

critique

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Leaving All, Gaining All • Accountability • *The Social Network*

Being Serious About Play



CRITIQUE



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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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FROM THE EDITOR

Considering all arguments

by Denis Haack



"The moment we want to believe something," playwright George Bernard Shaw (1856–50) commented, "we suddenly see all the arguments for it, and become blind to the arguments against it." I suppose that's only natural, but for those of us who want to think and live with integrity it's unwise to leave things there.

This is hardly a scientific observation, but I've noticed that people's beliefs tend to reflect their reading habits. What I mean is that political conservatives tend to subscribe to conservative publications, liberals to more progressive ones. Only rarely does the opposite seem to occur. Only rarely do I find left-of-center folk avidly reading *National Review* or their right-of-center counterparts reading *The New Republic*. The publications we choose tend to hold an editorial position with which we are comfortable, and in which we will find support for what we already believe. This is only natural, as I say, although this also means that only rarely can we be certain we hold our positions having considered the very best arguments against them.

The same holds true, it seems to me, for evangelical Christians. When we want to know the arguments against our faith, for example, we tend to read books of apologetics by Christians who argue for the truthfulness of the faith against the arguments of opponents. These books

can be extremely helpful. I read them too, and often recommend them in these pages. Still, if I want to hear the best and strongest argument against Christian faith, wouldn't it be better to read something written by a thoughtful disbeliever rather than reading a summary of their thinking filtered through the mind of a believer in the midst of a sustained argument for the faith? If I want to be assured that my position is true, plausible, and compelling, a good step in the process is being exposed to the best argument against what I believe.

When I am talking to friends who are moving towards Christian faith, I ask them if they have seriously considered the alternatives. I may have already loaned them copies of books like Tim Keller's *The Reason for God*. Now I suggest they read something like *Anarchy Evolution: Faith, Science, and Bad Religion in a World without God* by Greg Graffin and Steve Olson. I want them to come to faith not because it is easy but because it is true. Not because they cannot imagine any reason to disbelieve but because they have reflected on the alternatives and become convinced that the Gospel truly is the good news of life and reality.

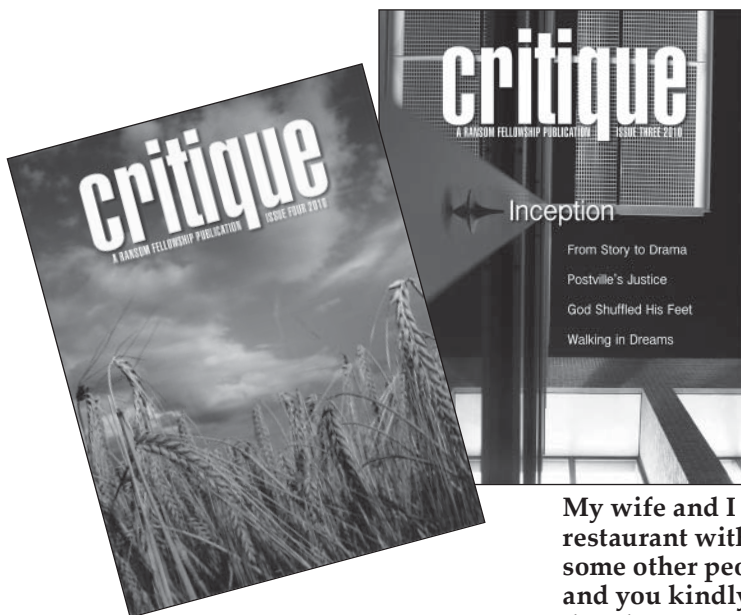
Occasionally I stop and review what I have been reading with this in mind. Margie and I make a point to subscribe to publications that hold positions editorially with which we disagree. As I've tried to learn about Islam over the past couple of years, I've read not just the Qur'an but works by Muslims. I cannot read all that I would like, so hard choices must be made. But I do want to read so that my thinking is not merely reinforced but challenged. I want to be challenged by the best that can be arrayed against what I assume to be true. It is not always easy and never very comfortable, but then truth is like that: gritty, real, messy, sharp.

If what I believe to be true is

convincing only because I live in the shadows away from the best arguments against it, I can hardly claim it to be the light. It may be, but it will always seem dim and untrustworthy, and my claims will always seem to be bravado instead of reality. Being made "children of light" (Ephesians 5:8) by God's grace means we have nothing to fear from the darkness. ■

Source: Shaw quote online (<http://thinkexist.com/>).

DIALOGUE: READERS RESPOND



To the editor:

Thank you for publishing the Postville story [*Critique* 2010:3, 4] and to Ruth DeFoster for putting flesh on the deplorable plight of those who want to call our country home. Can we read more from Ms. DeFoster?

With thanks for all your writing and work,

Henry Tazelaar
Mayo Medical School
Scottsdale, AZ

Denis Haack responds:

Henry: I would like more from Ruth as well, and have passed your kind note on to her.

To the editor:

It was about five years since Denis visited Three Village Church in East Setauket—and you spoke on a Saturday morning to mostly college students about Christians engaging popular culture.

My wife and I attended the Indian restaurant with our pastor Matt and some other people on Friday night, and you kindly held our 9-month old daughter as we ate.

Anyway, we moved to Rochester (the other one, in Western NY) in July 2007 and enjoy all of the excitement and brokenness that our diverse neighborhood has to offer (albeit, sometimes through gritted teeth). We are able, however, to walk to a movie theatre that shows movies that have been out a few weeks/months for those that can be patient to save a few dollars. Thus, I saw *Hereafter* and *Stone* for \$5 last Saturday. *Hereafter* treated psychic communication with the dead in a respectful manner, and was finely made. Of course, with Eastwood behind the camera, I knew it would be a quality story.

Anyway, the movie *Stone* was written by the same screenwriter as *Junebug* that was reviewed many years ago by RF. Whether or not it's worth a published review is your call, but as I overheard a gentleman leaving the theatre, "Man, that was a heavy movie." Indeed it was.

Robert DeNiro as a parole grantor with a complete lack of faith, though he attends church and listens to religious radio; his alcoholic wife (Frances Conroy) trapped in the marriage; Edward Norton as DeNiro's last parole case who goes through an interesting religious conversion

during the parole process; and Norton's wife (Milla Jovanich) who actively—and passionately—seduces DeNiro to release Norton early. I rate this an intense R for sexual situations, language, and violence.

Is *Stone* a Christian redemption story? No way. Is it at least hopeful? Nope. It's noisy, offensive, full of false idols, and so much brokenness ...but, oh, the discussions!

Best wishes to you and Margie and your family.

Mark Ippolito
Rochester NY

Denis Haack responds:

Mark, indeed I do remember you, and am delighted to receive such thoughtful comments about two films that I hadn't seen when you wrote, but have since—they moved up my list after reading your email. Thank you. The comments you overheard remind me of my visits to our nearby coffee shop. If it isn't too busy I usually ask the baristas what films they've been seeing and talking about. I've posed this question often enough that sometimes I can simply walk in and they begin making my order (I always order the same thing) and talking about films. Anyway, sometimes a film I've dismissed becomes a must-see after hearing what they say or moves up my list to be seen sooner than I had planned.

I doubt either *Hereafter* or *Stone* will be remembered as great cinema, but they put their focus on topics that are often treated dismissively today: life after death, and right and wrong (respectively). These perennial questions continue to be raised, and both films assume positive answers without being moralistic. Once again popular film reveals itself to be serious cultural dialogue.

Blessings, and thanks so much for writing.

Denis ■

READING THE WORD

Leaving all, gaining all



by Wesley Hill

Author's note: This was originally delivered as a talk at Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL on April 1, 2011, as part of a series of chapel service talks titled "Sexuality and Wholeness." The theme for this third talk in the series was "Homosexuality."

I'd like to frame what I have to say today with a story from the Gospel of Mark (10:23-31). In this story, Jesus's disciples are afraid of being left on the outside of the circle of God's saving grace. Having just seen a rich man depart with Jesus's pronouncement, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" the disciples wonder about their own fate. If the rich—those who were supposed to be a sure bet as candidates for salvation—may miss the kingdom, then what hope is there for the rest of us?

