

critique

A RANSOM FELLOWSHIP PUBLICATION

ISSUE TWO 2008

The Reach and Limits of Efficiency

**Redefining an Old Problem:
Dealing with Evil in the Film *Atonement***

Pushing Beyond Comfort Zones

**Re-Thinking Issues:
Civility and Immigration**

**When Nature is Not Enough:
A Look at the Film *Into the Wild***



Helping Christians Develop Skill In Discernment



At Peace, Always Troubled

The greatest goodness is a peaceful mind.

- Atisa Dipankara Shrijnana

982-1054 AD, Tibetan Buddhist teacher

A sense of deep inner peace is a curious thing. We all yearn for it, especially on frustrating, frantic days, but on the other hand we can feel most deeply alive in its absence. Say, when we've intentionally stepped outside our comfort zone to do something good, maybe even important, but the step into the unknown brands the moment into our memory. This may be one reason why extreme sports and tattoos are so popular--when numbness seems normal, the rush and pain can be reassuring.

Jesus promised peace for his followers, which several of them pointed out recently when I questioned the importance of inner peace for Christians. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you," Jesus told his disciples. "Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." True enough, I responded--but that's not all he said on the topic. Later in the same exchange with his disciples Jesus told them he would soon be leaving them in a broken world, but would not forsake them; God's Holy Spirit would come to live within them. "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Peace *and* trouble is what he promised.

So, if by inner peace we mean a sense of bliss from being detached from the hard reality of a broken world, we have mistaken Buddhist enlightenment for Christian redemption. If by peace we mean withdrawing into a protected world of middle class comfort, we have mistaken the American dream for Christian obedience. And if by peace we mean sliding into society hiding the sharp claims of faith to accommodate societal preferences, we have mistaken worldliness for Christian faithfulness. Whatever the peace is, it's not an absence of trouble.

Left to myself, I always choose wrongly, seeking comfort over messiness, familiarity over being stretched, isolation rather than incarnation. The inner peace this produces is merely a respectable form of addiction.

We live in a deeply troubled world. Following Christ means walking into that trouble, and that is always troubling. Always troubling, that is, except for a quiet confidence that the safest, most ultimately fulfilling, shalom-infused place to be in this troubled world is to be in Christ.

And that is to be fully at peace, always troubled; quietly confident, slightly on edge; in the dust of death, fully alive. It's at the intersection of fallen humanity and divine grace.

Sources: John 14:27; John 16:33.

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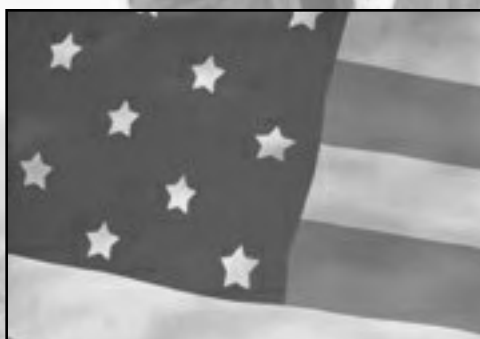


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gnosticism and holiness

To the Editor:

In the Dialogue section of *Critique* #4&5-2007, Mr. Haack responded to an S. Drews who was asking for comment regarding a baby shower for an expectant, same-sex couple. In your response, Mr. Haack, you made a statement that I would love for you to expand on: "Their desire for moral purity is admirable even though their understanding of holiness is far more pagan and Gnostic than it is biblical." The average American Evangelical (at least the ones I've met) are not acquainted with the term "Gnosticism." I'm familiar with the concept, and, being a subscriber to *Mars Hill Audio* journal, I've heard Ken Myers speak on the subject for quite some time. I would, however, love it if you would explain in plain terms what you mean for clarity's sake. There is a very slippery sort of sense that creeps up around this term when it is used in the Christian context, and I've never heard anyone clarify it satisfactorily. I bet, Mr. Haack, that you could. For instance, what does Gnosticism look like in the Church today? Why is it dangerous? What exactly were you saying in the aforementioned statement? How does it show up in a Christian life, and how does one discern it?

Thank you for your efforts and your ministry!
All the best,
J. O'Connor
St. Louis Park, MN

Denis Haack responds:

Good question, Julie--I'll be happy to try to clarify what I meant.

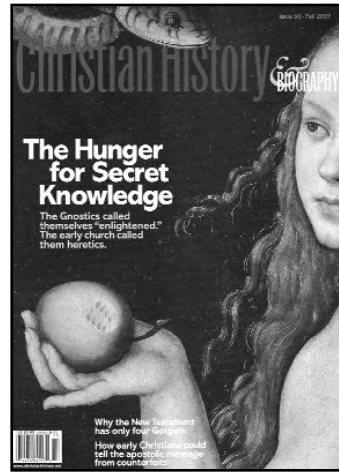
As I used the term, I was referring to the commonly held but mistaken idea that being holy involves staying on the correct side of the sacred/secular dichotomy. This view splits life into a sacred or spiritual realm and a secular or physical realm. The spiritual is more significant, more pleasing to God--so concentrating our time and effort here is required if we wish to grow in holiness. So, being a missionary is better than being a carpenter, and though cooking spaghetti is not exactly displeasing to God, it would be more pleasing to him if you invite a non-Christian to dinner and tell them about Jesus while they eat. This view is often made to seem biblical, but is not.

One expression of this dichotomy involves shunning sinners. It is more spiritual, in this view, to befriend fellow believers than it is to befriend unbelievers. Thus, as I wrote in the piece you referred to, some Christians

express offense over associating with a same-sex couple or attending their baby shower. Holiness, in their minds, is compromised by proximity to sinners. I would argue, instead, that we must follow Christ, who never remained aloof from unbelievers and sinners.



Usually, when Christians hold to some form of the sacred/secular dichotomy, the root goes back to the influence of pagan sources. Greek influence in Western culture is extensive, and the church has been plagued with this mistaken idea since the days of the apostles. I mentioned Gnosticism, however, and not just pagan thought, simply because there has been a renewed interest in Gnosticism in recent decades. This interest is on a scholarly level, but has also filtered down into popular culture. Examples of



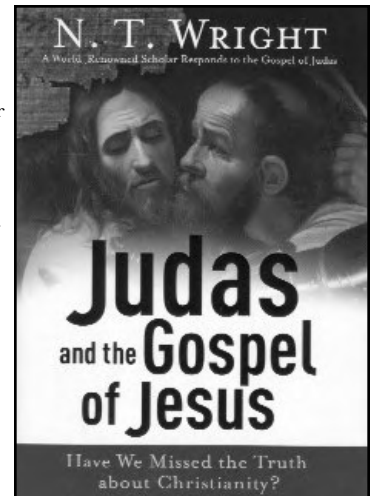
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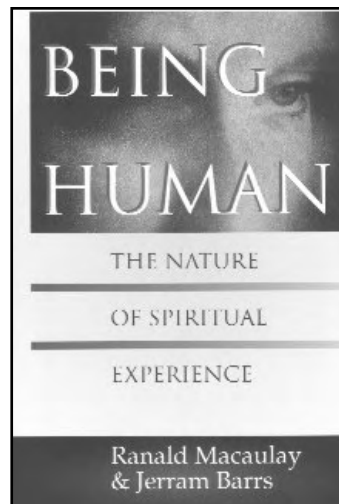
commend three resources



The second resource is *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus* by N. T. Wright (Baker Books). This accessible, brief (160 pp) study by a biblical historian includes a helpful chapter on Gnosticism, showing its influence in our world.



Whatever its source--Neo-Platonic thought or Gnosticism--the division or dichotomy of physical/spiritual or secular/sacred is contrary to orthodox biblical faith. It denigrates creation, which God identified as good, and which reveals his glory. It denigrates the incarnation, with Christ somehow trapped in Jesus' body. It mistakes holiness as concerned with the physical instead of being freed by grace and the Spirit's sanctification from sin. It confuses the meaning of faithfulness, so that instead of following Christ in engaging sinners in a messy, fallen world, we withdraw. And when it is lived out, it distorts every aspect of life. It is not simply mistaken; it is dangerous.



The third resource is *Being Human: The Nature of Spiritual Experience* by Jerram Barrs and Randal Macaulay (InterVarsity Press). It is a thoughtful analysis of the sacred/secular dichotomy in light of biblical history, tracing its history in the church, and exploring how the biblical perspective frees us to live for God's glory across all of life.

PUSHING BEYOND COMFORT ZONES



Last year a friend, Tim Giese, phoned with an invitation, though he worded it as a challenge. "You're always talking about discerning culture," he said with a good-natured snicker, "but there's a lot of culture you don't pay any attention to--let's go to the mixed-martial arts cage fight at the fair grounds next week. Bet you've never discerned one of them!" He had a point. I had noticed the ads in the newspaper and knew the sport was wildly popular, but had never considered attending. For one thing, I can think of more entertaining things to do than watching young men beat on each other; for another, attending a cage fight is a bit outside my comfort zone. It meant stepping into a world different from the one I ordinarily inhabit. "This one has three title bouts between fighters from the US and Canada, so the rivalry will be intense," Tim added. I told him I'd love to go.

As we walked to the door of the arena that night the parking lot included some serious pickups--serious as in gun racks, over sized wheels, dried mud, and decals of Calvin (not the Reformer) relieving himself. Knots of young men stood smoking outside the entrance. "How'ya doing?" they asked, and when we said great, they seemed genuinely pleased. "Should be some great fights tonight," my friend said, and they said the same in return, only with a lot of graphically descriptive adjectives that I won't bother to repeat here. Tickets were \$35/person for general admission; beer and pizza extra, and the venders were doing a brisk business. Uniformed cops were standing around all over. "That's because some nights the best fights aren't in the cage," my friend mentioned. Most of the police were talking casually with people in the crowd; I got the impression that some of the young men might have met the cops before.

