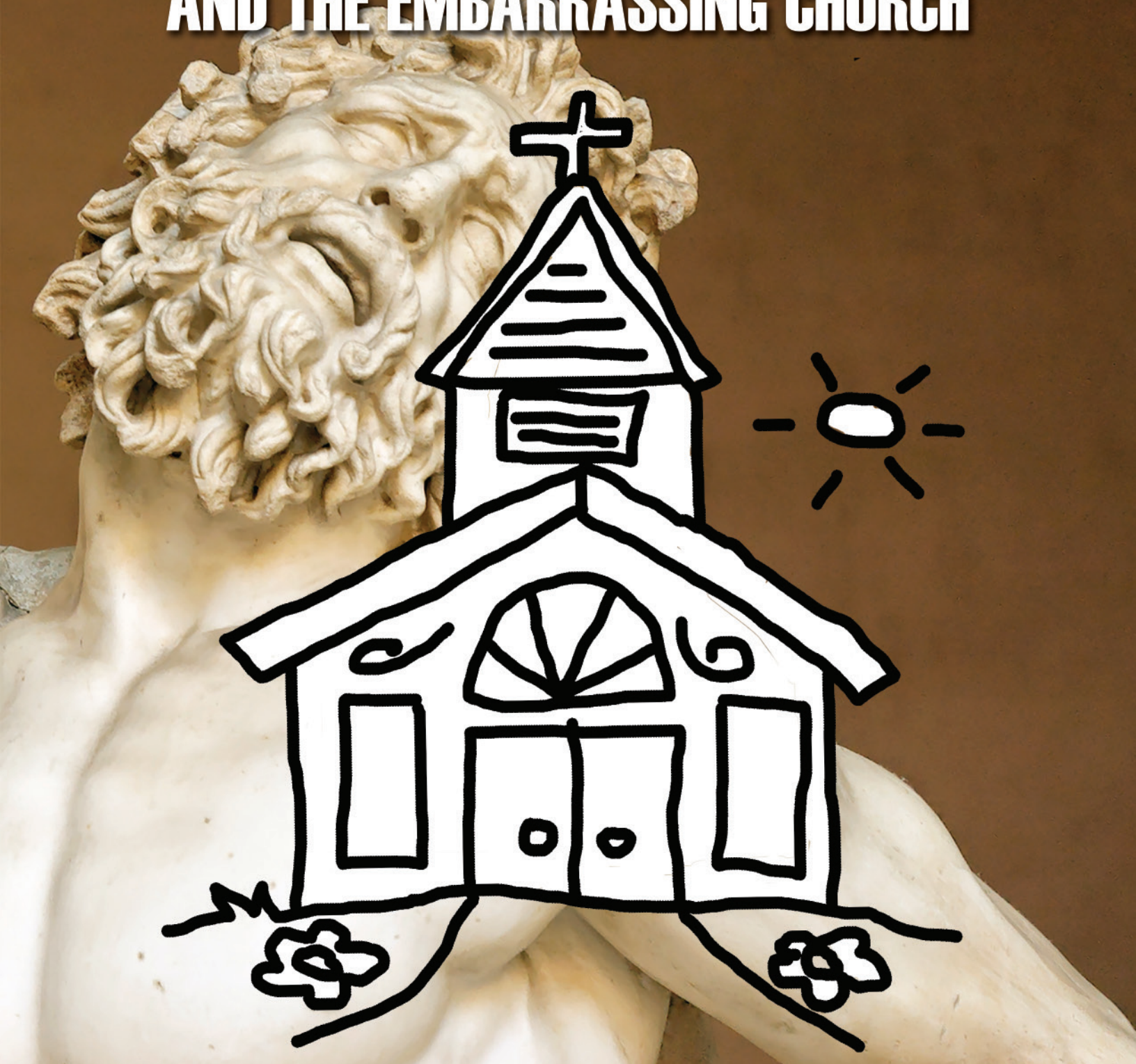


critique

A Ransom Fellowship Publication 2019 Issue 6

**POETRY, TEARS, HUMANITY, CONSPIRACY
AND THE EMBARRASSING CHURCH**



CRITIQUE



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

Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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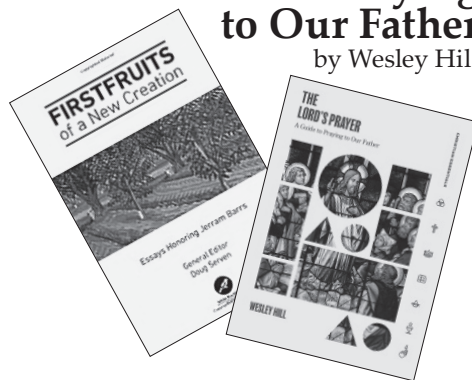
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Not Retirement, but Faithfulness



Recently people have asked if I'm retired. No, I say. In fact, I don't believe in it.

For one thing, I don't golf. Tried it once and was utterly bored by the third hole. Just what is the point? Besides, when I managed to connect with the ball it never went straight. My friends called it a slice and that was the only part of the game at which I excelled. My friends claimed they liked golf primarily because it got them outside. Not much of an outside, to my mind: just lawn, teeny holes, depressions with sand and water, and a few trees. A walk in a wood is far more stimulating. And natural.

Consumerism tells us we should work hard and save hard so that we can quit work, play hard, and live comfortably.

Which brings me to another thing I don't believe—comfort as a goal in life. I realize there are going to be competing visions of the good life in a broken world, and the differences really matter. In a consumerist society the final goal is a lifestyle of personal peace, sufficient affluence, and security—in other words, a life of relative comfort. But for the Christian, the goal of life is not comfort but maturity. And much of the time maturity isn't necessarily all

that comfortable.

What I believe in is faithfulness. It's what Eugene Peterson called *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (1980). Christian faithfulness, on the other hand, isn't static. Transitions, maybe even numerous transitions, may occur in a lifetime of faithfulness. They can be necessary and good and, through wise choices and God's grace, can lead to even more faithful faithfulness.

One transition I look forward to is being able to set aside all the paperwork, governmental forms, reports, spreadsheets, donation receipts, recordkeeping, and filing that is required to keep Ransom Fellowship legal and functioning as a nonprofit. It's all important work, but it isn't on the list of my favorite tasks. I'd rather have more time to write.

I realize that when it comes that transition might be interpreted by some as a signal I've retired, but that won't be the case. The time and energy I've given month by month to these necessary administrative tasks will be available for writing. That's not retirement, but a good transition in the midst of ongoing faithfulness.

Sometimes we transition to more expansive opportunities, and so the possibilities of our obedience expand. Sometimes we transition to more limited circumstances, and the possibilities of our obedience are more focused. I have a friend who transitioned from a paying position as a chaplain to mentoring young men, especially those who were abandoned by fathers. He's busier than he was before the transition.