In an effort to shore up his own chances, Peter blurts out to Jesus, "See, we have left everything and followed you." He seems to be hoping for Jesus's affirmation here: Yes, Peter, I can see that. You're safe! Since you made such a great sacrifice on my behalf, I'll guarantee you a spot at the heavenly banquet.

Interestingly, that's not the response Jesus gives. Rather than buttress Peter's confidence in his own heroic efforts, Jesus undercuts that sort of self-reliance. He says, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left

house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the Gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

Notice, Jesus doesn't condemn Peter's choice to leave behind his fishing nets and follow. After all, Jesus is the one who had commanded him to do so (Mark 1:16-17)! Instead, Jesus shifts Peter's perspective on that act of self-denial. Rather than view it as a badge of honor or a kind of qualification ensuring him a place on heaven's roster, Peter should understand his forsaking the life he'd always known as a venture in receiving from Jesus a life so staggeringly full of grace and glory that any sacrifice made to obtain it pales by comparison. If Peter has left behind his family, Jesus says, he receives a new family in his discipleship. If Peter has given up property, he inherits a choicer piece of real estate. If he forsakes a fine house, he gains a mansion. If he gives up his

life, then—in Jesus's favorite paradox—he gains it. Following me, Jesus seems to say, isn't simply about relinquishing things. It is about receiving the abundance of eternal life.

It is this double movement of discipleship that I want to talk about this morning—this movement of leaving behind, and the movement of receiving.

As you'll know from the title of this morning's chapel (if you're in the habit of checking the schedule ahead of time), I've been asked to speak to you on the topic of homosexuality. It was

"TRULY, I SAY TO YOU, THERE IS NO ONE WHO HAS LEFT HOUSE OR BROTHERS OR SISTERS OR MOTHER OR FATHER OR CHILDREN OR LANDS, FOR MY SAKE AND FOR THE GOSPEL, WHO WILL NOT RECEIVE A HUNDREDFOLD"

at Wheaton College, during my junior year, that for the first time I told another human being that I was wrestling first-

hand with homosexuality. I'd grown up in a Christian home, with two flawed, loving parents. From a young age, I'd been taught the Christian faith, and I trusted in Jesus. I loved him and wanted to follow him. Before I was willing to acknowledge, after puberty, the desires for my own sex that I was experiencing in an unremitting, exclusive way, I'd been taught from scripture that God created

marriage for a man and a woman and that gay relationships therefore missed the mark of God's intention for human flourishing. And yet, confusingly, I found myself, just when all my friends were beginning to notice girls and become interested in dating, having longings to be in that kind of relationship with a member of my own sex.

As a Christian, I needed guidance in how to respond to my sexuality in a way that honored God. But, as you might imagine, I was nervous to tell my parents or my Christian friends in high school about my desires. I grew up in the Bible Belt in central Arkansas, where gay people don't exactly expect to find the warmest of welcomes.

So I found myself one winter day sitting in the office of a Wheaton professor, telling him my biggest secret. We prayed together that day, we talked about what the future might hold for me in terms of friendships and other relationships, and we discussed God's compassion and tenderness in Jesus toward those who are broken in the midst of our sinful, fallen world.

As I discovered more about Christianity's historic teaching, I found myself convinced of the position the church has held with almost total unanimity throughout the ages—that although many people find themselves, through no fault of their own, to have sexual desires for members of their

own sex, this is not something to be affirmed and celebrated but is, rather, a sign that we are broken, in need of redemption and re-creation. Gay people are not uniquely broken—that's a position we share with every other

human who has ever lived, or will live—but we are, none-

theless, broken. And following Jesus means turning our backs on a life of sexual sin, just as it does for every other Christian.

That's the position I remain convinced of to this day, based on what I read about God's creation of male and female in the book of Genesis and Jesus's reaffirmation of that ancient teaching. As I think about my life of saying "No" to gay sex and a gay partnership, I find myself thinking of

Peter's impetuous outburst to Jesus, "See, I have left everything and followed you!" I second Peter's sentiment. I feel, much of the time, that I am turning

my back on what would make me happiest and most fulfilled in life. Now that I'm about to turn 30 and many of my married friends are having children, I feel the ache of being with-

out a partner. "Do you see, Lord," I pray, "all that I am giving up to follow you?"

And it's at this point that I'm beginning to hear Jesus's answer to Peter as a word spoken to me, too: "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the Gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life."

I hear in this a promise that relates, poignantly, to my life: "Truly, I say to you, Wes, there is no one who has left sex or a romantic relationship or marriage for my sake and the Gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children

and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life."

In the years since I have begun to tell the story of my sexuality to my fellow

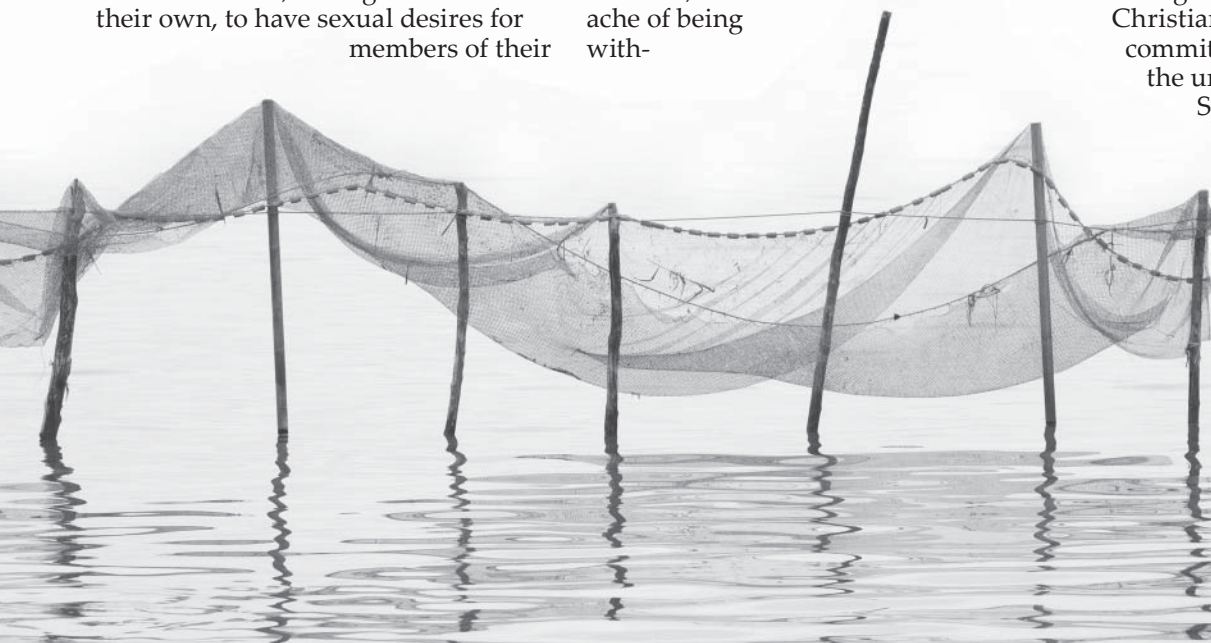
Christians in the churches I have been a part of, I have found Jesus's words to be true. Jesus has given me brothers and sisters and mothers and children. Knowing my celibate lifestyle, the

Christians I've befriended have committed themselves, through the unity secured by the Holy Spirit rather than through biological ties, to being my family, whether or not I ever experience marriage myself.

They have invited me into their homes, taken me on vacation with them, and encouraged me to consider myself an older sibling to their children.

"DO YOU SEE, LORD...ALL THAT I AM GIVING UP TO FOLLOW YOU?"

"THE ULTIMATE GAIN JESUS HOLDS OUT FOR PETER IS NOTHING LESS THAN A QUALITATIVELY DIFFERENT KIND OF LIFE, ONE THAT NEVER FADES, LOSES ITS GLORY, ONE THAT ENCOMPASSES THE FINAL RENEWAL OF CREATION ITSELF."





