

# critique

A Ransom Fellowship Publication

2011 Issue 2

Poetry: *Fireflies and Dust*

Film: *Winter's Bone, The King's Speech, 127 Hours*

Resources: *Make College Count, The Arabs,  
Of Pilgrims and Fire*

and

## Hindrances to Communication



## CRITIQUE



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### CONTACT CRITIQUE

www.RansomFellowship.org  
150 West Center, Rochester, MN 55902  
info@ransomfellowship.org

### ABOUT CRITIQUE

*Critique* is part of the work of Ransom Fellowship founded by Denis and Margie Haack in 1982. Together, they have created a ministry that includes lecturing, mentoring, writing, teaching, hospitality, feeding, and encouraging those who want to know more about what it means to be a Christian in the everyday life of the 21st century.

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Everyone on Ransom's mailing list also receives *Notes from Toad Hall*, a newsletter by Margie Haack in which she reflects on what it means to be *faithful* in the ordinary and routine of daily life and gives news about Ransom's ministry.

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## FROM THE EDITOR

# Trust and Feeling Safe

by Denis Haack



"Trust is confidence," Jim Belcher says, "that the other person's intentions are good and that we have no reason to be protective or careful around them." If we are to feel safe in conversation, safe to be truthful and open, safe to expose our fears, convictions, and hopes, safe enough to risk asking hard questions, admitting deep doubts, or voicing strong disagreement, we must be able to trust those with whom we are talking.

Whether the reputation is deserved or not, evangelical Christians tend not, as a group, to inspire this trust. It's one of the reasons many Christians are afraid to invite non-Christians to church functions—church is often an unsafe place for everything except conformity and easy answers. Treating people as those made in God's image, loving them as St Paul defines love in 1 Corinthians 13 means wanting them to be able to trust us even—or especially—when we happen to disagree with them. The fact they may not return the favor is beside the point.

It's true this sort of trust usually needs to be built over time. You may feel confident that my intentions are good towards you only after we have gotten to know each other a bit. You may need to watch me in a variety of settings before you feel very certain that you can cut loose without risking my anger, or dismissiveness, or sarcasm, or an answer that ends the discussion instead of deepening it. Granting unhurried

time to intentionally build trust is a rare grace, an expression of part of the biblical gospel of Christ.

But it is also true that some people seem to have an uncanny ability to inspire trust relatively quickly, if not instantly. I would like to be more like that.

How they accomplish this doesn't seem to me to be easily quantifiable. It can't be faked, of that I am certain. I think it boils down to meekness, a grace that Jesus recommended (Matthew 5:5) but that we don't consider very often. "Basil calls this 'the indelible character of a gracious soul,'" the Puritan Thomas Watson said. "By nature the heart is like a troubled sea, casting forth the foam of anger and wrath. Now meekness calms the passions. It sits as moderator in the soul, quieting and giving check to its distempered motions."

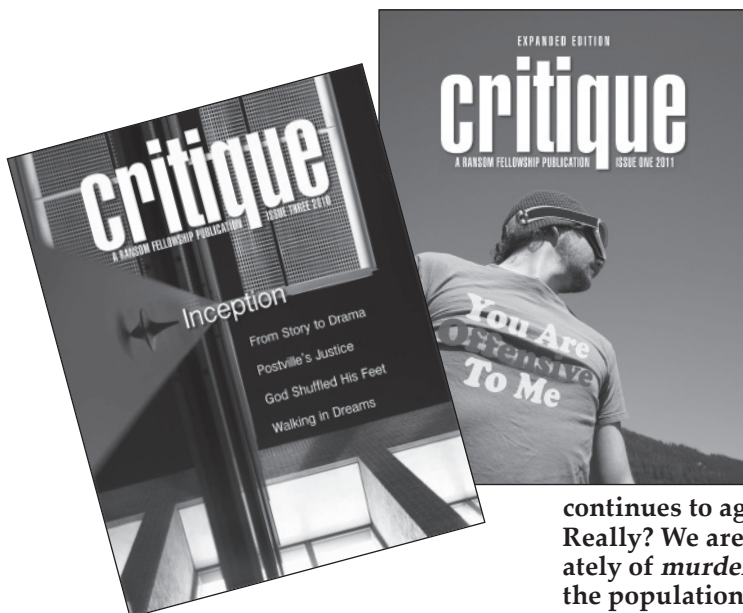
No doubt about it, I cast up far too much foam.

"As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved," St Paul writes, "clothe yourselves with... meekness" (Colossians 3:12). If it is true that we are chosen, if it is true that we are set apart to God by grace, if it is true that we are actually beloved of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—these realities mean that meekness is possible. I need not try to be God, or to try to fix you, or to control the conversation so it ends where I am most comfortable. I am called simply to be gracious moment by moment, because God through Christ has been gracious to me. Being gracious makes sense because grace is the only thing of value I have, and since I received it as a gift, I can offer it in turn, and be grateful for the opportunity, whatever transpires. Being gracious is possible because in the gospel we have been granted grace, and God's Spirit who arrives to take up residence within our very being proves his presence by causing fruit to grow that flows out into a lifestyle of shalom and loveliness (Galatians 5:22).

This is what inspires confidence and trust, and makes us safe. ■

*Source: Jim Belcher in Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2009) p. 52. Thomas Watson [1620-1686] in The Beatitudes, (1660), an exposition of Matthew 5:5.*

## DIALOGUE: READERS RESPOND



To the editor:

You probably saw the article in the *New York Times* by A.O. Scott on "The Cinematic State of Things." It picks up on many of the themes explored this year in *Critique*. Way to keep your finger on the pulse.

1. blurring of reality (particularly identity)

2. maternal monsters

3. maternal suffering

4. kids are perfect

5. arrested male development

6. investigative docs

7. residual Bush era

8. nostalgia for hedonism

9. power to the actor

10. discussion is more interesting than the movie

I saw the film *Inception* and remembered a review in *Critique* [2010:3]. It proved to be very helpful for a film that needs thoughtful discussion after viewing it. The questions were right on the money. I was then drawn into your excellent article on discernment, which deserves wide reading. On the basis of these two articles, I mailed copies of *Critique* to two friends today.

Keep up the excellent and unique work.

Warmly,

John Seel

nCore Media

Los Angeles, CA

Denis Haack responds:

John: Thank you for your encouraging words.

To the editor:

I was absolutely stunned—and I don't mean that in a good way—to read the statement, "The Western church will need to speak of euthanasia with greater compassion and thoughtfulness as the population

continues to age" [*Critique* 2011:1]. Really? We are to speak compassionately of murder? On the contrary—as the population ages, euthanasia will become a more enticing temptation, and therefore we will need to speak out more forcefully against it. The fact that man is made in God's image demands nothing less.

I'm not sure which error is more troubling: the doctrinal decision to advance such a startlingly un-Biblical position, or the editorial decision to present it as if it were a fairly mundane and self-evident observation. This sentence is a glaring flaw in an otherwise well-written article. I urge you to print a retraction.

Sincerely,  
Bob Stulac  
Crystal, MN

Denis Haack responds:

Bob: Thank you for writing—I appreciate the chance to clarify my statement.

Whenever we wish to persuade people to change their ethical beliefs and practices, it is important to consider both the tone and the content of our speech.

If our tone is belittling or unloving or harsh, for example, we can hardly expect our argument to be persuasive. This is part of what St Paul is getting at in 1 Corinthians 13. Even if we happen to be saying things spoken by angels or uttered by prophets or containing all knowledge, he argues, if we say it without love our speech is indistinguishable from the jarring clamor of jangling metal. Actually he goes further in his indictment—it is the Christian that is "a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (13:1). The reason is that even those who hold incorrect views on ethical issues like euthanasia are made

in God's image. Thus, when the church addresses such topics, we must speak with compassion, in other words, in a tone characterized by love.

The content of what we say, if it is to be persuasive, must recognize that those who disagree with us differ not just on the level of policy but on the far deeper level of assumptions and presuppositions. In other words, their support of euthanasia is based on a whole series of convictions and values that form their underlying worldview. It is threatening to be challenged on that level, and doing so requires thoughtfulness if we are to gain a hearing. We must be able to enter their perspective, identify points of truth, and patiently build a case from there—just as St Paul did with his pagan listeners in Athens (Acts 17). Simply telling them euthanasia is wrong is not only not persuasive, it suggests our position is implausible and thus not worthy of careful consideration. This will be especially important as the population ages during the early decades of the 21st century. As a generation of young adults mature and begin to make decisions for their aging parents, I'm not confident that many share the Christian conviction that every person bears God's image. Their commitment, instead, to a mystical spirituality, libertarianism in personal ethics, and interconnectedness as a measure of personal value will not only make euthanasia seem attractive but make them doubt the intentions of those who wish to use the power of the state to force them to act in accordance to another set of values.

