

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

In This Issue

04 Sound Bites for Jesus

What's on the back of *your* car?

06 Summer Love

Drew Trotter reviews *The Notebook* and *Spider-Man 2*. A longer version of this review is now online, which also discusses *The Terminal*.

08 Forgiven & Forgiving

Ideas worth meditating upon from *Forgiving and Reconciling: Bridges to Wholeness and Hope* by Everett L. Worthington, Jr.

09 On Culture & Pagan Ideas

Reviews of the *Eyes Wide Open* video series and *Finding the Will of God*.

11 Behind Every Question

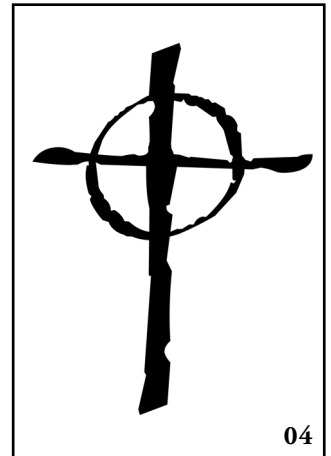
Consider answering questions with questions. Part four in the series on what winsome looks like.

02 Editor's Note

03 Dialogue

12 Somewhere I Belong

The increasingly popular Linkin Park is much more than a simple "rap-metal" band. Some thoughts and insights by Travis Scott.



Editor

Denis Haack

Managing Editor

Marsena Konkle

Contributing Editors

Jennifer Disney, Steven Garber,
R. Greg Grooms, Donald
Guthrie, John Mason Hodges,
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Outreach*

Henry Tazelaar MD
*Professor of Pathology,
Mayo Medical School*

Submissions

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

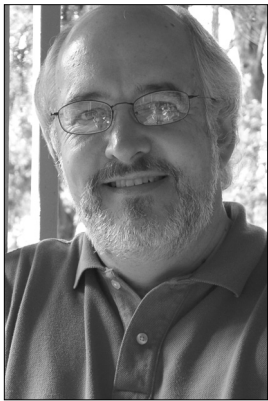
Correspondence

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



Accident Prone

Christianity is wonderful in its simultaneous insistence on the fact of God's sovereignty and on the significance of our lives, our knowing, imagining, and doing. So, we recognize that God's presence in our lives is

by his grace alone, while we actively nurture spiritual disciplines to pursue living, moment by moment, before his face. A conversation with a rabbi captures this reality with winsome clarity:

"Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach: 'Full experiences of God can never be planned or achieved. They are spontaneous moments of grace, almost accidental.'

"Bo Lozoff: 'Rabbi, if God-realization is just accidental, why do we work so hard doing all these spiritual practices?'

"Rabbi Carlebach: 'To be as accident prone as possible.'"

I like that for two reasons. One, it captures an old truth in a new and fresh way. The creative use of words is wonderfully subversive so that we see and reflect on old things in new ways. It also provides a fresh way to talk about our faith in a culture that tends to find that faith unattractive and implausible. Creativity in talking about faith is necessary to even get a hearing.

May we all be, increasingly, as gloriously accident prone as possible.

Searching ads

Those who have recently visited Ransom's website may notice that we've added a search engine. Google helpfully allows sites like ours to add this free of charge, which is not an insignificant factor. Though we have always posted indices and lists of our materials on the site, we hope the search

engine will make finding things even easier.

As with so much in this fallen world, however, free gifts often have strings attached. The Google offer contains one, namely, that when you use Google to search our site, small ads appear on the results page. As we note on our site, these ads are generated by Google—not by Ransom and so we have no control over them. For example, when I recently searched for "Babylon," the results listed my ongoing series of articles on living faithfully in our postmodern world. That is what I hoped would show up. However, two "sponsored links" also appeared. One was to amazon.com for a book purporting to show Jesus was born in 1053 AD and died in 1086. The other was a link to leftbehindprophecy.com where I could "find out how current events show that we're living in the end times!" (The exclamation point is theirs.)

Now, ads that Ransom neither sponsors nor endorses might seem like a problem, except for two things. First, most people surfing the web know about such things and ignore them. And second, when you consider what Ransom is all about, having these ads show up seems almost perfect. After all, we are concerned to help the people of God be discerning, to thoughtfully reflect on everything from the perspective of Christian faith. Seen in this light, the ads are merely one more place where discernment is necessary.

It's almost as if we planned it this way.

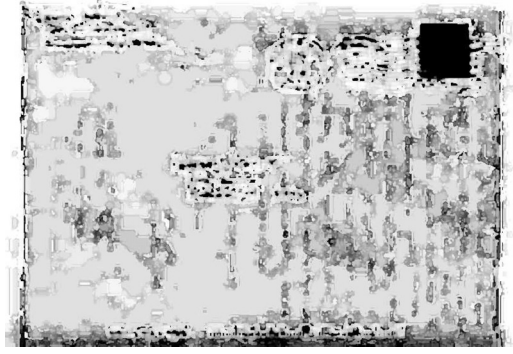
Correction

In *Critique* #4-2004 (p.5) we reprinted an excerpt from a wonderfully provocative piece in *Touchstone* on worship in evangelical churches. We misspelled the author's name—five times, as a matter of fact—which is S. M. Hutchens. We regret the error, repeatedly. ■

~Denis Haack

Source: Bo Lozoff quoted in *Christianity Today* (June 10, 2002) page 47.

Dialogue



Re: Slowing down, movies, worship, and Van Morrison.

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.

Guess who's coming to Bend! Death Cab for Cutie. If I hadn't just received the latest *Critique* [#4 - 2004, p. 8], I wouldn't have paid any attention. This issue of *Critique* is, in my opinion, the strongest yet, and I will keep your opening editorial remarks for frequent re-reading. When I try to sum up what Bill and I were looking for and what is my greatest joy here on Morgan Butte, the word I use is quiet. It is literally quiet here—except for the coyotes and finches—but the grace gift we've been given is exactly what you describe as a great human need for the conditions that make for meditation and thought and prayer. Perhaps I would have questioned once the longing for quiet as a desire for disengagement and personal peace, but I glimpse now that what actually seems to be happening is more like a discipline gladly experienced. I find quail to be very conducive both to quiet and gladness, as well as giggles.