None of the fights went beyond a few rounds; most ended when a fighter "tapped out," meaning the losing fighter taps a hand so the referee can see it, his opponent having gotten him into a painful hold from which he can not escape. One title match was over in seconds. A few punches were thrown, and then one launched a kick to the head of his opponent so fast it was a blur; the losing fighter simply dropped to the canvas, out cold.

In the stands were a handful of people my age (old enough for a discount in most restaurants), and I'd guess maybe a fourth of the audience looked to be above 35. The rest--the vast majority--were young adults. Sitting next to us was a group of young women, all of whom were seniors in high school or recently graduated. I spent the evening listening to the conversations going on around me. Young adults talking about the fights and fighters, certainly, but about much more, too: conversations about the myriad details of life, of school and jobs, of music and movies, of relationships and breakups, of hopes and fears. They were easy to talk to. They came to cage fights regularly, they told me, traveling to other cities when necessary. I asked them why. All their friends were there, one said. It's a good place to talk, another said--and it is, since the time between matches added up to far more of the evening than the matches themselves did. "Things are real here," one young woman said. Her friends agreed.

I couldn't help but think of *Fight Club*--a film dismissed by so many as full of mindless violence, which made me wonder if they had actually watched the film. Violent: certainly, but mindless? Quite the opposite--the movie is relentless in its insistence that we face life squarely. All the big questions are not just hinted at in the film--they are part of the dialogue and the reason for the plot. And in the world of the film reality seemed more real, somehow, the violence piercing through the ordinary numbness that usually makes us skim across the surface of life.

Would the young adults sitting around me in that arena describe the church in similar terms--a place where things are real? Would they describe my home and life that way? If, as I believe, Christianity is true, then by God's grace our community, lives and homes must partake of a reality that delights, attracts, and brings a shiver of fear to those who do not share it. If Christ is Lord

of all, then faith is more than a patina of color to brighten up an otherwise drab existence. It must partake of reality, a reality that flows out into every corner of life, a reality that takes our breath away with wonder. The second

way my comfort zone was breached this past year involved visit-

ing Islamic mosques. I've visited three: two in St. Louis, MO and the one in Rochester, Masjed AbuBakar, which is situated a few blocks from the Mayo Clinic. I wanted to make the visits, convinced that as a Christian I need to meet my Muslim neighbors, and grow in understanding their faith. On the other hand, walking into a mosque was something I had never done before, so I was unsure of what to expect. I felt that tension as I opened the door--walking in was just a bit outside my comfort zone.

The experience made me acutely aware of how foreign walking into a Christian church could be for someone who has never, or rarely attended one. It also made me realize how seldom I intentionally breach my comfort zone. I prefer to remain on the side of comfort. Yet, had Christ followed my usual pattern, there would have been no incarnation, no cross, no redemption. And I claim to follow him. In him, I am convinced, is the final reality.

Growing in Faithfulness

Here's an exercise that's rather instructive. First, identify the limits of your comfort zone. Second, name some of what you are missing in life by staying within those limits. And then, if you are a Christian, identify the limits your comfort zone should have given your calling from God.

Begin by identifying the places, people, and groups where you feel most comfortable. Think of it as an inner circle: here you are with people who share your deepest convictions and values; you are in places where you have some confidence in your competence and acceptance; and in groups in which you feel generally at ease. Don't rush the exercise; the more thought you bring to the process the more clearly you'll be able to identify your comfort zone.

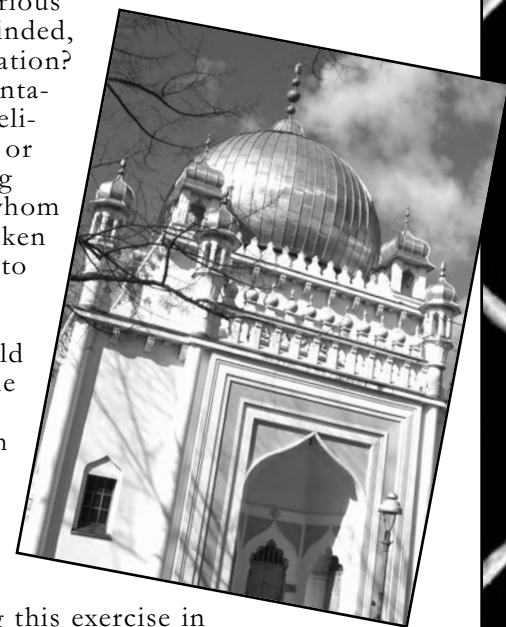
Then, identify a series of two or three outer circles that represent decreasing comfort levels. Let the circles grow out of your own life and circumstances, so that they reflect the realities of life in the community in which you live. Doing this with a group of trusted friends is best--not only can shared laughter lighten the task, they may bring up aspects of the wider community that you may tend to ignore. Slowly begin to identify the limits of your comfort zone--the people, places, and groups with which you feel less at home, more ill at ease. The more specific you are, the more helpful the exercise becomes.

Then second, begin to identify what your comfort zone will make you miss by staying within those limits. What members of your wider community will remain outside your circle of friends and acquaintances? What groups will you tend to remain ignorant about, or know only on the basis of hearsay?

And finally, if you are a Christian, identify what the limits your comfort zone should be given your calling from God. (If you are uncertain as to your calling, see the recommended readings at the end of this article.) What neighbors do you have but not know? To what extent are your friendships and acquaintances limited to people who are like you, defined perhaps by faith or work or economic status? To what extent is your life defined by a subconscious pursuit of comfort, safety, and ease rather than a determined faithfulness in following Christ into a broken world? What fears tend to keep you from taking legitimate risks? Are there groups of people against whom you speak and vote (say pro-life or pro-choice folk, or pro-global warming or anti-global warming) but with whom you've never tried to have a serious ongoing, open-minded, winsome conversation? Are there representatives of beliefs, religions, ideologies, or spiritualities living around you but whom you have never taken seriously enough to listen to and ask intelligent questions? What should your comfort zone look like if it becomes one with Christ's comfort zone? And what plans should you make to work towards this end?

Here again, doing this exercise in a community of trusted, safe friends who share our deepest commitments can save us from mistaking a foolish leap for a thoughtful plan.

[Continued on p.22]



REDEFINING AN OLD PROBLEM

Dealing with evil in the film **ATONEMENT**



Starring:

Keira Knightley (Cecelia Tallis)
James McAvoy (Robbie Turner)
Saoirse Ronan (Briony Tallis, age 13)
Brenda Blethyn (Grace Turner)
Romola Garai (Briony Tallis, age 18)
Juno Temple (Lola Quincey)
Vanessa Redgrave (Older Briony)

Director:

Joe Wright

Writers:

Ian McEwan (novel)
Christopher Hampton (screenplay)

Producers:

Liza Chasin, Richard Eyre, Robert Fox

Original Music:

Dario Marianelli

Cinematography:

Seamus McGarvey

Runtime:

130 min

Release:

USA; 2008

MPAA Rating:

R (For disturbing war images,
language and some sexuality.)

In *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil*, Andrew Delbanco puts a new spin on an old problem:

A gulf has opened up in our culture between the visibility of evil and the intellectual resources for coping with it... The repertoire of evil has never been richer. Yet never have our responses been so weak. We have no language for connecting our inner lives with the horrors that pass before our eyes in the outer world.

The old problem? The problem of evil, traditionally seen as philosophical in nature and defined something like this: God is good and all-powerful, but evil exists. How can the reality of the latter be reconciled with the truth of the former? Despite the efforts of philosophers like Alvin Plantinga (see his *God, Freedom, and Evil*) fans of the problem of evil insist that its only acceptable solution is for God to disappear, this despite the irony that apart from God the concept of evil itself fades, too.

Novelist Ian McEwan acknowledged the same problem in a PBS interview after the 9/11 attacks.

I don't really believe in evil at all. I mean, I don't believe in God, and I certainly don't, therefore, believe in some sort of supernatural or trans-historical force that somehow organizes life on dark or black principles. I think there are only people behaving--and sometimes behaving monstrously. And sometimes their monstrous behavior is so beyond our abilities to explain it, we have to reach for this numinous notion of evil.

Delbanco and McEwan recognize the same dilemma: doing away with the idea

Greg Grooms, a Contributing Editor for *Critique*, lives with his wife Mary Jane in a large home across the street from the University of Texas in Austin, where they welcome students to meals, to warm hospitality, to ask questions, and to seriously wrestle with the proposition that Jesus is actually Lord of all.

of evil doesn't make the problem of evil go away. It merely changes it from a philosophical problem to an existential one: if there is no God--no one to make atonement to--and no real evil--nothing to atone for--how do we cope with the reality of evil? The magnitude of this dilemma is painfully and beautifully captured in the film version of McEwan's novel *Atonement*.

Set in the years leading up to World War II it's a story with an unlikely villain: an adolescent girl from an upper-class English family. At 13, Briony Tallis (brilliantly played by Saoirse Ronan) is a fledgling writer with a good imagination, who witnesses two vivid romantic encounters between her sister Celia (Keira Knightley) and Robbie Turner (James McEvoy), a friend and former family servant, and is



in turns shocked, bewildered and fascinated by what she sees. Later that same day she also witnesses a crime, and her imagination links all these events together with tragic consequences.

Act one of *Atonement* is as nicely a crafted bit of filmmaking as I've seen recently. Director Joe Wright shows us each of the key events here from different points of view, and as our point of view changes, so do our feelings and our understanding of what has occurred. In so doing he underscores an important part of McEwan's message: choices that later seem evil often begin as nothing more than psychological confusion.

Only in act two does Briony (now 18, and played by Romola Garai) realize how mistaken--and destructive--her choices have been. She's a nurse, caring for wounded soldiers, seeking penance and reconciliation with her sister Celia, who's not willing to grant it, while Robbie in what is the most visually stunning scene in the film struggles to survive the evacuation of the British Army at Dunkirk.

