

# Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

## In This Issue

- 04 Who The Artist Is  
A discernment exercise posed by Sean Penn.

- 05 By the Rule of Faith  
An excerpt from *The Mentored Life* by James Houston.

- 06 Almighty Sins  
A review of *Bruce Almighty*.

- 10 Meditation on Jesus the Prophet  
In preparation for worship, with questions for reflection.

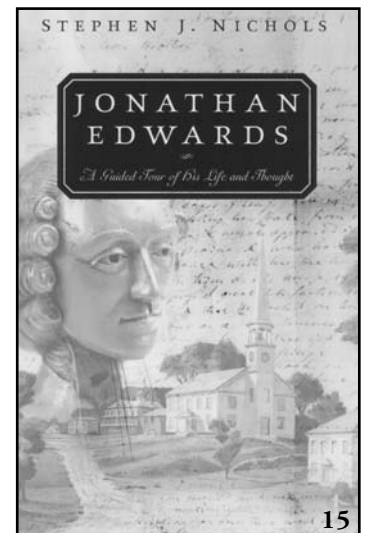
- 12 Children in Secular Schools?  
Headmaster John Seel grapples with the difficult question of whether Christian students should attend secular schools.

02 Editor's Note

03 Dialogue

09 Reflections

- 10 Prophets, Creation & Edwards  
14 Reviews of *Exploring the Old Testament*; *The Reenchantment of Nature*; three books on Jonathan Edwards.



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# Editor's Note



## “Christian” education

I hope John Seel's article, “Should I Send My Child to a Secular School?” on page twelve prompts some thoughtful discussion. He makes an important point when he reminds us that the separation from the world which we are

called to demonstrate involves separation not from the institutions of culture, but from the values, ideas, ideologies, and patterns of life that a fallen world erects in rebellion against God and his word. “A Christian is free to *participate* in all types of educational institutions—Christian and secular,” Seel writes, correctly, “but he is not free to be *patterned* by those that do not make biblical truth central.”

Christian parents and educators must seek to nurture a Christian mind and imagination in their young people. We must help the next generation learn to be discerning, so that with a quiet confidence in the gospel of the risen Christ they can talk about and live out the truth in a way that makes sense in our pluralistic, post-Christian, and post-modern world. Our young people are not truly educated, as Christians, if they are not equipped to see as God sees, across all of life and culture, and eager to grow in such faithfulness as a life-long quest.

One mistake we must not make as parents and grandparents is to assume that all Christian schools and colleges equip their students to engage the culture with discernment. The sad truth is that many don't. Just because a school is “Christian” does not mean that it nurtures a Christian mind and imagination in its students. Many simply shelter their students from the culture, not in order to train them to engage it as appropriate as the student matures, but simply to shelter.

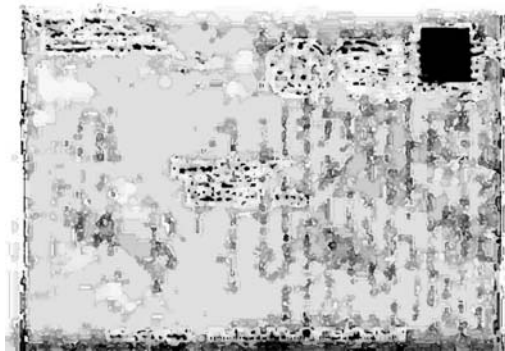
I attended a Christian high school, but I was totally unprepared for engaging my world as a Christian. In fact, my confidence in the truth of Scripture was undermined when I discovered that most of the instances in which “worldly or false ideas” had been refuted were mere caricatures of what non-Christians actually believed. Straw-men had been erected and shot down, while in reality things were not that simple. The sheltering made me defensive and fearful, and the failure of my teachers to walk alongside and help me learn to listen, ask questions, and think in biblical categories set me up to question the validity of my faith.

Though they will never be perfect, of course, there are some Christian schools and colleges that train their students to live faithfully as believers. The educators of such institutions are courageous since as the Bible reminds us, taking the gospel seriously is never comfortable. And parents who want their children sheltered will find much to criticize.

“Learning to make sense of life, for life,” my good friend Steve Garber reminds me, “is what the years between adolescence and adulthood are all about.” And as he shows so admirably in *The Fabric of Faithfulness*, this requires far more than merely attending an institution of learning that happens to be described as “Christian.” The nurturing of a deeply biblical life and world view, being in relationship with a mentor who embodies that world view, and choosing to live in a community which engages the world with the gospel are the three factors that are needed for a life-time of obedience. ■

~Denis Haack

# Dialogue



## Re: glasses, Bezaire, *Woven Hand*, Ideas, and *Wit*

Send e-mail to:

[letters@ransomfellowship.org](mailto:letters@ransomfellowship.org)

You are invited to take part in *Critique's* Dialogue. Address all correspondence to:

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

**T**hanks so much for your ministry. We enjoy *Critique* and *Toad Hall* very much. Upon the arrival of either, whatever book I am reading gets put aside for a while. But this brings up a slight problem: the covers of *Critique* are too similar for me to notice when a new copy arrives! It is disappointing to realize that days or weeks might have passed before I realized that there was a new one. Now don't get me wrong, I love the new design, but at a distance of 4 feet they are almost indistinguishable to my 45 year old eyes.

I thought a few suggestions would be appropriate. 1) The date in the upper right could be much bigger and bolder. 2) The picture could be bigger making it more easily recognizable. 3) The covers could be different colors, though I am sure that white is both most efficient and most easily readable... and looks very nice. 4) I could get glasses—I have been needing to do this for years!

We do appreciate your ministry very much, and will continue to read with pleasure... at least as soon as I notice it in the basket.

**Kurt Swanson**  
Edina, MN

**Marsena Konkle responds:**  
I took you up on several of your suggestions and increased the size of both the issue number and the picture. Unfortunately, I'm rather sure this doesn't actually solve the problem, which has indeed come up before. I think what people are looking for is a magazine cover; something that immediately distinguishes each issue from the next. But *Critique* is really a newsletter with a nonprofit budget that doesn't allow for covers with full color (don't I wish!). It's a great compliment to us that the readers of *Critique* rarely identify it as a simple newsletter and wish it could look more like a journal. Perhaps one day.

**T**hank you so much for putting the lovely paintings online [*Critique* #5 - 2003; [www.ransomfellowship.org](http://www.ransomfellowship.org)]. Very enjoyable! Bezaire really jarred my senses with those columbines... We had just come home from a trip up the road to see the wildflowers between Durango and Silverton.