In Amor Towles' novel, *A Gentleman in Moscow* (2016), Count Rostov's circumstances are radically restricted. From being a world traveling aristocrat,

he is exiled by the Bolsheviks to remain within the walls of a hotel, on pain of being shot if he ever ventures outside. Restricted and limited, perhaps, but his virtue and civility allow him to care for the staff of the Metropol and to adopt and raise a young girl whose mother is caught up in the turmoil produced by the Communist regime. The transition he endures is limiting, but it could be argued his best and most lasting work occurs after the limitation focuses his attention, time, and energy.

Which leads me to one more thing I don't believe: work is not essential to humanness. To some, retirement means to get past work into leisure. And leisure is the comfortable goal of a lifetime of effort. The Christian view is that we were created to work; the pagan myths said the gods disliked work so created humankind to do it. I'm not saying there are no jobs that are mind-numbing, back-breaking, or tedious—consider the administrative tasks I will happily relinquish. In a fallen world work, which should be glorious and fulfilling, is often reduced to toil. It will be restored when our king returns, but for now we must do the best we can.

I find writing to be hard work, actually, and sometimes tedious, but fulfilling enough that I can't imagine not doing it. And like I say, I don't golf. ■



To the editor:

Hi Denis and Margie:

Thanks for your great article, “Musing on the Physical” [*Critique* 2019:3]. Your marveling at the oaks along Lake Michigan reminded me of our gazing at the redwoods in the Sierras.

There is a beautiful article in the *Smithsonian Magazine* (April 2013) entitled, “Jane Goodall Reveals Her Lifelong Fascination with... Plants?” You may have read it before as it is several years old. If not the link is: [Smithsonian Magazine-23252007](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/jane-goodall-reveals-her-lifelong-fascination-with-plants-180966122/).

Take care and Aloha,
Bill and Judi Fong
Honolulu, Hawaii

To the editor:

Dear Denis and Margie:

25 years and counting!

That’s how long you’ve provided me with insight, encouragement, and inspiration. You’ve illuminated my understanding of scripture and how it intersects with the issues of our day. You are both dearly loved in our household. My husband and I commend you for your years of service to the Christian community.

With a grateful heart,
Kristin David
Boerne, Texas

To the editor:

Love your writing and other authors’ contributions. Don’t always agree, but I have to think why, and critical reflection is always a good process that we need more of.

Danny Bullington
Knoxville, Tennessee

Denis Haack replies:

Bill and Judi: Thank you for writing, for your kind words, and especially for mentioning the article by Jane Goodall. I try to keep up with the *Smithsonian Magazine* but missed this one. Her essay reminds me once again how science can increase our appreciation of God’s creation. There is so much that is delectable in what she records, but I was especially entranced by some of her comments about leaves:

The variety of leaves seems almost infinite. They are typically green from the chlorophyll that captures sunlight, and many are large and flat so as to catch the maximum amount. Indeed, some tropical leaves are so huge that people use them for umbrellas—and they are very effective, as I discovered during an aboriginal ceremony in Taiwan, when we were caught in a tropical downpour.

Orangutans have also learned to use large leaves during heavy rain. My favorite story concerns an infant, who was rescued from a poacher and was being looked after in a sanctuary. During one rainstorm she was sitting under the shelter provided but, after staring out, rushed into the rain, picked a huge leaf, and ran back to hold it over herself as she sat in the dry shelter.

Some leaves are delicate, some are tough and armed with prickles, yet

others are long and stiff like needles. The often-vicious spines of the cactus are actually modified leaves—in these plants it is the stems that capture the energy from the sun. I used to think that the brilliant red of the poinsettia and the varied colors of bougainvillea were flowers, but, of course, they are leaves adapted to attract pollinating insects to the very small, insignificant-looking flowers in the center.

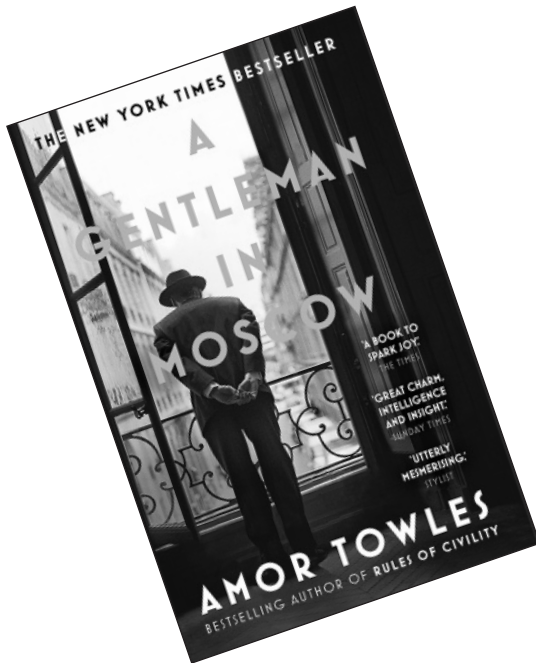
And then there are the most extraordinary leaves of that bizarre plant *Welwitschia mirabilis*. Each plant has only two leaves. They look like quite ordinary, long-shaped leaves on young plants, but they continue to grow, those exact same two leaves, for as long as the plant lives. Which may be more than 1,000 years.

Simply incredible and one more reason to praise, and to walk more slowly in order to observe what is around us in God’s world.

Kristin: We’re so grateful you took the time to write, and for following our work with *Ransom* for so long. We hope to continue, doing less speaking and more writing, and so please pray for us—we want to do exactly what you mentioned: illuminating our readers’ understanding of scripture and how the truth of God’s word speaks to the issues of our day.

Danny: You are so correct—we often learn best when we disagree and are motivated to reflect prayerfully, read more, and think things we take for granted through another time. And, contrary to our culture, we can remain friends while doing so!

Faithfulness in Exile



The year is 1922. Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov, a 32-year old Russian aristocrat, is living in the Metropol, a grand old hotel situated across from the Kremlin. The Bolsheviks view him as a dangerous relic of the old order and condemn him to live within the walls of the hotel. If he steps outside, he is told, he will be shot. He is ordered to vacate his suite, filled with art and heirlooms, and to move into a small attic room with a few belongings.

When one experiences a profound setback in the course of an enviable life, one has a variety of options. Spurred by shame, one may attempt to hide all evidence of the change in one's circumstances. Thus, the merchant who gambles away his savings will hold on to his finer suits until they fray, and tell anecdotes from the halls of the private clubs where his membership has long since lapsed. In a state of self-pity, one may retreat from the world in which one has been blessed

to live. Thus, the long-suffering husband, finally disgraced by his wife in society, may be the one who leaves his home in exchange for a small, dark apartment on the other side of town. Or, like the Count and Anna, one may simply join the Confederacy of the Humbled.

Like the Freemasons, the Confederacy of the Humbled is a close-knit brotherhood whose members travel with no outward markings, but who know each other at a glance. For having fallen suddenly from grace, those in the Confederacy share a certain perspective. Knowing beauty, influence, fame, and privilege to be borrowed rather than bestowed, they are not easily impressed. They are not quick to envy or take offence. They certainly do not scour the papers in search of their own names. They remain committed to living among their peers, but greet adulation with caution, ambition with sympathy, and condescension with an inward smile.
[p. 196]

A Gentleman in Moscow opens with Rostov's summons before the Emergency Committee of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, and ends 32 years later. I don't often like happy endings, but the final pages of *A Gentleman in Moscow* took my breath away.

