such as *Entertainment Tonight* or the *Today Show*, networks have found that they have an advantage over cable programming outlets.

Appeal #3: Customized audiences for advertisers.

Equally important, Reality TV has demonstrated the ability to deliver advertisers less fractionated audiences on shows like *Survivor* by assembling a broader cast. Casts can be carefully chosen by age,

The Appeal of Reality TV

Undernourished

gender, sexual preference, and race to fit the audience targeted by a given advertiser. "If film is a director's medium, and television drama is a writer's medium, Reality TV is without question a casting director's medium," claims Robert J. Thompson, a professor of television and popular culture at Syracuse University. "Fragmentation," adds Stacey Lynn Koerner from Initiative Media, "makes it harder for advertisers to appeal to a broad audience, so they are looking toward product placement and interactive viewing and purchasing. Reality TV allows us to understand at a basic level how viewers want to communicate with their television set, as well as the convergence of behavior with the internet." Reality TV offers the promise of a "family"-wide viewing audience.

Cost per episode, the need for programming, and the breadth of audience are the economic reasons for the format's success. There are additional reasons audiences find these shows appealing.

Appeal #4: Celebrities like me.

Perhaps the greatest reason Reality TV "works" is that our culture is obsessed with celebrities. We want to know about them (*The Osbournes*, *The Anna Nicole Show*), become like them (*Becoming*, *I Want A Famous Face*), or be with them (*The Simple Life*, *The Surreal Life*). Reality TV is based on the premise that anyone can become a celebrity. "We live in a world in which people are obsessed with the private lives of celebrities, and Reality TV takes the shortcut of making people celebrities based on their willingness to expose their private lives," writes Mark Andrejevic, associate professor of communication at the University of Iowa. Celebrities are modern culture's Greek gods and goddesses. They are the projection of our ideals and aspirations. Reality TV has made an industry of Andy Warhol's "fifteen minutes of fame." For major Reality TV shows, producers are forced to sort through 250,000 applicants and *Reality TV Casting Newsletter* gives tips to aspiring contestants about how to succeed in auditions.

Appeal #5: Rubbernecking Life.

Coupled with celebrity obsession is our growing acceptance of voyeurism. The prurient interest in the

private lives of others is being fed by the confluence of cultural attitudes and emerging technologies. Voyeurism can be defined, in a clinical sense, as having "over a period of at least six months, recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors involving the act of observing an unsuspecting person who is naked, in the process of disrobing, or engaging in sexual activity" (Diagnostic Criteria from DSM-IV). Voyeurism runs the gamut from the woman who peeks at her neighbor through the windows of her own home to the man who uses hidden mini-cams to videotape unsuspecting women.

Television has a natural affinity with voyeurism, and the advent of the internet expands the opportunity for supposedly anonymous voyeurism. Google the word "voyeur" and one has instant access to over 400,000 websites. The "peeping Tom" of Alfred Hitchcock's film, *Rear Window*, has lost its stigma as well as its association with perversion. And so the boundaries of appropriate public and private behavior blur. America is a nation of those who watch and are watched. From the bank ATM to the hidden camera in 7-11, we have become immune to the gaze of others, and so we gaze back with desensitized impunity. The premise of most Reality TV shows is based on some aspect of voyeurism—watching the private lives and emotions of others without being seen. The show *Big Brother* offers 24/7 internet streaming. On a Dutch edition of the show a couple had sex for all viewers to watch. In a Spanish edition, TV viewers control which camera is on at any given time. Lisa Bernard of *TV Guide* remarks, "You know, they're like car wrecks— [Reality TV shows] appeal to titillation."

Appeal #6: Embracing the Absurdity of Life.

An often-cited appeal of Reality TV is its latent unpredictability. While the situations are scripted



by
Dr.
David
John
Seel,
Jr.

and the contestants carefully cast, no one can finally predict the outcome of any given show, even the producers. “It’s just like high school,” explains a college coed who is a regular viewer of the format. “Everything is so dramatic.” Joel Betts, a participant on *Australian Survivor*, adds “[W]atching a real event as it unfolds where there’s danger is an irresistible combination.”

If, however, we begin to view all of life as unpredictable, we are implying that life is governed by chance and lacks a telos. This is an existentialist affirmation. Here the plots of Reality TV differ from that of the classic novel, which is based on the true structure of reality.