But I've also experienced the darker side of Jesus's promise—all of these new mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters are given to me along with "persecutions." I'm sure I haven't experienced anything so dramatic as actual persecution, but I've known my share of sadness, pain, loneliness, and despair as I contemplate the prospect of lifelong celibacy.

But in the midst of all this mingled joy and sorrow, I've also known the hope of Jesus's final promise: "in the age to come eternal life." The ultimate gain Jesus holds out for Peter is nothing less than a qualitatively different kind of life, one that never fades, loses its glory, one that encompasses the final renewal of creation itself. And that's the hope he holds out for me, too—life with God, beholding God, partaking in the newness of life that will come with the resurrection of the body and the unleashing of creation from its bondage to decay (see Romans 8).

If you are here this morning knowing yourself to be gay, or if you are here as a friend of a fellow student who is gay, I want to invite you to think about this double movement of discipleship we have before us here in Mark's Gospel. First Peter gives up everything to follow Jesus, then Jesus promises him not only a new home and a new family but a new life—eternal life.

If you're someone living with homosexual feelings, Jesus's message to you this morning is not primarily a *no* to your deepest self and your deepest hunger. I do believe discipleship to him entails giving up gay sex and gay relationships. And that may be more painful than you can imagine right now in your life as a student (I say as someone about a decade removed from college life). But, ultimately, Jesus is offering you the kingdom. He is offering you eternal life. He is offering you himself in the Gospel. Sacrificing your sexual freedom and sexual expression may seem like a high price to pay—it is a high price to pay!—but he promises you a joy so stunningly great that if you felt the full weight of it now, you would literally come undone.

But I hear one more note in this story that I think applies not only to those with homosexual feelings but also to those here who are not gay. Jesus promises Peter that in leaving his family, he will have a new family. Who do you suppose he is referring to? The answer, I think, is the church. In leaving behind his biological kin, Peter will find a new spiritual family. Which means that all of us who name the name of Christ are meant to be family for one another. We who believe are now each other's brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers and children. And this means that

if one of us is lonely, the others are there to link arms with that person and enfold them back into the family's fabric. If you are straight and a friend of a gay student, you are that student's brother or sister through the Gospel. Or for that matter, if you are gay and the friend of another gay student, you are that student's brother or sister through the Gospel. You are part of Jesus's promise to them. God is giving you, in love, to that student who has left everything to follow Jesus.

My prayer for this community is that God will enable you to leave your nets and follow Jesus wholeheartedly, forsaking all to find him. And may God enable you to see your sacrifice—your surrender of your very self—as no ultimate sacrifice. May he open your eyes to the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints (Ephesians 1:18), and to know him—the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom he sent—which is the eternal life of the age to come (John 17:3).

Amen. ■

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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.

READING THE WORLD

Being serious about play

by Luke Brad Bobo



I taught a course last semester called Vocational Orientation—a course designed to help students uncover their divinely appointed callings in life. I began with a series of talks/lectures on the theology of work, rest, and play based in part on Genesis 1–2:3. Sadly, many of them (all Christians) often could not put *Christian* and *play* in the same sentence. “I did not think you were serious,” one student said, “when you announced we would be discussing play!”

I want to make a distinction between play and leisure—play involves movement like sledding, blowing bubbles, playing football in the snow; leisure involves being relatively stationary. In *Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment*, psychiatrist Richard Winter calls leisure ‘sacred idleness’—which is helpful to know because sometimes people my age need idleness after playing. I played touch football with some friends several years ago and came back with a torn Achilles tendon; I was idle for six weeks in a cast.

When was the last time you were serious about playing? Or more specifically, when was the last time you went snow sledding? When was the last time you raked some leaves and then jumped in them? When was the last time you blew some bubbles? When was the last time you played softball? Played pool? Played tennis? Played golf? Played basketball? Played a video game? Played hide-n-seek?

WORLDVIEW

Where do we begin in order to answer the question, “How serious should we be about play?”

The answer is found in your worldview on the subject of play. Albert Wolters, in his book *Creation Regained*, defines worldview as “the comprehensive framework of one’s basic belief about things; things like God, things like death; things like ethics, things like play.”

So, based on your worldview, what can you say about play? Is it okay to play as adults? Should our play be structured or unstructured? Should it be scheduled? What is it good for? Should adult play be competitive or unfettered?

Another question worth asking is

what or who informs our worldview? I can’t speak for you so let me illustrate what and who informs my worldview about play.

My profession informs my worldview about play. Besides my Christian ministry studies classes, I also teach a business math course. I often have my students read an article entitled “How Do Students Study?” by Carmen M. Latterell. She teaches calculus. Latterell took a poll of her students to understand them a bit better, especially their study habits. “I work, I have fun, I study in that order,” one student wrote. “I am often out of time by the time I study.” We often talk about being out of time but notice this student takes time to have fun or play.

Our culture informs my worldview about play. Consider the Dave & Buster’s restaurant franchise. Their motto is “how to act like a kid without being embarrassed about it.” They refer to their restaurant as a “playground for adults, an arcade with liquor, a Vegas casino without money. Call it whatever you want, but the truth is this place will bring out the kid in you and let you relive those days of make-believe with toy soldiers and fire trucks.”

Another example from our society is the NFL Play60 campaign. This is from their Website:

Childhood obesity rates are at an all-time high: today, nearly one in three kids and teens in the United States are obese or overweight. We know that physical activity produces overall physical, psychological, and social benefits, and that inactive children are likely to become inactive adults. That’s why the National Football League and the American Heart Association have teamed up to create the NFL PLAY 60 Challenge (formerly What Moves U), a program that inspires kids to get the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity a day in school and at home. It also helps schools become places that encourage physically active lifestyles year-round.

This team of concerned parties—scientists and athletes—sees the benefit of play. This comes under the umbrella of Francis Schaeffer’s comment, “All truth is God’s truth.” This unlikely pair sees the truthfulness in an active lifestyle instead of a

sedentary lifestyle.

Nature informs my worldview about play. During warm days in St. Louis, I eat my lunch outside on the steps to my office building. As I do I am surrounded by tall Linden trees and an acrobatic show as I witness squirrels jumping from limb to limb and chasing one another. What I actually see is squirrels serious about playing. And this from the *Vital Measures Harmony Employee Health Letter* (June 1998) under the category, “what our cats teach us”: “stretch often—with your whole body; remember to play...” Yes, animals can teach us!

Literary luminaries inform my worldview about play. When commenting on people, C.S. Lewis writes this in *The Weight of Glory*:

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours [sic]. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously—no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption. (p. 46).

Sounds rather like an injunction from Lewis: “We must play.”

The Bible informs my worldview about play. Most of the instances of the word *play* appear in the Old Testament. Two Hebrew words are translated play (*sa’ al* and *sahaq*); the second word for play, *sahaq*, has a wide semantic range including to laugh, celebrate, rejoice, dance, entertain, frolic, joke, mock, make a pet, play, revel, smile, and scoff. But how the word is used in context is what really matters. Consider these examples:

Isaiah’s description of the peaceable kingdom includes the idea of children playing. “The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest.” (11:8).

Zechariah’s vision of the new, restored Jerusalem also mentions children playing. “The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there” (8:5). God seems to think

that play is natural. Can we not then presume that play is beneficial?

Psalms 104:25–26 says: “Here is the sea, great and wide, which teems with creatures innumerable, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan, which you formed to play in it.”

Job 40:20, describing the place where Behemoth can be found says: “For the mountains yield food for him where all the wild beasts play.”

In St. Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus refers to children as having playmates. “But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places and calling to their playmates, ‘We piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn’” (11:16–17). Eugene Peterson adds a modern touch in his version, *The Message*: “How can I account for this generation? The people have been like spoiled children whining... ‘We wanted to skip rope, and you were always too tired.’”