The Metropol is not a bad place in which to be exiled—it is luxurious and impressive, a city unto itself. Still, Count Rostov was a world traveler, having visited galleries, ballrooms, cafes, and palaces with his peers. Now his world is restricted, his rights erased, his dignity assaulted.

Count Rostov has every reason to be angry and cynical, but instead he remains a man of civility. Author Amor Towles is concerned for civility: his first

novel, *Rules of Civility* (2011), includes an appendix, "The Young George Washington's *Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation*." Throughout, Rostov remains content and makes his attic room a home. He treats his oppressors with dignity, not because he is fearful but because, though petty and cruel, they remain persons. The staff of the hotel—he knows every individual's name and story—remain loyal because he listens and cares, and is willing to serve. He makes lifelong friends and even adopts a young girl whose mother is unable to care for her.

Crafted with stunningly effective prose, there were sections so striking I had to pause, reread them, and then read them aloud to Margie. Towles is a superb writer. Lovely character development, surprising twists, keen humor, and poignant, believable relationships made me dread reaching the final page.

The novel also allows a glimpse into the banal wickedness of the Soviet system. Towles does not rail against it, but merely reveals in the unfolding of his story the foolishness of Soviet Marxism.

A Gentleman in Moscow is finally a tale about what it looks like to be faithful as an exile in one's own land. It reveals the significance of virtue and contentment, of civility and love. Rostov's world has changed but, rather than rail against it, he cares for those within reach and not only flourishes while living in the shadows but helps others do the same. ■

Novel highly recommended: *A Gentleman in Moscow* by Amor Towles (New York, NY: Viking; 2016) 462 pages

Awakenings

The sky held a smokelike hue
as the simmering substance of fire began to arise,
sculpting away vagueness, uncloaking ambiguities,
gathering the world to itself once again.

Fingers of light began molding the clay of creation,
shedding away its dark chrysalis,
awakening definition, apportioning out boundaries,
ordering surfaces to reveal their textures,
commanding forests, mountains, and meadows
to manifest their secrets
while banishing darkness back
into patterns of shadow.

Morning light sheared bark over bole and branch,
unmasking their rough, shimmering intricacies
while shining over great gatherings of leaf,
veined and verdigris.

Colors were coaxed, emerging into vividness,
and harmonies lifted
from the depths of dissonance
as revelations of sweetness appeared in bushes and trees.

Blades of grass became luminous.
The source of a few scents,
dogwood, honeysuckle, and hyacinth were revealed
while horsetail and ragweed, wind-trembled,
plumed their seed.

The wing-beats of fleeting bird shapes were converted
into hungry sparrows, vivid blue jays
and the coppery-breasted robin
stabbing for thick worms
oozing up from green, dew-sodden earth.

In a hazy, orange-tinged room,
shapes were being unfurled and carved into clarity,
even a formless soul,
his cloudy, drowsy-lidded eyes now open,
blinking, unveiled
before the coming of a new world. ■

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Scott Schuleit is the associate pastor at Taft Street Baptist Church. He enjoys preaching, the arts, theology, good conversation, and spending time with his dear wife Christina.

Advent Reflection

It is said, the end of a thing is in the beginning.
There were angels in both places:
at first they frightened shepherds;
at the end, angels hid their faces.
There was wood: a silken worn stable;
later, a raw, splintered cross.
There was a mother, frightened, pale, in pain
who melted at the wonder of God in flesh.
I wonder if she later froze seeing
her son's flesh beaten and staked.
Heaven gifted her a child
and hell tortured heaven's gift.
Legend says a donkey brought him to his birthplace;
Scripture records a donkey bore him to his death place.
A high priest praised and prophesied;
high priests betrayed and reviled.
Great rulers came first to worship.
Great rulers came last to mock.
A young father watched and prayed in Bethlehem;
An eternal Father forsook in Jerusalem.
A child was saved while innocents were murdered;
a man was murdered for innocence to be saved.
A life ended in death
so death would be ended—
And all could be reborn.
He who descended in frailty
ascended in victory
And He will come again. ■



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Cynthia Storrs currently writes near Nashville. She considers herself an amateur at yoga, poetry, and literary criticism, but an authority on Belgian chocolate.

Tears as a Spark of Fire

an excerpt by **Zack Eswine**

The first “sermon” I heard Jerram Barrs “preach” was in an apologetics class. It was this apologist’s way of *being*, as much as what he said, that broke through to my young and judgmental heart. Jerram was telling students about two of his neighbors. One was the victim of murder; the other was the perpetrator. Jerram began to read Psalm 10:

*He sits in ambush in the villages;
in hiding places he murders the innocent.
His eyes stealthily watch for
the helpless...*

*The helpless are crushed, sink down,
and fall by his might...
Arise, O lord;
O God, lift up your hand;
forget not the afflicted.*

At this moment, Jerram’s voice faltered. He looked out above his glasses but away from us. Her searched the wall with his eyes and heaved a deep breath. He could read no further. Then he looked down, pulled off his glasses, and set them on the lectern. He pulled both hands up and spread them flat upon his face, covering his cheeks, forehead, and eyes.

All of us paused. Everything stopped. I think back now, and words from poet Sylvia Plath come to mind: “I could feel the tears brimming and sloshing in me like water in a glass that is unsteady and too full.”

Without warning, the glass could no longer hold. It was as if Jerram’s head and torso collapsed into a heap and pounded down hard into the lectern. His shoulders shook amid the rubble. Then his voice found its breath. The waters splashed over.

I look back and realize Jerram must have been near the age I am now. In his mid-forties, Jerram *cried like a man* as if

none of us were there. I’m not sure I had ever seen a grown man cry like this. But there it was.

The biblical text and love for God and neighbor had led the apologist to weep. Reread that last sentence if you don’t mind. Class was in session. The sermon thundered. As a minister-in-training, all semester, I learned a great deal about the -isms and idols that create barriers to the Gospel in our hearts and in our culture. I learned what an apologist is meant to say. But that day, I was introduced to *who* an apologist is meant to *be*.

Jerram’s mentor was Francis Schaeffer, and many have suggested that the most crucial legacy of Schaeffer as an apologist is his tears. “L’Abri taught a person how to cry in light of our fragmentation with God, with each other, and ourselves.” I see now that Jerram was living what he had learned, teaching what had been taught. The love which drove the tears was like a baton and he was holding it out for us.

These tears were neither fraudulent nor sentimental. This apologist’s “drops of tears turned to sparks of fire.” The weeping bore a tenacious message. Love is “the mark of the Christian.”

I took note. I still remember. With others, I’m holding out my hand to Jerram’s baton, seeking to take hold and pass it on.

What if apologetics addresses our sorrows and not just our skepticism? What if doubt and faith, our questions and objections, arise not only because we sin, but also because of the wretched ways in which we are, all of us, sinned against? After all, it was Jesus’ defense of hope against death that included tears. “*See how he loved,*” the mourners said of Jesus when he wept (John 11:35–36). Jesus taught that love is how

they will know you are Christians (John 13:35).