One more personal note: My husband and I attended Fourth Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, MD, while Dr. Richard Halverson was pastor and he never made Christianity soft and empty of challenge. Always, in his sermons, he provoked us to think not only about the content, but what that content required of us to do. I'm so thankful for *Critique* and grateful for its provocations, for the same reason. You and your contributors seem to contribute needed help for the work and disciplines of being quiet. Thanks again.

Lola Kindley
Prineville, OR

You have introduced me to films I would not have known about, such as *13 Conversations About One Thing*. We used this as our first film for our movie discussion night. Thanks for the excellent questions!

Elaine Dyck
Winkler, Canada

Like S.M.Hutchens [*Critique* #4 - 2004, p. 5], I have been disturbed by the theatrical bent of modern worship. We no longer have the sense that we are coming into the presence of Deity. We are there to reinforce our values with the like-minded in an entertaining way. I have been wondering when it became permissible to applaud in church. If the choir does a good job, it should be because they are striving to corporately please Him. The congregation may say amen to their praise and so praise with the singers, but to clap for them diverts our attention from the One who is praised back to ourselves.

But Mr. Hutchens reminds me of Mike Douglas, who was interviewing a guest who commented that everything could be viewed sexually. They went on to mention all kinds of everyday things and somehow lust about all of them. Their conversation led my mind down the wrong path about these neutral objects for years. All our thoughts need to be brought into subjection to his lordship and if you cannot do so, especially in church, do not tell me about the details and so cause me to sin also.

Lynn Pisaniello
Lowville, NY

I noticed you liked the latest album of Van Morrison [*Critique* #4 - 2004, p. 8]. I think it is one of his best. He is a great singer, great personality.

And I like *Critique*. It always kindly forces me to slow down a bit. And think about my life. About my spirituality, the meaning of my work, the goal of my life.

Juraj Kušnierik
Bratislava, Slovakia

Sound Bites

Suburbia: where they rip out the trees & name streets after them.

I'm not tense, just terribly alert.

Proud parent of an honor student.

**It is as bad as you think,
and they ARE out to get you.**

**And your cry-baby, whining
opinion would be...?**

**GO AHEAD AND HONK.
I'M RELOADING!**

Bumper stickers and rear-window decals seem to be an enduring form of communication in our sound-bite world. Even friends who say they don't like them and won't put one on their own car readily admit to reading the ones they see on other cars. And when we happen on one whose rear end is plastered with stickers, most of us are glad when we roll up behind them at a stop sign so we have time to get through all the sound-bites on display. Still, most everyone I've asked seems to have a love/hate relationship with them. Sometimes we're amused by what we read, sometimes irritated, and occasionally, perhaps, even offended.

And of course, as in every other part of the market, Christians have produced their own. Sometimes it's the name of a religious school or college, sometimes an advertisement for their church, and sometimes it's a declaration of some aspect of their faith.

Not perfect, just forgiven.

1 cross + 3 nails = 4 given

**IN THE DARK?
FOLLOW THE SON.**

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What bumper stickers most amuse you? Most irritate you? Most embarrass you? Strike you as most creative (whether you agree or not)? Strike you as most effective? Why?
2. What bumper sticker(s) do you have on your car? Why did you decide to attach them?
3. If you have neither bumper stickers nor rear-window decals on your car, why have you made this choice?
4. Do different generations seem to react differently to bumper stickers?
5. The fish symbol seems to be a popular symbol that Christians choose to display. What does it communicate to the people that see it? Does it merely mean "Christian," or does it tend to be identified with a certain type of Christian?
6. Is there a place for irony in the messages Christians display? Why or why not? Consider the following bumper stickers:

My God can beat up your god.

I strangled Shirley MacLaine
in a previous life.

**Welcome to eternity:
smoking or non-smoking?**

*Jesus loves you but everyone
else thinks you're an a**hole.*

Jesus loves porn stars.

for Jesus

Read the Bible—it will
scare the **Hell** out of you.

God said it. I believe it.
That settles it.

Wise men still seek him.

We are too blessed
to be depressed.

Whatever the topic, it would be a mistake to think that bumper stickers—both as a form of communication and as to what they communicate—should not be reflected on with Christian discernment. ■

~Denis Haack

Source:

Phoenix and alpha & omega designs from *Symbols of the Christian Faith* by Alva William Steffler (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2002).

QUESTIONS CONT...

7. Some bumper stickers are Scripture texts. How effective are they in a post-Christian world? Is it possible they can be misunderstood?

**Act justly, love mercy,
walk humbly with God.**

“Go and sin no more.” ~Jesus

“Every knee shall bow.”

“Because I live, you also will live.” -Jesus

Dead to sin, Alive to God ~Rom 6:11

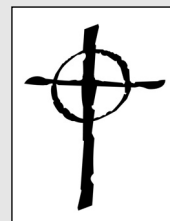
8. What should be the goal of a bumper sticker that calls attention to our faith as Christians? To raise questions? To proclaim a warning? To advertise a church? To identify ourselves as believers? To show that Christians can be creative? To show that Christians can have a sense of humor?

9. The two most commonly used Christian symbols today seem to be the fish and the cross. Are they effective? Why or why not? The history of Christianity is rich in a wide variety of symbols, monograms and shapes. Might it be wise to use less well-known symbols—such as the two illustrated here? Why or why not?



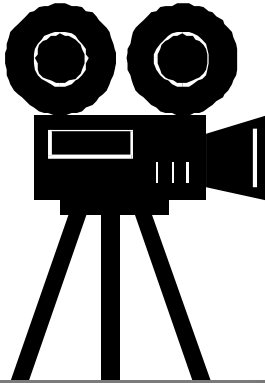
The phoenix (on the left) symbolizes the resurrection of Christ, and often appears on tombstones; the alpha & omega (on the right), the first & last letters of the Greek alphabet symbolize Christ as the beginning and end of all things (Revelation 22:13); here “m”, a letter from the middle of the alphabet is included, referring to Christ the same, yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

10. The pastors of Providence Presbyterian in Concord, NC, are both creative, thoughtful artisans, and have worked faithfully to bring beauty into the life of the church. For the church’s letterhead, website, and sanctuary, they designed a beautifully striking Celtic cross—reproduced here. The weathered, tattered lines remind us that we live in a fallen world, but that Christ entered that world to bring redemption, enduring its most complete expression of brokenness, death on a cross. The cross is available to members as rear-window decals. Respond.