**Carol Carpenter**  
Durango, CO

**I** just got my *Woven Hand* CD. I really like it. Just like you described [*Critique* #5 - 2003], I can't stop listening to it. At first, I was thinking, "whoa, this is really dark sounding." But I was drawn in and after a few listens, I was hooked.

**Rebecca Wimer**  
Pittsburgh, PA

**I** want to thank you for the stimulating ideas that so consistently come in *Critique*. My sermon for the third Sunday of Easter centers on the question, can one life make a difference? My two illustrations: William Wilberforce and rapper 50 Cent. I will offer the tenuous mathematical proposition that each of the twelve disciples may be responsible for telling 166 million of our contemporary Christians that Jesus is risen from the dead. Thank you for the idea.

**Jim Disney**  
Buffalo, MN

**M**y husband and I will be showing the movie *Wit* and using your discussion questions with a small group soon [[www.ransomfellowship.org](http://www.ransomfellowship.org)]. We are excited to see what seeds this plants. Thanks for what you do!

**Lisa Harding**  
Lakeville, MN

## Who the Artist Is

**O**n “The Charlie Rose Show” (PBS) actor Sean Penn told this story as he was being interviewed:

“A young couple brought their new baby, a boy, home from the hospital. He was their second child; the other was a four-year old girl. After the new baby had been home for a couple of weeks, the four-year old told her parents that she wanted to see the baby. ‘Okay,’ said the mother, ‘I’ll take you to see him.’ ‘No,’ said the little girl. ‘I want to see him alone.’ The parents looked at one another. They had been warned of this. The older child gets jealous of the attention being paid to the baby and finds a way to strike back. ‘I’ll take you in to see him,’ said the father. ‘No. I want to see him alone!’ ‘Well, maybe tomorrow,’ the mother said.

“The next day, the mother started to take her daughter to see the baby, but

the child pulled back, refusing, saying she would only see the baby alone. This went on for several days. Finally one evening, the parents made the momentous decision. They did not tell their daughter, but they would listen closely on the baby monitor while she was in the room with the baby, and they would be ready to act immediately if necessary. ‘Promise you won’t come in,’ the daughter said. ‘We promise,’ said the parents.

“The little girl stepped cautiously into the baby’s room. Her parents shut the door and quickly retreated to their bedroom, where they fixed their attention on the monitor. They heard nothing for a few seconds. Then there was the soft noise of their daughter making her way toward the baby in the crib. Then silence. There was a small chair in the baby’s room, and the parents heard what they took to be the sound of their

daughter moving the chair to the side of the crib. And then silence. The parents didn’t see their daughter sit down in that chair next to the crib. But they did hear her say to the baby, ‘Tell me about God. I’m forgetting.’

“The artist is like the baby.”



Penn’s anecdote raises some questions worth discussing. ■

~Denis Haack

### Source:

This story was provided by Charles Strohmer, author of *Uncommon Sense: God’s Wisdom for Our Complex and Changing World*.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What is your initial response to the story? Why do you think you responded that way? Did anything about this anecdote surprise you? If so, what?
2. What would you say is Sean Penn’s main point(s)? Is the story a better method of making the point(s) than simply saying the point(s)?
3. How does this anecdote compare to one of Jesus’ parables?
4. How does Sean Penn’s view of art compare and contrast with a biblical view of art? Could you use this anecdote unchanged as a Christian? If you feel the need to change it, what changes would you make? Why are they necessary?
5. “Tell me about God,” the little girl says to the baby. “I’m forgetting.” Is this “God” the God of Scripture? Why or why not? What difference does it make?
6. “We were created to love the beautiful,” Andi Ashworth writes in *Real Love for Real Life*. “Beauty gives pleasure to the senses, lifts the mind and spirit, and brings us to a place of longing for the Creator of all beauty.” Discuss this in relation to Penn’s anecdote. Is this how you see beauty and art? Why or why not?
7. What place does art and creativity have in your life? To what extent does the role of art and creativity in your life accurately reflect a biblical view of faithful life, art, and creativity? To what extent is your ordinary conversation peppered with stories like this? Since parables were a major component of Jesus’ conversation, what does this suggest for those who claim to be his followers? What plans should you make?

## By the Rule of Faith

An excerpt from *The Mentored Life* by James Houston.

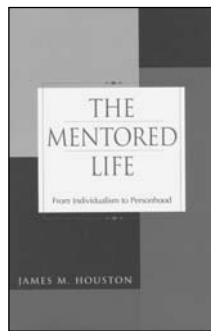
When we look into Scripture as we look into a face, not merely looking at it, we see, says Kierkegaard, that it is indeed a “love letter.” This is the approach that Irenaeus (AD 140-200) first called “The Rule of Faith” for reading the Bible with understanding and obedience. By this he meant that we must interpret the Bible as one story, God’s love story, and as having one central agent, the triune God of grace. At first, the Israelites assumed it was their love story, “The Way of Israel.” But once Christ is seen in all the Scriptures then only the presence of the Holy Spirit, in the light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, can generate such a profound change of consciousness.

Biblical thinking is thus contrasted to the deconstructive thinking that postmodernity now advocates. For us to determine what “makes sense” of the text is readily to see what we want to see and so to view it idolatrously. This excludes the biblical reader’s response to its iconic character, which points us beyond our own ideology. As Stephen Moore has aptly put it: “Today, it is not our biblical texts that need demythologizing so much as our ways of reading them.” The Rule of Faith consists in “listening to the God who speaks.” This commands communicative action, as we are exhorted not only to hear the Word but be doers of it. Reading the Bible is for the pursuit of godliness, not just to gain more information to reinforce our own life-world. For it comes as a royal proclamation, responded to by loyal subjects. Too many biblical scholars in Kierkegaard’s age as well as today have tried to “explain” the Bible instead of “listening” to it in obedience. Kierkegaard would argue that such scholasticism has actually the

effect of silencing the command of God’s Word.

The grammar of biblical reading—that is, living by the Rule of Faith—interprets all things in the light of God’s love. So individuals living “in sin,” that is, living autonomously and faithlessly, cannot be “persons-of-the-Word,” such as Psalm 119 depicts. For the “faithful” reader is one who needs basic trust in God in order to “delight” in God’s Word “day and night.” To be this kind of “reader,” Kierkegaard gives us several points of advice.