Love cries. Compassion makes visible. Tears give voice. Truth feels.

If the goal of Christian apologetics “is to defend and commend the truthfulness of Christian belief,” an apologist’s way of being with other people is itself part of what defends and commends the Christian faith. ■



*An excerpt from
“Apologetic Communication”
by Zack Eswine in Firstfruits
of a New Creation: Essays
Honoring Jerram Barrs
edited by Doug Serven
(White Blackbird Books; 2019);
pages 242–244.*

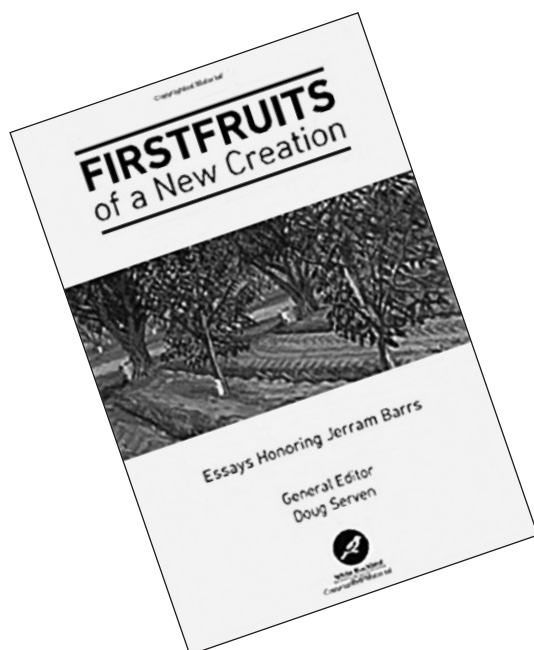
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Humanity and Prayer



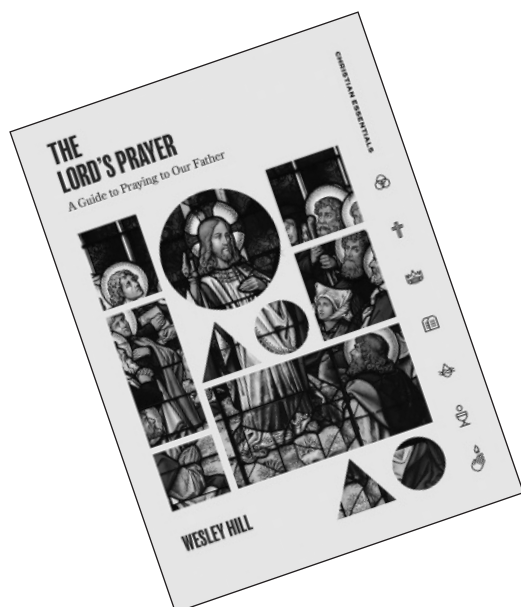
Firstfruits of a New Creation

Several years ago, I set aside time to attend a lecture series by Jerram Barrs. As I was about to leave, I remarked to Margie that I hoped to learn how better to apply scripture creatively to cultural issues. Jerram is gifted as a Bible teacher and exhibits keen insight into how to speak the truth of God's word into our increasingly post-Christian world. Don't bother, she replied. You already do pretty well with that. I'd rather you learned his gentle, lovely godliness.

Friends, former students, and colleagues of Jerram were asked to contribute chapters to *Firstfruits of a New Creation* in his honor, a *festschrift*

as it's known in academic circles. There are essays on a wide variety of topics, and reflections and memories of Jerram as a person. I contributed a chapter on film, "Being Human at The Box Office." *Firstfruits* is an exercise in thinking Christianly across all of life, culture, and reality, of taking seriously the claim of Christ to be Lord of all. All in honor of a beloved mentor of mine. ■

Book recommended: *Firstfruits of a New Creation: Essays Honoring Jerram Barrs* edited by Doug Serven (White Blackbird Books; 2019) 265 pages



The Lord's Prayer

It is hard to pray in our world of advanced modernity, even for those of us who believe in prayer. We are trained to be skeptical, we are busy, love efficiency, and have been too often bored by droning prayers that mention everything under the sun but never seem to make much of a difference. Living in the Lord's Prayer would do us good.

This is what Wesley Hill, professor at Trinity School for Ministry (Ambridge, PA), invites us to do in *The Lord's Prayer*. In this small format book in which Hill reflects thoughtfully and devotionally on each phrase in turn, we are taken back to basics in order to expand our

world. Prayer is envisioned within its cosmic context, our prayers are reimagined in our cultural setting, and our praying is shown to shape us body and soul. "Luther insisted," Hill says, "that asking for God's kingdom and will to be made manifest—which they would be, regardless of our efforts—is about stretching our hearts so that we may learn to desire truer, greater realities." ■

Book recommended: *The Lord's Prayer: A Guide to Praying to Our Father* by Wesley Hill (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; 2019) 101 pages + indices

READING THE WORD

THE EMBARRASSING CHURCH



A

s my friend Donald Guthrie, professor at Trinity International University and president of Ransom's board, is fond of saying, it's hard *being the local church* in America at the beginning of the twenty-first century. And I would add that for many believers—especially young adults—it can be hard *being in a local church* in America at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Strong cultural crosscurrents are buffeting Christ's church today. Polling research (and anecdotal personal experience) indicates that, if America is not fully post-Christian, it's rapidly moving in that direction. Many church leaders are uncertain why that's the case, how to reverse it, and how to react if the trend continues. What is more, the pluralism of our world has made the faith of Christian young adults feel fragile, a sociological fact that few in the church have even begun to consider with care. As Alan Noble, professor at Oklahoma Baptist University, points out, the difference between a Christian in twelfth century England and one in twenty-first century America is that the American is aware every moment of every day that they need not be a Christian, that there are other options available, that many thinkers and friends they admire choose against Christianity, and that they are not able to prove their faith sufficiently to convince their unbelieving friends that it is true. Even if they aren't personally struggling with doubt, the pluralism of their world has fragilized their faith. And to make matters more difficult, the culture wars of the last few decades

have failed, though many cultural warriors have yet to notice. In the eyes of our politicized world, the culture wars have made the church appear to be little more than one more tribe angling for political power, and the warring has made Christianity unattractive and greatly increased hostility against the church and its message of grace.

Is it any wonder, then, that it's hard being the local church in America at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Or that it can be difficult to be a thoughtful Millennial in an evangelical church in America today?

Still, we should keep all this in perspective. Compared to those parts of the world where the church is facing systematic and violent persecution, the American church has it pretty good. I'd much rather live as a believer in America than in North Korea or Saudi Arabia or China or Iran. Besides, everyone in a broken world faces adversity of various kinds. Organizations rarely live up to our expectations, groups we join often end up disappointing us, and as the old joke goes, if we find a perfect church it'll begin going downhill the moment we join it. The center of gravity for evangelical faith has shifted from America and the West to the growing, vibrant church in Africa, Asia and South America. Our difficulty, to some extent, stops at our border.