My hope is that the church could do better in the days ahead. Those that are open to euthanasia believe their perspective is enlightened and humane, while ours is hard-hearted, rigid, and dangerous to personal freedom. If the church continues to engage in shrill partisan rhetoric, political posturing, and unkind sloganeering, we may feel (self) righteous about our effort, but we will fail to persuade people to examine the claims of Christ as the Lord of life. Indeed, the western church will need to speak of euthanasia with greater compassion and thoughtfulness as the population continues to age. ■



## POETRY

# Fireflies Dust

*Out in the country  
the stars speak to you,  
sometimes they sing their silver  
tongues  
there shimmering in vast choirs  
amidst cathedrals of night.  
Beneath their singing  
two boys were running over dark earth,  
racing, tumbling, laughing through the  
darkness,  
their footfalls as fleet  
as a rabbit's heart beating,  
beating out its blood  
dancing through veins.*

*My twin brother was ahead of me,  
breathing out brightness  
into warm night wind  
as we drifted through soft streetlight  
and past glowing orange windows  
moving with murmuring shadows,  
our legs moving through the dying fire  
of our neighborhood,  
feet kicking through its ashes.*

*And we would make our way to the  
woods,  
to the moon-illuminated labyrinth  
filled with the cymbal brush  
and light percussion  
of leaves and stream  
and insects gently humming  
through the incense of wildflowers  
dreaming out their cool spice.*

*And I remember,  
I remember the fireflies  
imprisoned in our amazed hands,  
weeping and weeping their green  
luminescence,  
pleading for release  
to meet familiar fires,  
yet we carried them home  
and later we pressed close to the jar  
with dark faces  
and wide eyes  
flecked with the flare  
of their loneliness. ■*

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*The leaf obeys its Creator,  
wavering its green in the tireless,  
unfailing wind.  
And the sky  
continually bears  
on its immense back,  
a burden of blue.  
And when a storm comes on  
the clouds darken,  
weaving together without question,  
and from this,  
lightning looses its silver,  
its flicker and flash,  
always obeying  
with sudden bursts of illumination.  
The rain falls willingly,  
dropping down  
to pummel dry earth,  
mixing it into mud  
as it should,  
a task performed  
without hesitation,  
yet the dust,  
that which is most blessed,  
crowned over all creation,  
burns,  
burns with a rage  
deep in its breast. ■*

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Scott Schuleit received the MA in Christianity and Culture from Knox Theological Seminary. His poems have appeared in the Mars Hill Review, The Penwood Review, Spring Hill Review, Christianity and Literature, and Sehnsucht: The C.S. Lewis Journal. His non-fiction has been published in several print and non-print publications, including: Tabletalk, Reformed Perspectives Magazine, Monergism.com, The Gospel Coalition, and Modern Reformation. Scott is the youth ministry leader at Lake Worth Christian Reformed Church and enjoys walking, observing, reflecting, and spending time with his dear wife Christina.



## REFLECTIONS

# Hindrances to Communication



by Denis Haack

Good communication is hard even at the best of times in this badly fragmented world.

Have I overstated that? I don't think so. Would someone more optimistic than I (someone who is, in other words, less realistic than I am) put a more positive spin on the topic? Perhaps.

Please understand: I'm not suggesting communication never flows smoothly and with apparent ease. That sort of lovely, free conversation often happens in Toad Hall's dining room over a shared meal, a line of lit tea candles, and later in the living

room, over coffee and pieces of fresh berry pie as a short story is read aloud and discussed. Neither am I suggesting that strangers can never meet and quickly find a point of contact—perhaps similar backgrounds, concerns, questions, gifts, interests—and feel like they've known each other for years when in reality they've just met. And I'm not suggesting that weeks, perhaps even months can pass while two people—neighbors, colleagues, lovers—find an almost sacred mixture of talk, listening, and silence that nourishes peace in both souls, allowing the relationship to deepen with slow beauty and without hints of tension. I do not doubt any of that, and I cherish it all.

Rather, when I say that communication is hard, I am suggesting that assuming it will always go well, or that some relationship is so secure that misunderstanding could never

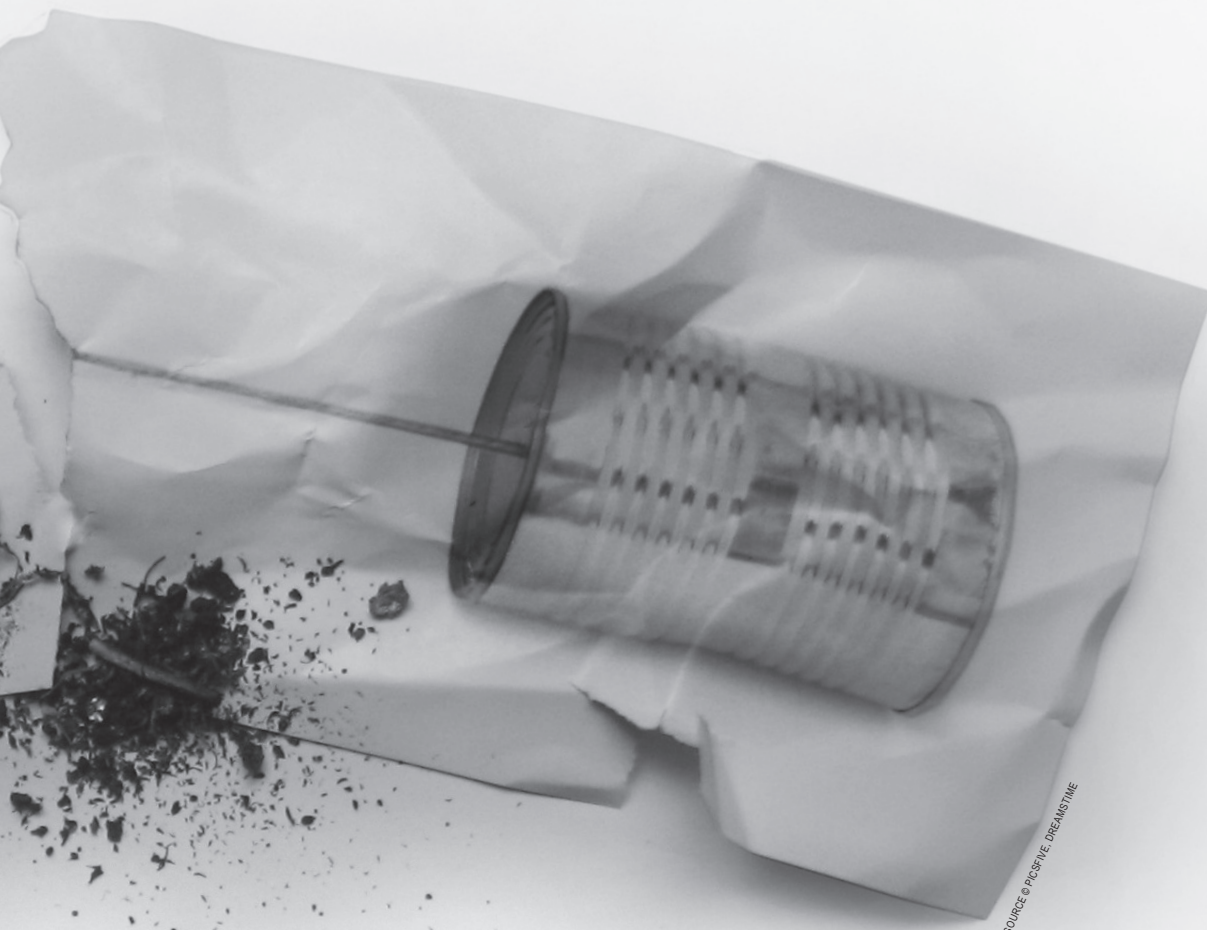
arise is an invitation to disaster. I need to keep reminding myself that good communication is always a precious, ultimately fragile thing—so that I never take it for granted, and so that I always remember that without grace, effort, and a sense of humor it can all too quickly unravel.

*I found my old Bible stories hardback and brought it out on the porch. It was time somebody taught them something about something.*

*They gathered round, sitting on the floor, and I got down amongst them. I started into Genesis and how God made the earth, and how he made us and gave us a soul that would live forever. Moonbean reached into the book and put her hand on God's beard. "If he shaved, he'd look just like that old man down at the Pak-a-Sak," she said.*

*My mouth dropped a bit. "You mean Mr. Fordlyson? That man don't look*





SOURCE © PICSETTE DREAMSTIME

like God."

Tammynette yawned. "You just said God made us to look like him."

"Never mind," I told them, going on into Adam and Eve and the Garden. Soon as I turned the page, they saw the snake and began to squeal.

"Look at the size of that sucker," Freddie said.

Tammynette wiggled closer. "I knew they was a snake in this book."

"He's a bad one," I told them. "He lied to Adam and Eve and said not to do what God told them to do."

Moonbean looked up at me slow. "This snake can talk?"

"Yes."

"How about that. Just like on cartoons. I thought they was making that up."

"Well, a real snake can't talk, nowa-days," I explained.

"Ain't this garden snake a real snake?" Freddie asked.

"It's the devil in disguise," I told them.

Tammynette flipped her hair. "Aw, that's just a old song. I heard it on the reddio."

"That Elvis Presley tune's got nothing to do with the devil making himself into a snake in the Garden of Eden."

"Who's Elvis Presley?" Moonbean sat back in the dust by the weatherboard wall and stared out at my overgrown lawn.

"He's some old singer died a million years ago," Tammynette told her.