In act three Briony, now old and dying (played by Vanessa Redgrave), is a famous writer, publishing her 21st and last novel: the story of her choices as a child and their tragic aftermath, but with an important twist. The atonement which eluded her in real life is written into her novel. The college students with whom I watch films reacted very differently to this twist. Some saw it as a weak attempt at a happy ending, others as a final acknowledgement of the pointlessness of the story. Briony's thought's on the matter are found on the last page of McEwan's novel:



The problem these fifty nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the

r. greg grooms | the darkened room

limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all.

To be sure, there are elements of grace in *Atonement*. In the blood and madness of Dunkirk an impromptu choir sings a Charles Parry hymn that echoes persistently. After Briony comforts a dying French soldier in a London hospital, she (and we) are blessed with a few moments of Debussy's *Clair de Lune*, the emotional high point in Dario Marinelli's extraordinary musical score. Despite the beauty of these moments I've no doubt that in the end McEwan would leave us all where he left Briony: with the grim realization that if God is fictional, atonement is, too.



Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What was your initial response to *Atonement*? Why do you think you reacted this way?
2. The first and most persistent sound in Dario Marinelli's musical score for *Atonement* is the sound of a typewriter. Why did he use this throughout the film? What thoughts and feelings did the sound evoke in you?
3. What visual images from the film linger most strongly in your memory? Why?
4. Identify and describe each of the important characters in this story. With whom do you identify? With whom are you supposed to identify--and why?
5. In act one Director Joe Wright shows us the same events from two different points of view. How did your understanding of the events change as your point of view changed? How did your feelings change? Why did the writer and director give us more than one point of view? Whose point of view is correct?
6. Why does Briony identify Robbie as the perpetrator of the crime she witnessed? Do you think you might have made the same mistake had you been in her situation? How does your assessment of the seriousness of her choice change as the film progresses?
7. For whom do you feel the most sympathy in this story: Robbie, Celia, or Briony? Why? For whom do you think you're supposed to feel sympathy--and why?
8. Ian McEwan is rather straightforward in his admission of atheism. If he were a believer, how do you think his faith would've changed the telling of his story? Would Christianizing the story have made it a better film?
9. At the heart of the gospel is the hope that in Christ we can find atonement not only with God the Father, but also with one another. Is this so? As a believer are you better at reconciling with God, or with other believers, or with your unbelieving friends?
10. Which version of the problem of evil--the philosophical or existential--is more troubling to you? Why? Do you think Ian McEwan is satisfied with Briony's solution to the existential dilemma? Why?

AN INTIMATE, AUTHENTIC REVELATION OF HEARTS

A review of CD
remember that i love you (2006)
by Kimya Dawson

*i'm lost and alone and i'm fair and i'm free
you am what you is and i are who i be
what i'm lacking in strength i make up for in smarts
you keep your stability i'll keep my heart
["Wandering Daughter"]*

Kimya Dawson is best heard live in an intimate setting. The concert I attended was in a small venue near the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. The Cedar Cultural Center seats 465, and the place was packed, 85-90% of the audience consisting, I would guess, of 15-25 year olds. They rocked out to the sound of the French band, L'Orchidée d'Hawaï--the guy ahead of us swinging his dreadlocks in great arcs to the beat. By the time Kimya Dawson took the stage it was quite late, but her effect on the crowd was stunning. They listened to every song in intense, complete silence, seeming to be on the edge of their seats. It wasn't so much that they acted like they were in the presence of a performer they loved, but more like they were with someone who knew their hearts and yet loved them enough to not walk away. As she sang, they did not sing with her, though it seemed clear many knew the lyrics. They wanted her to sing to them, to be reassured, for a few moments at least, that someone saw, could name, and was moved by the alienation, doubts, fears, hopes, and brokenness that have shaped their world.

*have you ever had a dream that your favorite baby's drowning
and you grab him by his sweater sleeve
pull him up onto the ground
and you can hear the water slosh
around inside his tiny gut
you push his belly up and down
but he can't cough the water up
suddenly a flood comes out his mouth
til there is nothing left
inside of him he's empty now
there isn't even one small breath
and he goes limp in your arms
all the peoples' mouths are moving
all you hear are car alarms
and you wake up and start to cry
i will lose my shit if even one more person dies
so please don't die...*

*the human body's made up of good and bad bacteria
but the antibiotics and the antibacterials*

*are killin' all the good ones
and the bad ones just get stronger
and become super infections
it's harder to destroy them
and it's harder to detect them
and there's something in her blood
and there's something in her leg
and there's something in her brain*

*my mom's sick she's in a hospital bed
i've got a word for all you ghosts in her head
and all you skeletons in her closet
leave her alone
please because my mom needs you gone
my mom needs you gone
as long as she is haunted she'll never get strong
my mom needs you gone
["My Mom"]*

There is a lovely paradox in Kimya Dawson's music. Her songs are simple, childlike, almost childish in spots, yet they probe into the meaning of life. Her voice is clear and calm, yet her lyrics build intensely, rushing out in

crowded lines as if pausing to catch our breath is something we cannot afford in the face of so much honesty. Depending on the song, she strums or picks her guitar, playing less with the air of an accomplished instrumentalist than like a close friend who cannot wait to let us hear her new song. And the seeming innocence of her lyrics and voice are held in tension with an earthiness in her comments between songs that can dip into coarse adolescent humor.

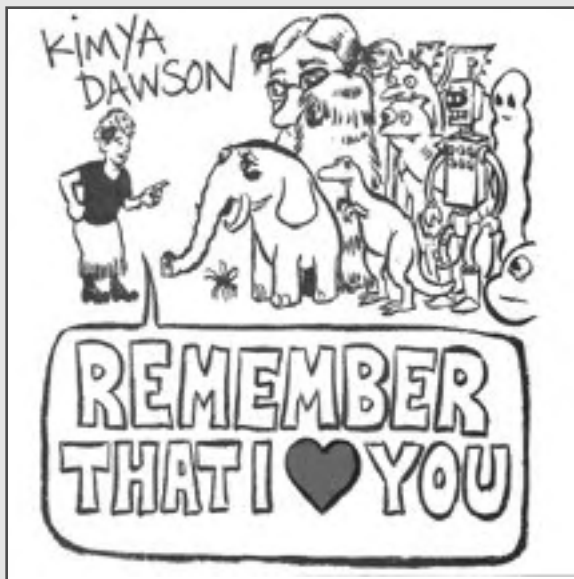
"Touching on a range of issues, from her mother's declining health to her own fitness as a mother," music critic Greg Smyth says, "Kimya seems drawn to the big themes: death, disease and one person's relative insignificance in the world. All of which may sound

incredibly pretentious on paper, but, when delivered in Dawson's faltering vocals, what could easily stray into cloying sentimentality is strangely affecting."

One song was written after a devastating earthquake deep in the Indian Ocean sent a tsunami ripping through villages on the coast on December 26, 2004:

*one of her babies is rotting in the sun
and the other one was found drowned in the ocean
her mom and dad are in their van crushed and bloated
and her husband was thrown from his fishing boat
so please give me a break from all your complaining
about who was mean to you and how your stepdad is a pain
- i care, i swear, but i just can't take it, not today
all i can think about are tsunamis and earthquakes*

*everything she's ever known is gone, gone, gone
everyone she's ever loved is gone, gone, gone
the only reason she's alive is
she grabbed a palm frond and held on
and held on
["12/26"]*



As he was producing the film, *Juno*, director Jason Reitman asked Ellen Page, who plays the lead character, Juno, which musician she thought her character would listen to. Kimya Dawson, she replied. It was a good choice, part of what made the film so fine and the soundtrack so memorable. In *Juno* the soundtrack did not simply provide emotional background for what we see on the screen. Instead, music and plot were woven into a single story that spoke truth in beauty in the story of a young woman, in high school and pregnant, trying to find her way through the myriad choices of life.

No musician can speak for an entire generation, though some seem to have their finger on a generation's pulse in a way that is uncanny. Such artists seem to have access to hearts, to see past surfaces to the deeper realities of life, to be able to reflect uncertainties and dreams that many seem to miss and few bother to name.

Rather than preach, such musicians listen, and so have something to say. Kimya Dawson will not be loved by all of the postmodern generation, nor does she speak for them all, nor is every heart of that generation identical. Everyone is not Juno. But she speaks for many, and that is a grace.

*i never wanted
to be better than my friends
i just wanted to prove wrong
the people in my head
the ones who told me I'd be better off dead
the ones who told me that I would never win*

*when i delivered newspapers
they said i was too slow
when i was a barista
they said I made lousy foam
when i worked in retail
they said i was a slob
much too dumb for school
and much too lazy for a job*

*so i rode my bike like lightning
and i made cappuccinos
that would make the angels sing...
i wrote the kinds of papers teachers hang up
on their walls
i was employee of the month at seven different shopping malls
and one time playing football I pulled the tendons in my leg
to prove that I was tough i hopped on one foot
and finished up the game*

*i thought if I succeeded I'd be happy and they'd go away
but first thing in the morning
I'd still wake up and I'd hear them say
"you're fat, ugly, and stupid, you should really be ashamed
no one will ever like you you're not good at anything"...*

now people send me emails that say thanks for saying



*the things they didn't know how to say
and the people in my head still visit me sometimes
and they bring all of their friends but I don't mind
I play my guitar like lightning
when I sing I like it when you sing too loud and clear
different voices different tones all sayin' "yeah, we're not alone"
I got good at feeling bad and that's why I'm still here*
[From "The Competition"]

Over the years I've asked numerous groups a question. I asked it one evening to a group of high school students, friends of my youngest daughter, as they sat in our living room listening with us to their music. I've asked it to college groups I've spoken to, and to classes in churches. I've asked it in coffee shops and in bookstores to groups who were hanging there. The question is this: How many of you know someone who committed suicide--or who tried seriously to end their life? Each time, the result has been the same: a majority of hands go up. I've also asked the question to groups my own age, and far fewer hands are raised. I don't remember a single person committing suicide in my high school. Whether it happened or not is

beside my point, which is this: does not this reality of death and sorrow shape the post-modern generation, a group who has also known first hand both the far-reaching fragmentation of the family and a growing clamor of voices doubting that any story exists to bring true significance to life?