The Darkened Room

Summer Love



A review of *The Notebook* & *Spider-Man 2*

by Drew Trotter

The Notebook

Credits:

Ryan Gosling
(Noah Calhoun)
Rachel McAdams
(Allie)
James Garner
(Duke)
Gena Rowlands
(Allie Calhoun)

Director:
Nick Cassavetes

Runtime: 115 min. Rated
PG-13 for some sexuality.

Spider-Man 2

Credits:

Tobey Maguire
(Spidey/Peter)
Kirsten Dunst
(Mary Jane Watson)
James Franco
(Harry Osborn)
Alfred Molina
(Doc Ock/Dr. Octavius)
Rosemary Harris
(May Parker)
J.K. Simmons
(J. Jonah Jameson)
Daniel Gillies
(John Jameson)

Director:
Sam Raimi

Runtime: 127 min. Rated
PG-13 for stylized action
violence.

When, in the blush of youth, people consider marriage, there are at least two mistakes they often make. One is to believe deep-down this dream-like state of euphoria will last forever. Full and mature love requires the regular decision of the will to love the other person in spite of their shortcomings; the young person is often blind to those shortcomings altogether, much less loving someone in spite of them.

The second mistake is to believe it is not possible to love “successfully” more than one person. Much hand-wringing and trauma goes into finding “the only one for me.” The idea that true love only happens between two people for whom the stars have magically aligned simply does not fit reality. Love is more complex than that, as the Bible and life teach us.

It is rare for recent American film to show this sort of realism, especially with younger characters, but two current movies do a fine job of raising issues for us to consider.

The Notebook, a weepy study of love and its vagaries, provides the most stimulation to think about marriage, commitment, desire, and destiny. The screenplay splits time between the present in which we find two older residents of a nursing home, one of whom reads to the other a story of young love, and the past in which that story is acted out between the exquisite Rachel McAdams (*Mean Girls*) and the equally adept Ryan Gosling (*The United States of Leland*). The present-day story, though tender and winsome in many ways,

leaves much to be desired as James Garner and Gena Rowlands labor under the sugary pretensions of overblown dialogue and silly plot devices. Gosling and McAdams, however, play the young 1930’s lovers Noah and Allie with a verve, wit and wisdom that makes us root for them and the success of their summer love. When, after a separation engineered by Allie’s mother, they chance upon one another again one college degree and one war later, Allie is engaged to a fitting suitor—money, status and education to equal her own—a likeable and caring character who vies with Noah for the audience’s heart, as well as hers. Here the writing of the movie noticeably improves, and Allie is faced with choosing between two men who love her deeply, and for both of whom she feels a real love.

What she will decide is never really in doubt in our age of happy endings, but the important thing about this film is that the decision to marry one over the other is not sealed off into neat either/or categories like heart vs. head, or money vs. happiness. The only either/or that is presented is a believable and commendable one: the aching of the heart vs. the pull of perceived security. Allie and Noah are portrayed as fighting with each other, cognizant of each other’s weaknesses and aware that their difference in class will create difficulties for their marriage. Though these important aspects of any relationship are not thoroughly explored, the film is clear that both characters understand marriage to be hard work and that is enough.

Much more could be written about the choice Allie has to make and its plausible presentation, but before leaving the discussion of this movie, I should warn the reader that the boundaries of the PG-13 rating are severely tested here. Though technically the movie lacks enough nudity to warrant an R rating, the erotic tension

between Noah and Allie is explicitly displayed. Linking sexual activity to the playfulness, discipline, passion and beauty of love always charges a film with much more erotic electricity than sheer nudity does anyway, and this movie proves it in spades. It is not for the unmarried teen, and those who suffer from the oppression of lust should be wary of its potential for adverse impact upon them.

Spider-Man 2 does not approach the supercharged atmosphere of *The Notebook*, mostly because the relationship between Mary Jane Watson (Kirsten Dunst) and Peter Parker/Spider-Man (Tobey Maguire) is not the full focus of the plot. Parker's distractions from being a superhero also include problems at work, at school, with his friend Harry Osborn, and even with his dear Aunt May. The dominant aphorism of the first film, "With great power comes great responsibility," haunts Parker as he encounters the desires and challenges of growing into manhood and struggles with the way having super powers interferes with that process.

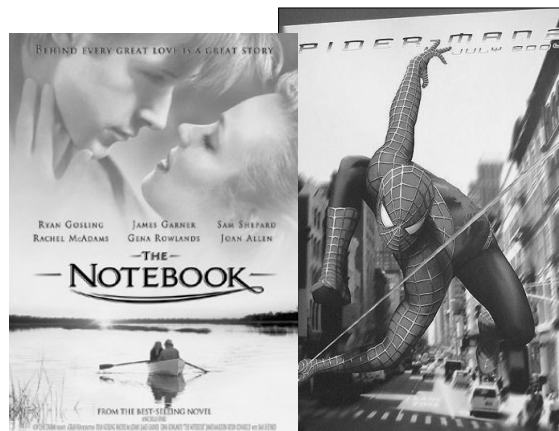
But Peter's relationship to Mary Jane is crucial to his development, and the treatment

of that relationship is handled with a subtlety and depth that is generally unheard of in comic book films.

Without spoiling the film for those who have not yet seen it, suffice it to say that Parker has interpreted his life's responsibility as Spider-Man to mean that he can have

no close relationships because if anyone were to find out his secret identity, those whom he loves would be at risk. Mary Jane points out the fault in that logic to Peter, when she reminds him of two important things: that she has a right, too, to decide whom she will love, and that love is worth risking everything for.

Mary Jane is also faced with the equally difficult decision of being in love with John Jameson, an astronaut, millionaire and all-around good guy. Again, the script does not do the standard, expected thing: we like John Jameson and can understand fully Mary Jane's love for him. As in *The Notebook*, but in a much more chaste way, sexual attraction



There is something to be said for a glimmer that Hollywood recognizes hard work as part of love.

helps Mary Jane make her decision, as she tries out the famous upside down kiss on John. But it is the friendship that Mary Jane and Peter have always shared, coupled with the attraction of the dashing hero Spider-Man, that helps her decide in the end.