"Was he in the Bible, too?"

I beat the book on the floor. "No, he ain't. Now pay attention. This is important." I read the section about Adam and Eve disobeying God, turned the page, and all hell broke loose. An

angel was holding a long sword over Adam and Eve's downturned heads as he ran them out of the Garden. Even Nu-Nu got excited and pointed a finger at the angel.

"What's that guy doing?" Tammynette asked.

"Chasing them out of Paradise. Adam and Eve did a bad thing, and when you do bad, you get punished for it." I looked down at their faces and it seemed that they were all thinking about something at the same time. It was scary, the little sparks I saw flying in their eyes. Whatever you tell them at this age stays forever. You got to be careful. Freddie looked up at me and asked, "Did they ever get to go back?"

"Nope. Eve started worrying about everything and Adam had to work every day like a beaver just to get by."

"Was the angel really gonna stick

Adam with that sword?" Moonbean asked.

"Forget about that darned sword, will you?"

"Well, that's just mean" is what she said.

"No it ain't," I said. "They got what was coming to them." Then I went into Noah and the Flood, and in the middle of things, Freddie piped up.

"You mean all the bad people got drowned at once? All right!"

[From *Welding with Children* (1999) by Tim Gautreaux, p. 8–10]

The sad truth is that understanding can falter—even disintegrate—even between friends who have been close for years. Or that we imagined were close. But then understanding dissipates into hurt, painful silence, or worse, angry, rabid accusations and we wonder if we've known them at all. Or we settle into a kind of middle ground, a to-all-appearances-friendly veneer covering a relationship, now uncomfortably hollowed out, that used to overflow with effortless talk, confidence, and affection. Sadly sometimes the relationship just seems to unfold that way, little by little, slowly, an inexorable process that's hardly noticeable at first, until we find that no matter what or how hard we try, things stay stuck. Sometimes the passage of time introduces change that interrupts the rhythm of the friendship, and for some reason no new rhythm can be found, so absence produces bad feelings that fester. Sometimes, far more often than I care to admit, afterwards I can spot ways I derailed our communication, intentionally or not, maliciously or not.

Communication and understanding is central to our humanity, and essential to life and community. Since it is usually the artists who are most alert to the things that matter most, it's no wonder that musicians often weave the troubles of miscommunication and the heartbreak of misunderstanding into the lyrics of their songs.

when I did something  
(so stupid, so dumb)  
I saw it coming  
now all I want to know is how come  
(how come?)  
we're all fingers and thumbs?

["Stupid" on This (1998) by  
Peter Hammill]

Sometimes real understanding

never seems possible, when everything we say is taken wrong, or heard wrong, or assumed to mean things we never intended. People seem unwilling or incapable of listening, of entering into a view of things different from their own. Sometimes all that seems to matter is what they say. We wonder if they wanted understanding at all or were merely looking for a chance to proclaim whatever idea or belief they happen to have adopted. Here relationship becomes reduced to conformity, meaning we need to conform to them, as if they have become the final standard for all that is true. Though imagining themselves wise, their embarrassing immaturity derails conversation, guts friendship, and increasingly makes their position implausible and unattractive.

Christians are not immune to this brokenness in communication and understanding. If you doubt that, review the legacy of bitter rivalries and congregational splits that have plagued church history. And to think we are the ones expected by our Lord to demonstrate his divine origins to a doubting world by loving one another, even at cost (John 13:35; 17:20-21). It's a travesty, something I have occasionally needed to apologize for to my non-Christian friends. Another sad proof of our failures here involves the sadly distorted perceptions of evangelical faith prevalent among our non-Christian neighbors. Many have "been witnessed to," an ordeal that left them convinced that evangelical faith has nothing of significance to say into their world. They are asking questions about God's existence and the nature of spirituality while the one witnessing talked about forgiveness and accepting Jesus. It was like ships passing in the night. They have also been exposed to evangelical rhetoric in the public square, convincing them that evangelicals represent a subculture intent on using political power to remake society, whether our neighbors like it or not.

No, I think I have it about right. I have bungled communication too often to imagine it is an easy endeavor.

Good communication is hard even at the best of times in this badly fragmented world.

*Dumbed down and numbed  
by time and age*

*Your dreams to catch the world, the cage  
The highway sets the traveler's stage  
All exits look the same*

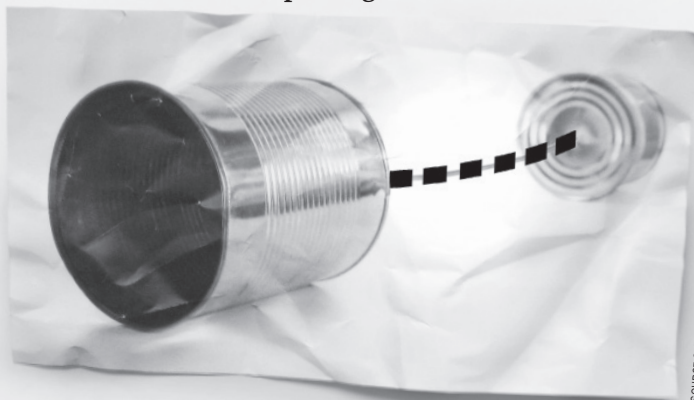
*Three words that became hard to say  
I and love and you  
I and love and you*

[From "I and Love and You" on  
I and Love and You (2009) by  
the Avett Brothers]

## MISGUIDED EXPECTATIONS

Sometimes our troubles in communication involve expectations we have adopted, usually unconsciously. Julie Gorman, who teaches at Fuller Seminary, identifies some that appear to be deadly to healthy communication and fairly widespread. And as I will explain, for Christians each expectation represents a failure to appropriate some aspect of the truth of the Christian faith.

### Expecting to be Understood



"We expect to be understood by other Christians," Gorman says, "and it comes as a shock to realize that they do not understand." Actually I think it applies more widely than that. We expect to be understood, period, and are shocked when we aren't. If not shocked, at least convinced it's the other party's fault—things were certainly clear when I spoke them.

But Christians should never be shocked to be misunderstood, whether by those who share our faith or those who do not. Misunderstanding occurs because of two realities, both basic to the Christian understanding of creation, that as creatures we are both fallen and finite. Being fallen means our minds are never fully dependable,



and our autonomous hearts are always attracted to whatever ideas seems to make us the center of the universe, even though it sets us adrift to be, in Walker Percy's memorable phrase, lost in the cosmos. If anything we should be shocked when someone hears us correctly. But even if we were not fallen we would remain finite. Even if all we are and do weren't so badly broken we would still be severely limited. Even at the best of times we can never comprehend everything at once, but only grasp bits and pieces, parts, and partially at that, which means we can never fully, exhaustively understand anything.

Being both fallen and finite, it makes more sense to expect misunderstanding, to see clear communication as a grace, a gift as precious as it is unexpected.

*My life is different now I swear  
I know now what it means to care  
About somebody other than myself*

*I know the things I said to you  
They were untender and untrue  
I'd like to see those things undo*

*So if you could find it in your heart  
To give a man a second start  
I promise things won't end the same*

*Shame, boatloads of shame  
Day after day, more of the same  
Blame, please lift it off  
Please take it off, please make it stop*

[From "Shame" on  
Emotionalism (2007) by the  
Avett Brothers]

### Misinterpreting Conflict

"We believe that conflict is wrong," Gorman notes, "so we often gloss over misunderstandings to maintain the illusion of harmony." Misunderstanding isn't necessarily bad. It can become the beginning of discovery, the moment when a friendship begins to deepen, the chance to address

convictions and values that are usually assumed rather than examined and discussed. Misunderstanding isn't conflict—if by conflict we mean quarreling, discord, and antagonism—though in our brokenness we often turn it into that.

Given that we are both fallen and finite, we should expect both misunderstanding and disagreement. Discovering that the people I am conversing with are not on the proverbial same page is a good thing. I may be wrong, you may be wrong, we both may be wrong, or we both may be correct—just because we are both correct doesn't mean we won't necessarily seem to disagree or misunderstand each other. I may be saying the same thing you are, but saying it so differently that you have to believe I'm wrong, or think I'm claiming something that I'm not saying at all. The trouble comes when we respond to disagreement or misunderstanding in a way that serves to end the conversation instead of deepen it. Or when we define what is essential for unity so narrowly that almost no one makes the cut. That is not Christian orthodoxy but self-centeredness. It is never wise to be stricter or more insistent than God is himself.

An illusion of unity is neither healthy nor godly. As hypocrisy it can be maintained only so long before the conflict breaks into the open. As an effort to sidestep the hard work of dealing with whatever misunderstanding or disagreement that disturbed our unity, it is like ignoring the warning signs of cancer. Still, like receiving a bad diagnosis, it is hard to face conflict, especially when our busy lives have already removed whatever margin we need to flourish emotionally and spiritually. "I don't care to belong to a club," Groucho Marx once said, "that accepts people like me as members." Only the gospel both calls us to such graciousness and provides

us the grace to make a lovely response to conflict possible. Grace insists that conflict—misunderstanding and disagreement—need not lead to despair, cynicism, or shattered friendships, but can lead instead to deeper relationships and broader understanding.

Not perfectly, of course, but substantially and really.