A friend who is a physician at the Mayo Clinic observed that he had seen numerous farm accidents over the years. Legs ripped from sockets, hands mangled in machinery, objects thrust through bodies. In each case the pain is immense, the recovery difficult, but in no case, he said, did the sufferers ask to have their life ended. So, imagine, he said, the inner agony and chaos so many young adults must experience to drive them to such despair.

In our globalized world, more entertainment exists than ever before, more gadgets, more education, more opportunities. All true, all undeniable. But that does not suggest, as so many do, that life is therefore easier, that indecision is always irresponsibility, and that a failure to strive for success is always failure. Life is far richer than that. Christians who suggest such things are especially at fault--they forget a central tenet of their faith, which is that we are fallen creatures in a bent world, and our brokenness is total. Yes, whining is a problem, but those who can listen with maturity should be able to distinguish between adolescent complaining and a despair that is appropriate in the face of death.

Kimya Dawson listens--to her own heart, and, it seems, to the hearts of the young adults who flock to her concerts. We would do well to listen, too.

Sources: "Wandering Daughter" from Kimya Dawson's CD *i'm sorry that sometimes i'm mean* (2002); Greg Smyth, part of "a sinister cabal of superior writers" online in BlogCritics (<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2006/05/24/182104.php>).



WHEN NATURE IS NOT ENOUGH

Some movies are like cotton candy, others like granola. Some are sweet but vacuous; others more demanding but more nutritious. Sean Penn's cinematic adaptation of Jon Krakauer's book is of the latter version. It's a granola film designed for prolonged reflection and meaningful discussion. Viewers or reviewers who easily dismiss the poignancy of the film's existential journey only reveal the superficiality of their souls.

Into the Wild tells the true story of Chris McCandless, an Emory University honors graduate, who embarks on a two-year sojourn that ends in his death in the Alaskan wilderness. It is an epic tale of a life stripped bare of its modern nonessentials in a desperate search for what really matters. It ends with an epiphany at the moment of personal tragedy. *Into the Wild* is a cautionary tale for those trapped by the superficial and self-indulgent, for those whose suburban alchemy turns the American Dream into the search for the Holy Grail. The meaning of life is not here. But neither is it to be found in the Alaskan wilderness--as the poetic outdoorsman discovers in his dying aloneness.

The film is a marked achievement for writer/director Sean Penn. Shot on locations that track McCandless' cross-country odyssey, the magnetism and menace of nature is beautifully portrayed. In tandem with cinematographer Eric Gautier (*The Motorcycle Diaries*), Penn uses the physical landscape as a backdrop to McCandless' spiritual soulcape. Emile Hirsch's performance (*The Lords of Dogtown*) as McCandless captures his sense of anger, arrogance, and adventure with depth and sensitivity. A varied and talented supporting cast complement Hirsch. Hal Holbrook, as widower Ron Franz, was nominated for an Academy Award. One can quibble with the film's length (two hours and twenty-eight minutes), its use of voice over (McCandless' sister, Carine, provides the familial back story), and its musical overuse of Eddie Vedder. But little mars the over all scope of the film's epic journey and the character arch of its protagonist's tragic epiphany. The film grips you and does not let you go.

To the outward observer, Chris begins the film filled with youthful promise: academic achievement, graduate opportunities, career prospects, and adoring, if demanding, family. But no one's life is as it appears. Neither is Chris'. Beneath his veneer of middle class aspiration and expectation lies a deep-seated anger and restlessness. With monomaniacal courage, he abandons it all--his prospects, his prosperity, and most importantly his parents. "Rather than love, than money, than faith, than fame, than fairness...give me truth," he declares. There is something noble, even spiritually heroic in his relentless search for truth.



Starring:

Emile Hirsch (Chris McCandless)
Marcia Gay Harden (Billie McCandless)
William Hurt (Walt McCandless)
Jena Malone (Carine McCandless)
Brian Dierker (Rainey, as Brian Dierker)
Catherine Keener (Jan Burres)
Vince Vaughn (Wayne Westerberg)
Hal Holbrook (Ron Franz)
Kristen Stewart (Tracy Tatro)

Director:
Sean Penn

Writers:
Jon Krakauer (book)
Sean Penn (screenplay)

Producers:
David Blocker, Frank Hildebrand,
John J. Kelly, Sean Penn

Original Music:
Michael Brook, Kaki King, Eddie Vedder

Cinematographer:
Eric Gautier

Runtime:
148 minutes

Release:
USA; 2007

MPAA Rating:
R (For language and some nudity.)

John Seel is a cultural analyst, educational reformer, and cultural renewal entrepreneur. John is a viral marketing consultant with Walden Media. He and his wife, Kathryn, live in Cohasset, Massachusetts. He can be reached at: djsjr@earthlink.net.

The romantic wayfarer strikes out unencumbered by the dictates and distractions of suburban life into the mythic salvation of solitude and nature. On his journeys he observes and critiques the lives of others. He perceptively identifies the hidden pain in everyone else but himself. And yet, his knowledge of others is never joined with empathy, for he is hardened against the possibility of love. "Some people feel like they don't deserve love. They walk away quietly into empty spaces, trying to close the gaps of the past," he observes.



What Chris fails to acknowledge is that his risk-taking is fueled by anger; his adventurous spirit is an escape from self-reflection. "The core of man's spirit comes from new experiences." Sensitive and social, his outward persona is at odds with his inner demons... and so he keeps moving lest attachments to others expose his deepest fears.

Like all romantics, he blames others--the constraints of convention--society with its parents, hypocrites, politicians, and pricks. The wilderness by contrast is pure and primal.

*Alaska, Alaska. I'm gonna be all the way out there, all the way f*cking out there. Just on my own. You know, no f*cking watch, no map, no axe, no nothing. No nothing. Just be out there. Just be out there in it. You know, big mountains, rivers, sky, game. Just be out there in it, you know? In the wild.*

Chris is in love with Nature. "You don't need human relationships to be happy. God has placed it all around us." Penn makes the pantheist's case just as strongly as one can make it. The physical power of raging rivers, the vistas from mountain summits, the stars in a cloudless sky, and the majesty of snowcapped peaks are the visual sirens of McCandless' inner odyssey.

Chris read Henry David Thoreau and Jack London. He should have added Steven Crane:

*A man said to the universe,
Sir, I exist!
Nevertheless, replied the universe,
That fact has not created in me
The slightest feeling of obligation.*

One can embrace Nature, but it will not return the embrace. The universe like Rhett Butler turns on those who embrace her and says, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn." G. K. Chesterton adds, "A man loves Nature in the morning for her innocence and amiability, and at nightfall, if he is loving her still, it is for her darkness and her cruelty."

And so the berries are not food, but poison. In the midst of his slow solitary starvation, Chris acknowledges the spiritual blockage to his metaphysical blindness. He has abandoned love because he cannot forgive those who should have loved him but did not. The aging widower warns him prior to his trek into the wild, but he does not have ears to hear: "When you forgive, you love. And when you love, God's light shines upon you."

What really matters, when life is stripped of everything else, is relationships. Nature is not enough. It is not Nature that points beyond itself, but Creation. And so



Chris scrawls his epiphany in the leaves of a book: "Happiness is only real when shared." It is love we seek--even when it demands the forgiveness we resist. As he closes his eyes in death, he envisions the embrace of his parents. "What if I

were smiling and running into your arms? Would you see then what I see now?"

How far will we have to run? How many layers will we peel away before we acknowledge that the search for truth leads to the reality of love? To have searched and died knowing is more heroic than to have never searched at all.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How does Chris McCandless' choices expose the rat race we call the American Dream?
2. How do our "heart histories" differ from our public persona?
3. What do the people Chris meets on his journey reveal about his own story?
4. What are the differences between Chris and Carine?
5. Chris asks whether his parents learned anything in his absence. What do they learn?
6. Is the film finally tragic or hopeful?
7. How does this film teach us to see others differently?
8. What did Alaska come to represent for Chris? What lessons did it teach him?
9. Great films raise questions, expose falsehoods, and demonstrate humanness. In what ways does this film succeed?
10. If Chris had conquered the wilderness and returned to civilization to write a book about his experiences, would he have learned the same lessons?

Every two years the American politics industry fills the airwaves with the most virulent, scurrilous, wall-to-wall character assassination of nearly every political practitioner in the country and then declares itself puzzled that America has lost trust in its politicians.
[Charles Krauthammer]

[Robert Orben]
Illegal aliens have always been a problem in the United States. Ask any Indian.

RE-THINKING ISSUES: CIVILITY AND IMMIGRATION

As I write this America is in the midst of a political campaign--which isn't saying much, now that I have said it. I think of campaigning as a constant rumble in the background, like the noise of the engine on a cruise ship. As Michael Novak once quipped, when you're on a cruise you want the engine to run smoothly, but it ruins the cruise if you have to spend much time in the engine room. In any case, political campaigning is underway, which means it is a time to make choices, which means we need to think about issues responsibly, which means for Christians that our politics needs to be intentionally under Christ's Lordship, which means that we need to be sure our thinking is informed by a biblically informed Christian perspective instead of being simply swept along by political ideologies or slogans or party loyalties.

Within the flurry of competing concerns and candidates, all Americans should agree that two issues are worth careful consideration: civility (or actually its lack) in the public square, and what to do about the undocumented immigrants (usually called illegal aliens) that have entered the U.S. Though I am writing as an American within an American context, neither issue is a distinctly American one. In an increasingly pluralistic world, people must figure out how to live together given their deepest disagreements, and huge populations are on the move in Africa and the Middle East, and from both those regions into Europe and Great Britain, as well as into the U.S. It does not take much imagination to see that failing to address these two issues properly could be deadly, since violence has already erupted over them. As we peel back the news stories we find that cherished freedoms are involved. It is worth remembering that freedom is a fragile gift--hardly the norm in human history.