- ♦First, be “alone with God’s Word,” that is to say don’t allow commentaries to get in the way of the text itself.
- ♦Second, create silence for God’s Word. Otherwise we forget it is



***“Today, it is not our biblical texts that need demythologizing so much as our ways of reading them.”***

God’s Word, or else we cannot hear it above the “noises” of our own cultural dispositions.

- ♦Third, regard it as the mirror in which we see and respond to what we see of ourselves as sinners.
- ♦Fourth, this should lead us to a profound sense of conviction and lead us in personal repentance to read it contritely, humbly open to God’s message to us, and so to appropriate it personally.
- ♦Fifth, read it responsively, to act upon it and “do the truth.”

♦Sixth, recognize the indirection of the biblical communication, as Jesus himself spoke in parables. For thus the biblical narrative will draw us into its storytelling, to participate within it and appropriate the message for ourselves. For the truth cannot be imposed; it can only be appropriated personally.

♦Finally, read it hopefully, believing “all things” are possible for God, so we are “open” to the “newness” of God.

This, then, is how Kierkegaard would have us “open” and “read” our Bible, to be disciplined existentially by it. For discipleship itself is existential. It is not just informational in its posture and its intent. Christ himself is “the true reader” of the Scriptures, whose example we follow.

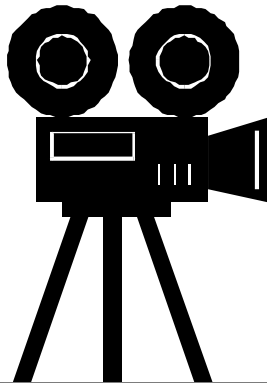
The Bible is thus God’s story, having one central agent, the triune God. Scripture must be interpreted accordingly, in the context of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. John Owen thus exhorted, “Let reading follow prayer.” For if the purpose of Scripture is “to make us wise unto salvation,” then its communicative action is to lead us to Christ, to abide in him. Reading the Gospel becomes then a character-shaping reality. ■

—excerpted, James M. Houston

#### Excerpted From:

*The Mentored Life: From Individualism to Personhood* by James M. Houston (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress; 2002) p. 132-135. Copyright © 2002 by James M. Houston.

## Almighty Sins



### A review of Bruce Almighty

by Marsena Konkle

There are a few Jim Carrey movies that, if you put a gun to my head, I would admit to liking despite my greatest efforts not to. His over-the-top antics, amazingly pliable face, and physical comedy should be beneath this highly-educated, middle-class evangelical woman. But God finds ways to keep me humble. Laughing helplessly at Jim Carrey's over-acting is surely part of His arsenal.

I wasn't planning to see *Bruce Almighty*, the latest Carrey film because the previews looked gimmicky and predictable (and remember how sophisticated I am). But a friend alerted me to an online interview with the director Tom Shadyac conducted by Christian movie reviewers and as I read his comments, I knew it was a movie I had to see. *Bruce Almighty*, it turns out, is about so much more than Carrey strutting around, lip-syncing, "I've got the power," and making a woman's skirt rise above her waist.

Nothing in Bruce's life is going well. He's a television reporter assigned to covering such things as the baking of the city's largest cookie rather than the important news items he dreams of covering in prime time. His girlfriend (subtly named Grace) wants more commitment than he can give. He regularly gets stuck in traffic jams. His apartment, his job, his very life are all mediocre. And he blames God. If God were truly all powerful, Bruce reasons, it would take Him a split second to correct all these things that are going wrong. God hears Bruce's grumbling and decides to put Bruce in charge of not only his own life,

but the lives of all the people in his hometown. God's reasoning: If you think my job is so easy, go for it.

As Bruce's life is changed irrevocably, the movie explores a range of critical issues: unexpected encounters with God, the humbling experiences that often precede an admission of sin and the desire for redemption, learning to pray, reconciling with loved ones, and struggling with free will. Of course, with Carrey as a star and only ninety minutes to address these issues, they are not, needless to say, explored in any sort of theological depth.

Yet. It's astounding that a mainstream movie would take on such heady—and distinctly Christian—themes. No wonder The Voice Behind, a Christian organization whose stated purpose is to encourage "goodness, truth, and beauty in and through art, entertainment, and media," wanted to post Shadyac's interview. The very first question—and I should know better than to be surprised—was: "Who made the decision to have Bruce and Grace cohabitating without marriage?"

As evidenced by this poorly phrased question, the movie has indeed received criticism from the Christian community because Bruce lives with his girlfriend and he swears, using the mother of all curses: the F word. Shadyac, in response to this, points out that Bruce, at the beginning of the movie, is immature. And unredeemed. Which is true. But it seems to me that Shadyac shouldn't have to explain this. Especially to Christians. It should be self-evident to those of us who have needed redemption ourselves. Perhaps we need to be reminded of what we were like when God first reached out to us. We were not simply a little wayward. We were *steeped in sin*.

Just like Bruce. After God—played winningly by Morgan Freeman—bestows

#### Film Credits

##### Starring:

Jim Carrey  
(Bruce Nolan)  
Morgan Freeman  
(God)  
Jennifer Aniston  
(Grace Connelly)  
Philip Baker Hall  
(Jack Keller)  
Catherine Bell  
(Susan Ortega)  
Lisa Ann Walter  
(Debbie)  
Steven Carell  
(Evan Baxter)

##### Director:

Tom Shadyac

##### Screenwriters:

Steve Koren  
and others

##### Producers:

Gary Barber  
Roger Birnbaum  
and others

##### Original Music:

Mick Jagger  
and others

##### Cinematographer:

Dean Semler

##### Costumes:

Judy Ruskin Howell

Runtime: 101 minutes  
Rated PG-13 for language,  
sexual content and some  
crude humor.

on Bruce godlike powers, one of Bruce's first acts is to part a traffic jam with a simple flick of his wrists. A clearly ridiculous and appalling use of power. Out of vengeance and jealousy, he makes his co-worker, the evening news anchor, speak gibberish on the air. He tries to force his girlfriend to stay with him (coming face to face with the mystery of free will) despite his insufferable behavior. He goes for days without using his power to help a single person. It's easy to judge him for his selfishness.