*Tried to give you warning  
but everyone ignores me  
Told you everything loud and clear,  
but nobody's listening  
Called to you so clearly  
but you don't want to hear me  
Told you everything loud and clear,  
but nobody's listening*

*I got a heart full of pain,  
head full of stress  
Head full of anger, held in my chest  
Uphill struggle, blood sweat 'n' tears  
Nothing to gain, everything to fear*

[*"Nobody's Listening"* on  
Meteor (2003) by Linkin Park]

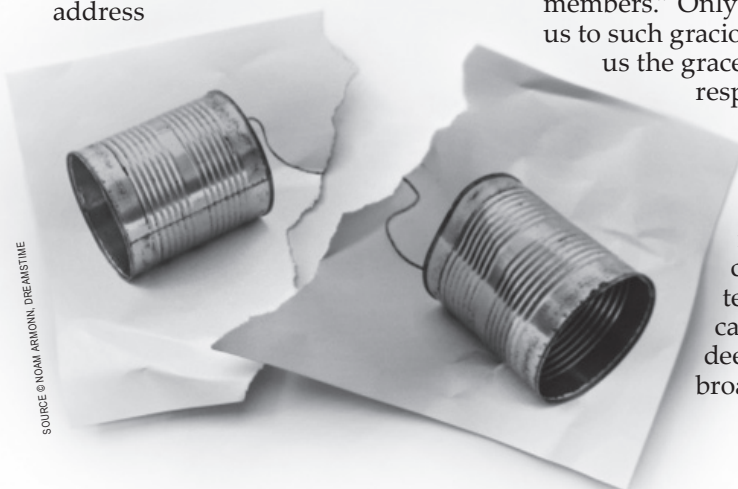
### Misunderstanding Agreement



SOURCE © DANA ROTHSTEIN, DREAMSTIME

How is it possible that Christian friends, people who as far as I can tell seem quite reasonable and nice can support unjust political policies and candidates, conform to such reprehensible cultural trends, endorse such wrong-headed ideas, and insist on such counter-productive patterns of church life and worship? "We often live with the assumption," Gorman says, "that unity means we will all think alike or agree on everything." It seems, at least from my experience, that this assumption is widespread among Christians, but needs to be gently and firmly refuted as a false expectation.

For decades, following in the footsteps of Harry Blamires, Os Guinness has argued that evangelical Protestants need to recover what he calls "thinking Christianly." This is not, he says, "thinking by Christians," since it is obvious a Christian can think in ways quite contrary to his faith and beliefs. Nor is thinking Christianly "simply thinking about Christian topics." Christ's claim is to be Lord of all, which means that the



SOURCE © NOLAN ARMONI, DREAMSTIME

gospel has something constructive to say about every aspect of life and reality. Rather, “thinking Christianly is thinking by Christians about anything and everything in a consistently Christian way—in a manner that is shaped, directed, and restrained by the truth of God’s Word and God’s Spirit.” And Guinness is quick to add, “thinking Christianly should not be confused with adopting a ‘Christian line’ on every issue.” It isn’t even always desirable or needed or possible.

Yes, there is a core set of beliefs that define the Christian tradition—one ancient example is found in The Apostles’ Creed. Deviation here involves moving from orthodoxy to heterodoxy, and that places one outside historic, biblical faith. But to imagine that sharing core beliefs means that every detail of life is equally well defined is to misread holy Scripture. Living as a Christian involves a process: we move from the biblical text, to the meaning of the text, to an application of the text in our own historical, sociological moment, to a decision as to what policy we will support in the public square, to actions taken to support it. Each step in that process is not equally evident to every believer. So, as we move from text to action, from Scripture to daily life, we need to grant one another freedom. Again, I am not here talking about rejecting such doctrines as Christ’s divinity or God as one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or the inspiration of Scripture. I am referring to how we can agree as Christians that Deuteronomy is canonical, and that in the law recorded in the text there are details touching specifically on how Israel was to treat their natural environment—as in Deuteronomy 20:19 and 23:6. However, moving from those texts (along with others we deem applicable), to support raising taxes on gasoline to help decrease America’s dependency on foreign oil is an argument that (unfortunately) might not convince everyone. We might both be faithfully seeking to have a Christian mind, to think Christianly, but we might still disagree on lots of things.

*They say prayer has the power to heal  
So pray for me, mother  
In the human heart an evil spirit can dwell  
I am a-tryin’ to love my neighbor  
and do good unto others  
But oh, mother, things ain’t going well*

*Ain’t talkin’, just walkin’  
Through the world mysterious and vague  
Heart burnin’, still yearnin’  
Walkin’ through the cities of the plague.*

*Well, the whole world is filled with speculation  
The whole wide world which people say is round  
They will tear your mind away from contemplation  
They will jump on your misfortune when you’re down*

*Ain’t talkin’, just walkin’  
My mule is sick, my horse is blind.  
Heart burnin’, still yearnin’  
Thinkin’ ‘bout that gal I left behind.*

[From “Ain’t Talkin’” on Modern Times (2006) by Bob Dylan]

### Triumphant Testimonies

As I grew up in the church, one source of discouragement and doubt came in the stories—we called them “testimonies”—that people told about their coming to faith. The testimonies seemed to have three parts: I was bad and my life was messed up; then I invited Christ into my life; and now I am happy all the day. No one seemed



to have doubts and questions, and when I voiced mine it became evidence that my faith and devotion were faulty. We talked a lot about “God’s blessing,” but that looked suspiciously to me like the success promised to those pursuing a lifestyle of middle class consumerism—mentioning this was not well received. I’m certain the desire was good (to honor God for his goodness) and the intention was admirable (to encourage everyone to trust God), and I do not question that. What I would question is how Christians can expect their stories to be helpful when they

are so radically different from the stories of Scripture, so removed from the reality of life in a fallen world. “Because of a strong ‘do right’ perspective [in the Christian community], many find it difficult to be honest in communicating,” Gorman notes. “We find it easier to share what we should do and our success stories rather than our real feelings and struggles.”

There is something about transparency that is strangely beguiling. Hypocrisy has always been detestable, but in a cynical age it becomes increasingly troublesome. Don’t imply you have no doubts or questions about faith, because all that proves is either that your faith is too shallow to prompt reasonable reflection or that you are so distracted that the cries of your own heart are drowned out by the cacophony of your busyness. Don’t respond to every hard question with a “verse” or “saying” or “sermon quote” because hard questions are resolved within community and ongoing conversation, and bullet points only prove you are not taking the questioner with sufficient seriousness. Don’t try to give the impression that everything is fine with you, because we know it isn’t,

and so your impression is as faked as the latest tabloid version of Madonna or Lady Gaga, made possible because like them you have learned to manipulate your public image.

I am not saying that we must all exhibit our dirty laundry in public, because that is neither admirable nor edifying. We simply need to be honest, real, willing to acknowledge being finite and fallen and the wonder of being given grace. I

need to demonstrate I am safe to be with, neither hiding nor displaying my dirty laundry, so that you can know that you do not need to protect yourself in my presence, and that real conversation is possible.

*When I was younger,  
so much younger than today,  
I never needed anybody’s help in any way.  
But now these days are gone,  
I’m not so self assured,  
Now I find I’ve changed my mind  
and opened up the doors.*



*Help me if you can, I'm feeling down  
And I do appreciate you being round.  
Help me, get my feet back on the  
ground,  
Won't you please, please help me.*  
["Help!" on Help (1990) by The Beatles]

## Imposing an Agenda



Sometimes we feel we must insist on an agenda to make the conversation turn out correctly. I realize some meetings have a set purpose. We're both busy, I don't want to waste time uselessly, and so when we meet let's identify our agenda and do what is needed. But that's not what I'm concerned with here. I'm concerned with all the times we feel somehow obligated—through guilt or self-centeredness or whatever—to impose some agenda in order to keep from losing control.

Last night is an example. Our small group met, and the evening unfolded in ways I had not anticipated. I take my role as facilitator of the group seriously, and so had set aside several hours over several days to prepare. I had planned our study around a short piece a friend of mine had written that I thought raised provocative questions about our spiritual pilgrimage as Christians. I spent time reflecting on the ideas involved, identified possible tangents that might come up, prepared questions I could use if the discussion flagged, and imagined how the various members might respond to the topics we'd be covering. To put it mildly, I got it all wrong. The discussion did not go as planned, I never used the questions I had prepared since they would not have fit the flow of the evening, and the members responded in ways I never anticipated. Yet it turned out to be a wonderful evening.

I do not regret the hours I spent in preparation, even though what I had planned ended up being off target. The fact I was so comfortable with the material meant I could relax as the discussion unfolded in surprising ways, confident that my surprise didn't mean we were lost. It turned out to be a rich conversation, with thoughtfulness, disagreement, storytelling, laughter, and sober reflection. When I mentioned it was time to close several were surprised the evening had gone by so quickly. One person mentioned we hadn't really resolved anything—far more questions had been raised than answers. My goal had been to prompt us to think about our spiritual pilgrimage of faith in new ways, and they agreed we had accomplished that.