Of course, true to secular Hollywood's *modus operandi*, none of the characters in these movies seek God's will in finding out who is best for them. None of them is portrayed as having religious conviction at all, though *Spider-Man 2* does hint at Christian faith in some of its characters. None address fully the Biblical notion of virtue as criterion for soul-mate selection, and all value sexual compatibility too highly on the scale of conditions affecting marriage.

But even with these deficiencies, there is something to be said for a glimmer that Hollywood recognizes hard work as part of love and choice between two attractive loves as part of the very human side of romance.■

~Drew Trotter

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. The review did not have the space to fill in a clear gap: what is a Biblical view of love? To what passages would you point to develop such a view?
2. Do you agree with the reviewer's premise that it is possible to love two people enough to consider marrying either of them? Why or why not?
3. Of course, the Christian faith teaches that marriage is intended for one man and one woman at a time. How does the Christian make this choice, especially if one seems to have more than one alternative?
4. Assuming you have seen *The Notebook* and/or *Spider-Man 2*, what do you think of their use of sexual attraction as a marker of love? Discuss specific scenes in some depth. What about these scenes made them memorable? Dialogue? Acting? Lighting? Composition?
5. How would you as a Christian believer have made these films differently? Specifically, would you have changed anything about the two older people in *The Notebook*? What did you think about their relationship?

Note: A fuller review is now online (www.RansomFellowship.org/M_SummerLove.html) which includes discussion of *The Terminal*. If you haven't read Trotter's review of the original Spider-Man, it's also worth reading (www.RansomFellowship.org/M_Spider.html).

Dr. Andrew H. Trotter, Jr., is the executive director of the Center for Christian Study in Charlottesville, VA, where he teaches and writes on theology and culture, focusing on modern American film. Copyright © 2004 by Andrew H. Trotter, Jr.

Forgiven & Forgiving

We talk a good forgiving line as long as somebody else needs to do it," Christian ethicist Lewis Smedes noted, "but few of us have the heart for it while we are dangling from one end of a bond broken by somebody else's cruelty." Yet we know that forgiveness is not just what we have received as children of God but what we have been called to give—as graciously and freely as we have received it. "Forgive us our debts," our Lord taught us to pray, "as we forgive our debtors" (Luke 11:4).

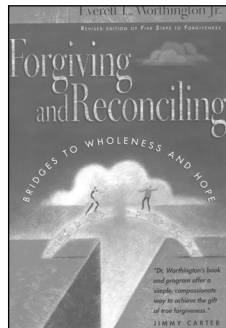
In his new book, *Forgiving and Reconciling*, which we recommend to you, Dr. Everett Worthington uses years of research and experience as a counseling psychologist in the light of Scripture to unpack the meaning and process of forgiveness. The book is rich, warm, practical, convicting, and hopeful, and two of Worthington's sidebars—reproduced here—challenge us to reflect more deeply on what God's word has to say to us on this crucial topic.

Note the questions for reflection and discussion on the following page. ■

~Denis Haack

Source:

Forgiving and Reconciling: Bridges to Wholeness and Hope by Everett L. Worthington, Jr., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2003) pages 31, 69, 104.



Seven characteristics of biblical forgiveness

As Christians, when we forgive, we...

- ...**forbear**, limiting our initial reaction through a developed forgiving personality, practice forgiving, suppression of negative motives;
- ...**freely grant decisional forgiveness** as soon as we can, implying our intention not to seek revenge or avoid, but to seek conciliation to the extent possible and to desire good for the person who harmed us
- ...**find other biblical ways to avoid or reduce unforgiveness** such as seeking justice, accepting the wrong and moving on, turning judgment over to God, telling a different story about the event (see Gen 50:20);
- ...**focus on the good of the other person** more than we focus on ourselves and the damage we have felt;
- ...**feel agape love, empathy, sympathy, compassion** for the person who harmed us;
- ...**forgive because we have been forgiven** rather than because we receive a blessing when we forgive; and
- ...**follow through** on our changed emotions and motivations to not act negatively toward the person but to bless the person.

What to do when you feel attacked

Don't react. Instead of letting your own feelings rule, *think*. Question why this might have happened:

- ...Could the person's fear, stress, worry or hurt have provoked the attack?
- ...Is the person caught up in the punch and counterpunch of the situation?
- ...Is the person feeling that you are somehow threatening his or her survival?
- ...Is the person reacting more to his or her own painful past than to you?

If you have already lashed back, can you do anything to lessen the tension?

- ...Can you apologize quickly before things get out of hand?
- ...At a minimum, even if you believe the attack was not provoked, can you say, "I am not trying to make you angry—I don't want us to argue"?
- ...Before you respond with your own side of the argument, can you listen thoroughly to the person and summarize his or her point of view?

Eyes Wide Open Video

QUESTIONS ON FORGIVENESS

1. Describe some heroes of forgiveness. What most impresses you about them?
2. Identify a list of Scriptures that address forgiveness. Which texts might it be wise to study and meditate on? How do the following texts apply? Exodus 34:6-7; Matthew 6:12-15; 9:1-8; 18:21-35; Luke 17:3-4; 23:34; Romans 12:9-21; Colossians 3:12-17; 1 Peter 3:8-9; 1 John 1:8-10.
3. Describe a time when you were forgiven. How did it make you feel? What did it do to your relationship with the one who hurt you? Your relationship with God?
4. Why is forgiving so difficult? When is it (relatively) easy? Why? Who are the people you find most difficult to forgive? Why?
5. What is the role of Christian community in forgiveness? Is it possible to help one another grow in becoming more forgiving persons? What plans should you make?
6. How do you tend to react when you feel attacked? What do you find most difficult in responding Christianly to an attack? What is harder, to be attacked by a non-Christian or by a Christian? Why?
7. After feeling attacked, do you tend to relive the experience in your imagination, perhaps arguing with or correcting your attacker? How helpful does this tend to be in forgiving and seeking reconciliation?



owski's *Eyes Wide Open* would be on it. Of the growing number of books on the market exploring popular culture from the perspective of Christian faith, it is the best.