Both issues also provide an opportunity for Christians. For, as we dig deeper into questions surrounding civility and immigration, we discover that orthodox biblical faith is uniquely able to address them. The biblical Story provides a compelling reason for human significance and dignity, provisions for healthy human communication, a firm foundation for freedom, and a solid basis for justice when human rights and the provisions of law conflict.

Though I have no research to back this up, my impression, for what it is worth, is that most Christians aren't even aware of the opportunity that's been presented to us. Instead, many are energetically fighting as cultural warriors (a prime symptom of the lack of civility) and repeating conservative or liberal slogans about illegal aliens (rather than evoking a distinctly biblically informed sense of justice).

It will be sad if history records that America missed an important opportunity in failing to adequately address the questions of civility and immigration. It will be a tragic dishonoring of the name of our Lord if history records American Christians were conformed to the world's thinking instead of rooting their political understanding and behavior in the truth of God's word.

Two Christian thinkers have published wonderfully accessible studies addressing these two issues, and it is a delight to commend them to you. Neither is too long to be out of reach for busy people, and though both are scholarly, neither are academic and dry but lively and practical. I recommend each for two closely related reasons.

The Case for Civility: And Why our Future Depends on It written by Os Guinness, is clear, concise, and compelling. I recommend it first, because it presents the case for winsome, persuasive (rather than warrior, offensive) communication in the public square, and second, because it is a superb model of how a Christian can make their case in the public square rigorously without being argumentative.

Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible written by M. Daniel Carroll, is thoughtful, careful, and biblical. I recommend it first, because it helps Christians gain the perspective of Scripture to bring clarity to a complex political and legal issue, and second, because it is a superb model of how Christians can root their political convictions about current issues on the truth of God's word in Scripture.

The Case for Civility

Grappling with liberty, diversity, and unity has been part and parcel of the United States's being the world's "first new nation." Indeed, *E Pluribus Unum*, or "Out of Many, One," is not just the American motto but one of America's great accomplishments. Whereas the special pride of the ancient Jews was that out of one--namely,

Abraham--they had become many, the special pride of Americans is that out of many--namely, the diverse tide of settlers and immigrants--they have become one.

No feat could be more relevant to the world in the global era, for on a small planet united by our communications, our travel, our markets, and our common planetary problems, we are still divided by our religions, our political ideologies, our cultures, and our civilizations. There will not be, and there should not be, a universal way of being modern. Multiple modernities are both inevitable and proper, but the world requires precedents and patterns for how the challenge of living with our differences may be tackled, and the American experiment provides the most thought through and helpful model so far.

The questions raised are daunting. How can we live with our deepest differences on a global scale? How do we do it when there are tensions between entire ways of life, some of which are grounded in truth claims that are absolute--ways of life that are so different as to be philosophically and socially incompatible? What does it take in such a setting to establish a global public square that is both cosmopolitan and civil, doing justice to both halves of the first word--so that in some sense we are citizens of the worldwide "cosmos" while also citizens of our local city or "polis"? And how can we build such a worldwide order that promotes liberty, justice, and equal opportunity for all while allowing for the full consideration of global diversity and disorder? And above all, how can we do so when the differences that are the deepest differences of all are religiously and ideologically grounded differences, over which humans have fought and are still fighting? [p. 60-61]



Guinness shows persuasively that a civil public square is preferable to either a naked or a sacred public square--and that it is actually possible. He shows that American Christians have every reason, both in terms of a commitment to the convictions of the founders expressed in the American Constitution and an even deeper commitment to the teaching of Scripture to take the lead in this effort. And he helps us see how we can begin, by being faithful as citizens if only we will choose to be guided by principle instead of being manipulated by ideology.

The candidate we choose to vote for may be elected, or not, but either way neither hell nor heaven hang in the balance. The party we prefer may have a majority in Congress or not, but either way no tragedy has occurred--a tragedy is the brutal conflict in Darfur or your Mom being diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's. Our vote matters, but does not matter most of all.

On the other hand, at least on the long view, working to demonstrate the possibility and promise of a civil public square matters a great deal more because far more is at stake. The effort is consistent with a Christian understanding of faithfulness. It involves beginning with simple steps as individual citizens to stand for greater justice and freedom for all. And if we fail here, as Guinness shows, the future of the freedoms we cherish is made rather dim.

Christians at the Border

Carroll deals primarily with Hispanic immigration, though his biblical study applies to immigration issues involving all national and ethnic backgrounds. The heart of his book includes three chapters in which he takes us into the Scriptures. Whether we realize it or not, the Bible says a great deal which is pertinent to the movement of people across national borders. Some biblical characters were immigrants, like Ruth (into Israel), Joseph (into Egypt), and Daniel (into Babylon). And unlike the law codes of the nations surrounding Israel, the Mosaic regulations had a great deal to say about how the people of God were to treat the foreigners in their midst. Then in the New Testament we find Jesus embracing outsiders (women, Samaritans, and lepers) and the apostles picking up an Old Testament theme in identifying God's people as sojourners and strangers. Finally Carroll takes us into Romans 13 and the questions of obeying the laws of the land. Why haven't we done this sort of study before taking a position on the topic? Though applying what the Bible says will take courage and holy-spirited creativity, neglecting what it teaches is foolish for those who claim to believe Scripture is God's word, written.

Resident Aliens is the provocative title of a stimulating work on Christian identity and ministry in modern America by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon. The idea behind the title apparently comes from one of the biblical quotations that preface the book: "But our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20-21). The title is apropos to our concerns, as "resident aliens" is one of the translations given for the Hebrew and Greek words of the Bible that refer to the sojourner. *Resident Aliens*, however, does not deal at all with immigration issues (it was published in 1989). Nevertheless, what it says is relevant.

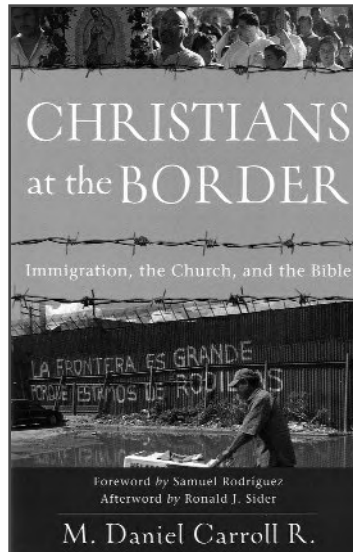
Hauerwas and Willimon's contention is that the Christian church has lost its way and is captive to the culture. The church must regain the vision of being a distinct community, a distinct community made up of ordinary individuals with a calling to be faithful to its Lord. The focus on living the life of the Savior in the world is clear from the other biblical quotation that begins their book: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5). Christians are to display the life of Jesus, and this requires acquiring a set of virtues, like peaceableness, kindness, hospitality, and patience. Christians and the

church need to be a certain kind of people with a particular way of looking at and living within society. For the church to be the church requires training in these virtues, the nurturing of Christian tradition through Word and sacrament, and the continual practice of the virtues. The virtues are fundamental for a Christian approach to Hispanic immigration. An appropriate response to the complicated situation in society will not come from detached, objective analysis, cost-benefit calculations, efficiency quotients, and cultural arguments. The decisions that are made and courses of action that are recommended should be commensurate with the life of Jesus--his actions, his teaching, his cross. Analysis and calculations are necessary, but they must be informed by more transcendent beliefs and other overriding life commitments.

Christians, both of the majority culture and Hispanic, are not to exclude the "other," whether Christian or non-Christian. We are all called to embrace the "other." We can embrace those who are different--and even those who have offended or wronged us--because we have embraced Jesus, who calls us to a self-sacrificing life for others. We embrace him, because he first embraced us. We take up that cross of forgiveness and hospitality because he took up his.

This embrace of the other--the majority culture of the Hispanic and the Hispanic of the majority culture--will be a "soft embrace." Resident aliens will embrace resident aliens: respectful and mindful of differences, open to grow and change, reciprocal and mutual, personal and communal, assured yet with great risk, while confident in the light of the Word, the empowerment

of the Spirit, the example of Jesus, and the blessing of the Father. Let the journey to reconciliation begin. May the church lead the way. [pp 138-140]



Indeed, may we be faithful as God's people. Immigration is a complicated issue to resolve, and justice hangs in the balance. Some argue that something must be done quickly because things are quickly getting out of hand. Be that as it may, one thing is certain: for the Christian biblical principle must be prior to expediency, and faithfulness before either economic concerns or fears about security. Dr Carroll, Distinguished Professor of Old Testament at Denver Seminary, helps root this highly charged political issue in solid biblical study--to help us get started.

We highly recommend both works to you. Read them carefully. Discuss them with friends. And for the sake of God's glory, the honor of Christ, and the grace of justice and freedom, put them into practice.

Books recommended:

The Case for Civility: And Why Our Future Depends on It by Os Guinness (New York, NY: HarperOne; 2008) 175 pp.

Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible by M. Daniel Carroll R. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic; 2008) 140 pp.

Sources:

Krauthammer online: www.quoteagarden.com/politics.html

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TWO POEMS

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

We have long believed that one test of being too busy is whether we have time for poetry--if not, we are too busy. Poetry resists being rushed, insisting instead that the words, phrases, lines and metaphors be savored, slowly, as if words woven together with truth and beauty really mattered. It is a pleasure to introduce Natasha Heller in her first submission to *Critique*. In "Jack and Jill Want to Stay Married Forever," she transforms a classic nursery rhyme into a metaphor for the hard but noble task of building a faithful marriage in a world which fragments all it touches. And in "A Conversation at a Diner," Heller takes an ordinary encounter between strangers and reveals something extraordinary in the moment because even strangers reveal God's image. Brew a cup of tea or pour a glass of wine. Then read slowly.