Notice, there are no references to adults playing in this limited sweep of scripture. However, I am a child of God the Father. And the Bible often exhorts adults to behave like children at appropriate times. My wife often refers to our son as “Luke’s man-child.” As adults, I think we are all either a man-child or a female-child. We can have child-like tendencies and this is okay!

NATURE OF THIS PLAY

If I have convinced you that we (adults) should play, then, to use Gideon Strauss’s phrase, “how shall we then play?” I believe we learn the nature of play or the prescription for play by watching children play. In other words, watching children not only

informs my worldview about play but defines play for me. This is what I have noticed:

- Kids are not aware of decorum or propriety. I remember once after preaching in Covenant Seminary Chapel, two little kids just started dancing spontaneously. Their father was nearby and they giggled as they choreographed their own dance. Assured of their father’s presence these kids felt at ease to play.
- Unlike adults who are slaves to the clock, kids are oblivious to schedule or time. I remember when my 2-year-old cousin visited she would awake and say, “Outside, I wanna go outside.” I was still in my pajamas and had not had my morning coffee yet.
- Kids’ play is often not competitive.
- Kids are quite creative. The opening to the film, *Toy Story 3* depicts a younger Andy being very creative and imaginative. In our neighborhood we have a Joshua and two Calebs—my son (Caleb B.) and the brother of Joshua (Caleb H.). I asked Caleb H., a high school freshman, to explain the rules of their wiffleball game that is played on the edge of my backyard. He replied in an e-mail:
 1. *If the pitch hits the [lawn] chair without hitting the ground first, it is a strike.*

2. *If the batter swings and misses, it is a strike.*

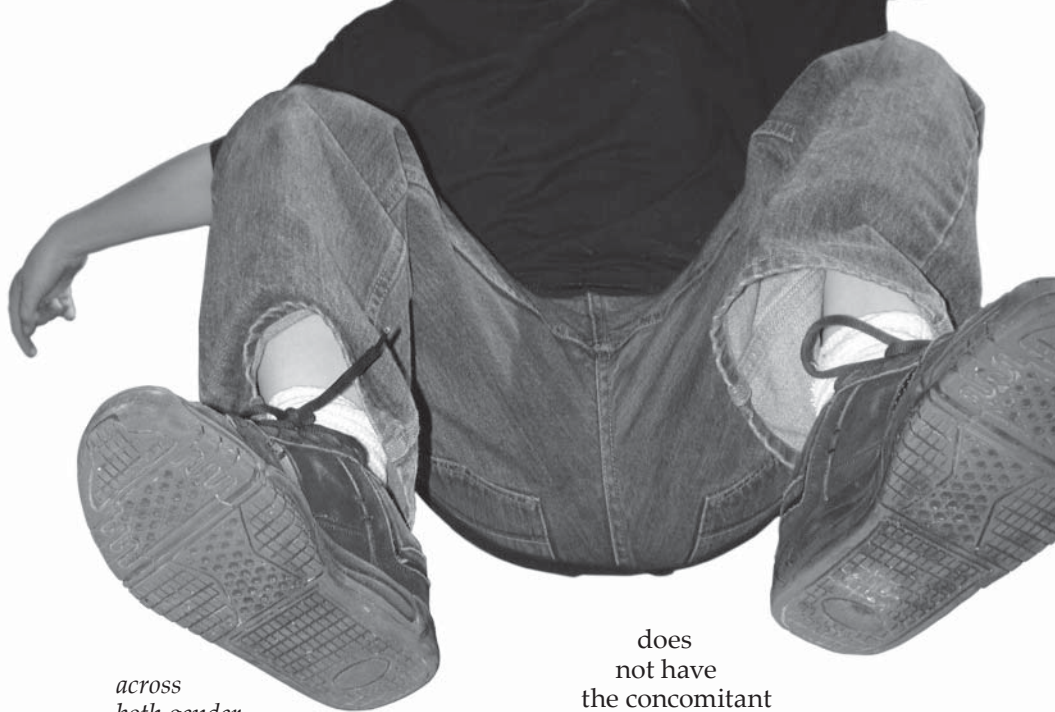
3. *Three strikes are an out.*
4. *Four balls are a walk.*
5. *You can choose whether you want to play two or three outs in an inning.*
6. *If there are more people on base than there are players on the team, you use ‘ghost runners.’*
7. *Ghost runners remain on the same base unless they are forced to go to the next base by a runner.*
8. *Fielders may throw the ball at a base to get a force out or they can peg the runner with the ball.*
9. *If a runner goes half way to the next base, he cannot return to the previous base, he has to keep going and can then get forced out by the fielder.*
10. *We usually play anywhere from 5 to 9 innings.*
11. *You can make your own home run line according to where you are playing.*
12. *If the ball is hit past this line without touching the ground first, it is a home run.*

Notice the creativity here? “There are many different ways to play wiffleball,” Caleb concluded his e-mail, “but this is the way we play.” When I arrive at home, Caleb and another teenager are often playing catch and they permit me to play catch with them, sometimes before I change my clothes.

A former student of mine works at the YMCA and she oversees kids who range in age from 5- to 10-years-old. I asked her to jot down her own observations of kids play:

Indeed it is true that children most certainly play. They use creativity to express their imagination. However, they are not necessarily free of the pressures, pretense, and self-awareness that many adults have. From a young age, their understanding of a social normalcy creeps into their interactions with each other and their own sense of play. I found that, starting as young as kindergarten, the children would actually cease a particular kind of play (i.e., hot wheels) and pick up another (i.e., toy guns) based on the response of their peers. Not only was the issue of self-image portrayed through their play (keep in mind, this occurred





across both gender and grade lines), but their own depravity and selfishness hindered them as well. This is not to say there is no care-freeness in their play. It's just that when it is mixed into their imagination there is a constant self-awareness. This expresses itself through the way in which they use play. When play is used positively—it provides the child with an outlet to discern what they might want to be (i.e., playing house, doctor, army men). On the flip side, the children might also use that same way of play and channel it out in a negative way. Simply meaning that those same identities can be used to hide themselves from who they see themselves to be presently (much like adults) or as an escape from the condition of the world around them. Though I thought this could have been my own projection onto the children, I had the opportunity to engage in conversation with a third grade girl about the word play. She told me that when she plays she gets to use her imagination and it makes her feel free. (This same girl also has a broken home life in that her parents are deciding whether or not they should divorce, thus resulting in constant fights in front of her and her younger sister. Of course she would find freedom through play.)

MY DEFINITION OF PLAY

Based on my observations, the nature of kids and my former student's observations, I offer this very preliminary definition of play that adults can engage in—play is often spontaneous, often without regard to how one looks, is creative and imaginative, and often

does not have the concomitant pressure of being competitive or physically fit or athletic.

We have freedom in Christ to act goofy!

CONCLUSION

I think the evidence is pretty overwhelming: adults should play, or rather, adults should be serious about playing. Cats, squirrels, birds, and dogs play. Children play. Restaurants like Dave & Buster's are intentional about providing a safe place for adults to play. After finishing my lecture on the theology of work, rest, and play, I said this to my students: "work hard, rest hard, and work harder at playing." Or better, this from James McLurkin, PhD, who delivered the keynote address during Sibley Day at Lindenwood University: "A master in the art of living draws no sharp distinction between work and play." ■

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Sources: Gideon Strauss from "How Should We Then Play?" online (August 1, 2006; www.cardus.ca/audio/530/). Pedro Acevedo, "Play is the Password for Kids of All Ages at Dave & Busters," in *The Miami Herald* (August 22, 1999).