Not all of our small group discussions go that well, of course. Sometimes we get bogged down, or chase some tangent that fades into insignificance, or float on the surface of things so our hearts are protected from the inroads of grace and love and truth. I am convinced, however, that had I insisted on my agenda I would have shortchanged the group, undercut the discussion, and substituted a sense of control for the liveliness of true community.

But if we care about bringing the gospel into the conversation, someone will say, won't we want to "impose" that agenda? This question makes sense only if by the "gospel" we mean a presentation—about the cross and forgiveness—that we want to give. If that is what you want to do, why not inform your friend and find out if they are willing to continue the conversation. Isn't that more honest, more truthful than finding some way to slip it in? But, someone might object, what if I do it lovingly? I don't know how that is possible. Manipulating a conversation for my own ends always requires treating the other as less than fully significant, less than a fellow creature made in God's image. More to the point, it is unnecessary. Since Christ is Lord of all, the gospel—the biblical story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration—has something profound to say about every slice of life and culture and reality. Let the conversation go where it will, and everywhere it goes the gospel is

relevant. Our problem is not the need to impose an agenda on conversations and discussions but of having such a weak understanding of the gospel that we cannot meaningfully discuss our own faith unless we've turned it into religious exercise.

## GOOD COMMUNICATION

The glory in all this is that, against all odds, good communication is possible. As a Christian I have this confidence not simply because I have experienced it but because I believe that this hope is grounded in the very nature of God. This is part, one small part, of the wonder that God reveals himself as Trinity, one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When the biblical creation narrative has God saying, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness," (Genesis 1:26), it sets itself apart from all the creation myths of antiquity. This God is a unity yet, more than that, a complexity in unity that is believed by the prophets and finally made clearer by the apostles after Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension. This God not only speaks but lovingly communicates in himself and to his creation, meaning that communication among his creatures fits into the reality he has made. It is a grace, but not an anomaly, and since God's communication did not cease at the fall, we need not despair that as fallen creatures good communication is somehow impossible.

Hindrances to good communication are real, as we can all attest. We are fallen people that bring expectations to every conversation that, when examined, are revealed by the faith we profess to be unhelpful and misguided. "Let the words of my mouth," the Hebrew poet prayed, "be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer" (Psalm 19:14). David had it exactly right. Acceptable words can't be expected, but they are possible because God stands behind reality like an unshakable rock, and because he interrupts our brokenness with redemptive grace.

So, let's talk. ■

**Sources:** Community that is Christian by Julie Gorman, p. 150. Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to do About It by Os Guinness (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books; 1994) p. 135–136.

# Winter's Bone

A movie review by Drew Trotter



*Winter's Bone*, the darling of last year's Sundance Film Festival, where it won the coveted Grand Jury Prize as well as a special jury prize for screenwriting, dazzles not only the mind but also the heart with its characterizations, its plot and its tone. Of its many themes, perhaps the most interesting is the difficulty of perseverance in a universe that seems relentlessly stacked against one. Ree Dolly, a seventeen year old girl who lives in the southern Missouri Ozarks and *Bone's* main character, is saddled with a basically catatonic mother and two siblings aged 12 and 6 for whom she has complete responsibility. Her father, in and out of trouble, has put their property up as a bond for his release from jail, and now has disappeared. The film's plot revolves around an odyssey in which Ree, played by relative newcomer Jennifer Lawrence, goes looking for him, and, as the IMDb summary puts it, "hacks through dangerous social terrain" as she does so. That terrain includes the searing edginess of mountain poverty, the dangers of backwoods drug dealers, and the general rawness

of life, lived as a mother and caretaker far before one's time. All these adverse circumstances find in Ree a heroine in every way their match.

Extraordinary performances, particularly by John Hawkes as Teardrop Dolly and Dale Dickey as Merab, but really by all the film's actors (some of whom were locals with no acting experience) make this film as engaging as any for a long, long time, but chief among them is Lawrence, who plays Ree with a subtlety and grace that has to be seen to be believed. Ree's tenacity for good, the depth of her willingness to risk her life to see the right thing done, derives from several sources, all of them challenging for the Christian. First, and clearly foremost, she recognizes the need her siblings have for her protection and provision of even the most basic things in life, and she responds self-sacrificially to those needs. They are allowed to live the life of children, happy with their trampoline, their walks in the woods, their dolls and dogs, but she also makes them face their fears, and, slowly, with love, schools them in the way to live in a world that they already know is hard. She cooks for them, drills them on their spelling and oversees their homework, teaches them how to shoot a gun and skin a squirrel. Poignantly, when her friend Gail asks her what she's doing with "all them guns," Ree matter-of-factly replies she's "just teaching them a little bit of survival." When their own parents—Ree's parents, too—fail them, she steps in and does the best she can to help the children not only to survive but to live, and to live as if the world is a good place with wonders and joys, even in the midst of its brutalities and limitations. She is their still point in a turning world.

But when she needs to be, Ree can be as hard as nails, hard enough to face, and even pursue, men with guns, menacing women who beat her senseless, and drug lords who could kill her as easily as spit. When, in the final

frames of the film, she is asked to do something so grisly even imagining it makes the blood run cold, her courage and grit reaches its apex. Never planning beyond the next step, Ree is driven by her love for her siblings and her deep sense of responsibility for them, but she is also driven by the second source of her perseverance: poor as it is, she loves the land and the simple log house they inhabit because it is theirs, because it is home. Debra Granik, the writer and director of the film, has a remarkable sense for establishing tone and atmosphere, and her work gives the viewer this same sense that, though the world of the Ozarks is ugly and miserable in many ways, that world exists in the midst of a beauty and an elegance that makes one appreciate it anyway. The film, for instance, begins with a lovely Ozark tune about hearing a lullaby "way down in Missouri...on my momma's knee," when, suddenly a long shot fills the screen, a landscape that is at first bleak and depressing, showing a hilly, scraggly field strewn with cars, an old RV, and a school bus. But the camera lingers long enough to allow the eye to take in the hills beyond and a cloud-filled, winter sky, beautiful in their blue and gray silence. From there the camera cuts to children bouncing on a trampoline, riding on a skateboard, playing with new-born puppies. These are Ree's brother and sister and while they play, she hangs wash on the line, repairs an old doll, takes care of the daily chores. Finally, as the opening sequence finishes, Ree speaks the first words of the film: "Come on, let's go." They've had their play-time, allowed by her work on their behalf. Now it's time for supper. Life is hard, but life is good.

Her final words, also the final words of the film, echo the opening words by speaking almost their opposite: "I ain't goin' anywhere." It is a promise to her two siblings not to leave them, not to join the Army. As she puts it "I'd be lost without the weight of you two on my back," but



it's not just going away from them that would cause Ree to be lost. She'd be lost without the woods, stark and leafless as they are in February and March in that part of the world. She'd be lost without the music, heard throughout the movie, roots music that can only be spawned in the hills of places like Missouri and Tennessee, symbolized by her father's banjo that her little sister plays at the end of the film, music that speaks of longing and of joy in ways that only old-time folk music can. She is a woman of the land; she knows her world, and longs for no other. Even her feeble attempt to get into the Army derives only from the purpose of obtaining the \$40,000 promised for joining so she can continue the life she is living.

Ree's wisdom is also exceptional. Early on in the story she delivers to her younger brother one of those lines that punches you with joy it is so astute. Her neighbors have killed a deer and are skinning it as Ree and Sonny watch from their porch. Sonny innocently says, "Maybe they'll share some of that with us." Ree replies, "That could be." Sonny persists, "Maybe we should ask." Ree turns to him, takes his chin in her palm and turns his face toward hers, speaking clearly in a strong, motherly fashion: "Never ask for what ought to be offered." In one sentence both their dependence on the kindness and support of their neighbors, and the dignity and self-reliance they know they must retain at all costs to live in this world, burst the heart of the viewer. But there is something more in this gentle command: the maxim draws the boundary between these two conditions. This is wisdom.