Nor is it the first time in history that the church was ineffective or on the defensive or in some sort of disarray or a source of disappointment to believers. In 1889, for example, Vincent van Gogh painted *Starry Night*, the view from the window in the asylum where he was living, hospitalized for mental reasons. The night sky is aglow with stars, a swirling illumination that is gloriously

set against a blue expanse. In the foreground is a town, lights glowing in the windows of homes. Only one building is dark: the village church. I am usually so overwhelmed by the starry night that I fail to notice the sadness of van Gogh's vision.

We have so much choice today I find it hard to imagine what it must have been like for a devout believer in such a village where the church no longer embodied the gospel or was strangled with legalism or saddled with thoughtless or unfaithful leaders. If things get bad enough, I can easily drive to a church in the next town or listen to a recorded sermon at home, but both options weren't available to the vast majority of Christians over the last two millennia.

And it isn't as if Christ didn't warn us that it could be hard. "Do not think," he said, "that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). And the division cut by that sword will extend, he promised, deeply in our most beloved relationships. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates Jesus' words this way:

Don't think I've come to make life cozy. I've come to cut—make a sharp knife-cut between son and father, daughter and mother, bride and mother-in-law—cut through these cozy domestic arrangements and free you for God... If you don't go all the way with me, through thick and thin, you don't deserve me. If your first concern is to look after yourself, you'll never find yourself.
(Matthew 10:34–35, 38–39)

Modern PR theory would suggest saying such things is not a good way to launch a religious movement, but Jesus apparently had not read that memo.

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. (John 15:18–22)

Still, there is a difference between facing hostility because people hear, understand, and reject the claims of Christ as Lord and Savior, and facing hostility because the church has somehow lost its way. It's a special type of misfortune when, in this broken and uncertain world, Christ's church becomes a source of difficulty in the experience of believers.

Of course, the church has always faced difficulties from within as well as from without. The church is a community of sinners, redeemed but still sinners, and sinners can be trusted to find ways to subvert the truth, to argue endlessly about Holy Scripture, to refuse proper authority, and to choose their own way over God's word.

In the nineteenth century, for example, Anglican Bishop John Colenso (Natal, South Africa) published a book that questioned the orthodox view of Scripture and undercut the veracity of some Christian doctrine. Samuel Stone, an Anglican clergyman in Windsor, England defended the orthodox understanding against Colenso's attack and in the process sought to educate the people of God in the truth. To that end he wrote a series of 12 hymns,

each one based on an article of the Apostles' Creed. The one he wrote on the church, based on "I believe... in the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints," is the famous hymn, "The Church's One Foundation." Notice these two verses:

*Though with a scornful wonder
men see her sore oppressed,
by schisms rent asunder,
by heresies distressed,
yet saints their watch are keeping,
their cry goes up, "How long?"
and soon the night of weeping
shall be the morn of song.*

*Mid toil and tribulation,
and tumult of her war,
she waits the consummation
of peace forevermore;
till with the vision glorious
her longing eyes are blest,
and the great church victorious
shall be the church at rest.*

The church is a place of hope, Stone insists, waiting for the return of her King, a hope generated because the church is not yet a place of rest and victory but of struggle and difficulty. The list of difficulties he includes in his lyrics is daunting, and enough to generate more than one night of weeping in the hearts of sensitive believers who love Christ's bride.

So, it's easy to understand why it is hard being the local church in America at the beginning of the twenty-first century. And why it can be hard being in a local church in America at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

It isn't merely a sociological fact; it is an intensely intimate experience—and it is at this point that the cultural situation bleeds into personal pain. At times the church itself becomes a source of adversity for believers.

I feel the tension. Ever since I emerged from my spiritual wanderings convinced that Jesus is Lord, I have been proud to consider myself an *evangelical*. The term is an old one, stretching back to the time of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the Protestant Reformation. It refers to those who seek to center their lives and hearts and minds on the gospel of Christ, the *evangelion*. They are found in every Christian tradition—Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, Protestant—as those who want always to faithfully speak and live so as to demonstrate the truth of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The mystery of faith—that Christ came, lived, died, rose, and will come again—is at the core of their convictions, and the story of scripture that unfolds in creation, fall, redemption, and restoration is the story which they seek to live out day by day for the glory of God. The particular tradition of faith to which I belong is important to me, but it pales almost to insignificance compared to the centrality of the gospel itself.

Yet recently I have been distancing myself from the term *evangelical*. The reason is not that my convictions have changed, but that I find the American church that self-identifies as evangelical to be rather embarrassing. More closely aligned with a conservative or, more accurately, an individualist nationalist political agenda than with the gospel, it is not an identity I am willing to assume. This is not because I do not agree with

anything in this political agenda, but because I believe the church should never be associated with any ideological agenda. "I'm not an evangelical," I told a non-Christian recently who asked. "I am a historically orthodox follower of Jesus Christ." I felt better; they had no idea what I meant.

It breaks my heart to write this. I love the long, noble, evangelical tradition that stretches back in my case through Francis Schaeffer, Abraham Kuyper, John Calvin, St. Augustine, the apostles, and my Lord Christ. In the past I have been pleased to be known as an evangelical but no longer. The evangelical church in America at the beginning of the twenty-first century has become far too embarrassing.

But the pain of my embarrassment is nothing compared to what some of my friends have experienced. My discomfort is a minor irritation, a small issue of what I call myself when asked to describe what sort of Christian I am. A little disappointment that I no longer feel free to use the term I have long loved. What is to me an inconvenience is to some dear friends a crisis of faith. Though no one may have intended this, the embarrassing church is sometimes a source of such adversity that it effectively becomes the evicting church—and lives are changed, and faith challenged or overturned as a result.

Over the past several years, Margie and I have had numerous conversations with young adults who have walked or are walking away from the evangelical church. In some cases, they have walked away not just from the church but from the faith. Others have chosen to remain in the church but do so without enthusiasm. To us they express discomfort and say that, before their secular friends, they feel embarrassment. People ask

them why they would associate with the evangelical church, and they find they have no answer that satisfies either their friends or, more devastatingly, themselves. They don't feel they quite fit into the evangelical church, but never intended that to be the case.

When we ask them why, they can tell us their reasons, a ready litany of concerns. You've probably heard them yourself and, if you are like me, you may share some of them. Here is some of what we've heard in these conversations. I'm not expressing their concerns in the terms they shared with us—but the meaning is the same.

Most of the time they don't give a reason so much as tell a story. The actual concern can be found between the lines, bubbling up from the trajectory of the story they've told. This is partly because we've asked them to tell us their story and so they do. And it's partly because what they are wrestling with is primarily existential and only secondarily cognitive. They haven't come into our living room to discuss a series of ideas or to sort out how their ecclesiology has been altered by their church experience, but to try to make sense of where they find themselves. It isn't a rational, abstract conversation but a personal, intimate one; a reflection on church, their church, and how to make sense of that church in a world where that church seems to have become irrelevant to their lives.