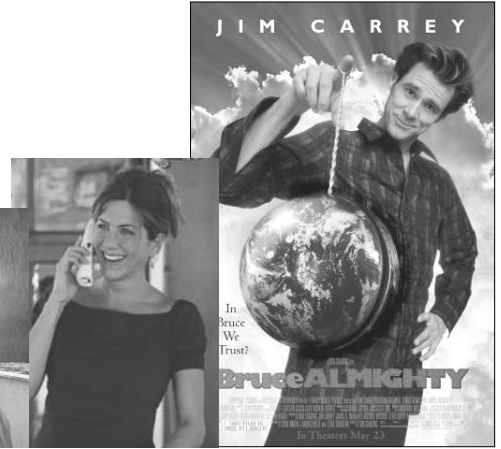
But I recognized myself in all the ways Bruce chooses to misuse his abilities. How many times do I catch myself praying that God will help me get to work on time or help my check get to the Visa company by Monday so I don't have to pay a late fee? When God—the living God of Abraham, not the one played by Morgan Freeman—actually did offer godlike powers to a human being in the Old Testament, Solomon asked only for wisdom. I tremble to think what I would have requested (especially in light of the things I have consistently asked for over the years). And I don't think I'm alone. When Bruce, overwhelmed by the number of prayers he receives, decides to simply say yes to everyone's heart-felt requests, violence and rioting ensues because hundreds of people win the lottery and their individual winnings are laughably small. I'm sure there's truth in the comedy: hundreds—who knows? maybe thousands—of people pray every day to win the lottery. I know for a fact that many prayers are uttered on Superbowl Sunday. We are selfish people who pray for ridiculous things.

Even after discussing prayer, redemption, and free will with Shadyac, the interviewers once again circled back to Bruce and Grace living together, feeling it was a major sticking point, especially for Christian parents. "It would have been nice," one of them said, "if [Bruce and Grace] could have been dating. If it could

have been more healthy. Because there is nothing in the film that casts that relationship as a mistake."

Shadyac replied: "You know, I have been going to church since I was a babe. And I go to church today. And I think one of the challenges of our church, and churchgoers in general, is to accept humanity as it is. We have people in churches acting out, because they don't accept the whole human being. They deny that we are sexual human beings. Or, that we can be angry. I, as a filmmaker, am not going to deny that. I am going to embrace that. I think it's important to embrace the whole of humanity, and to say we are imperfect. By the standards of most Christians today you could not read your Bible. I mean, the Bible is chalk full of some pretty racy stuff, folks. There's a lot, a lot, a lot of sexual impropriety. There is violence—all kinds of things. It's not about a moment. It's about the entire journey. If the Bible had not ended where it ended, it would be a pretty downer of a book. It ends with redemption. So, if you take one sentence out of the Bible, like with violence or sex, and you just focus on that sentence, you would not want to go near the Bible. But, if you look at the Bible as a whole, it's redemptive and beautiful and it's God's love story to mankind."

Criticizing a movie for depicting premarital sex indicates, if nothing else, that we're rightly concerned about sin. But really, deep down, it also means we don't want to see reality depicted on the movie screen. I guess Evangelicals prefer stories of per-



***This movie—for all its farcical situations and crazy clowning around—gave me an honest picture of who I am before the perfect example of Christ.***

fectly redeemed people, living as we all know we should, sin-free. Which none of us can. Yes, we're redeemed. But not a single one of us can live as though we're already in heaven. Instead, we throw adult-sized tantrums when we step in a puddle, secretly suspecting that mud up to our ankles is proof God isn't watching out for us. We get angry when we're passed over for the promotion at work. We focus on ourselves when our loved ones need us to see and hear *them*. Whatever our individual sins, we are all fallen. And perhaps when we object to seeing sin on screen, what we're really objecting to is seeing ourselves so exposed.

It's striking to me that Christians consistently object to two particular sins in the movies: premarital sex and foul language. Yet it seems to me, equally serious sins are also found in *Bruce Almighty*: selfishness, lovelessness, and jealousy. I've never heard of a Christian community boycotting a movie for realistically depicting these. I wonder why.

I drove home from this movie humbled. And deeply convicted. Because this movie—for all its farcical situations and crazy clowning around—gave me an honest picture of who I am before the perfect example of Christ. I'm floored that God sees me as worthy of redemption, for I am surely as foolish

**continued on the next page...**

# The Darkened Room cont.

and foolhardy as Bruce. This movie doesn't answer our deepest theological questions. But it does an admirable job of beginning the conversation. ■

~Marsena Konkle

**Source:** All Shadyac quotes were found on The Voice Behind ([www.voicebehind.org](http://www.voicebehind.org)), and The Voice Behind credits Hollywood Jesus with the original interview ([www.hollywoodjesus.org](http://www.hollywoodjesus.org)). Many thanks to Steve Garber for alerting me to it.



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial reaction to the film? Why do you think you reacted that way?
2. What is the message(s) of *Bruce Almighty*? Consider how it addresses themes such as: the nature of reality or what is really real; what's wrong with the world, and what's the solution; the significance of relationships and love; the significance and meaning of being human; whether there is right and wrong, and how we determine it; the meaning of life and history; and what happens at death.  
  
Where do you agree? Where do you disagree? Why? In the areas in which we might disagree, how can we talk about and demonstrate the truth in a winsome and creative way in our pluralistic culture?
3. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (casting, direction, script, music, sets, action, cinematography, editing, lighting, etc.) used to get the film's message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? What details or background images seem to have significance?
4. In the interview on *The Voice Behind*, director Tom Shadyac says he speaks at spirituality conferences where "they only talk of religious movies as being ones that only deal with religion. And it's just not true. This one just happens to have God in it so it's viewed as a religious movie. But, so many movies are spiritual or religious movies, and people won't see them that way because there isn't a priest, nun or a minister." Do you agree or disagree with Shadyac? What makes a movie religious or spiritual? If it depicts sin, does it also have to end with clear redemption or change as *Bruce Almighty* does, effectively telling the whole story? Or is it valid to tell only part of the story? What movies have you seen that you consider spiritual?
5. Do you agree with Shadyac that churchgoers in general have difficulty accepting humanity as it is? Where do you see evidence of this? How should Christians view humanity?
6. Shadyac points out that the Bible depicts sin, sometimes graphically. Do you think there is a difference between the way the Bible depicts sin and the way this movie does? Use the "bedroom scene" as an example. What stories in Scripture depict similar sin? Shadyac's interviewer wanted the movie to somehow indicate that premarital sex is wrong. Do you think Shadyac should have done this? Do the stories in Scripture always do this?
7. What was the role of prayer in this movie? How did the different characters pray? What sorts of things do you pray for? What does Scripture have to say about prayer?
8. What insight does the film give into the way people see life, meaning, and reality? How can you use the film as a useful window of insight for Christians to better understand our non-Christian friends? Might the film be a useful point of contact for discussion with non-Christians?