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first given as a lecture at the L'Abri retreat in January 2011 in Steelville, Missouri.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION:

1. Who or what informs your world-view about play?
2. What is your opinion on my former student's observations?
3. When was the last time you played like a child? How did you feel afterwards?
4. Does the idiom, "twice a child, once an adult" have any bearing on your lack of playing?
5. Can we really be secure in Christ and play, too?
6. Does the passage, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, but when I became..." have any bearing on your lack of playing?
7. Why doesn't the Bible mention adults playing? (This is a speculative question.)
8. How does one's self-image affect the freedom to play?
9. Do professional sports that are so competitive discourage you from playing?
10. Does our freedom to play say anything about our theology or what we believe about God?
11. I saw a license plate that read Rx=Play. Is this true?
12. What is your definition of adult play?
13. One of my students in Vocational Orientation went out with some unbelievers for a night of playful fun. Her friends said this about her: "She's a riot, BUT she's a Christian." What's being communicated here?
14. What does your faith tradition, denomination, etc. say about adults playing? Does it square with scripture?

DISCERNING LIFE

Accountability

by Denis Haack



Accountability is much in the news these days. Politicians on the campaign trail, for example, claim they will be transparent so as to be accountable to their constituents. Wall Street CEOs solemnly inform the Congress that bailed them out that their banks do not need more regulation because they are already accountable to share holders. Is it cynical of me to admit that most of these claims strike me as being disingenuous (at best) if not downright deceitful?

LOVING ACCOUNTABILITY OR BURDENSOME LEGALISM?

Being accountable isn't what we wake up wanting every morning—we wake up yearning to be autonomous. Being autonomous is the default mode; being intentionally accountable comes only with wisdom shaped by grace.

It's risky to be accountable. Performance reviews at work don't always turn out well, and failing to merit a promotion can be disappointing. Having friends remind me that I have failed to keep a promise is disheartening—I don't like failing my friends or myself. Realizing, as I have, that long standing patterns of dysfunction cause me to seek to control events and the people I love is not just humiliating but devastating. Yet the patterns remain deeply entrenched, and so repentance becomes tiresome and shameful since the same things arise, time and time again. I don't even like knowing these things about myself, so being accountable to another increases my discomfort.

Yet, I have lived long enough to be convinced that I need to be accountable. I am not trustworthy enough to be autonomous. I need to find a safe community within which friends love me enough to ask thoughtful, probing questions that encourage me to keep moving forward in my pilgrimage towards flourishing across all of life and culture as a person made in God's image and redeemed by Christ. "We are his workmanship," St. Paul insists, "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). Contrary to popular opinion, in other words, there is purpose to be had in this broken

world, shaped for us beyond the horizons of time and space, specifically *for us* so that all we are and do and feel becomes a reflection, imperfect but substantial, of nothing less than the very glory of God. Amazing but true.

The stunning reality of this grace is what prompts me to risk accountability in the face of my insane desire to stake myself out as an autonomous being every chance I get.

Mutual accountability can only be sustained in a place of genuine safety, and that kind of place is sadly in very short supply. Worse, many of the people who offer themselves as accountability partners are not trustworthy. They claim to be, but aren't. "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs," Jesus warned. "If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces" (Matthew 7:6). Notice Jesus is not criticizing the dogs and pigs here, because they are simply doing what's in their nature. They are incapable of distinguishing pearls from slop and can be nasty to anyone that throws stuff at them. Rather, Jesus is criticizing any of his followers who give what is sacred and precious to those unprepared to receive it.

Notice the context carefully (7:3–5)—when Jesus speaks of dogs and swine he is referring to people who offer to remove little splinters from other people's eyes. They claim to be trustworthy, capable of delicate operations, but walk around, Jesus says, with entire planks of lumber lodged under their eyelids. And in case we are wondering what Jesus means, how he measures their untrustworthiness, Jesus names it—the people with lumber are judgmental (7:1–2). We all know the type because being judgmental takes so many

forms. They do not listen, so certain that they know what our problem is; they prescribe neat little solutions and steps of action, certain they have the solutions to all dilemmas; they quote scriptures to meet our problem without persuading us that they are walking with us through the valley; they are unwilling to be silent, never realizing that presence can be a deep grace; they look on us with concern not acceptance and so make us into a project to be fixed rather than a person to be loved; their tone is self-satisfied, assured, and patronizing, never imagining for a moment that the one they call Lord calls them swine.

I am glad for Jesus's warning because accountability is difficult enough without being violated by people busily fishing around in my eyeball trying to find a splinter. I'm willing to take the risk, but with care to identify pigs and dogs, to avoid as much as possible their abuse.

Safe community is a place where pearls are cherished, not trampled. So, assuming we can find safe community, we can and should risk mutual accountability.

THE QUESTION IS HOW?

Which brings me to the issue I've been considering and want to raise here: assuming we are in safe community, how can we lovingly ask probing questions of one another without being too intrusive? Can we craft sensitive questions that encourage each other to grow and mature without being formulaic? Can our community as Christians, in other words, include something of true loving accountability without descending into procedures that are ugly and burdensome?

Some questions—"How are you?" for example—are potentially intrusive but lose their potency by being little more than civil courtesies. Most of the time we don't expect much of an answer beyond, "Fine," and most of the time that's exactly what we get, whether the person happens to be fine or not. That doesn't make the exercise entirely meaningless, since conversation seems to flow more easily when we can begin

innocuously, when we've each had a chance to say something aloud. But sometimes the question rises above the level of courtesy to probe more

deeply into the things that matter most. Last week when I saw a dear friend for the first time in over a year I asked, "So, how are you?" and because we cherish our relationship and have nourished our friendship he responded by telling me things he'd most likely not tell most other people. It's a question we always ask one another when we get together, believing as we do that probing into one another's soul is an exercise that encourages us to keep on keeping on. Such mutual accountability is helpful and rare and risky but precious—and we need it.

Christianity is a distinctly corporate affair. Those who name Christ as Savior and Lord are made "one body," St. Paul claims, a spiritual reality transacted by God's Spirit for which our baptism as believers is both a physical symbol and divine guarantee (1 Corinthians 12:12–13). Once incorporated into this reality, our flourishing and identity are inseparably tied to one another and to the whole. "If one member suffers," Paul insists, "all suffer together" (12:26) and whether it seems so or not, we are made "indispensible" to one another (12:22). The Spirit dispenses a variety of gifts and callings to all the members (12:11) so that, rather than face fragmentation in our differences, we can care for one another (12:25). This is part of what we mean when we affirm in the Apostles' Creed, "...I believe in the Holy Spirit,

the holy catholic church, the communion of saints..."

This means that, for the Christian, community is essential. We were made for it, and, in the biblical creation narrative, being alone was the only thing said by God to be "not good" for the human beings he had made (Genesis 2:18). Human beings, created in the image of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, yearn for unity

but find that disunity and all that flows from it—disagreement, division, envy, disappointment, jealousy, violence—plagues our efforts to come

together. When St. Paul speaks of the mystical union we have as members of Christ's body, he is claiming that the shattering of relationships in the fall (Genesis 3) finds its ultimate healing in the redemption of Christ (John 17:21–23; Ephesians 5:25–32; Colossians 1:19–23). The church is meant to be a demonstration of this cosmic reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18–21), not achieved fully on this side of the kingdom's fulfillment, of course, but substantially, really (Ephesians 2:14–18). Christian community is so important that Christ warned that the watching world had reason to disbelieve his divinity if we fail to demonstrate love for one another (John 17:20–21).

What I have written here is not new or, from a Christian perspective, very radical. It is part of what the church has always believed about itself, about what the community of Christian believers is meant to be and demonstrate while we wait for the return of the king.

What I have written is radical, however, in a broken world and in a society that elevates individualism and autonomy to the status of idolatry. I doubt a single day passes that I am not encouraged to be self-reliant, to seek self-fulfillment, to achieve independence, to be true to myself, to find my own way, to claim my right to live my life as I see fit. I may not always be conscious of it, but this is the message

that infests the background noise of life, from advertising to casual conversation and even, sadly, in much of the church. Assumed to be true, it is largely unremarked and unremarkable, and part of Christian faithfulness includes the necessity to quietly yet firmly dismantle its supremacy.

All of which leads back to the issue I am raising here: How can we live out something of the reality of being Christ's body in our broken world? More specifically, I'd like for us to reflect together on some questions we might pose to one another, in love, to help us evaluate our growth towards spiritual maturity, to be accountable to one another—or whether developing such mutual accountability is possible at all.