*Winter's Bone* is as good at every level as any film this year, and that is saying something. Hopeful, without ever straying from depicting the grit and gristle of the "hard-knocks life" experienced by its characters, it is a movie not to be missed. ■

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**Drew Trotter**, a contributing editor for Critique, is the executive director of the Consortium of Christian Study Centers (<http://studycentersonline.org>), and

*has taught at the seminary level for more than thirty years. However, there is no evidence that his teaching has ever done anything for anyone but provide a lasting, non-invasive cure for insomnia, so he wonders whether or not he actually should include this impressive statistic in a blurb that is being distributed to the general public.*

#### **Winter's Bone Credits**

##### **Starring:**

Jennifer Lawrence (Ree)  
Isaiah Stone (Sonny)  
Ashlee Thompson (Ashlee)  
Valerie Richards (Connie)  
Shelly Waggner (Sonya)  
Garret Dillahunt (Sheriff Baskin)  
Lauren Sweetser (Gail)  
Cinnamon Schultz (Victoria)  
John Hawkes (Teardrop)  
Kevin Breznahan (Little Arthur)  
Ronnie Hall (Thump Milton)  
Dale Dickey (Merab)

**Director:** Debra Granik

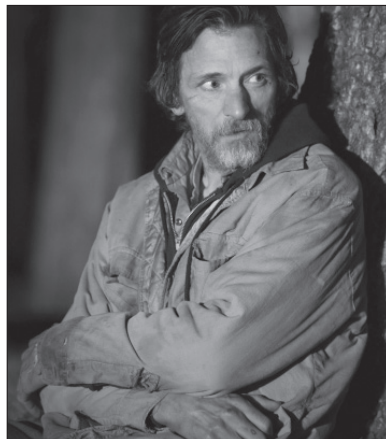
**Writers:** Debra Granik and Anne Rosellini (screenplay), Daniel Woodrell (book)

**Producers:** Jonathan Scheuer, Shawn Simon, and others

**Original Music:** Dickon Hinchliffe

**Cinematography:** Michael McDonough  
U.S.A.; 100 minutes; 2010

**Rated R** (for some drug material, language, and violent content)



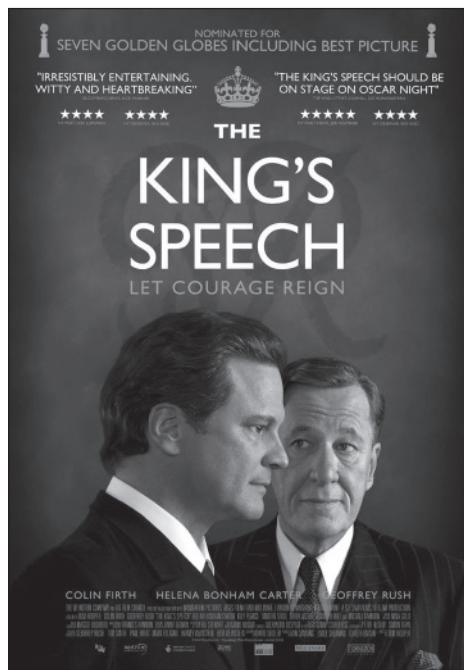
## **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION**

1. Several times Ree is faced with giving up the search for her father. Many times she is counseled to do so. Was she right in continuing? Would you have? Why or why not?
2. Can you think of a parallel situation in your own life when it was all up to you? What did you do?
3. Only once in the film is there any reference to anything spiritual (when Ree, teaching the children to shoot a rifle, tells them to kneel down "like you do when you're prayin'"), yet the reference seems to indicate that prayer is a natural part of the Dolly family's life. Are there other indicators? How would you have changed the film, if at all, if you had wanted to show the Dolly family as Christian?
4. Other than Ree, with which character did you most identify? Why?
5. The script has been cited for its elegance, not just in its dialogue but also for its tightness of plot and its full development of even minor characters. Can you cite some examples of this elegance? Do you agree with this assessment?
6. What would you say are the richest truths of human experience portrayed by this film? Give examples of those truths.



# The King's Speech

A movie review by Greg Grooms



"Be not afraid of greatness: some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them." [William Shakespeare in *Twelfth Night*, Act II, Scene V]

In January 1936 King George V of England died, leaving the throne to his son David, who reigned as Edward VIII for 325 days before abdicating in order to marry an American divorcee, Wallis Simpson. His brother, Albert, then became King George VI and reigned until his death in 1952.

Tom Hooper's splendidly entertaining film *The King's Speech* is the story of Albert's unlikely ascension to the throne and of help he received along the way from an equally unlikely source.

In America we've long celebrated the right of an individual to shape his or her own life. It is part of our DNA. In pre-World War II Britain, things could not have been less American, especially for the royal family. The young Albert, it seems, was left-handed. As this was considered inappropriate for a prince, he was forced to use his right. Bertie was also slightly knock-kneed, thus his boyhood years

were spent in braces to create a good, royal bearing. Unfortunately all of this shaping also produced a strong stammer that haunted Albert throughout his life, and for a man whose professional purpose is to be a public figure this was, to say the least, awkward.

In *The King's Speech* Albert's search for help with this problem leads him through a frustrating procession of doctors who treat his problem with less-than-effective therapies ranging from marbles-in-the-mouth to smoking. (Albert died in 1952 from lung cancer brought on by smoking.) When his wife Elizabeth (played by Helena Bonham Carter) incognito seeks the help of yet another therapist, he simply suggests her husband "change jobs," and when she says "he can't," he wants to know why. "What is he, an indentured servant?" Her ironic answer—"Something like that"—captures Albert's dilemma: he is not free to decide which role his life will play. His only choice is how that role will be played, and with war looming there's a lot riding on his performance.

Enter his redeemer. Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush) is the antithesis of Albert (Colin Firth). He's not only a commoner, he's a (mostly) failed actor who makes his living as a self-styled speech therapist. He's a man who determinedly lives life his way. He treats speech impediments his own way, too. *The King's Speech* is rated R because of a scene in which Lionel encourages Bertie to curse extemporaneously. The result is one of the most delightfully vulgar things I've ever seen on film. With Lionel's help, Bertie not only learns how to give a speech, he learns how to serve.

The bell tower here at the University of Texas is engraved with a quote from the gospel according to John: "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." It's a goal students at the University of Texas pursue every day, not a pursuit of knowledge, but of the freedom to define one's self. In the name of freedom they choose not only their



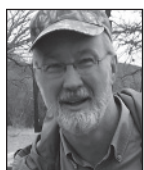
careers and spouses, but they can choose to change their sex, their appearance, and one day whether or not to keep their children. For them, freedom is doing what they want. It's not what Jesus had in mind when he spoke. According to theologian J.I. Packer, Christian freedom is first freedom from: freedom from the power of sin and the tyranny of pleasing ourselves. And as people who have been set free, we're called to see what freedom is for: to love and serve God and our neighbor. Service is what we were made for, so freedom is found in serving.

Does Bertie live happily ever after? At the risk of spoiling the film, I'll answer: No more than we do. The hope of the gospel isn't that if we work hard everything will be all right. Our hope is in what Christ has done and is doing in our midst. But Bertie does discover that necessity isn't the opposite of freedom.

I recommend *The King's Speech* to you: well acted, well scripted, a delightful story. It's Oscar worthy. ■

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**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

regularly welcome students to meals, to warm hospitality, to ask questions, and to seriously wrestle with the proposition that Jesus is actually Lord of all.

#### Credits: *The King's Speech*

##### Starring:

Colin Firth (King George VI)  
 Helena Bonham Carter (Queen Elizabeth)  
 Derek Jacobi (Archbishop Cosmo Lang)  
 Paul Trussell (Driver)  
 Charles Armstrong (BBC Technician)  
 Geoffrey Rush (Lionel Logue)  
 Jennifer Ehle (Myrtle Logue)  
 Calum Gittins (Laurie Logue)  
 Dominic Applewhite (Valentine Logue)  
 Ben Wimsett (Anthony Logue)  
 Guy Pearce (King Edward VIII)  
 Timothy Spall (Winston Churchill)  
 Michael Gambon (King George V)  
 Adrian Scarborough (BBC Radio Announcer)  
 Andrew Havill (Robert Wood)

Director: Tom Hooper

Writer: David Seidler

Producers: Iain Canning, Emile Sherman,  
 Gareth Unwin

Cinematographer: Danny Cohen

U.S.A.; 118 minutes; 2010

Rated R (for some strong language)

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What are your first impressions of the film? First impressions aren't considered conclusions—they're what you're left thinking of in the moments after the film ends.
2. Contrast the brothers, David and Albert. How are they similar, in what do they differ, and why? Which attracts you more and why?
3. Contrast Albert and Lionel. Aside from their professional relationship, what do you think attracted them to one another? How was theirs an unlikely friendship?
4. What visual images from the film stand out most strongly in your mind? Lionel is shown most often against an inviting backdrop—a fireplace or a chair—while Albert is shown more often in space—in a large room or in front of a blank wall. How does this influence the way you feel about each character?
5. While he never pretends to be a medical doctor, Lionel makes no effort in the film to make sure Albert knows he isn't one, which leads to an embarrassing moment later. In your opinion is this less than honest and worthy of criticism? Or is Lionel the victim of society's overemphasis on credentials?
6. David also gave a famous speech—his announcement that he has stepped down as king—that isn't heard in full in this film. It includes these words:

*"You all know the reasons which have impelled me to renounce the throne. But I want you to understand that in making up my mind I did not forget the country or the empire, which, as Prince of Wales and lately as King, I have for twenty-five years tried to serve.*

*"But you must believe me when I tell you that I have found it impossible to carry the heavy burden of responsibility and to discharge my duties as King as I would wish to do without the help and support of the woman I love.*

*"And I want you to know that the decision I have made has been mine and mine alone. This was a thing I had to judge entirely for myself. The other person most nearly concerned has tried up to the last to persuade me to take a different course.*

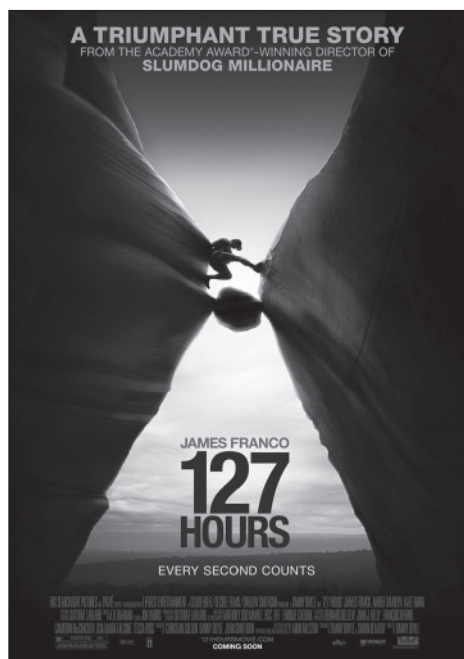
*"I have made this, the most serious decision of my life, only upon the single thought of what would, in the end, be best for all."*

Discuss this quote. Do you admire David's decision to abdicate? Why or why not?