## A Cemetery Walk

**C**lara Tiprit was born on May 9, 1903. A year and fifteen days later, she was dead. William Royce Palmer came into the world on June 10, 1940, and left it the next day. Arley E. Cantrell died on March 11, 1893, three months short of his second birthday.

I wrote these names and dates on the blank pages of a history book I had with me as I walked through the main cemetery in Siloam Springs, Arkansas. The striking thing is how few steps I had to take before coming to yet another infant or child's grave.

OUR LOVED ONE  
INFANT DAUGHTER  
OF FRANK AND LEMMA  
DUNCAN  
BORN AND DIED OCT 19, 1923  
OF SUCH IS THE  
KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

OUR DARLING  
PAUL W.  
SON OF FRANK AND LEMMA  
DUNCAN  
SEPT 7, 1924-SEPT 23, 1936  
DEATH IS ONLY A SHADOW  
ACROSS THE PATH TO HEAVEN

EVELYN M.  
GOODNIGHT  
1928-1928  
GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

At the time of writing, I have lived in Siloam Springs less than two weeks, but I have visited its cemetery four times, having spent more than a couple hours there, reading names, recalling what was happening in the world when the people who owned those names were born and died, and (in a dreadfully un-Protestant fashion) praying, in a semi-conscious sort of way, for God's mercy on the departed. Two of those times I have

had my toddler daughter, Eleri, with me, and every time I have come to an infant or young child's grave and have reflexively whispered aloud "Jesus" or "dear Jesus," I've done so out of sympathy for the pain that death must have caused the child's loved ones and, more selfishly, for the pain I know I would feel if...

I have friends who stay in the city they



*The prospect of death focuses the mind and thereby imparts a valuable education.*

live in, and intend to stay there, not because they like it, but because their twin daughters, who died together as they were born together, are buried there.

It seems so trite to say that cemeteries are sobering places. *Of course* they are sobering. That's why cities—those churning agents of modernity—often make it difficult to visit them. I lived in Dallas for three years, and in that time I came across only one cemetery and noticed immediately how hideous and uninviting it is. There is a fairly large cemetery near downtown Anchorage, Alaska, but it's surrounded by frumpy old buildings and a municipal airport, and finding parking is an off-putting challenge. In Healdsburg, California, there's a monument to a young woman that is itself surrounded by four small markers—the woman lost four babies in four consecutive years. This monument is covered with tall, thorny weeds, as is most of the old cemetery in that supposedly sophisticated wine country town. Dead people aren't good

consumers; they don't watch cable TV. It seems they're best ignored.

In Siloam Springs, the cemetery, which is well kept, lies across the street from John Brown University. It's a perfect neighborhood match—not because, as the jokes go, the boring professors might as well be lecturing the deceased, but because, in one variation on the old saying, the prospect of death focuses the mind and thereby imparts a valuable education. Think you're someone special? Go visit a cemetery. Think you've got a long life ahead of you? Go visit a cemetery. Bored? Frivolous? Prone to wasting time? Visit a cemetery.

Walking past the gravestones, I have also found myself thinking that developing the skill of Christian discernment involves, yes, figuring out how to participate effectively in "the world." But I think it also must involve determining when and how to stand aloof from the passing world. The Scriptures don't advise morbidity, but they do constantly call to mind the brevity and ephemeral nature of this life and the need to be smart in deciding what to do with it. Some things are worth the Christian's time and effort. Some things aren't. And no one has been given an unlimited amount of time to figure out which is which.

As I write this, I realize that it's hard to dwell on the inevitability of death, or even to reflect on the effect a cemetery can have on a receptive person, without tripping over clichés—"live each day as if it were your last," "grab life by the horns," etc. So, instead of trying—instead, perhaps, of vulgarizing what is better left unspoken—I will close with this unsolicited suggestion: Put aside an hour to walk or sit in a quiet old cemetery. Bring a pen and notebook. And pay attention. ■

~Preston Jones

*Preston Jones teaches at John Brown University. Copyright © 2003 Preston Jones*

## Meditation Written to Help

### of Jesus as Prophet on a July Sunday Morning, to be Followed, After

**P**ilate's robes are gaudy and turbulent, his hair shiny, the marble floor. Sweat. His appearance says enough, but he speaks words to Jesus anyway. To the prophet (at least), he says, "What is truth?"

For a moment—maybe ten seconds—the prophet just poses, blinking, silent. This is the best answer, and Jesus can tell that Pilate, though irritated, finds this a bit sexy. Then Pilate snaps out of it, and the prophet speaks.

This husband, confident in his wife's love, or at least in her commitment, places his finger over her mouth at the intimate moment. His pupils are dilated enough so that he sees gazelles and fruit and cedars of Lebanon. Only later will he tell her what he has seen—the words mean more after the fact. He always speaks, eventually, but only because she needs them.

Sometimes I have called to hear her voice on the answering machine. I loved her because she finished my sentences. Tonight, across the street, a man will pick

up the phone and pay by the minute to hear words that hint at intimacy. Across town the psychics are doing well—three appointments today. A widow, a mother,

*Our bones are drying up for lack of syntax. Vowel us to death, they said.*

and an orphan are hoping for words from the other side. They feel that they cannot go on without them.

I sympathize. Pilate, the insecure lover, the phone-sex addict, the bereaved—we are waiting, dictionary in hand, for a word or two to translate, some spoken thread to hold us together.

My bite-sized Japanese-English Dictionary gives me the words for "priest" and "king," but not for "prophet." So I settle for "mouth." The Japanese symbol for mouth surprises me at first. I expect ornate labyrinths of line, like a temple or wheels inside wheels. Or a small intes-

tine. Instead, I get a box. Four simple lines almost right-angled, connected at the corners, like a book, like I could shove a loaf of bread through it.