Appeal #7: Participation in the Story.

The ongoing conversation about the shows as they unfold in living rooms and dorm rooms across the nation leads to the two other aspects of Reality TV’s appeal. Reality TV shows are now designed so that audiences can vote on performances or who is to be removed from the show. For example, the last episode of *American Idol*, which aired June 2003, had 24 million phone and text voters for their favorite performers, which is approximately 25% of the votes cast in the 2000 presidential election. This participatory aspect of Reality TV is an aspect of the programming that will expand in the coming years as TV and the internet continue to converge. To channel surfing at the click of the remote will soon be added the substantive direction of a show.

Appeal #8: Laughter at the Misfortunes of Others.

An interesting aspect of Reality TV viewing is that it is often more enjoyable to watch with other people. Reality TV has spawned the rise of weekly TV parties. These shows are social events where a group of friends gather to watch, discuss, and critique the participants’ appearance

and behavior. It allows a group of friends to explore apparently real social situations from the safety of anonymity. “What’s up with those shoes?” one female viewer comments



However contrived, Reality TV shows become social experiments in human interaction.

to her friends about a contestant entering a timeout on *The Bachelor*. “What’s up with her hair?” another retorts. This kind of nonstop social banter and mocking allow one to feel good about oneself as well as provide a venue for casually exploring the fluidity of social norms among one’s peers.

At a deeper level, many Reality TV shows promote what Germans call *schadenfreude*. It means delighting in the misfortunes of others. Augustine described envy as “sorrow over other men’s good fortune and joy over other men’s misfortune.” Even in the joking banter while watching these shows, there is often a callous edge of put-downs and amusement at the emotional turmoil of the show’s participants. Sociologist Mark Fishman of

Brooklyn College asks what causes us to derive entertainment from the suffering of others. “Certainly there may be catharsis involved,” he explains, “but that is also achieved through fiction—we don’t need to see a real person suffer in order to have a cathartic experience. Perhaps we are simply happy that these things aren’t happening to us, but that seems more reasonable when we see something accidental and spontaneous rather than something deliberately staged for our amusement.” Our laughter and non-stop critique can point to a more sinister motivation. These shows give us the freedom to express an envious spirit.

Appeal #9: Your tears are my tears.

It is almost impossible when one invests so much of oneself into the unfolding drama of a given Reality TV show not to become emotionally involved in one or more of the characters. Emotional openness and the willingness to bare one’s soul is a major characteristic looked for when casting a Reality TV participant. Sasha Alpert, the vice president for casting for Bunim/Murray Productions, which produces *The Real World*, observes: “In casting, you want to see how far people will go in terms of opening up—how much they will tell you about the guy they have a crush on or their confusing relationship with their father. You need people who are open, enigmatic and unpredictable.” The shows are cast with engaging stylized types of personas. The villains are vilified. The sluts are scorned. The lovable geeks are dumped—with tears, of course—just as the hunks are embraced with cheers and hugs among the viewers. A “real” event on TV has more power when there is some kind of personal connection. I noticed this with the news of Prince Diana’s death. It struck me much more

powerfully than news of other celebrities' deaths, simply because years before I shook her hand on a street in Cambridge, England. A touch of reality—even if distanced by the medium of TV—makes it much easier to be invested in the unfolding lives of the participants.

Appeal #10: Lessons about life.

Finally, Reality TV has an appeal because it offers lessons about life. However contrived, Reality TV shows become social experiments in human interaction. The good, the bad, the cruel, and the noble are all there. In fact, the social experiments seen week to week have few counterparts in the academy. Social scientists Rick Pioto and Kelly Otter write, "The type of manipulation and control which television shows like *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, or *The Bachelor* perform regularly with impunity would never be allowed in any kind of legitimate social science experiment, at least not without rigorous and strict oversight by a Human Subjects Review board." Rather than making us shy away from the format, most viewers are further intrigued, repressing their qualms with notions of "consenting adults" and "monetary reward."

Genres of "Reality"

Reality TV formats fall into approximately ten categories. We will probably see a further blurring of these distinctions and, of course, spoofs about Reality TV shows in the future. Relationship-oriented shows appeal more to women just as competition-oriented shows appeal more to men.