7. There were many objections to David's marriage to Wallis Simpson—social, political, and moral—but only one with legal grounding. Mrs. Simpson's first divorce was not recognized by the Anglican Church and, therefore, might not have been considered legal in a British court. So David, in marrying her, might have been guilty of bigamy. Do you think David should have been allowed to marry her and continue as king? Defend your answer.
8. Define freedom. How would Albert, Lionel, and David define it? (That's 3 more definitions, not one shared.)
9. In one of the film's pivotal moments, Lionel, deliberately goading Albert to anger, asks "Why should I listen to you?" Discuss Albert's reply: "Because I have a voice!"

# Love is a Cry for Help

A movie review of *127 Hours* by Wesley Hill



A couple of years ago, when *Slumdog Millionaire* came out, I went to see it five times in the theater. Each time I took a different group of friends, eager to share my enjoyment with them. Each time I wept, moved by the staggeringly joyous ending, feeling what critic Roy Anker, in his review of the film, called “the soul’s deep thirst for repair of some small slice of the world’s incalculable woe.” We were given a glimpse of that repair when the two protagonists, Jamal and Latika, kiss and then cue the credits with one seriously awesome dance scene. For perhaps the first time in a very long time, a movie’s “happily ever after” ending didn’t seem trite or affected. I remember at the end of that year making a list in my journal of the high points of the past twelve months, a record of experiences that had left their mark on me. Seeing *Slumdog* made it on that list.

And now director Danny Boyle’s next film, *127 Hours*, is playing in theaters as I write this. I’ve now seen it three times, first with my brother, then with two other couples, dear friends both. I think I probably won’t see it again, but who knows. The only

time I can remember being this moved by a cinematic experience is, well, when I watched *Slumdog Millionaire*. And that same hunger—the thirst for what this film has given me—just may take me back to the theater for one more go.

You probably don’t need me to rehearse the plot, but just in case, here’s the outline. *127 Hours* tells the true story of then 27-year-old Aron Ralston, who in 2003, while hiking in Blue John Canyon in Utah, was trapped by a chockstone that pinned his right arm to one wall of a crevice. After surviving for about five days—hence the movie’s title—on 500 ml of water and exhausting all other options (he ingeniously tried to devise a pulley with his climbing rope and carabiners to hoist the rock off his arm), he fashions a homemade tourniquet and with a blunt pocket tool cuts off his arm and hikes out of the canyon.

At one level, it sounds like just another action movie, with maybe a bit more gore than is usual for that genre. But pinning it with that label just doesn’t capture this movie’s profundity. Why does this film grip me so much? In the first place, James Franco’s performance as Aron Ralston is a remarkable, beautiful feat of acting. I suspect it will go down as one of the great cinematic performances we have. Think about it from a purely artistic standpoint: How many actors can you name who could manage to remain compelling while dominating 90 minutes of screen time with virtually no supporting cast?

More deeply, this film explores what it means to love. (All good stories boil down to this, so if this movie is good, then it shouldn’t be a surprise that it does too.) At the beginning of the film, Aron barrels into the canyon, music blaring in his headphones. He arrives there after ignoring phone calls from his mom and sister and brushing aside his boss’s queries about where he was headed. The archetypal narcissistic loner, he fits

every aspect of the stereotype: brash, enamored with his own humor (snapping pictures of himself incessantly and flirting with a couple of girls he meets on the trail), arrogant, overconfident. But by the end of the film, when the moment has come for him to decide whether to actually go through with the amputation, what ultimately gives him the courage to do so is a memory of his ex-girlfriend looking at him with a mixture of pain and pity, saying, “You’re going to be so lonely, Aron.” He’d wanted the loneliness at the time, savoring freedom from entanglements. But now, remembering her love, he has a premonition of himself having a son—hoisting him on his shoulders, holding his hands, letting him place his tiny boy feet on top of his massive man feet and walking him around the room, as if on stilts, laughing. Imagining that future—a life of family, children, love, relationships—is what gives him the final motivation to pull out his pocket knife. He realizes he’s made a terrible mistake, isolating himself, and he wants another chance to live life differently.

Aside from the sheer brilliance and zany innovativeness of the film’s technical artistry, it’s this narrative arc—from loneliness to love—that explains, I think, my enthusiasm for this movie. Near the end, when Aron has made it out of the canyon and is on the trail, his severed arm dripping blood, he sees some other hikers a little way ahead. With the triumph of Sigur Rós’s song “Festival” providing the soundtrack, he cries out, barely audible at first, “Help me.” Then, bellowing hoarsely: “PLEASE HELP ME!” The hikers hear him, turn around puzzled. Then, seeing what’s happened, they come running. That was the moment the screen started to blur as I tried to blink away tears. For me, it wouldn’t be much of an exaggeration to call that moment in the theater, holy.

Browsing the Internet recently, I stumbled across this quote from the



actor Hugh Laurie.

*"One of my favorite moments in Star Trek is when Captain Kirk looks over the cosmos and says, 'Somewhere out there someone is saying the three most beautiful words in any language.' Of course your heart sinks and you think it's going to be, 'I love you' or whatever. He says, 'Please help me.' What a philosophically fantastic idea, that vulnerability and need is a beautiful thing."*

More profound than that, I'd argue, is the vision of *127 Hours*. According to this movie, it's not that "Please help me" is more significant than "I love you." Rather, "Please help me" is itself a form of "I love you." The two cries belong together.

It's when Aron asks for help that the film's weight and euphoria reaches its climax. His vulnerability, his plea for rescue, is what leads him back into the arms of his family, back into relationships with people, back to love. ■

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**Wesley Hill** is pursuing a PhD in New Testament studies at Durham University, UK. His book, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality*, is available from Zondervan.

#### Credits: *127 Hours*

##### Starring:

James Franco (Aron Ralston)  
Kate Mara (Kristi)  
Amber Tamblyn (Megan)  
Sean Bott (Aron's friend)  
Treat Williams (Aron's Dad)  
John Lawrence (Brian)  
Kate Burton (Aron's Mom)  
Lizzy Caplan (Sonja Ralston)  
Fenton Quinn (Blue John)

##### Director: Danny Boyle

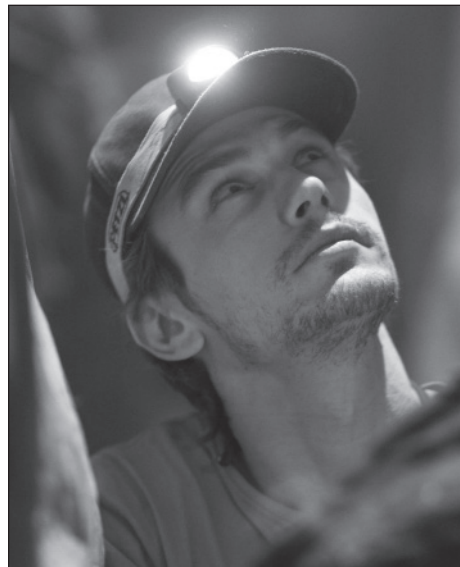
Writers: Danny Boyle and Simon Beaufoy  
(screenplay), Aron Ralston (book)

Producers: Bernard Bellew, Lisa Maria Falcone,  
John J. Kelly, and others

Original Music: A. R. Rahman

Cinematography: Enrique Chediak, Anthony  
Dod Mantle

U.S.A.; 94 min; Rated R (for language and some  
disturbing violent content/bloody images)

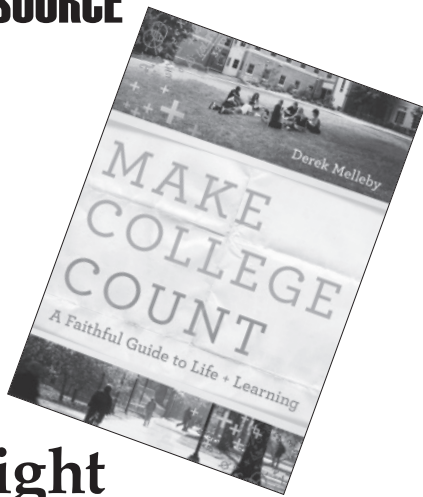


#### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Did the characteristically frenetic cinematography of a Danny Boyle film enhance or detract from this particular story? Why?
2. This film includes a scene of horrifically graphic violence. How would you compare this scene to violent moments from other films? Does it fit on a continuum with those or does it stand alone? Is it effective, necessary? Why or why not?
3. How would you explain Aron's looking upward to say "Thank you" once he's free? If you don't interpret it as a prayer to God, how else would you make sense of it?
4. Discuss Aron's journey in the film under the heading of "conversion." Why is Aron's story an instance of what Christians mean when we talk about "repentance"? Or, if you don't think that it is, why not? How has Aron changed?
5. Is this movie a "feel-good film" (as Danny Boyle claimed)? Why or why not? Should Christians—with our story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration—like "feel-good films"? What makes for a genuinely happy ending?