One theme that has appeared often is the surprise at how well their lives are going since dropping out of church. They had always been taught that church attendance was essential to the Christian life. That Christians needed the church, and that life would be lessened somehow and problems multiplied if they walked away. And

now they have walked away and report that everything has been fine. Some of them have had to deal with guilty feelings initially, or with the shame evoked by disapproving parents, but they expected that. They sleep in on Sunday mornings, give their tithe to charities doing work they support, and find this new weekend routine is actually more helpful than church in getting them ready for another week of work. If attending church is so essential, why has walking away from the church been so easy and cost free? Why has their post-church life been so satisfying?

After listening to their stories and asking questions and listening some more, I've parsed those stories to distill out the following list of concerns about the church. Please read them and reflect on them with an open heart and mind. Even if you think some aren't true, they represent the perceptions of people who loved Jesus only to find the church—either the evangelical church in general or their local church—to be a stumbling block to their faith. Even if they are entirely mistaken at every point—and I do not believe they are—their reasons for walking away are worth hearing with care and compassion.

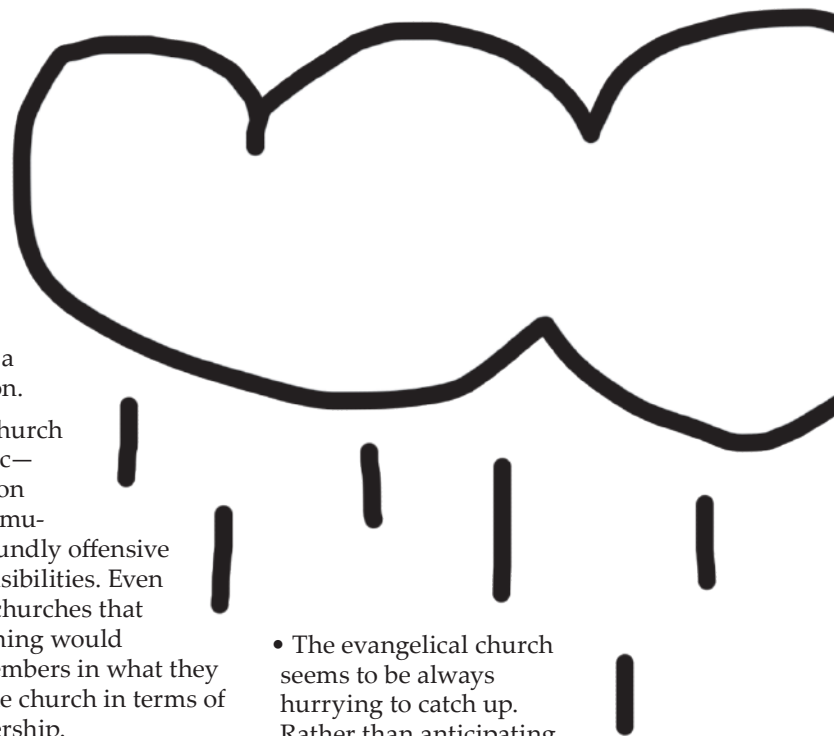
- The evangelical church has become politicized. And this politicization leads to at least three problems. One, its members do not have a distinctly biblical political philosophy growing out of the long tradition of political philosophy developed by great thinkers like Augustine, Aquinas, the Reformers, and Abraham Kuyper. Instead, they merely adopt a secular conservative or progressive agenda and add a few biblical proof texts to make their views appear religious. And of course, to outsiders, to the millennial generation,

and to anyone who cares about a thoughtful rooted faith, this represents a fatal lack of authenticity. The second problem is that except in churches that reside along the fringe of the ecclesiastical galaxy, most churches do not address the pressing issues of our society and world in fear of offending members. Leaders see this a way to remain neutral; it is actually the way to be irrelevant. The most important issues that people deal with all week are never mentioned, to say nothing of explored biblically and thoughtfully in church. And three, significant segments of the evangelical church have become identified with a specific political ideology—like white evangelicals supporting a nationalist ideology tainted by racism—that effectively blocks the non-Christians who refuse that ideology from considering the truth of the church's message in the gospel.

- The evangelical church has failed to be a center for creativity, art, and craft. Just look at church architecture—case closed. Captive to consumerism and the aesthetics of pop culture, new churches often tend to look either like warehouses or arenas. While the medieval church was a patron of the arts, the church in the world of advanced modernity seems to have forgotten that the Lord they profess is not only the God of all truth (John 14:6) but also the God of all beauty (Psalm 50:1–2).
- The evangelical church has encouraged, even enflamed, the culture wars. Sometimes the encouragement has been explicit, and at other times the failure to address such issues implies no problem exists. The truth is that the growing hostility to the Christian gospel can be traced to the tribal attempt of conservative Christians to use political power to

force their vision of the good life on a resistant population.

- The evangelical church holds a sexual ethic—especially in relation to the LGBTQ community—that is profoundly offensive to postmodern sensibilities. Even those evangelical churches that claim to be welcoming would restrict LGBTQ members in what they could do within the church in terms of teaching and leadership.
- The evangelical church spawns believers that tend to be less than admirable. More specifically, many Christians tend to be judgmental, negative, withdrawn from the wider community, critical of the arts, slow to care about issues of race, economic inequality, or for caring for the earth and environmental degradation, and are often ghettoized within their own tribal schools, activities, and groups. This means that evangelical Christians appear by and large unattractive—or to lead unattractive and restricted lives—to many of their non-Christian neighbors. It's thus hardly surprising that some believers are hesitant to be identified as evangelicals.
- The evangelical church does a poor job demonstrating how the orthodox doctrines of the faith creatively address all of life and reality and provide intellectually satisfying answers to the most pressing questions of our age. Many services of worship include a recitation of the historic creeds or confessions, but rarely are the assertions of such documents shown to be intimately relevant to ordinary, everyday life. A chasm exists between doctrine and life.
- The evangelical church seems to be always hurrying to catch up. Rather than anticipating the questions and challenges of the next generation, the church seems to address issues only after the wider culture has raised them and then moved on. It does not lead the world but follows it, and often ends up saying too little, too late to make much difference.
- The evangelical church seems to be unnecessary to human flourishing. Young adults who decide to walk away from the church find that their lives, relationships, and careers continue to unfold, and that little or nothing seems to be missing. If the church is really all that it claims to be, why should this be? Why wouldn't those who leave find a gnawing emptiness in their hearts and lives that nothing other than the church can fill?
- The evangelical church rarely serves its neighborhood so that unbelievers will miss it if it closes its doors. It claims to believe that all people are worthy of care and justice, but most local churches exist primarily to serve its members and its foreign missionaries, and to perpetuate itself as an institution. When churches fold—and many do as larger churches with better facilities and range of activities compete for a declining





pool of evangelical believers—one almost never hears neighbors say, “Well, I didn’t agree with what they believed, but I will miss the way they cared for and sacrificially served the needy. It cost them, but they never complained or asked us to make it up to them. They showed all of us what justice and compassion really looks like.”