Jack and Jill Want to Stay Married Forever

Natasha L. Heller

Jack and Jill want to stay married forever.
They tell this to each set of parents,
and are received by grim grins and bitter laughs,
caused by long divorces and fights over
who should get the slimy ten gallon tank
in which to start a new fishy family,
complete with step-guppies.
The parents wish them luck, in ways that mean
I-give-those-kiddies-five-years-at-most
and *Remember-when-we-were-that-foolishly-young?*

So Jack and Jill start up the hill to no applause,
and a Farmer stops to give directions and
work the well, saying, *The problem with carrying*
empty pails is you reach the top with nothing to show.
The bucket seems too full to Jack--
when he and Jill fall, in a slosh-tangled heap
nearly back to the bottom,
he mutters, *Better to fetch water once we're there.*
But the Farmer makes sure they're filled up for the next go-round,
against their damp protests and the sounds of squelching.

At least we almost saw the view that time Jill tells Jack,
brushing her scraped knees clean of mud, their second forced landing.
I'll admit Jack says, patting down his wet-clumped hair,
Spilling is not such a problem when your bucket is always overflowing.
They take off their shoes, no good against the mud-slicked bank,
Jill thinking of the first two barefoot gardeners,
before fruit got in the way of a perfect marriage,
and Jack, that the wetter the well ends up getting them, the better--
breaking his crown at the Farmer's feet is getting easier every time.



A Conversation at the Diner

Natasha L. Heller

With tip your coffee comes to eighty-three dollars.
The waitress laughs out her fantasy,
apron strings biting her waist,
the stiff dough of a few babies
and long shifts close to the plate of deep-fried bits.
Bobby, the old jazz artist, whoops.
For that price you have to go home with me.
He knows how to write music with the lights cut off.
(Of his last gig, he's said, *If that man had hung up,*
I'd of died.)
The waitress leans, heavy-hipped, and kind.
'Who's Bobby?' my husband will want to know.
She considers her fictional answer, like the dust motes
on slow afternoons, when she's missing her children.
I'll say, 'Dunno, but he gave me eighty-three bucks.'
Bobby thumbs out four extra ones, for the joke
they've made, commanding the place, an aging tiger.
The waitress holds the bills in her hand,
like a small bouquet, yells to the cashier,
Gonna make me a sign and put it over this booth.
'Life sat here.'

Natasha Heller goes to the Rochester L'Abri conferences when she can, dragging along her kid brother so he can get some culture. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *GreenPrints* and *Relief: A Quarterly Christian Expression*. (Go find her.)

The Reach and Limits of Efficiency

I was at the Post Office this week to mail a package. I stood in line. The line snaked across the lobby and doubled back on itself. The line did not seem to be moving. I waited as someone's grandmother counted out pennies from the bottom of her purse to purchase three stamps, after reminiscing about each rise in postal rates since the Truman administration. Waited as another clerk chatted about the day's news headlines with a patron, after his postal business was completed. I thought I should perhaps try to meditate on patience as a virtue, but decided instead to figure out ways to rationalize my growing rage as righteous anger.

The previous week I had waited--in stocking feet--in an even longer line to go through security at an airport. As I waited I wondered why there often seems to be more agents standing and talking than there are checking travelers. I waited as another grandmother ahead of me had her purse ransacked so that an offending pair of tiny scissors nestled in her yarn could be confiscated; her foot long knitting needles were allowed through. I thought of clever ways to ask one of the idle agents what exactly, he was doing to make my flight safer, but decided not to risk delaying my chance to get caffeinated before my flight took off--if it did take off on time, which of course it didn't.

It may seem as if my topic here is waiting, but it isn't. Nor is it patience, or anger, or high blood pressure--which, not surprisingly I suppose, I have.

My topic is efficiency. I prefer to do business with efficient institutions peopled by efficient staff, and I don't associate long lines, interminable waits, and inexplicable delays with efficiency. I tend to see efficiency as a good thing, as having a positive value. And a good case can be made for that. What I'd like to do here, though, is ask whether there are not areas of life in which a desire for efficiency is not good. Where it may even have very negative results. And if so, what would good and positive inefficiency look like?

Photo courtesy of: stock.xchng

The Progress of an Idea

In *The Mantra of Efficiency*, Dr. Jennifer Alexander provides an interesting history of the notion of efficiency. Prior to the industrial revolution--that is, until the 18th century--efficiency was a philosophical or theological concept applied to God, or in Greek thought, to cause and effect. So, we have Christian theologians referring to the "efficient grace" of God in salvation, meaning that his grace is not just sufficient for redemption, but powerful to save, completely accomplishing the salvation that God wills in his love. And in Aristotle's philosophy we find a prominent place given to notions of cause, "in which the efficient one was the active and immediate principle that produced change."

Then, Alexander says, with the Enlightenment and modernity, efficiency began to be applied to human beings. In mid-18th century England, John Smeaton (1724-1792), who pioneered the field of civil engineering, did a series of tests to determine the efficiency of waterwheels. It was an important issue because waterwheels were a primary source of energy at the time. His studies caused controversy, however, because the terms and formulas on which he based his tests were still in dispute.

Nevertheless, Smeaton is important not just for launching a new field of science, but for taking an abstract principle from the realms of philosophy and theology and transforming it into a standard by which to measure the value of human effort and work.

Later in France, Gérard-Joseph Christian (1776-1832) pushed the idea of efficiency a step farther. He

argued that that some machines were more "perfect" than others. The more perfect machine was the one that "produced the most, the most rapidly, and with the greatest economy; it also contributed to the intellectual and physical well-being of the worker."

Then, beginning in the 19th century two seminal thinkers applied the notion of efficiency to the task of management. In 1859 Charles Darwin (1809-1882) published *On the Origin of Species*. In it he argued that natural selection was not purposeful but it was efficient in producing change that resulted in progress for the species. "Darwin argued," Alexander writes, "that selection scrutinized 'the whole constitution, structure and habits of each creature--favoring the good and rejecting the bad, 'working so that the characteristics

of all living beings tended 'to progress towards perfection.' He made the management metaphor clear: natural selection undertook the 'work of improvement' of species by selecting 'only for [the good] of the being which she tends.'" The second

thinker who applied efficiency to management was Alfred Marshall (1842-1924), an economist. Marshall's *Principles of Economics* envisioned economics in evolutionary terms. For him, Alexander says, "efficiency grew out of rational choice and deliberate integration, by a manager, of various skills, materials, and resources into an organization or firm." As a result, increasingly the pursuit of efficien-

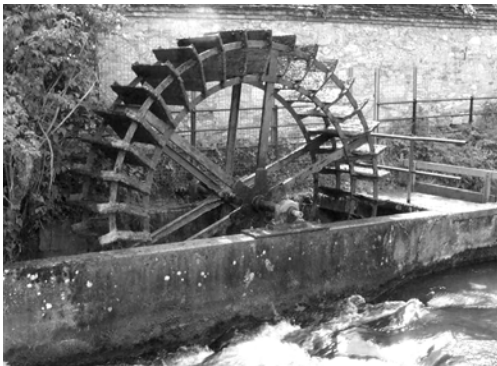
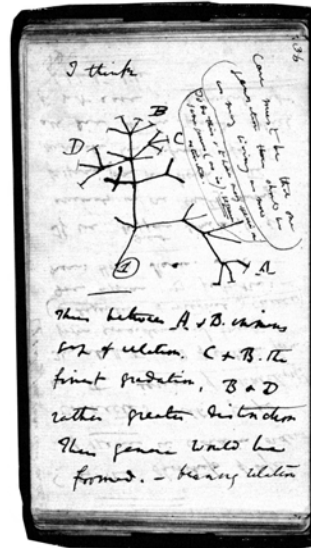
cy was defined as a good thing, as something that contributed to progress and success, as something that applied to far more than just machines, and as something that could be managed rationally.

In the early years of the 20th century, efficiency as a standard was applied directly to workers. Henry Gantt (1861-1919) developed the chart that still bears his name, as a means of keeping track of the productivity of individual workers. Arguments were made for the need for managers and experts to set arbitrary standards to measure efficiency, just as thermometers use arbitrary gradations to measure temperature. The best worker in a factory might make fewer widgets than the number of memos the best secretary can produce in the office upstairs, but by setting arbitrary standards of

achievement in each case, both could be measured as to whether they were efficient in their work. They could even be spurred on by incentives attached to those arbitrary standards to even greater efficiency--and productivity--in the future.

And so it has gone. One economist, Nobel winner Robert Fogel (1926-), saw efficiency as such a good that it changed his view of slavery. When his number crunching indicated that "American slavery had been efficient, more so than agriculture in the northern states," Fogel concluded in *Time on the Cross* (1974) that Southern slavery must not have been as bad as he had assumed. Thankfully, Fogel changed his mind later--the truth is that slave owners can use force in ways that seem to produce efficient productivity, while remaining inhumane, oppressive, and deeply evil.

"Characterizing efficiency," Dr Alexander correctly concludes, "requires taking seriously both the



benefits and deep hurts it has offered." It also requires that we think deeply about those parts of life where efficiency must never be applied at all, or even where efficiency as a standard must be seen as counter-productive. "Although there may be situations in which people would question looking for efficiency (think of love and faith), in general people speak of efficiency as a good thing and associate it with a job well and economically done. All other things equal, better efficient than not." If I cannot produce enough widgets to justify my salary, I am probably in the wrong line of work. Employers should seek to train their staff so that customers receive the help they need efficiently. If I am too busy, on the other hand, to hang with my children and grandchildren and listen to their music, I am too busy. And trying to listen efficiently is not merely an oxymoron, it is a recipe for wounding the people I love.

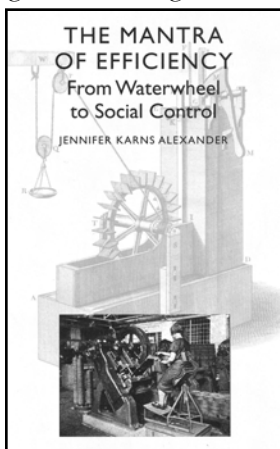
In some areas of life trying to be efficient is the last thing we should desire. Efficiency, from a Christian perspective, can be counter-productive to the good life. This is where the need for careful discernment arises.