QUESTIONS USED IN THE PAST

It turns out that questions like this have been developed in the past. For example, in the mid-eighteenth century a religious revival occurred in America that is referred to by historians as the First Great Awakening. (First, because a Second Great Awakening occurred in the early nineteenth century.) Thousands responded to the preaching of the Gospel, and the leaders of the First Great Awakening encouraged the formation of small groups so new converts could meet for prayer, encouragement, study, and spiritual growth.

One prominent preacher involved in the First Awakening was John Wesley (1703–91). An Anglican clergyman, Wesley became a popular preacher who launched what later came to be known as Methodism—originally a negative term used by opponents making fun of Wesley's desire to be methodical

"ALMOST ALL OF OUR RELATIONSHIPS BEGIN AND MOST OF THEM CONTINUE AS FORMS OF MUTUAL EXPLOITATION, A MENTAL OR PHYSICAL BARTER, TO BE TERMINATED WHEN ONE OR BOTH PARTIES RUN OUT OF GOODS."

— W. H. Auden



about spiritual growth. Wesley formed people into “bands” of 5–10 people that met weekly to report on their spiritual progress as Christians by taking turns answering a series of questions:

- What sins have you committed since the last meeting?
- What temptations did you face but did not give into?
- How were you delivered from those temptations?
- Where else did God give you help or victory to live as a Christian?
- What have you thought or done which you were unsure as to whether it was sinful or not, or where have you been unclear as to God’s will?

Another prominent preacher in the First Great Awakening was George Whitefield (1714–7A0). He formed “societies,” and developed accountability questions as well:

- Are you sure you are a Christian? Are you sure God’s Spirit lives inside you? Is the Spirit shedding abroad God’s love in your heart? How clear is his witness? Are you enjoying it? Why or why not?
 - What scriptures is God using in your

life?

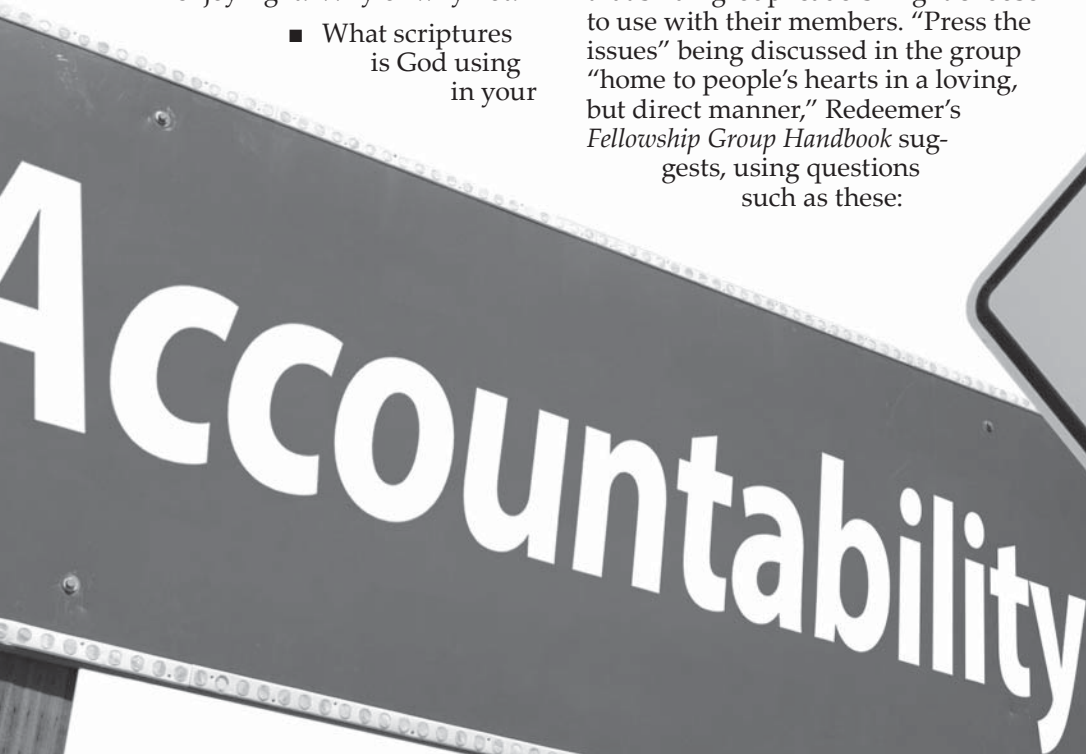
- In what ways is God helping you overcome sinful habits? In what ways are you becoming more aware of your sins and faults? How are you increasing in your understanding of them?
- In what ways are you growing in love towards other people?
- Which fruit of the Spirit are you growing in most and which are you most lacking?
- Are there certain promises and assurances in the Bible that are particularly precious to you right now?
- Are you becoming aware of certain situations that are dangerous to you and create temptations?
- Can you recognize the first motions of sin in the heart: pride, lust, carelessness, bitterness, envy, and self-indulgence?

MORE QUESTIONS, ASKED MORE RECENTLY

Others have formed their own list of accountability questions. For example, Redeemer Presbyterian in Manhattan includes some questions that small group leaders might choose to use with their members. “Press the issues” being discussed in the group “home to people’s hearts in a loving, but direct manner,” Redeemer’s *Fellowship Group Handbook* suggests, using questions such as these:

- ▲ How has God been working in your life lately?
- ▲ Are there things you have been convicted about? How did the conviction come about? What steps are you taking to deal with those things?
- ▲ What have you heard in the sermons recently that have been particularly convicting or comforting?
- ▲ What areas of obedience have you been working on?
- ▲ Where have you recently experienced God’s kindness and love in your life?

Then, in a lovely piece on the meaning of the period of the church year leading up to Easter, “On Keeping a Holy Lent,” Craig Higgins, a Presbyterian pastor in Rye, New York, includes a series of questions. Though specifically intended to help Christians reflect on their spiritual maturity and growth during Lent, they fit well into the



Accountability



category of accountability questions we are considering here:

- ◆ Have I been fervent in prayer? Was there warmth? Access?
- ◆ Have I prayed at my stated times? With my family?
- ◆ Have I practiced God's presence, at least every hour?
- ◆ Have I, before every deliberate action or conversation, considered how it might be turned to God's glory?
- ◆ Have I sought to center conversations on the other person's interests and needs and ultimately toward God, or did I turn them toward my own interests?
- ◆ Have I given thanks to God after every pleasant occurrence or time?
- ◆ Have I thought or spoken unkindly to anyone?
- ◆ Have I been careful to avoid proud thoughts or comparing myself to others? Have I done things just for appearance? Have I mused on my own fame or acclaim?
- ◆ Have I been sensitive, warm, and cheerful toward everyone?
- ◆ Have I been impure in my thoughts or glances?
- ◆ Have I confessed sins toward God and others swiftly?
- ◆ Have I over- or under-eaten, -slept, or -worked?
- ◆ Have I twisted the truth to look good?
- ◆ Have I been leading in my home, or only reacting to situations?

Higgins appends to his list of questions a series developed by Jack Miller (1928–96):

- Is God working in your life?
- Have you been repenting of your sin lately?
- Are you building your life on Christ's free justification or are you insecure and guilt-ridden?
- Have you done anything simply because you love Jesus?
- Have you stopped anything simply because you love Jesus?

There are other lists of questions available, and you may know of them,

but this is a sufficient sampling for our purposes. The issue at hand is whether questions like this can be part of the mutual accountability that is developed as part of our community as Christians.

AN ENCOURAGEMENT OR A BURDEN

It seems to me that being in meaningful community where we are lovingly accountable to one another as members of the body of Christ is both a human need and a biblical mandate. That much is easy. Much more difficult is determining how to accomplish this so our efforts help one another flourish rather than become one more burden in a life where burdens tend to be the norm rather than the exception.