Now Romanowski has produced a 3-part video series based on his book. The videos come with a discussion guide, and outlines of each episode which can be used as handouts are available free of charge online. The videos do not cover all that is in the book, but they are a superb means of taking groups into the material in a way that will stimulate reflection, Bible study, and discussion. Lively and well made, with hundreds of clips from numerous films, this teaching tool should be widely used in the Christian community.

Early in the first video, Dr. Romanowski allows us a glimpse into the heart of his concern for the series. He poses "four questions to pursue in trying to understand and evaluate film and other popular art forms:

"1. How do artists go about constructing a vision of life? And how do they communicate these life visions in popular artworks?

We do not publish a master list of books that we believe every reader of *Critique* should read, for the simple reason that we are convinced that Christian discipleship can not be reduced to a one-size-fits-all formula.

If we were to compose such a master list, however, William Roman-

"2. What roles do the popular arts play in our lives and society?

"3. How do films play with our emotions and thoughts and get us to transfer interpretations to the real world?

"4. Finally, how should audiences, and in particular Christian audiences, go about engaging and evaluating popular art?"

If these are the questions you would like to reflect on for yourself, with your children, and within your church community, consider allowing Romanowski to act as your mentor and guide.

The stories of the postmodern generation are found in the movies and if we wish

to engage them seriously with the gospel, we will need to be fluent in the language of their world. *Eyes Wide Open* helps us learn that language, helps us see popular culture through the lens of Scripture, and provides tools to more thoughtfully engage our world intelligently with the gospel.

We recommend the *Eyes Wide Open* video series to you. Use it in small groups, family discussions, youth groups, and Sunday school classes. And buy one for your church library. ■

~Denis Haack

Reviewed: *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture* video series (3 episodes), based on the book by William Romanowski, published by Brazos Press.

Outlines/handouts for the videos are available free online (www.calvin.edu/calvinmediafoundation/).

The video series and the book can be ordered from Hearts & Minds Books by phone (717.246.3333) or via email (read@heartandsmindsbooks.com).

A Pagan Notion

If there is one thing that most Christians want to know, it is what God's will is for their lives. The topic usually arises especially when a decision needs to be made, when people have reached a fork in the road and need to make a choice. Is it God's will for me to go to college? Which college is God's will for me? Does God want me to accept this job offer? How can I determine whether God would have us move, or stay where we are?

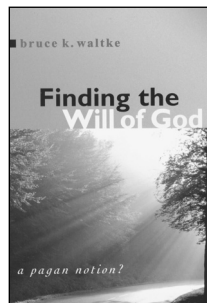
Complicating matters are some of the testimonies we hear. Christians claim to have found God's will and then had it confirmed in how things worked out so beautifully for them. Anyone who is going through hard times can find themselves wondering if they've somehow stepped off the path, if what they had thought was God's will for them actually wasn't. So, we try to follow the pattern of finding God's will that these other people used, and hope that will bring some assurance, if not clarity, to our lives and hearts.

"What does it mean to 'find' God's will?" asks Bruce Waltke, a professor at Reformed Theological Seminary (Orlando, FL). A pretty basic, common enough question, but his answer might be surprising, indeed. "The word 'finding' we normally use in the sense of learning or obtaining or attaining to God's mind. When we seek to 'find' God's will, we are attempting to discover hidden knowledge by supernatural activity. If we are going to find his will on one specific choice, we will have to penetrate the divine mind to get his decision. 'Finding' in this sense is really a form of divination. The idea was common in pagan religions."

Now, if that is a bit stunning, read on, and be stunned some more:

"Pagans devised all sorts of special tasks to help them determine the mind of God. Each of these tasks included searching for some special sign given by the gods. The most popular was hepatoscopy, the study of the liver. Pagans believed

that memory and intelligence resided in the liver, not the brain, and they created an entire course of study to read livers. The liver was the heaviest organ, and therefore if God was going to reveal His mind to man He would do so through the heaviest and supposedly most important organ...



There is not a single instance in the New Testament where God intervenes "in response to seeking his will in a perplexing situation."

"The ancient priests would sacrifice a sheep, and 'read' the liver's shape to see what God had to say to them, much as a carnival gypsy might read your palm at the fair. One of the greatest kings of Assyria, Ashurbanipal, spent much of his life studying livers in order to divine the will of his god. Most of the ancient texts offer explanations for reading the liver of a sacrificed animal, and they include special notations for encountering unique situations.

"The ancients saw hepatoscopy as being particularly important, especially in times of war or famine. It was not unusual for a team of priests to slaughter a dozen sheep and study their livers, hoping to find similar signs in several

animals. They felt that the use of many livers, with the work being done by a number of different priests, assured them of a measure of certainty in their work.

"As silly as it may seem to us now, this was common practice. The people put much faith in hepatoscopy because they all recognized that there is a God, and they all wanted to communicate with Him. Since the shedding of blood and the very thought of life was wrapped up in a sacrifice, they thought it would offer them a sign from God. It was certainly more bloody, but theoretically not much different, than a modern man or woman who asks God for a sign to guide them. Both are methods of divination that require God to work in a miraculous way to reveal His will."

After reviewing how pagans sought to find God's will and how God communicated to his people in the Old Testament, Waltke outlines a biblical understanding of the topic in the second half of this brief, practical book. He points out that there is not a single instance in the New Testament where God intervenes "in response to seeking his will in a perplexing situation." Not one. Instead, he says, God calls us to something far richer, more gracious, and amazingly wonderful: a living, ever growing relationship with himself and his word which increasingly changes us into the very image of Christ.

"If we are committed to the 'way' of Jesus Christ," Waltke concludes, "a way that compels the transformation of lives and cultures into a conformity with the ultimate realities with God, our theology (what we believe about God) will shape our lives (how we live for God). As we are led by the Spirit into a fuller understanding of him, we

continued on page 16...

Behind Every Question

Part Four of What does Winsome Look Like?