**T**he German word for "creator," *Schopfer*, also means "scoop, or ladle."

One word and the stars unfurl. Another and the moon hurls into the darkness. A tree rips through the ground, an apple drips from the limb, bones from dust, quail in the desert. But I wasn't there when God dialogued the world into being by the word of his power. None of us were, so I don't blame them. God is Spirit, and his people kept looking for a mouth. He gave them a voice from the not-quite-white clouds, from the fire, from the stained mountains. The people looked at the clouds, hoping to see a face in there, a nebulous smile. They looked for tongues in the fire and said that if you looked hard enough, the mountains looked like chipped incisors. All they

## Briefly Noted: Prophet Study

by Denis Haack



Since growing in Christ requires regular, serious Bible study, I am always looking for resources to help ordinary believers dig into Scripture. IVP has launched a series of books that provide basic information on various sections and books of the Bible without being a commentary. Each of the 17 chapters of *A Guide to the Prophets* covers a different prophetic book of the Old Testament and follows a specific format: date of biblical book; issues in interpretation; structure and outline; theological themes; rhetorical intention; place or function of the book in the canon of Scripture; notes on further reading; and discussion questions to prompt reflection and application. This is a book designed to be on hand as you do your own Bible study. It is not the only resource you'll want available—a selection of commentaries by authors stretching back over time is recommended—and you may not always agree in details, but its concise format makes it a helpful addition to your, or your church library. ■

**Book reviewed:** *Exploring the Old Testament (volume 4): A Guide to the Prophets* by J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2002) 269 pp + index.

# Prepare Us for the Worship

## a Few Moments of Awkward Silence, by the Reading of Psalm 83:1

wanted was a mouth, a literal set of lips to lock onto.

So He gave them Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Malachi. He gave them smashed tablets and parched land and dry bones clinking and bare cheeks and bicuspid, full of dirt and grit. "Go on. Pick a mouth, any mouth." Locusts, honey, and scratchy shirts.

That wasn't good enough.

I wonder if God deliberated over what they should look like, Jesus' lips. Chapped, cleft, moustached, wax. We don't care if they're glossy, puckered, or pouty, we want to see them come off your lips, they said. We want to see your mouth move. Our bones are drying up for lack of syntax. Vowel us to death, they said.

So he did. For thirty-odd years. Then Pilate had him crucified, and those lips were

sealed in a tomb. The people were too afraid to speak.

**M**aybe we're beginning to hear. Maybe lips are just boxes for shaping air. Maybe I should quit demanding form and listen for content. Forget the predictions, the tea leaves, the wheels inside wheels. Stick your teeth in our hearts. Grab my hair and jerk my head back. Break my stiff neck if you have to. Expose the jugular, wrench my jaws apart, reach down and ladle the words straight into my gut if you have to. If I tell you I won't listen, don't listen to me. Right now, I'm telling you, I need you to speak. I love you for finishing my sentences, but now I need you to begin them. For God's sake, I'm tired of living on bread alone. Speak. SPEAK. Please.

*O God, do not keep silence;  
do not hold your peace or be still, O God!*  
Psalm 83:1 ■

~Jeremy Huggins

*Jeremy Huggins, a recent graduate of Covenant Seminary is driving his Dodge Dart across country to begin graduate studies in creative writing in Spokane, WA. His last article in Critique, "Did Jesus Smoke?" [#1 - 2003] is still hanging in the air, and his movie discussion guides are posted on Ransom's website ([www.ransomfellowship.org](http://www.ransomfellowship.org)). Copyright © 2003 by Jeremy Huggins*

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your first or immediate reaction to this meditation? Why do you think you reacted this way? Imagine reading it as you sit in church waiting for the worship service to begin. How would it affect you? How would it affect your ability to worship? Why?
2. How would you describe the meditations or readings you have been exposed to? What sort of readings appear in your church bulletin to help the congregation prepare for corporate worship? How did this practice in your congregation begin and develop? What sort of readings do you use, or have you used in your own private worship? How did your practice begin and develop? If you use none, why? How is Jeremy's meditation similar to those you use, or are used to? How is it different?
3. What role should creative writing play in the corporate worship of the church? In our personal devotional life?
4. What objections might some evangelicals raise to this meditation? How would you respond to those objections?
5. One objection that can be made about the usual sort of meditation that appears in bulletins or devotional books is that they are rarely creative, and often sentimental. They appeal to the mind by providing a mini-sermon, but rarely do they appeal to the imagination. The feelings they evoke tend to be warmly comfortable, rather than jarring us awake. And they can be easily consumed in one reading, never prompting questions and rarely forcing us to read a second time to understand on a deeper level. To what extent do you think this objection is valid?
6. How does Jeremy's meditation tend to force us out of our comfort zones? If someone says that corporate worship is the one time in our week when we should be comforted and assured, not discomfited by a reading that we have to re-read to absorb, how would you respond?
7. How does this meditation grant insight into the biblical text? What insight did you gain from reading it?

## Should I Send My Child

If one believes that the Lordship of Christ is over all of life, and that the commonly held secular/sacred dualism is wrong, should a Christian student be sent to a secular educational institution?”

This was the question put to me by Covenant College President Niel Nielson over lunch. It is a deep and probing question about the fundamental nature of education and discipleship.

Sometimes similar questions are asked, such as: “How can a Christian parent send their student to a public high school or a secular prep school?” Or “How can a Christian headmaster who believes passionately in Christian education send his graduates to secular colleges and universities?” These are questions designed to make Christian parents and administrators alike defensive.

The answer is one must always be engaged in “Christian” education irrespective of the setting. The difference is in how it is accomplished. Let me explain.

Education is in the business of shaping beliefs. And beliefs are the rails on which one’s life runs. Consequently, education is no small matter. In discipleship, we must respect the priority of the mind. The failure to understand God and reality correctly will corrupt the soul, destroy a society, and leave people in spiritual ruin: “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6) and “a people without understanding come to ruin” (Hosea 4:14).

Education is not spiritually or morally neutral. It is perspectival—leading us either toward or away from God. Christian philosopher Dallas Willard warns, “Ideas and images are the primary focus of Satan’s efforts to defeat God’s purposes

with and for humankind. When we are subject to his chosen ideas and images, he can take a nap or a holiday.”

Too many Christians see discipleship as something to be discussed in Sunday school, but not in Monday school. In our post-Christian culture, casual Christianity will not be adequate to the challenges we face today. This is especially the case for our children. Parents often focus on educational status, athletic opportunities or premiere college acceptances, while neglecting the role of education in shaping the core beliefs of their child’s heart.