1. Relationships (*The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, *Temptation Island*, *Average Joe*, *Cheater*, *elimiDate*, *Blind Date*, *Dismissed*, *Shipmates*)
2. Extreme Situations: Physical Tests

(*Survivor*, *Boot Camp*) and Psychological Tests (*Fear Factor*, *Scare Tactics*)

3. Talent Searches (*American Idol*, *The Apprentice*, *American Candidate*, *Popstars*)
4. Competitions (*The Mole*, *Amazing Race*, *Iron Chef*)
5. Personal Makeover (*Extreme Makeover*,



What lessons are we learning as we follow the unpredictable drama of staged realities of normal people placed in abnormal situations?

Queer Eye For The Straight Guy, *What Not To Wear*, *Starting Over*)

6. Home Makeover (*Trading Spaces*, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*)
7. Celebrity Life (*The Simple Life*, *The Surreal Life*, *The Anna Nicole Show*, *The Osbournes*, *The Newlyweds*)
8. Professional (*Cops*, *America's Most Wanted*, *Unsolved Mysteries*, *Rescue 911*)
9. Talk Shows (*The Jerry Springer Show*, *Oprah*, *Dr. Phil*)
10. Voyeur (*Big Brother*, *Road Rules*)

Clearly, after examining this list of Reality TV programs, we see that the allure of the celebrity form and the hidden pleasures of voyeurism are dominant appeals of Reality TV. To date, seven movies have been made about the format, each having box office grosses in excess of \$34 million. They include: *The Truman Show*, *Jackass*, *Showtime*, *Eatv*, *Reality Bites*, *The Real*

Cancun, *Real Life*, and *Series 7: The Contenders*.

Leering Silhouettes

While legitimate difference can be noted between the different Reality TV formats and some are clearly more scandalous in their design, the similarities tend to outweigh the differences. Perhaps one of the most meaningful questions we can ask ourselves is why we are so prone to being sucked into to these shows. What lessons are we learning as we follow week to week the unpredictable drama of staged realities of normal people placed in abnormal situations for all to watch?

Reality TV shows succeed because they appeal to real human desires, often the most petty desires. They are frequently exploited for our amusement and other's profit. And these petty desires are made the main thing. In the end, Reality TV promises what it cannot deliver—nourishment and satisfaction. "Beneath all their surface liveliness," Plantinga concludes, "the sadness of these programs is that they reduce their participants to mere leering silhouettes." ■

~John Seel

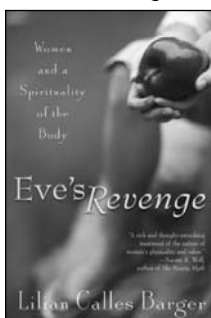
David John Seel, Jr., M.Div., Ph.D., is headmaster of The Cambridge School of Dallas and author of Parenting Without Perfection: Being a Kingdom Influence in a Toxic World. Copyright © 2004 by David John Seel, Jr.

Endnote:

¹Herb Terry is associate professor of communications at Indiana University Bloomington.

Women's Issues

Briefly Noted: Eve's Revenge



by Bob Burns

What is a balanced, Biblical perspective for women who have grown up with an educational system impacted by feminism and a media satiated by eroticism? Lilian Calles Barger addresses these concerns primarily through a discussion of the body and spirituality.

Barger has written for the thinking non-Christian and Christian alike. This is not a self-help book presenting simple solutions to complex issues. Rather, in a style not unlike the author of Ecclesiastes, she addresses primary concerns of women, creatively addressing these issues from a biblical/theological perspective without sounding preachy or using worn, simplistic evangelical language. By moving beyond the triteness of so much evangelical jargon, Barger provides a modern model of what Paul did at the Areopagus. She has done her homework and understands the perspectives of our culture, affirming what is good and providing thoughtful Biblical critique. She doesn't offer easy answers, but rather points to a significantly different (and biblical) way of viewing and living life. ■

Bob Burns (Ph.D., D.Min) is pastor of education and theology at Perimeter Church in Duluth, Georgia. Copyright © 2004 by Robert W. Burns

Book reviewed: *Eve's Revenge: Women and a Spirituality of the Body* by Lilian Calles Barger (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press; 2003) 224 pp.

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