- The evangelical church wounds its own. Questions and challenges are met with formulaic answers, favorite verses of scripture, and quotes from famous preachers. What’s really needed and wanted, of course, is someone to listen and to walk alongside as doubts are examined and life is shared so that our experiences can be brought into connection with the Christian story. So often doubters are made to feel marginalized as leaders claim to be entirely doubt-free and provide sweeping solutions for very personal struggles. Though the church may mean well, this approach not only does not resolve doubts, it wounds the doubting believer by making them feel like an unbeliever. Such wounds can be debilitating to faith.
- The evangelical church makes little or no effort to translate its message into terms that resonate with those who live in the world of advanced modernity. Often it seems as if the leadership doesn’t realize that many Christians live outside the evangelical ghetto. They need to hear the gospel in terms that their closest neighbors and friends—outside the church—can easily comprehend and appreciate.

Instead, sermons are given that reflect the language of theological commentaries and the way the church has been talking to itself since the nineteenth century—or the seventeenth, depending on which church you are attending. Evangelicals claim to believe the gospel is for every age but seem frozen in the recent past.

- The evangelical church is often defensive and reactive. If it is truly Christ’s body and so his presence on earth, if it is truly indwelt by the Holy Spirit, if it truly possesses the means of grace in word and sacrament, and if it’s Lord is truly Redeemer, King, and Judge of all the cosmos, why does it not act as if this is the case? It should be neither defensive nor triumphalist before the world but instead always willing to demonstrate the power of sacrificial love, even at cost. It should be humble because it knows that, though its message is true, there is no way to definitively prove it so that everyone will find it credible. And its members should demonstrate a fearlessness in admitting “I do not know,” with the quiet reassurance that they are willing to work on the issue as if it is a matter of life and death—because for the person raising the question it just might be.
- The evangelical church seems to be reacting to our increasingly pluralistic and post-Christian world by choosing one of two extremes. Some try to make church more entertaining, hoping to save it by making it more attractive to a distracted world. The problem is that no matter how hard they try, far better entertainment can be found in the world and online. If the church competes here, it will always lose. And others double down on getting the truth right, making certain they stand

for the right values and teach the right doctrine. The problem is that this always slides into legalism and is more concerned with maintaining purity than demonstrating love.

These are the concerns—or some of them, at least—that Margie and I have heard over several years of talking to people who are now or have already walked away from the church. I realize this is not a scientific poll but merely anecdotal evidence, but we’ve heard it enough times in a variety of ways to make me believe it represents something real. I wonder if you have heard similar things, or perhaps felt them yourself.

I should mention that my interest in this involves several things. The first is, as you might guess, how might Margie and I best care for the people telling us their stories. They are precious, often wounded, and needing, not a lecture on church attendance, but a listening ear and someone to demonstrate that Christianity consists of something far more deeply rooted and mythic and real than their church experience has led them to believe.

This also interests me because I believe the church is actually essential to faith, even when it appears not to be. Without going into the details of my doctrine of the church, I am convinced from Holy Scripture that, in word and sacrament, the church dispenses grace that can be found in no other place. Often the people who have walked away from the church mention how they find experiences of glory or awe in nature, on walks

for example. These are moments of worship for them; an adequate substitute, they say, for worship in church. I always acknowledge their experience and agree—God’s glorious grace can indeed be found in creation. I believe, however, that the Lord gave the church word and sacrament linked to a special promise, that when the church gathers the Lord Christ is present, actually and really, in her midst. I don’t know how it works, but I believe that in receiving scripture, bread, and wine in church I am receiving God’s grace that can be found nowhere else. Nowhere else. And that remains true regardless of the condition of the church or her ministers. On Sunday mornings I hear and taste, “This is God’s word... This is Christ’s body... This is Christ’s blood...” and I know I have reached past the interface separating the visible from the invisible sides of reality and been touched by grace in the real presence of my Lord. And that, I am convinced, is available nowhere else.

And my interest in this resides in the fact that I believe the church is resilient. It may appear rigid and breakable in its local manifestation as an institution, but it remains Christ’s beloved bride (and so will never be abandoned) and indwelt by the Holy Spirit (and so even the gates of hell cannot prevail against it). Like the mythical phoenix, it always rises with new life from the ashes into which it most recently crumbled. So, regardless of the condition of the church in any society, believers can remain people of hope.

In church a few weeks ago we sang “Build Your Kingdom Here” by the Rend Collective, an Irish folk worship band from Northern Ireland. In the form of a prayer, it captures well the Christian hope for the church. “Build

Your kingdom here,” the chorus goes, “Let the darkness fear.” Absolutely. Even when shadows have penetrated into the sanctuary, in the end it is the darkness, not the church, that has reason to fear.

And there is more. Thurman Williams, a Presbyterian pastor in St. Louis, Missouri, argues that Philippians 1:12–14 is key to understanding the gospel in times of adversity.

I want you to know, brothers [and sisters], that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Notice St. Paul does not say the gospel is advancing *in spite* of the adversity he is experiencing, or even *in the midst* of it. Rather, the apostle insists the adversity is the means, the instrument God used to advance the gospel.

Imagine the apostle’s delight, Williams said, if God had told him that through him the entire imperial guard in Rome would hear the gospel. “Great!” Paul would likely have said, “How’s that going to occur?” Easy, would be the divine reply. You’ll be thrown in jail for a very long time and the imperial soldiers will be your guards. You’ll get to know them and demonstrate Christ’s love for them. What the enemy uses to try to interrupt the advance of the gospel, God subverts to his own purposes. Not only was the guard evangelized, but the church was encouraged to live and speak the truth with greater courage.

I have no idea how God will use the embarrassing church to advance

the gospel in America in the twenty-first century. And I may not live long enough to see it. But to all those who are discouraged because St. Paul has been tossed into prison, I say, just watch and see. Just watch and see. ■

Sources:

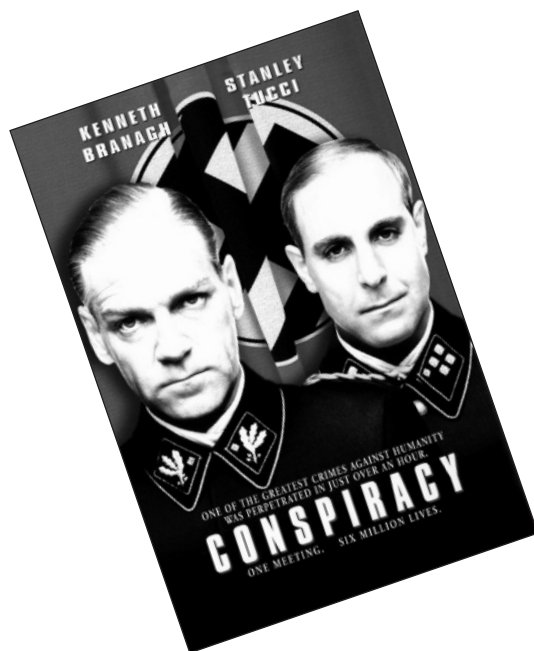
Alan Noble and Thurman Williams in lectures at Covenant Theological Seminary in October 2019 as part of the 2019 Francis Schaeffer Lectures, “Advancing Through Adversity”

Information on hymn, “The Church’s One Foundation,” online (https://hymnary.org/text/the_churchs_one_foundation)

Information on song, “Build Your Kingdom Here,” online (<https://rendcollective.com>)

What Does Evil Look Like?

a movie review by **R. Greg Grooms**



Once upon a time the face of evil was easily recognizable, at least in the movies. It looked like Lee Marvin in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and Jack Palance in *Shane*. It wore a black hat and a leering expression that promised violence when angered. When I watched old westerns with my kids, they never had to ask, "Is he a good guy or a bad guy, Daddy?" They could tell just by looking.