***Education is in the business of shaping beliefs. And beliefs are the rails on which one’s life runs. Consequently, education is no small matter.***

William Wilberforce, the great English parliamentarian who fought for the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century, writes of such parents, “They would blush on their child’s birth to think him inadequate in any branch of knowledge or any skill pertaining to his station in life. He cultivates these skills with becoming diligence. But he is left to collect his religion as he may. The study of Christianity has formed no part of his education. His attachment to it—where any attachment to it exists at all—is too often not the preference of sober reason and conviction. Instead his attachment to Christianity is merely the result of early and groundless prepossession. He was born in a Christian country, so of course he is a Christian. His father was a member of the Church of England, so that is why he is, too. When religion is handed down among us by hereditary succession, it is not surprising to find youth of sense and spirit beginning to question the truth of the system in which they were brought

up. And it is not surprising to see them abandon a position which they are unable to defend. Let us therefore beware before it is too late. Let us beware that, in schools and colleges, Christianity is almost—if not altogether—neglected. We cannot expect those who pay so little regard to this great object of education of their children to be more attentive to it in other parts of their children’s conduct.”

Education is a spiritual battlefield. It is a battle for one’s mind and hence the loyalty of one’s life. When the Bible warns, “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life,” its warning is first and foremost an educational warning.

So beliefs matter, consequently education matters. How then does this relate to Christian students’ participation in secular education—whether public high schools or secular colleges? Back to President Nielson’s question, “Is it right for a Christian student’s mind to be shaped by a secular education?”

The key to understanding the responsibilities of a Christian student is found in the distinction “participation” and “being shaped by.”

A Christian is free to *participate* in all types of educational institutions—Christian and secular—but he is not free to be *patterned* by those that do not make biblical truth central. “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2).

“The Christian,” wrote theologian J. Gresham Machen, “cannot be indifferent to any branch of earnest human endeavor. It must all be brought into some relation to the gospel. It must be studied either in order to be demonstrated as

# to a Secular School?

false, or else in order to be made useful in advancing the Kingdom of God.”

Too few Christian students are equipped to face the intellectual challenges of secular education, whether in public high schools or secular colleges. Youth groups and college ministries do little to prepare them. Instead, students have a devotional relationship with Jesus based on heritage and feelings, but not thought or conviction. They have little understanding of a biblical world view or the ability to assess the core premises of competing world views. Thinking is not a category of their devotional life. And for others, even if they had the understanding, they do not feel the necessity of engaging all that they are reading and studying from the lens of biblical truth. Failure in this is not a matter of casual neglect. It is a matter of having one's heart shaped by false beliefs—false ideas about the nature of truth, the nature of personhood, and the nature of human destiny.

Christian students, wherever they are studying, are under orders to take thinking seriously. Positively, Christian students are commanded to “demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ”

(2 Corinthians 10:5). Negatively, they are warned: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Colossians 2:8).

This means that a student in a secular institution must consciously “double-study:” engage one's studies from within the secular perspective as well as to think it through by

***It is not the place where one studies that matters, but the process involved in the study and the preparation necessary for that process to be adequately biblical.***

reading books or being in dialogue with others in order to gain a Christian perspective. Most Christian public junior high and high school students don't have intellectual tools to engage in this process and so are subtly shaped by the secular beliefs in these schools. Most Christian university students don't have the spiritual motivation or tools to double-study and are thus incrementally secularized at the deepest recesses of their convictions. It is largely for this reason that 90% of Christian students who enter college lose

their convictions and connection to the church within two years.

A Christian high school faculty should recognize that if they send students to secular universities before they are intellectually equipped and spiritually motivated to engage in this process, they are guilty of Jesus' stern judgment in Luke 17:1-2. “Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin.” This warning should shape a Christian high school's college placement recommendations. It's a warning that should also be heeded by parents whose children are in educational institutions that do not promote a biblical perspective on life or reality. It is not the place where one studies that matters, but the process involved in the study and the preparation necessary for that process to be adequately biblical.

Education is dangerous, for education is spiritual. It's a heart business. For this reason, Christian educators and parents must be passionate about equipping young adults to think after the mind of Christ. Anything less is to lead these little ones in harms way. ■

~John Seel

*David John Seel, Jr., M.Div., Ph.D., is headmaster of The Cambridge School of Dallas and author of Parenting Without Perfection: Being a Kingdom Influence in a Toxic World. Copyright © 2003 by David John Seel, Jr.*

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Do you agree with Dr. Seel? Why or why not?
2. How can an older Christian mentor a young adult (their own child, or someone else's) to be equipped to engage life and culture from a deeply rooted commitment to a Christian world and life view?
3. How would you determine whether a Christian school or college trains its students to be discerning, rather than merely sheltering them from the world?
4. Dr. Seel argues that “one must always be engaged in ‘Christian’ education irrespective of the setting.” Though he is referring to students, this applies to all of us seeking to be faithful in a post-Christian world. What plans should you make?

## Creation Woes & Glory

**W**hy is Christianity being blamed for the rape of the environment and our planet's ecological disasters? We are not talking about the failure of individual Christians but the more serious charge that Christianity itself—or more precisely, the Bible—and therefore God himself is to blame. *The Reenchantment of Nature* by Alister McGrath shows among other things that the charge is incorrect and that those who make such claims haven't done their homework.

McGrath is well qualified to write a book such as this. He first trained as a scientist at Oxford, conducting research in molecular biophysics. While there he encountered Christianity and eventually, as he says, "I followed in the footsteps of my fellow countryman C. S. Lewis and gave in to what I regarded as the coherence and attraction of the Christian faith." He moved to Cambridge to research the relationships between science and Christianity from a theological perspective.

As he turned his expertise to the problems of the environment, he became concerned by the misinformation about the Christian view of the natural world. The positions that Christians reportedly take were not part of the theology he knew and had made a study of. So where did they come from?

The answers to this question and the resulting analysis of why such a distortion has occurred are dealt with throughout this book. However, McGrath is not just concerned with identification of this anti-Christian error and the sources of it. He is also concerned about the root problem, of why humanity is actually making a mess of this planet.

McGrath traces the actual disregard of nature to the Enlightenment and humanity's rejection of the role of crea-

ture and the belief that science would enable man to be his own creator. This led to a lowering of our respect for the natural world; nature is merely something we manipulate to our advantage, especially as we throw off any restraints imposed by the "shackles of religion."

In response to the actual mess the planet is in, *The Reenchantment of Nature* seeks to wean us away from a dreary utilitarian way of viewing things to a rediscovery of the wonder of nature. Its engaging approach includes a scholarly analysis

***McGrath seeks to wean us away from a dreary utilitarian way of viewing things.***

of the roots and limitations of scientism.

Those who are troubled by Richard Dawkins will find adequate refutation of his stance, although McGrath is less strong on exactly what we put in its place and how we are to do it.