## RESOURCE



## Right Questions, Good Answers

Whenever a book is written by someone who works with the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding, I take notice. *Make College Count* is by Derek Melleby, who directs CPYU's College Transition Initiative, and if you are a college student or know a college student, get a copy and read it. *Make College Count* is brief, thoughtful, rooted in the gospel, and on the mark when identifying the issues worth discussing. This is not a book by someone who has burrowed away into a library and done research but someone who has read widely, sunk deep roots into Scripture, reflected wisely, and hung out with young adults, listening, learning, talking, and praying.

Melleby organizes *Make College Count* around a series of seven questions every college student answers, whether they realize it or not:

1. What kind of person do you want to become?
2. Why are you going to college?
3. What do you believe?
4. Who are you?
5. With whom will you surround yourself?
6. How will you choose a major?
7. How do you want your life to influence others?

The university years is the period during which people are shaped in ways that help form their character, understanding, worldview, relationships, and vocation. That shaping revolves around the answers that are given—intentionally or by default—to

those seven questions.

Melleby realizes that Christian students are usually told what not to do when they leave for college, and he knows that is insufficient advice. The law, no matter how holy, does not answer the deepest yearnings and needs of the human heart.

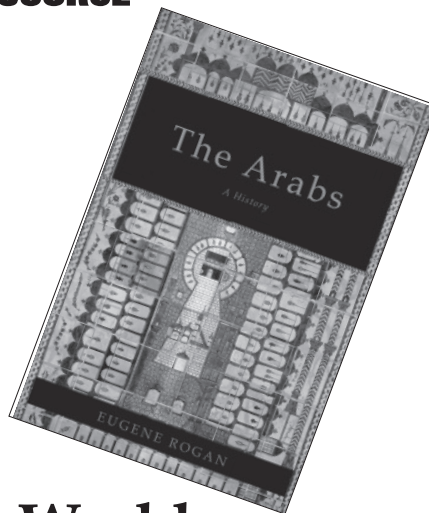
*There will be pressure to engage in social and intellectual activity that could be detrimental to your health and faith. No question. But if there is one message that I hope gets through in this book, it is this: Christian students should not fear college. The Christian faith offers a foundation and framework for you to make your time in college the best four (or five or even six!) years of your life. The Christian life is defined more by*

*what we do than what we don't do. My prayer is that this book equips you with a vision to make the most of your college experience by growing in your faith, developing lasting friendships, and thinking more deeply about your place in God's world. But please don't take this book as another lecture trying to tell you what to do. Rather consider it an invitation to envision college differently, to ask good questions before going to college, and to be pointed in the direction of helpful resources.*

We recommend *Make College Count* to you. ■

**Resource:** *Make College Count: A Faithful Guide to Life and Learning* by Derek Melleby (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011) 113 pages.

## RESOURCE



## A World We Should Know

I suspect I do not need to list reasons that it might be wise to include this book (or another on the same topic) on your reading list. The reasons are evident in the headlines of each day's news.

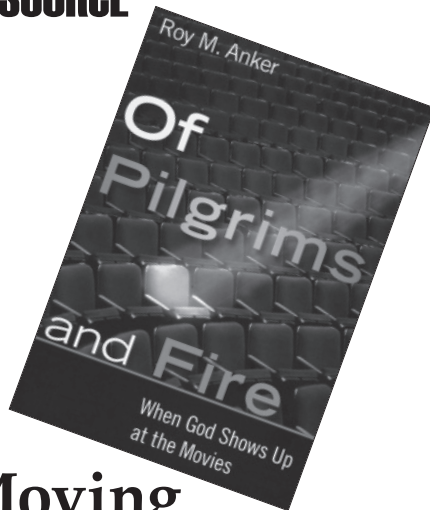
*The Arabs* is accessible for the general reader, covering five centuries of Arab history from the Ottoman Empire to the present historical moment. It is a work of serious history

by a serious scholar, but the goal is not a recital of events, names, and places but the telling of a story in which events unfold as real people in real places sought to live life in a part of the world where those who desired power, political influence, and international prestige always left their mark. The Arab world is a place where armies have often marched, where empires have risen and fallen, and where a history rich in art, culture, and extremes of wealth and poverty have produced people who are proud of their legacy and willing to fight to preserve their dignity.

*Bound by a common identity grounded in language and history, the Arabs are all the more fascinating for their diversity. They are one people and many peoples at the same time. As the traveler moves across North Africa from Morocco to Egypt, the dialect, calligraphy, landscape, architecture, and cuisine—as well as the form of government and types of economic activity—transform in a constantly changing kaleidoscope. If the traveler continues through the Sinai Peninsula into the Fertile Crescent, similar differences arise between Palestine and Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, and Iraq. Moving south from Iraq to the Gulf States, the*



## RESOURCE



## Moving Pictures, Godly Reflections

*Arab world shows influences of nearby Iran. In Oman and Yemen, the influences of East Africa and South Asia are apparent. All of these people have their own, distinct history, but they all see themselves bound by a common Arab history.*

This wildly diverse story is the one Eugene Rogan, professor at St Anthony's College, Oxford, tells in *The Arabs*. It is a story many of us do not know very well, though our representatives makes crucial decisions about this part of the world on an almost daily basis. As I write this, the blood of American soldiers is being absorbed into the soil of one country, Iraq that is in the very heart of the Arab world. Those who ruled in Baghdad once ruled a sprawling empire that stretched into Europe and controlled trade that poured such wealth into the caliph's coffers that the European ambassadors who came calling were intimidated by what they saw.

This is a story, a history we need to know, and in *The Arabs* the prose makes reading it a delight. We recommend it to you. ■

**Resource:** *The Arabs: A History* by Eugene Rogan (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2009) 407 pages + notes + index.

I have never met Roy Anker but from his books I think I have at least a good hint as to what he is like. I suspect he loves his work as a teacher (he is a professor); he is committed to the notion that Christian faith speaks meaningfully to all of life and culture (he teaches at Calvin College); and he loves good stories (he teaches literature and film). It is true that the facts about Anker are included in his author's bio, but I would have recognized his passions—mentoring a generation of young adults, reveling in good stories, appreciating the expansive wonder of the gospel—simply from reading what he has written. This is a man who has more than a job; it is his calling.

In *Of Pilgrims and Fire* Anker allows us to listen in as he watches and reflects on twenty films, from mainstream classics like *Superman* and *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, to thoughtful expositions of life like *Magnolia* and *The Shawshank Redemption*, to foreign productions like *Decalogue 1* and *Babette's Feast*, to older, often ignored films like *Crimes & Misdemeanors* and *The Godfather: Part III*. For each film he provides some general comments, a brief list of things to watch for in the film, some comments to read after viewing the movie, some questions for reflection and discussion, some of the things that film critics said about the film, and a few other films that include the director and/or main actors. *Of Pilgrims and Fire* helps us think without telling us what to think.

*Humanity's appetite for stories is insatiable, because stories are deeply pleasurable. Within the human's relentless curiosity, though, the most urgent question of all is the one about what will happen to one's own self, fragile and mortal, and for what reasons and purposes it will happen. That is the deep mystery to which stories speak. People generally seem to be wired that way, whether from a survival instinct or as a trace of the "image of God" lingering within them. Simply put, we love stories, and not just as illustrations of larger, abstract truths. Stories themselves have a depth of appeal and cogency that math and philosophy never will. Stories entice and compel and, if told well, convince. Even the Scientific American has pursued this*

*question, concluding finally that "the safe, imaginary world of a story may... have a unique power to persuade and motivate, because [stories] appeal to our emotions and capacity for empathy" (9/18/2008).*

*Most stories are really very simple. The late novelist John Gardner once observed that there are really only two kinds of stories: a stranger comes to town, or someone goes on a trip. Someone comes, or someone goes—both are pilgrims—and then change and the unexpected happen....*

*Stories work to tell us what the world and the creatures in it are like, providing maps, if you will, of the terrain of human experience: why people do what they do, what's likely to happen, what evil looks like, what ultimately matters most, and what we can generally expect from life in a human skin.*

You will not have to agree with everything Anker says in *Of Pilgrims and Fire* to benefit from the book. It is intended to be a guide to seeing more clearly, an invitation to engage the art and beauty of film more fully instead of just letting movies wash over you as you sit in the dark.

We recommend *Of Pilgrims and Fire* to you. ■

**Resource:** *Of Pilgrims and Fire: When God Shows Up at the Movies* by Roy M. Anker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010) 249 pages.

## RESOURCE

Hearts and Minds bookstore is a well-stocked haven for serious, reflective readers. When ordering resources, mention Ransom Fellowship and they will contribute 10 per cent of the total back to us. ■

**Resource:** Hearts and Minds bookstore, [www.heartsandmindsbooks.com](http://www.heartsandmindsbooks.com)





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