Most of us have probably absorbed our ideas about efficiency without much sustained reflection. We dislike long waits in lines at businesses that are poorly run, in which workers seem unable or unwilling to discriminate between necessary and less vital tasks. And we wonder at people who seem able to produce so much in such little time, wondering why we never seem to be as efficient or productive. Engineers and managers study efficiency, of course, in order to develop skill in increasing it in themselves and their work, their machines and their people. Companies hire efficiency experts to help them remain competitive in an increasingly globalized marketplace. We've grown up in this world, and so have absorbed, like catching a virus, the notion that all things being equal, efficiency is a good thing.

The problem is that a lack of reflection on a standard or measure that is applied to all of life in a fallen world is a dangerous way to live. Yes, efficiency is good--as long as it is applied to the right things in the

right ways. But it can wound people when applied inappropriately, and it can suck the goodness from life if applied to things that are best enjoyed in their most gloriously inefficient forms.

For Christians a standard like efficiency must be examined in light of the biblical Story if we are to live faithful lives in the world God has created. The questions which follow are designed to help us reflect on efficiency--its meaning and its limits.



Source:

The Mantra of Efficiency: From Waterwheel to Social Control by Jennifer Karns Alexander (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press; 2008) pp. 2, 9, 35, 60, 75, 167.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Where have you experienced or observed efficiency as a positive, helpful standard? What made it so?
2. Where have you experienced or observed efficiency as a negative, destructive standard? What made it so?
3. The argument can be made that modernity has so injected efficiency into the warp and woof of life and culture that it forms an inescapable (even if subconscious) pressure from which it is difficult to escape. So much so, in fact, that we tend to automatically measure things by a standard of efficiency unless we intentionally set out to do otherwise--and then it is a struggle to not apply it. Do you agree? Why or why not?
4. In what parts of life should efficiency never be applied as a standard? Why? What happens when efficiency is (mis)applied in these areas?
5. In a fast-paced, hectic, rest-less (in both meanings of the term), efficiency-inebriated world, one form of Christian faithfulness is to intentionally waste time. Do you agree? Why or why not?
6. Can the Christian spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation, or silence ever be made efficient? Should they be? By what standard should they be measured? Should they be measured at all?
7. Christian sociologist Jacques Ellul (1912-1994) is reported to have said: "Modern technology has become a total phenomenon for civilization, the defining force of a new social order in which efficiency is no longer an option but a necessity imposed on all human activity." Do you agree? Why or why not? What might your agreement/disagreement imply as to your experience of and belief concerning efficiency?
8. Novelist Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) is reported to have said: "The worst enemy of life, freedom and the common decencies is total anarchy; their second worst enemy is total efficiency." Do you agree? Why or why not?
9. French philosopher Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) is reported to have said: "Remember the parable of talents--the story of the three servants who had received talents, five, two and one respectively? When their master returned they all gave account of their stewardship. The first two had doubled their capital. Each of them said so in sixteen words and their work was pronounced, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.' The third servant had accomplished absolutely nothing but his report took forty-three words, three times as long as each of the other two reports. Don't be like servant number three. Make good! Don't explain your failure! Do the thing you are expected to do! Then you won't have to explain why you didn't, couldn't, wouldn't, or shouldn't. Efficiency! That is the soul-satisfying joy of making good. Doing your work just a little better than anyone else gives you the margin of success. Making good required no explanation. Failure required forty-three words." Discuss. Do you believe this a valid interpretation of the meaning of Jesus' parable (Matthew 25:14-30)? Why or why not?

Wearing Out On Purpose

Deliberate obsolescence in all its forms--technological, psychological, or planned--is a uniquely American invention. Not only did we invent disposable products, ranging from diapers to cameras to contact lenses, but we invented the very concept of disposability itself, as a necessary precursor to our rejection of tradition and our promotion of progress and change. As American manufacturers learned how to exploit obsolescence, American consumers increasingly accepted it in every aspect of their lives. Actual use of the word "obsolescence" to describe out-of-date consumer products began to show up in the early twentieth century when modern household appliances replaced older stoves and fireplaces, and steel pots replaced iron ones. But it was the electric starter in automobiles, introduced in 1913, that raised obsolescence to national prominence by rendering all previous cars obsolete. Even the most modern American women hated hand-cranking their cars and were greatly relieved when they could simply push a start button on a newer model. The earliest phase of product obsolescence, then, is called *technological obsolescence*, or obsolescence due to technological innovation.

The second stage of product obsolescence occurred about a decade later, in 1923. Executives who had migrated to General Motors from the chemical and dye-making giant DuPont adapted a marketing strategy from what was then America's third largest and most rapidly growing industry: textiles and fashions. Instead of waiting for technological innovations that would push consumers to trade in their older-model cars, General Motors turned to sleek styling as a way of making newer cars more desirable and pulling potential buyers into the showroom. The success of GM's cosmetic changes to the 1923 Chevrolet indicated that consumers were willing to trade up for

style, not just for technological improvements, long before their old cars wore out. This strategy was so successful that it spread quickly to many other American industries, such as watches and radios. The annual model change adopted by carmakers



is an example of *psychological, progressive, or dynamic obsolescence*. All of these terms refer to the mechanism of changing product style as a way to manipulate consumers into repetitive buying.

The most recent stage in the history of product obsolescence began when producers recognized their ability to manipulate the failure rate of manufactured materials. After prolonged use, any product will fail because its materials become worn or stressed. This is normal. But during the Depression, manufacturers were forced to return to the practice of adulteration--the nineteenth century technique of using inferior materials in manufactured goods--as a simple cost-cutting measure: inferior materials lowered unit costs. But these same manufacturers soon realized that adulteration also stimulated demand.

After a decade of unprecedented affluence and consumption during the 1920s, consumer demand fell radically with the onset of the Depression, and in desperation manufacturers used inferior materials to deliberately shorten the life spans of products and force consumers to purchase replacements.

Planned obsolescence is the catch-all phrase used to describe the assortment of techniques used to artificially limit the durability of a manufactured good in order to stimulate repetitive consumption. To achieve shorter product lives and sell more goods, manufacturers in the 1930s began to base their choice of materials on scientific tests by newly formed research and development departments. These tests determined when each of the product's specific components would fail. One of the few known examples of this monopolistic (and hence illegal) strategy was a change, proposed but never implemented, to shorten the life of General Electric's flash-light bulbs in order to increase demand by as much as 60 percent.

As obsolescence became an increasingly useful manufacturing and marketing tool, an eclectic assortment of advertisers, bankers, business analysts, communications theorists, economists, engineers, industrial designers, and even real estate brokers contrived ways to describe, control, promote, and exploit the market demand that obsolescence created. What these approaches had in common was their focus on a radical break with tradition in order to deliver products, and prosperity, to the greatest number of people--and in the process to gain market share and make a buck. Both goals strike us today as quintessentially American in spirit.

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Excerpted from:
Made to Break: Technology and Obsolescence in America by Giles Slade (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 2006) pp. 3-6.

[Continued from p.7]

In Christ's comfort zone

Francis Schaeffer, my spiritual mentor, used to warn about what he saw as a pernicious temptation for Christians in the West: personal peace, along with the affluence that made the pursuit of it possible. The problem is that life has gotten so busy, margins so slim, and stress so constant that personal peace seems less a temptation to avoid than a respite to be embraced. We can even come up with spiritual sounding justifications for pursuing it. The true solution to these pressures, though, is carefully planned cycles of rest. Personal peace, in contrast, is an attempt to keep from having to walk by faith, an escape from everything that is different from us as if our comfort is the final standard of all that is obedient for a believer.

It is foolish to try, but sometimes I try to imagine what Christ went through to enter my world: From an infinite, all-encompassing omnipresence to be a fetus in a womb, as the deity of all life to a slow, agonizing death by crucifixion, the One who spoke far-flung galaxies into existence yet was disbelieved by the ones he came to love. My mind boggles.

It's a little less foolish to read the Gospel narratives and try to imagine some of what the disciples went through as they followed Christ. Walking with Jesus meant leaving their comfort zone to live in his. In Samaria, a place good Jews avoided, the disciples were surprised that Jesus would sit at a well in broad daylight talking unhurriedly with a woman (John 4:27). Though they may not have understood it fully at the time, Jesus clearly expected them to adopt his perspective in place of their own (John 4:31-43). He didn't seem to worry much how comfortable they were about it, either. Another time Jesus disappeared when crowds of needy people were clamoring for him (Mark 1:32-39). It took a while for the disciples to track him down (he had slipped out before dawn to pray). "Everyone is looking for you," they told him. "And he said to them, 'Let us go on to the next towns.'" He knew his calling from his Father, and so could say No to good things in order to say Yes to what was truly important. There is no record whether the disciples understood--I doubt I would have--but it's clear Jesus expected them to follow him. He touched untouchable lepers (Mark 1:41), insulted religious leaders (Matthew 23), befriended Roman collaborators (Luke 19:1-9), and for a Messiah had a horrible reputation (Matthew 11:19). Some people even came to Jesus wanting to become disciples, but he made their comfort zones the reason they could not (Luke 9:57-62).

I do not want the narrow limits of my comfort zone to disqualify me.

And I take comfort in knowing that being in Christ is the safest place to live. There will always be risk when we seek to follow Christ in faith, but that risk is always less dangerous than refusing to be faithful to the calling we have been given. After all, Jonah had his encounter with the fish running from faithfulness, not in the middle of fulfilling his calling (Jonah 1:10).

In the past I have proposed some of what seems to

me to be required if we are to be faithful as Christians in our increasingly pluralistic world:

Learning to listen, really listening.

Asking thoughtful questions.

Giving the gift of unburied time.

Opening our homes and lives in warm hospitality.