One of the fascinating things about reading the Gospels is how often Christ acted in ways very unlike how we usually behave. I am not thinking of how he was without sin, while we are sinners (which is significant, of course), but rather how he often interacted with people in ways most Christians usually don't.

Consider, for example, the conversation Jesus had with a lawyer in Luke 10:25-26. The man approached Jesus with a question—a question that we would all probably insist Jesus could have answered easily. “Teacher,” the lawyer said, “what should I do to inherit eternal life?” Not only could Jesus have answered this easily, most training courses in evangelism would say that we all should have a ready answer for that one. What could be more basic? Yet, rather than simply giving an answer, Jesus responded by asking the lawyer a question in return. “What is written in the Law?” Jesus asked, “How do you read it?”

The Scriptures do not tell us why Jesus did this, but it is not too difficult to suggest at least two possible reasons. For one thing, Jesus' question transformed a Q & A session into a conversation, with some true give and take. And for another, Jesus' question served to probe more deeply into the man's heart and mind (see Luke 10:27-37).

Questions Answering Questions

What Jesus' example reveals to us is that asking questions should be something we are willing to do even when we've been asked a question by a non-Christian. It can help probe more deeply into what's behind their question, and perhaps reveal the real question that hasn't yet been verbalized. And sometimes it clarifies their question, so that we don't get sidetracked into issues that are secondary. Of course

giving honest answers to honest questions is essential, but that doesn't mean that every question should immediately prompt a mini-sermon.

An example of this is mentioned by Judson Poling in an article in *Leadership*. He heard a student tell a professor whom she knew to be a Christian that she didn't believe in God. Rather than launching into a defense of theism, the professor asked, “What is this god like, the god you don't believe in?” She described an angry, vengeful god, which the professor said he

“Choosing to believe in Christ carries major internal ramifications. Snappy, pat answers don't satisfy these inner struggles.”

didn't believe in either, and went on to discuss the God of the Bible with her. What had begun as confrontational was turned into a conversation by the professor's question.

Poling lists several other questions that he has asked, not as formulas to be memorized and regurgitated, but to help us reflect on how, like Jesus, we might ask probing questions in response to a question someone has posed to us. Poling calls them “conversational tools for digging deeper.”

“That's an interesting question. What do you think?”

“What situation in your life makes you wonder about that?”

In response to an angry challenge, “did Jesus really teach that?!” “If I say Yes, would you rule out the possibility that it's true? Why won't you even consider it?”

“Is there any answer that you won't

accept? Why?”

“What has led you to conclude [or ask] that?”

“What information do you think would cause you to change your mind?”

“If everyone held that view, what would society look like?”

“If you found out you were wrong, what would be at risk? How would your life change?”

“Most seekers' questions,” Poling writes, “whether intellectual or emotional, indicate underlying issues. Choosing to believe in Christ carries major internal ramifications. Snappy, pat answers don't satisfy these inner struggles... Behind every question is a person asking that question, and we need to minister to that person—if we can find him.”

Listening and asking questions is part of being winsome as followers of Christ. Only those who have real compassion for people will take the time and effort to enter into their lives and invite them into a true, living conversation. Learning to ask questions when questions are posed to us helps us turn encounters into conversations, allows us to give the gift of unhurried time, and follows the example of the Lord. It's a winsome way to live out our conviction that every person is created in the image of God. ■

~Denis Haack

Source:

“What are They Really Asking?: Get to the heart of the question before you get to the answer” by Judson Poling in *Leadership* (Fall 2002) pp. 85-86.

Somewhere



The Music and Message of Linkin Park

A few years ago *Rolling Stone* reviewed the debut album of a relatively unknown southern California band. The review was unflattering, dismissing the band as just another “rap-metal” group that had nothing new to add to this genre. He labeled their lyrics “corny” and gave them a lowly two and a half stars

out of a five star rating system.¹

That album was *Hybrid Theory*, the first full-length album by Linkin Park. This same album went on to become the best selling album of 2001, going quintuple platinum and selling over 14 million copies. *Hybrid Theory* was released in 2000 and, after spending quite awhile at the top of the charts, is currently #3 on Billboards top 20 Pop albums.² *Rolling Stone* changed their tune about Linkin Park and a later reviewer described *Hybrid Theory* as “Twelve songs of compact fire.”³

Linkin Park didn’t stop there. They won a Grammy for Best Rock Performance for their song “Crawling” and released a remix album, *Reanimation*, which has sold over a million copies. The band also won the award for Favorite Alternative Music Artist at the 2003 American Music Awards and their second full-length album *Meteora* sold over 3.5 million copies in 2003.

While many other bands in their genre are struggling, failing, and disappearing, Linkin Park is excelling. Many have lumped them into the “rap-metal” or “nu-metal” genre which is largely considered to be dying. A feature article on the band at MTV.com sees “Linkin Park’s tremendous success [as] somewhat baffling since they cling so tightly to the increasingly taboo rap-metal formula, shun rock-star antics and lack any sort of celebrity charisma.”⁴

Linkin Park’s success is even more baffling considering they defy the stereotypical mold of nu-metal due to the fact that their music is devoid of sex, violence, and vulgarity. MTV asks the big

question: “Just what is it that allows Linkin Park to thrive where other rap-rock bands are struggling?”⁵

One possible answer is simply that Linkin Park does not fit neatly into the category of nu-metal. Their instrumentation has a much broader range than most groups. The trademark sound in nu-metal is a DJ and a turntable with the typical rock instruments. While Linkin Park does indeed have a DJ and uses a turntable, their sound is much more diverse than your average nu-metal band, using such instruments as piano, cello, violin, and a Japanese flute. One of the songs on *Meteora* even uses a ten piece orchestra. Linkin Park uses this strange mix of instruments to bring a richer sound to their music. Their music is deceptively artistic; if you caught a snippet of one of their songs on the radio, you might pass it off as the same old rock industry driven dribble with a heavy beat and plenty of catchy hooks. But a closer listen reveals that there is more to this band.

If their music is superior to anything else in their genre (which I believe it is), then their lyrics are even more so. From conversations I’ve had with other people, in addition to my own experience, it seems the words which Linkin Park sing, rap, and scream are what gets people hooked. As Linkin Park wrestles with relationships and life in general, they have a simple sincerity which sets them apart and resonates deep within their listeners.