Some of us, for example, grew up in situations where questions like the ones I have listed above were used not graciously but as legalistic warnings to conform. The person who asked me repeatedly, "Did you read your Bible today?" may have believed they were encouraging me to maintain a spiritual discipline. What it produced in me, however, was guilt and a deep distaste for a routine I had been taught to make a part of my life as a Christian. A specific practice had been developed, and conformity to that practice became a measure of spirituality. No exceptions were granted, at least none that I ever heard of, and failing to maintain the practice meant my spirituality was in doubt. After a while questions like this became emblematic of a faith that seemed burdensome rather than freeing, an open attempt to exercise control by manipulating in me a sense of shame over falling short of what was expected.

Tone is important, but it goes deeper than that. The question, "Are you right with God?" is one of the most important questions imaginable, but it can be posed not just for blessing but also for curse. Sometimes it sounds more like a scolding, a not so thinly veiled suggestion that

something is wrong, we need to fix it, and our interrogator knows how that can be done.

Some of the questions developed by John Wesley and George Whitefield simply would not be appropriate in many—if not most—small groups in existence today. *What sins have you committed since the last meeting?* Can you imagine asking the members of an average Christian small group to take turns answering that one? Most church groups are not safe enough to involve that sort of honesty, even if some of the members were willing to answer it.

**"THE LIFE I TOUCH FOR GOOD OR ILL
WILL TOUCH ANOTHER LIFE, AND
THAT IN TURN ANOTHER, UNTIL WHO
KNOWS WHERE THE TREMBLING
STOPS OR IN WHAT FAR PLACE MY
TOUCH WILL BE FELT."**

— Frederick Buechner

People are different, with differing pasts and various experiences that help shape who we are today. A set of questions that for one person is a

wonderful encouragement to live a more intentionally thoughtful lifestyle that helps integrate thinking, doing, and feeling could for someone else be an annoyingly intrusive burden that churns up feelings of guilt and threatens to engulf them in conforming to things that feel legalistic. Consider one of the questions in Higgins's list: *Have I prayed at my stated times?* Some people could receive that as a healthy challenge to become serious about the discipline of prayer, while others could hear it as a way to get everyone to conform to a certain set practice that doesn't necessarily fit their personality or where they happen to be at this point in their pilgrimage.

DEVELOPING GOOD QUESTIONS

The solution is not to stop using accountability questions, but to shape questions that are life affirming within a group that cultivates safety and grace. A small group that reflects loving care for its members is a rare and precious space in our fractious and fragmented world. In such a setting, accountability tends to naturally develop as members share their hearts and lives ever more deeply and increasingly encourage each other to flourish as Christians. As we get to

know one another, discussing this issue and constructing a list of questions to use can be a lovely exercise where members listen to each other and commit to continue building into each other's growth towards spiritual maturity.

Ransom has been part of this process, and so it is not simply a theological exercise. Over the years, people have come and gone from the groups that meet regularly in Toad Hall. Some join as non-Christians, others with some measure of faith already intact, and all with baggage, some good and some not so good. Compassion is not a static thing, but vital, always listening, eager to be certain it is received as grace, always mutually intentional, perhaps an interruption (as accountability always is) but never intrusive or burdensome, but freeing.

Some of the questions we have used in Ransom are these:

- ▲ Where did you see surprising displays of beauty and grace (in nature, relationships, art, or daily life) since we last met?
- ▲ What has brought you life in the past week?
- ▲ What hindrances to flourishing as a person have you been encountering personally?
- ▲ Have you enjoyed any moments, intentional or accidental, of quiet restfulness in the midst of all the busyness of life?
- ▲ Is there a song that has especially resonated with your soul over the last few months?
- ▲ Is there anything in the Bible that has recently brought a flash of clarity, some bit of insight to some part of your spiritual pilgrimage?
- ▲ Do you have dreams or hopes (or maybe doubts or fears) about your spiritual growth over the coming months about which you would allow us to pray?
- ▲ Which fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control) that does not come naturally to you does God seem to be trying to develop in you?
- ▲ Are you carrying a burden or feeling the weight of concerns that you'd be willing to let us know about?

I do not include Ransom's list because we believe it necessarily better, nor do I think that every group should use it. I include the questions simply because over time we have found them generally useful. Your group is different from ours, so your list will need to be your own.

We would encourage you to be part of a small group where you can find intentional, safe community and some measure of accountability in your spiritual life. Over four decades of life together, Margie and I have found we need this setting for all sorts of reasons, the primary one being that our small group has consistently been the source of encouragement to keep on keeping on. Life has a way of producing unexpected potholes when we yearn for a bit of clear progress, and having people around who care enough to listen and pray has been a grace. It has never been close to perfect or smooth, or even particularly noteworthy, but the combination of prayer and sharing, eating meals together, Bible study, and compassionate listening has been a source of life.

I need my small group to spur me to spiritual maturity. Sometimes we use questions to help accomplish that goal. It isn't always comfortable, but I wouldn't want to live without it. ■

Sources: Wesley, Whitefield, and Redeemer from Fellowship Group Handbook: A manual for leaders and coordinators (New York: Redeemer Presbyterian Church; version 2.0, 1997), part 3.9, Self-examination; and Miller from "On Keeping a Holy Lent" (1998) by Craig R. Higgins

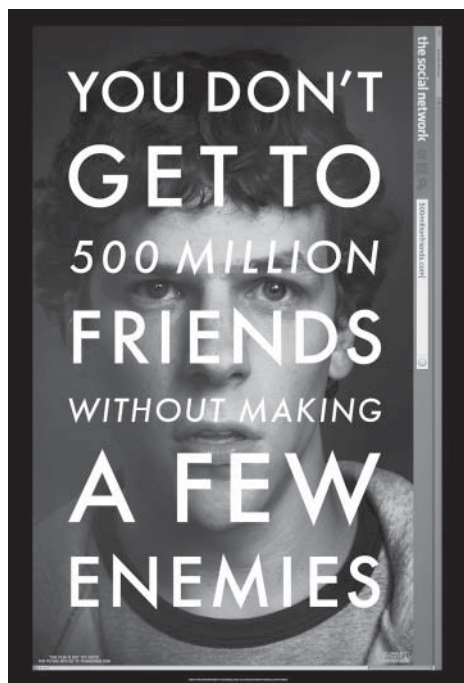
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION:

1. What comes immediately to mind when you hear the term "accountability"? Why is this?
2. What process do you use to evaluate your life? How did you get started with the process? If you have no process for periodic evaluation, why is this?
3. What areas of life especially seem to require periodic evaluation and adjustment to keep them in proper balance? What aspects of modern life, society, and church seem to regularly intrude on your flourishing as a person?
4. What specific questions would you include in a personal inventory for yourself? Which if any of these questions would you be willing to introduce into a community for the sake of mutual accountability? Which would you definitely exclude? Why?
5. Are there evaluative questions from your childhood or background that now seem to haunt you as a source of guilt? Why or how did they become so counterproductive?
6. How do you respond to the idea of using evaluative or accountability questions about spiritual life in a group setting? Why?
7. Do you think accountability is helpful for spiritual growth? Why or why not?
8. Describe the conditions a community needs to meet to allow mutual accountability. Which of these conditions are most difficult to achieve and maintain? Why is this? How do you establish a basis for real accountability? What needs to be present to allow accountability to be helpful instead of burdensome? How should a group begin? What safeguards can be in place?

DARKENED ROOM

The Social Network

a review by Greg Grooms



At the end of their 1979 ode-to-nihilism, *The Wall*, Pink Floyd, after dismissing most of the things we turn to for comfort—school, work, love, sex, politics—as “just another brick in the wall,” gave themselves an out in the album’s last cut, “Outside the Wall”:

*All alone, or in twos
The ones who really love you
Walk up and down outside the wall
Some hand in hand
Some gathering together in bands
The bleeding hearts and the artists
Make their stand
And when they’ve given you their all
Some stagger and fall after all it’s not easy
banging your heart against some mad
bugger’s
Wall*

Yes, I’m afraid even mainstream nihilists cannot be trusted; they need something to live for as much as the rest of us do. And what better refuge from the pointlessness of it all than humanity itself? Whatever else may happen to disappoint you, there will

always be someone to love you, someone you can trust, someone to rely on. Or will there be?