Developing skill in being discerning.

And I want to propose one more: intentionally breaking out of our comfort zones to walk by faith in Christ's. It's the only way we'll be able to fulfill our calling from God.

I do not mean these things as a technique, or a formula, for they are neither. I mean them instead as a way of life, as habits of the heart that we can, by God's grace grow into. They are not guilt-trips nor are they legalisms. They are meant instead, to shine a little light into the thicket of possibilities we face in order to make sense of the way forward.

Begin by taking stock of the extent your comfort zone is holding you back from being faithful. Then take a simple step of faith outside your zone. Join a discussion group sponsored by a bookstore (making time for it, if necessary, by dropping some activity at your church). Spend time each week knitting at a coffee shop until others join you. Call a mosque in your area and find out when you can visit--many host open houses and provide introductory talks on Islam. Ask a friend who is comfortable some place you are not if you can go with them to help you get past your disease. Go on a short-term mission trip. Go to New Orleans and help Habitat for Humanity build houses.

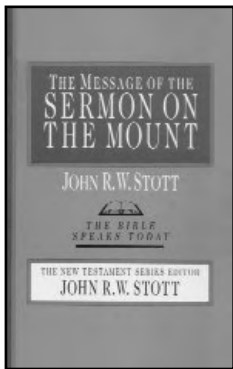
How can we witness to God's kingdom in Christ if we do not follow him into a broken, needy world?

There have been times in the past, after I have written an article like this, when I've then received emails from people demanding why I have encouraged readers to attend porn films or to visit brothels or to hang out with corner drug dealers--all that the correspondent could apparently think of as being outside a Christian's comfort zone. Of course I am not suggesting that people set aside the dictates of conscience, or cross the line of good and evil, or to be foolish in a dangerous world. I suspect that it is fearfulness that causes people to read such absurdities into articles like this. A fear that since the truth is fragile, taking any step into a fallen world is spiritual folly. Such fear is unwarranted. We live in a deeply troubled world and in it, Jesus promised, we will have trouble. "But take heart," he says, "I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

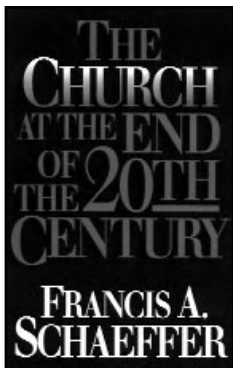
Begin simply--but simply begin. When the Bible reveals that we are broken, fallen people, it means we can no longer trust our comfort zone to be an adequate standard for being faithful. And remember: at every step, we can have a quiet confidence that the safest, most ultimately fulfilling, shalom-infused place to be in this troubled world is to be in Christ.

Questions for discussion and reflection:

1. Together with a small group of trusted, grace-full, kindred spirits, take the time, perhaps over several weeks, to go through the exercise outlined in the article.
2. Read each text of Scripture--and its immediate context--mentioned in this article. Are the texts of Scripture used appropriately by the author?
3. What other texts from Scripture could be used as further examples of how God's people need to be moved beyond the narrow limits of their comfort zones?
4. What influences shaped and formed your comfort zone? To what extent were they appropriate earlier in your life? To what extent are they appropriate now?
5. Is there a close friend who might be willing to walk with you as you take some initial steps outside your comfort zone?



6. In his book, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, John Stott says this when commenting on Jesus' claim that his followers are to be salt in the world (Matthew 5:13-16): "God intends us to penetrate the world. Christian salt has no business to remain snugly in elegant little ecclesiastical salt cellars; our place is to be rubbed into the secular community, as salt is rubbed into meat, to stop it going bad. And when society does go bad, we Christians tend to throw up our hands in pious horror and reproach the non-Christian world; but should we not reproach ourselves? One can hardly blame unsalted meat from going bad. It cannot do anything else. The real question to ask is: where is the salt?" [p. 65] To what extent does the Christian community--do we--live as salt? Is it possible that part of the problem is related to people staying within their comfort zones?



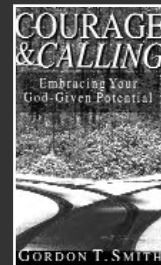
7. In *The Church at the End of the 20th Century*, Francis Schaeffer comments on the diversity present in the 1st century Christian church: "The early Christian church cut across all lines which divided men--Jew and Greek, Greek and Barbarian, male and female; from Herod's foster brother to the slave; from the naturally proud Gentiles in Macedonia who sent material help to the naturally proud Jews who called all Gentiles dogs, and yet who could not keep the good news to themselves but took it to the Gentiles in Antioch. The observable and practical love in our day certainly should also without reservation cut across all such lines as language, nationalities, national frontiers, younger or older, colors of skin, education and economic levels, accent, line of birth, the class system of our particular locality, dress, short and long hair among whites and African and non-African hairdos among blacks, the wearing of shoes and the non-wearing of shoes, cultural differentiations, and the more traditional and less traditional forms of worship" [p. 106]. Since Schaeffer wrote this in 1970, some of the specifics are dated--update his list with, for example: undocumented workers and legal immigrants, tattooed and pierced, etc. How comfortable would your church be with such diversity? How comfortable would you be? Why, in a wildly pluralistic society like ours, does Sunday morning tend to be, by and large, a homogeneous gathering rather than one as diverse as the wider society? What texts of Scripture might be useful for reflecting on this issue?

For further reading on calling:

The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life by Os Guinness (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson; 1998).



The Fabric of This World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work by Lee Hardy (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing; 1990).



Courage & Calling: Embracing Your God-Given Potential by Gordon Smith (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1999).



Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation edited by William Placher (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing; 2005).



The Road imagines a burned-out world, unrelentingly gray from the ash that falls like snow and through which a man and his son trudge, devoid of hope yet refusing to stop. Food is scarce, people are dangerous, and death walks with them. As McCarthy did in *No Country for Old Men*, the stark story he tells in his latest novel raises essential questions that are both urgent and perennial. This one is being filmed as well, and we encourage you to read the book before the movie is released. McCarthy sees more deeply than most into the broken reality of a fallen world, and in the process subversively questions the received wisdom of a postmodernist world.

The Road by Cormac McCarthy (New York: NY: Alfred A. Knopf; 2006) 241 pp.



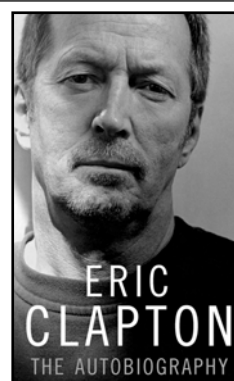
Soon after the end of the World War I, a mail order bride, Inge, arrives in Minnesota to become the wife of Olaf, a Norwegian farmer. But Inge turns out to be German, so prejudice keeps them from marriage and legalism ejects them from the church. The story of Olaf (played by Tim Guinee), a man of very few words, and Inge (played by Elizabeth Reaser), who is wonderfully feisty, is deeply human, touching without becoming sentimental. Told from the perspective of Inge at the end of her life, *Sweet Land* is a delightful film of courage, love, community, and people who find grace in the midst of hard work and hard times.

Sweet Land (2005) Rated PG. Written & directed by Ali Salim.



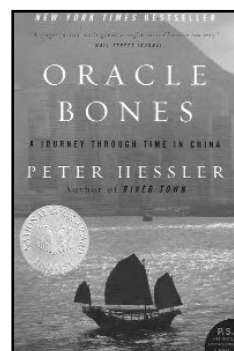
After covering the brutal warfare that convulsed the sprawling cities of Congo for years, AP reporter Bryan Mealer set out to travel across this largest of all African nations. By river barge crawling up the Congo River, on trains swaying over isolated track not maintained in decades, and by bike snaking through equatorial forests and swamps, Mealer wanted to see if hope could be found in a land shaped by centuries of suffering. His well-written story allows us to see past headlines into a land where vicious fighting, rampant corruption, a destroyed infrastructure, hunger, and disease haunt the lives of people whom most of the world has forgotten.

All Things Must Fight to Live: Stories of War and Deliverance in Congo by Bryan Mealer (New York, NY: Bloomsbury; 2008) 296 pp.



Music lovers will be interested in this autobiography, a story that honestly details both amazing musical creativity and the broken relationships cluttering years lost in the haze of addiction. *Eric Clapton* is a testament to common grace in a broken world.

Eric Clapton: The Autobiography by Eric Clapton (New York, NY: Broadway Books; 2007) 328 pp.



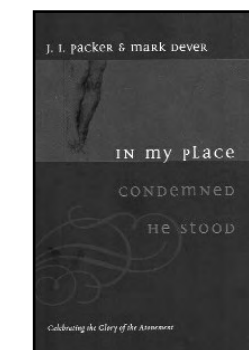
Few Western reporters have immersed themselves so thoughtfully into the rapidly changing world that is mainland China as has Peter Hessler. He allows us to see into the lives of ordinary people as a nation proud of its long history elbows its way onto the world scene.

Oracle Bones: A Journey Through Time in China by Peter Hessler (New York, NY: Harper; 2006) 458 pp.



Iron & Wine is the band featuring the music of folk-singer, songwriter Sam Beam. *The Shepherd's Dog* is more musically involved than Beam's previous recordings, but his lyrics remain enigmatic, filled with surprising, dark metaphors.

The Shepherd's Dog by Iron & Wine (2007).



Over the period of a lifetime of faithful service as a theologian, J. I. Packer wrote several thoughtful essays on the meaning of the crucifixion. They have become classics: clear, biblically orthodox explorations of the meaning of redemption secured by Jesus' substitutionary death on our behalf on the cross. These have now been gathered into one volume, along with additional essays by Packer, professor of theology at Regent College (Vancouver) and Mark Dever, pastor in Washington, DC. This is the heart of the gospel, the essential meaning of the biblical claim that through Christ we are brought into a relationship with the divine Judge who becomes our Father.

In My Place Condemned He Stood by J. I. Packer and Mark Dever (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books; 2007) 188 pp.