Chester Bennington and Mike Shinoda, the two main lyricists for Linkin Park, say that as they develop lyrics for their songs they start with a particular experience one of them has had or is having. Then their goal is to then turn those particular experiences into universal stories that a broad group of people can relate to. About their lyrics Bennington said, “We wanted to be as honest and open as we could... we wanted something people could connect with, not just vulgarity and violence.”⁶ He also said, “We don’t talk about situations, we talk about the emotions behind the situations.”⁷

One way they achieve this is through what one reviewer has labeled the “unnamed you.” Linkin Park rarely ever identifies who they’re talk-

1 Belong

ing to and about in their songs, be it a parent, girlfriend, friend, etc. They leave the identity of the “you” to the interpretation of the listener. It’s these universal stories that make Linkin Park’s music so popular and the sheer number of records that they have sold shows that this approach to songwriting appeals to many not just in this country but around the world. What are the universal stories that drive the music of Linkin Park and what recurring themes within their songs strike a chord with people?

Brokenness is a strong theme, especially in the area of relationships. In “Easier to Run,” the chorus laments personal brokenness:

It’s easier to run

Replacing this pain with something numb

It’s so much easier to go

Than face this pain here all alone

Bennington is showing us his way of coping with pain so intense that it’s made him numb to life. This pain is described as “wounds so deep they never show [and] they never go away.” He tells us that this pain has evinced a sense of “helplessness inside” and the pervading feeling that he is misplaced in life. He speaks of the “darkness” of his past and memories that replay in his head “for years and years.”

In several interviews, lead singer Chester Bennington has been very open about the fact that much of the pain and struggle that come through in his lyrics is from his parents’ divorce and from the experience of several years of sexual abuse when he was a child. Referring to their lyrics, Bennington says, “It’s a good way to confront a lot of things that we’ve dealt with in the past... On [Meteora], I reacted to how I dealt with a lot of pain in my life and how I was sexually abused when I was young, and what I went through after that [with drugs and rebellion].”⁸

It may seem these experiences cannot be universalized but more reflection shows they can. We live in a society that has a divorce rate of 50%. No matter how we interpret that statistic what we come up with is an incredibly high number of divorces. Statistics also say that by the age of eighteen, 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men will be victims of

sexual abuse. These numbers are telling. Like divorce, even if someone hasn’t personally experienced this type of brokenness, odds are they either have a close friend or family member who has (even if they’re not aware of it). The brokenness that surrounds us is huge!

Aside from divorce or sexual abuse, I think it’s pretty safe to say that we are still a victim of brokenness. There’s domestic violence, neglect, emotional abandonment. Most of us know what it feels like to be used by another person or betrayed by a friend. We know the pain of failed relationships, either romantically or in friendships. We all experience the brokenness of miscommunication and being misunderstood. Brokenness is all around us and, more importantly, within all of us. Linkin Park refuses to let us ignore the fact that we are a bunch of screwed up people living in a screwed up world. Their lyrics are painfully clear.

Linkin Park’s music is seething with the latent fury of broken relationships, yet amazingly, their rage does not end in violence. Their songs don’t point towards retribution and vengeance but rather escape from the brokenness and sometimes even to a sort of poetic justice for the perpetrators of the brokenness. This is even more interesting when you consider that their music has been placed in the “rap-metal” genre which is a blending of the two most violent musical genres in existence. Linkin Park blends the two of these without incorporating any of the violence.

How is this possible? Their lyrics offer some insight. Consider “Breaking the Habit:”

I don’t want to be the one

The battles always choose

‘Cause inside I realize

That I’m the one confused

I don’t know what’s worth fighting for

Or why I have to scream

I don’t know why I instigate

And say what I don’t mean



by
**Travis
Scott**

Tuned In cont.

*I don't know how I got this way
I know it's not alright
So I'm breaking the habit
Tonight*

There is a dark beauty and power in these words. The writer seems to realize that he's the one "battles always choose" because he is the one choosing to battle. He sees himself instigating strife and saying things he doesn't mean. This is a tendency that needs to be broken and the song indicates a willingness to go to the darkest ends to escape recurring culpability. While the song doesn't point to a hopeful resolution, we can celebrate the fact Linkin Park realizes, at least in part, that people are radically corrupt.

There is an overarching sense of guilt and responsibility in their music. Although they sing of painful experiences and how they are the products of broken environments, they still see themselves as responsible for their actions. Bennington doesn't ignore the damage others caused but he also doesn't ignore the fact that he is personally responsible for much of the strife in his life. Linkin Park doesn't resort to violent conclusions because of an awareness of their own responsibility for the brokenness that is in and around them.

This is an incredibly realistic view of life. If any of us look at ourselves, we quickly realize that we bear guilt and responsibility. Even though we may try, none of us can fully and finally play the victim and pretend that all the pain in our lives comes from completely external sources. Honesty reveals the truth that too often we are the ones who neglect, abandon and betray others. We carry the guilt and shame which Linkin Park sings about.

This is refreshing when we consider the climate of irresponsibility so prevalent in our culture and particularly within popular music. We could come up with a long list of bands who not only write songs which revel in irresponsibility and shamelessness but go a step further and don't even claim responsibility for the words which they write and sing. In the midst of all this comes Linkin Park's voice of reason



We can celebrate the fact that Linkin Park realizes, at least in part, that people are radically corrupt. There is an overarching sense of guilt and responsibility in their music.

which begs to be taken seriously. They realize that part of being human is accepting the consequences to our actions. In a world where the main problem is not that people are becoming increasingly immoral but are instead becoming amoral, Linkin Park steps in and screams "No!" There is right and wrong. It's not okay that we hurt each other in our relationships. They also remind us that no one is exempt from this behavior, themselves included.

It's encouraging to know that so many people are latching onto this message. The seriousness and sincerity with which Linkin Park wrestles with their guilt and responsibility gives their words

a weightiness that many are receiving wholeheartedly. Hopefully this is a sign that as a society we are realizing that if we're going to find any significance in our existence, the first thing we need to do is take responsibility for our actions. Linkin Park does this to such an extent that their sense of guilt, shame, and responsibility seems to almost become their identity.