Of course, evil has never been that easy to spot in the real world. Case in point: the Wannsee Conference in 1942. On January 20th, fifteen distinguished leaders from all parts of German life and society met at a lake home outside Berlin. They represented the army, the Ministry of Justice, the Foreign Office, the Ministry of the Interior, the government of several occupied territories, and, of course, the Nazi Party. There, over an elegant luncheon, they planned the Final Solution, the systematic murder

and disposal of some 11 million Jews.

Conspiracy (2001) is an HBO/BBC production in which director Frank Pierson attempts to reconstruct what happened at Wannsee. It was shot in the villa that housed the original conference. The problems considered and the solutions adopted there are as recorded in the only surviving copy of the minutes of the meeting. Only the dialogue is imagined, and it is fascinating.

The faces of the actors who recreate the conference are familiar to most movie goers. Emmy Award winner Kenneth Branagh (of *Henry V*) is SS Lt. General Reinhard Heydrich, Emmy Award winner Stanley Tucci (of *The Devil Wears Prada*) plays SS Obersturmbannführer Adolph Eichmann, and Oscar winner Colin Firth (of *The King's Speech*) is lawyer Wilhelm Stuckart. We know these men, we like them, we trust them and the characters they play, which makes their about face in this film all the more chilling and effective.

Imagine actually seeing their faces at Wannsee, listening to the debate while not understanding German. What might you think they were discussing? The war effort, certainly, and perhaps the countless problems associated with providing for soldiers—guns, ammunition, etc.—as well as the civilian population—food, medicine, health care. Just looking at them, one might even have assumed they were talking business or family matters—but genocide? Never! For in the real world, unlike the old movies, evil rarely if ever looks the part.

And now imagine your shock when you learn this was what they actually said:

Branagh as Heydrich: We will not sterilize every Jew and wait for them to die. We will not sterilize every Jew and then exterminate the race. That's farcical. Dead men don't hump, dead women don't get pregnant. Death is the most reliable form of sterilization.

Tucci as Eichmann: Now, last summer Reichsführer Himmler asked me to visit a camp up in Upper Silesia, called Auschwitz, which is very well isolated, and close to significant rail access. And we are turning that camp into a major center, solid structures, and here's where your Jewish labor comes into play, Herr Neumann: the Jews haul the bricks and they build the buildings themselves. And when the structures are complete, we expect to be able to process 2500... an hour. Not a day, an hour.

Firth as Stuckart: ...you're shallow, ignorant, and naïve about the Jews. Your line and what the party rants on about, how inferior they are, some sub-species, and I keep saying how wrong that is! They are sublimely clever. And they are intelligent as well. My indictment to that race is stronger and heavier because they're real, not your uneducated ideology. They are arrogant, they are self-obsessed, they are calculating and reject the Christ and I will NOT have them pollute German blood!

Stuckart was a moderate voice at Wannsee, insisting that mass sterilization was a better option than extermination. Heydrich, founder of the SS, was described by Hitler as "the man with the iron heart." Eichmann escaped Germany after the war, but was later captured by Israeli agents, tried in Jerusalem, and found guilty of crimes against humanity. French philosopher Hannah Arendt was present

at Eichmann's trial and, in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, she summed up the most horrifying aspect of Wannsee very well:

The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together.

Now imagine yourself at Wannsee. From the start Heydrich sets the stage: we're here to solve the Jewish problem. How might you respond? What objections might you offer? This plan might jam the courts with cases arguing

about who is Jewish and who isn't. It might undermine the war effort by discouraging the soldiers who would be a necessary part of the planned executions. And it certainly would be a logistical nightmare. Is it even possible to kill and dispose of so many? All are merely technical problems to which Eichmann and Heydrich offered technical solutions in the form of the death camps. But would you dare to raise moral objections?

At the Nuremberg trials after the Holocaust, one German official after another offered the same defense: "I was only following orders. I feared for my life." I feel the heavy weight of both these excuses, and I will not lightly dismiss them with self-serving promises of what I would have done had I

been in their place, because I've never been in their place. But I will offer one last appeal to conscience.

In the New Testament epistle of James, the evil man is described as one who looks at his face in a mirror, turns away, and forgets what he looks like. Evil, we seem to forget, can look very like us. It's an apt description, I think, for evil by its nature tends to hide itself especially in our own hearts, and failing to see it for what it is makes it all the more likely to flourish.

I heartily recommend *Conspiracy* to you. ■

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What images and words linger in your mind after watching *Conspiracy*? What do they leave you thinking of?
2. During the twentieth century, more people were killed by their own governments than perished in battle in wars. Has this in your opinion made you more sensitive to evil or more inured to it? Why?
3. In films, Nazis are often visually caricatured as monstrous freaks (think *Raiders of the Lost Ark*) or comic characters (remember "Springtime for Hitler" in *The Producers*?). Discuss your mental images of Nazis. How have they been shaped by media images?
4. In one of *Conspiracy*'s darker moments Heydrich relates the story of a boy whose meaning in life was derived from hating his father. He concludes the story saying, "But when the father died, and the hate had lost its object, the man's life was empty... over." Eichmann asks, "So we should not hate the Israelites?" To which Heydrich answers, "No, but that it should not fill our lives so much that, when they are gone, we have nothing left to live for. So says the story. I will not miss them."
5. Which moves you more strongly, love or hate? How do you know?
6. In his book *The Death of Satan: How Americans have Lost the Sense of Evil*, Andrew Delbanco wrote, "A gulf has opened up in our culture between the visibility of evil and the intellectual resources available for coping with it." Simply put he thinks our culture is poorly equipped to recognize and cope with evil. Do you agree? Defend your answer.
7. Do you believe in Satan? Why? What difference does it make in your life?
8. In the film *Operation Finale* (2018) writer Michael Orton imagines a conversation between Eichmann and Peter Malkin, one of the Israeli agents who captured him. Imagine yourself in Malkin's place. What would you want to ask Adolph Eichmann?
9. Are you glad you watched *Conspiracy* or do you wish you'd never seen it? Why?





Movie credits for *Conspiracy*

Director: Frank Pierson
 Writer: Loring Mandel
 Cinematographer: Stephen Goldblatt
 Produced by Frank Doelger, Frank Pierson,
 David M. Thompson, and others
 Starring:
 Kenneth Branagh (Reinhard Heydrich)
 Stanley Tucci (Adolf Eichmann)
 Colin Firth (Dr. Wilhelm Stuckart)
 Peter Sullivan (SS.Col. Eberhard 'Karl'
 Schöngarth)
 Kevin McNally (Undersecretary Martin
 Luther)
 U.K., U.S.A., 2001; 96 minutes.
 HBO Films in association with the British
 Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)