The fact that the abuse of nature is not part of historic Christian theology says little to those who are making it a part of today's theology. The plea to rediscover our enchantment with nature does not in itself suffice to overcome bad theology and the abuses that arise from it. Neither does it speak to our sinful condition. We are all far too capable of staring in awe at a sunset while leaning on the axe we are using to destroy the forest around us.

This book is well researched yet not too technical. The need to take a fresh look at the way we view the world is very important. McGrath is an engaging writer and this is an impressively readable

book, which will take you from creation into the present via Faust, Freeman Dyson and Frankenstein; via Prometheus, Aquinas and Douglas Adams; via Star Trek and Pandora's Jar. Read it. ■

—John Barrs



*John Barrs lives in the UK and has degrees in science and theology. He has lectured on and researched taxonomy and ecology and has worked at L'Abri UK.*

### Editor's Note:

This is an excerpt of a much longer review which is worth reading in its entirety. To read the full treatment, log onto our website ([www.ransomfellowship.org/R\\_McGrath\\_Reenchantment.html](http://www.ransomfellowship.org/R_McGrath_Reenchantment.html)).

**Book reviewed:** *The Reenchantment of Nature: The Denial of Religion and the Ecological Crisis* by Alister McGrath (New York: Doubleday, 2002) 256 pps.

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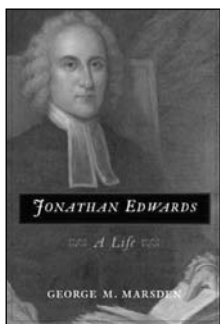
# Legacy of Grace

Just as we sometimes wonder what events transpiring around us will be truly significant a century from now, I have sometimes wondered how previous generations saw events in their day. Take the year 1703, for example. Some things were underway (we can see now, at least) that would be remembered. That was the year, for example, that Peter the Great laid the foundations of St. Petersburg. In Great Britain Isaac Newton was elected to the presidency of the Royal Society, and construction began on Buckingham Palace. Bach and Handel were busy composing music, Daniel Defoe, author of *Robinson Crusoe* was writing, and in the American colonies Cotton Mather was preaching.

In 1703 very ordinary things also happened, of course. Babies were born, for example, though two were born that year who would certainly be remembered. Both entered the ministry and became leaders in a remarkable evangelical renewal that swept through the church in Britain and America. Their names were Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley. Edwards influence was strong for a century after his death, but has waned since, which is sad. Historian Mark Noll refers to it as a “tragedy.”

“No one in the last 300 years has seen more of heaven, more of hell, more of happiness, and more of holiness than the New England pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards,” says John Piper. “His vision of God and Christian living are unsurpassed in grandeur, gravity, and gladness.” Edwards’ passion for delighting in God and his word, for living all of life in holiness to God’s glory, his overwhelming desire to know God in all his awesome beauty, and his unshakable commitment to the gospel of grace have a

depth and solidity that are bracing, rather like a cup of cold water in either the shallow sentimentality or the dry, cold orthodoxy that often passes for evangelicalism today. This year, as we celebrate the 300th anniversary of his birth it would be good to pray that the theology of grace and glory which Edwards preached would once again be heard in the church.



## Edwards: A biography

Though numerous biographies of Edwards have been published, evangelical cultural historian George Marsden has written a new one which is carefully researched, detailed, and yet accessible to the average reader. Like the rest of us,

***“Jonathan Edwards’ vision of God and Christian living are unsurpassed in grandeur, gravity, and gladness.”***

Edwards had clay feet, and though Marsden clearly appreciates his subject, he writes about Edwards’ failings as well as his virtues.

“We will never learn anything from the sages of the past,” Marsden notes, “unless we get over our naive assumption that the most recently popular modes of thought are the best. Edwards had a wonderful ability to carry the implications of widely held Christian assumptions to their logical conclusions, sometimes with unnerving results. Not everyone will agree with all his premises and so will not be compelled by his conclusions. Nevertheless, anyone might do well to contemplate Edwards’ view of reality and its awesome implications.”

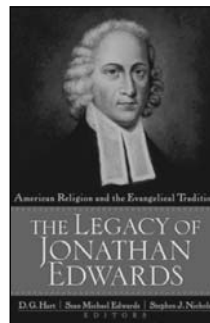
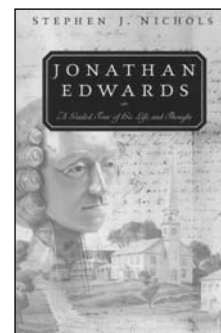
*Jonathan Edwards: A Life* will not only introduce you to Edwards, it

will draw you into a period of history which is quite unlike where we live culturally today. It will give you a chance to review an important part of the evangelical heritage, and meet a man whose legacy is so rich that we need to learn from him today.

## Edwards: An introduction

In *Jonathan Edwards: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought*, Stephen J. Nichols provides readers with an overview of Edwards’ life, writings on revival and church life, writings on theology and philosophy, and his sermons. A good place to begin, and a helpful addition to any library. Well written by a scholar who knows Edwards well, this book is easily accessible even to those who knew nothing of Edwards when they began.

Nichols believes that Edwards should be read by Christians today, but realizes that the passage of 300 years means that they might need a little assistance in getting started and in making their way through the thousands of pages that Edwards left behind. (And without a word processor.) This book was written to meet this need, and fulfills it admirably.



## Edwards: Scholarly papers

In *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* fourteen scholars (theologians and historians) reflect on various aspects of Edwards’ thought and work. Though this volume won’t be of interest to every reader, those interested in thinking about Edwards more deeply will want to

continued on the next page...

# Resources cont.

read it, especially since some of the papers take issue with some of what Edwards stood for. ■

~Denis Haack

#### Books recommended:

*Jonathan Edwards: A Life* by George Marsden (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; 2003) 505 pp. + appendices + notes + index.

*Jonathan Edwards: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought* by Stephen J. Nichols (Phillipsburg, PA: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing; 2001) 237 pp. + indices.

*The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards: American Religion and the Evangelical Tradition* edited by D. G. Hart, Sean Michael Lucas, and Stephen J. Nichols (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic; 2003) 247 pp. + index.

#### Source:

Piper quote from the online brochure for "A God-Entranced Vision of All Things," a conference on Jonathan Edwards sponsored by Bethlehem Baptist in October 2003; Noll quote from Piper's online biographical sketch of Edwards ([www.DesiringGod.org](http://www.DesiringGod.org)).

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1. To call attention to resources of interest to thinking Christians.
2. To model Christian discernment.
3. To stimulate believers to think biblically about all of life.

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