In perhaps the best made of last year’s films, *The Social Network* turns the cynical eye of reason on the last refuge of the meaningless: human relationships. No matter what you may have heard, Aaron Sorkin’s screenplay isn’t about Mark Zuckerberg, who refused to take part in the project, nor is it about the advent of Facebook, the Internet phenomenon that, according to its devotees, has changed the world. It’s about relationships, or perhaps more precisely, it’s what relationships are about.

I’m not suggesting that reason *per se* is inherently cynical. Most Americans would benefit greatly from a little disciplined thought about themselves and the world they live in. Thinking doesn’t produce cynicism; failing to think clearly does. But when the cynic turns reason towards relationships, his conclusions are predictable.

Relationships are about sex. In his book *Accidental Billionaires*, on which *The Social Network* is based, Ben Mezrich writes, “The impetus of everything in college, I think, is to get laid... I know that was my whole purpose in becoming a writer.” I don’t know Mark Zuckerberg; perhaps he and Ben Mezrich are really alike at this point, or perhaps Mezrich is guilty of creating the film’s Zuckerberg in his own image. Either way, sex is the cheapest commodity that is traded in *The Social Network*, and thus, the most easily obtained.

Relationships are about social standing. Crowds and music are a

sure sign in *The Social Network* that an important conversation is going on. If like me, those are just the sort of circumstances in which you have a hard time understanding words, be sure to add subtitles to your viewing. This is never more important than in the film’s first and most painful scene. Mark and his girlfriend Erica are having a DTR—Define The Relationship—talk you shouldn’t miss. It’s quickly evident to everyone but Mark that it isn’t going to end well.

Mark: “I want to try to be straightforward with you and tell you that I think you might want to be a little more supportive. If I get in [to the Phoenix Club, an elite Harvard social club] I will be taking you to the events, and the gatherings, and you’ll be meeting a lot of people you wouldn’t ordinarily meet.”

Erica: “You would do that for me?”

Remember Erica’s line, because Mark will repeat it (whether consciously or not, I can’t tell) at another turning point in the film.

Does Mark need Erica? Sure, but in his mind he needs to be seen with her even more. He’s like the eccentric

who buys a Van Gogh, not because he loves it, but because others will look at him differently because he owns a Van Gogh. He’s the ultimate

nerd: brilliant, needy, awkward, inspiring sympathy and loathing in equal measure. That Facebook is born from the tension between his needs and his ineptitude is at the same time his salvation and his tragedy.

Relationships are about money. Or not. Angus Wall and Kirk Baxter

“IN PERHAPS THE BEST MADE OF LAST YEAR’S FILMS, *THE SOCIAL NETWORK* TURNS THE CYNICAL EYE OF REASON ON THE LAST REFUGE OF THE MEANINGLESS: HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS.”

won a well-deserved Oscar for their seamless melding of *The Social Network*'s two story lines: the story of Mark and Facebook, and the story of the lawsuits filed in the wake of Facebook's success by two of his former classmates, Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss, who accuse him of stealing the idea of Facebook from them, and by his best friend, Eduardo Saverin, co-founder of Facebook. When an opposing attorney accuses him of starting Facebook so he could gain admittance to the Phoenix club, Mark replies, "Ma'am, I know you've done your homework and so you know that money isn't a big part of my life, but at the moment I could buy Mt. Auburn Street, take the Phoenix Club, and turn it into my ping-pong room."

It's a quote that perfectly captures a central dilemma of the film: having money isn't a worthy goal. That's old school. But what money can do for

you creatively, socially, relationally? That's cool. Sean Parker, the founder of Napster, makes a brief appearance in *The Social Network* in the person of Justin Timberlake, and explains it like this:

Sean: "A million dollars isn't cool. You know what's cool?"

Eduardo: "You?"

Sean: "A billion dollars."

Of course, there's just enough truth in Sorkin's snapshots of love to make them believable.

Anyone who watches *The Social Network* and can't relate to the pain of Mark's failed relationships is either a liar or has led a charmed life. None of us are immune to the lure of sex, money, or social standing; all of us struggle with the power they exert over us and our relationships. The cynic is right in admitting that even the best of our relationships are

flawed, just as all of us are. But he's dishonest in pretending that once we've seen the faults there's nothing left to see.

C.S. Lewis put it like this in *The Four Loves*:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.

The Social Network begins with Mark in a room full of people, talking with Erica face-to-face. It ends with Mark alone with his

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION/REFLECTION:

1. While they're still fresh, discuss your first impressions of *The Social Network*. What images or dialogue linger in your mind? What does it leave you thinking about?
2. One reviewer dubbed the film, *Five Angry Men*. Who are the angry men in the film? Why are they angry?
3. In my review I assert that *The Social Network* isn't about Mark Zuckerberg or Facebook; it's about relationships. In your opinion is this a fair charge?
4. There are two central male/female relationships portrayed in *The Social Network*: Mark and Erica, and Eduardo and Christy. Two others—Sean and Amelia, and Mark and Alice—get less face time. Describe all four. What is it that brings each couple together? While they're together—and none are for very long—what is it that keeps them together?
5. Two women in *The Social Network* describe Mark in very different terms.

Erica: "You are probably going to be a very successful computer person. But you're going to go through life thinking that girls don't like you because

you're a nerd. And I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, that that won't be true. It'll be because you're an asshole.

Marilyn: "You're not an asshole, Mark. You're just trying so hard to be."

Which in your opinion is closer to the mark (no pun intended) and why? Which, if either, do you think comes closer to Aaron Sorkin's view of Mark? Defend your answer.

6. Discuss how women are portrayed in *The Social Network*, from Facemash to romance to legal counsel. Is *The Social Network* implicitly misogynist? If not, how does it escape that charge?
7. Imagine you were on the jury hearing the Winklevosses' lawsuit against Zuckerberg just as it's laid out in *The Social Network*. How would you have ruled? Don't base your verdict on your understanding of intellectual property law, but on your own sense of fairness. In your opinion, who deserves to win and why?
8. Same question, but different lawsuit. This time it's Zuckerberg vs. Eduardo Saverin.
9. In a recent review Sorkin said,

"This thing—social networking, and obviously Facebook is the king of that—which was meant to connect all of us and bring us closer together, I don't think it's done that. I think it's done the opposite. I think we're now by ourselves, inventing new identities, performing for each other. I think it's an insincere form of connection. But, let me quickly add that that is an opinion that has absolutely nothing to do with the movie. You can love Facebook, hate Facebook, never have heard of Facebook, be indifferent to Facebook, and that will not affect your enjoyment of the movie anymore than being a fan of bank robberies is going to affect your enjoyment of *The Town*."

Discuss this quote.

10. Are you on Facebook? If so, why? If not, why not?

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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 and warm hospitality to ask questions and seriously wrestle with the proposition that Jesus is actually Lord of all.

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computer, sending her a friend request via Facebook, waiting for her reply. How do you think she answers? There's a sad irony evident in this ending: while Facebook may allow you a *yes* here, *The Social Network* does not. ■

The Social Network credits

Starring:

Jesse Eisenberg (Mark Zuckerberg)
Rooney Mara (Erica Albright)
Bryan Barter (Billy Olsen)
Brenda Song (Christy)
Dustin Fitzsimons (Phoenix Club president)
Joseph Mazzello (Dustin Moskovitz)
Patrick Mapel (Chris Hughes)
Andrew Garfield (Eduardo Saverin)
Calvin Dean (Mr. Edwards)

Director: David Fincher

Writers: Aaron Sorkin (screenplay), Ben Mezrich (book)

Producers: Aaron Sorkin, Kevin Spacey, and others

Original music: Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross

Cinematography: Jeff Cronenweth

Runtime: 120 min

Release: USA, 2010

Rated: PG-13 for sexual content, drug and alcohol use, and language