Identity is a major theme in much of Linkin Park's music. "Somewhere I Belong" is the post-modernist creed for the ever elusive search for an identity lost:

*When this began
I had nothing to say
And I'd get lost in the nothingness*

*Inside of me
I was confused
And I let it all out to find
That I'm not the only person
With these things in mind
Inside of me
But all the vacancy the words revealed
Is the only real thing
That I've got left to feel
Nothing to lose
Just stuck / Hollow and alone
And the fault is my own
And the fault is my own*

*I want to heal / I want to feel
What I thought was never real
I want to let go of the pain I've held so long
[Erase all the pain 'till it's gone]
I want to heal / I want to feel
Like I'm close to something real
I want to find something I've wanted all along
Somewhere I belong*

Within these lyrics there is a pervading sense of emptiness and an inner vacuity. The speaker wants to heal and feel and

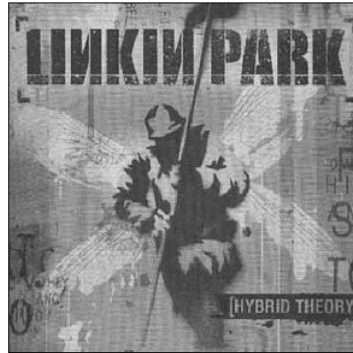
find a place to belong. Many of Linkin Park's lyrics point to a self-fragmentation and disintegration where they no longer know who they are and seem to wonder if they ever did. There is no peace with life or self because of this lack of knowledge of self and identity. Deep down, these are the questions that every single one of us has to ask and that Western society in particular seems to be plagued with. Who am I? What is my significance? What is my worth and value as a person? It's easy to see in these lyrics how Linkin Park's view of brokenness and personal responsibility flow into their search for lost identity.

Personally I love this group. Their lyrics and their music resonate deep within me. When I listen to their music something in it stirs me up and makes me want to scream, "Yes, somebody gets it!"

This is not just another mainstream band: Linkin Park unabashedly pokes us where we hurt. They are not afraid to be sincere, honest, and emotional. They don't tote the male bravado of the other groups they are associated with. They effectively communicate the effects of sin in the world and the need for the gospel. Although this is not their intention they still do it better than the majority of Christians I know. They are willing to be broken in front of the world and, for the most part, the world has loved them for it. While many Christians see sin and brokenness merely as something to be dealt with, Linkin Park reminds us that it is right to be angry at the brokenness which surrounds us.

It is also interesting to realize that, while their music deals with some dark and bleak things, they don't consider their music to be dark or bleak. Bennington says, "I look at where I am today, and take those negative [past] experiences and turn them into positives."⁹ Linkin Park transforms painful situa-

tions and unpleasant emotions into art that lifts and lightens the soul. Though this may seem like a strange contradiction to many people, it makes complete sense to me and my fellow post-moderns. For us, the words of our favored musicians reverberate in our souls much like the words of the poets and philosophers did for the ancient Greeks. We drive in our cars or sit in our rooms, crank the volume, and scream along with bands like Linkin Park. The result of all this is not a wallowing in bitterness but a powerful cathartic release of the



While they may not provide us with many answers to the problems (and I don't think it's their job to do so), they nail the diagnosis of the human predicament on the head.

frustration pent up within us. It is a moment of true connection where the artist becomes our vicarious channel to express that which we aren't allowed to bring up in our daily "civilized" conversations. In our world of rampant individualism these instances become an almost sacred experience where in we realize that we are not alone. We are reminded that there is nothing which has beset us except that which is common to man.

All this is not to say there isn't potential danger here. If taken to an extreme these experiences can be used almost like a drug. However, there is danger in all extremes and the misuse of this type of vicarious listening does not negate its value for helping normalize shared human experience.

Even if I didn't like the music of Linkin Park I think I would still have to support them. In a musical culture that is becoming increasingly fake and full of fluff, the guys in Linkin Park attack us with a sober reflection of reality. They honestly and powerfully

bring up the issues we need to deal with. While they may not provide us with many answers to the problems (and I don't think it's their job to do so), they nail the diagnosis of the human predicament on the head. As Christians we can learn from them since they communicate this predicament in a much more effective manner than we usually do. ■

~Travis Scott

Note: If you want to experience the music of Linkin Park, I recommend starting with *Meteora* which is more refined lyrically and musically and is therefore more accessible to the first time listener.

Travis Scott resides in St. Louis, MO, with his beautiful wife Brooke where he is working towards his M.Div at Covenant Seminary. Travis is currently intern for the Francis Schaeffer Institute and is slowly going deaf from listening to music too loudly.

¹Matt Diehl, "Linkin Park." *RS* issue 855.

²As of March 31, 2004.

³David Fricke, "Linkin Park." *RS* issue 891.

⁴Jon Wiederhorn & Sawy Calloway, "Linkin Park: Inconspicuously Huge." www.MTV.com

⁵Ibid

⁶Linkin Park's Compassionate Thrash." www.rollingstone.com.

⁷"Linkin Park: Inconspicuously Huge." www.MTV.com.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

...continued from page 10.

experience what Scripture calls 'the will of God.'"

We commend *Finding the Will of God* to you. Though it does not include discussion questions, as the quotes in this review suggest, discussion will probably follow pretty naturally from reading it. Accessible and clearly written, it is a book that points out common errors only to point to a better way. When Jeremiah wrote the exiles in Babylon about how they were to live faithfully in that pagan city, he told them they needed to be discerning (29:8-9). Discerning, that is, not about Babylonian ideas and values (which were obviously problematic), but about false ideas and teachers within their own community who would lead them astray. There are myriad teachings within the church about "how to find God's will," and Waltke's book suggests we need to be discerning about them. ■

~Denis Haack

Book reviewed:

Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion? by Bruce K. Waltke (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 1995, 2002)
187 pp.

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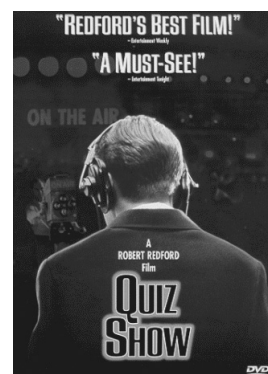
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