Media and Discernment

We live in the midst of a media storm, and Christians need to develop discernment in their consumption of various media (TV, movies, music, videos, computer, etc).

Media Exposure

We live in the midst of a media storm. Every day we are confronted by more media messages than a previous generation could even imagine.

For example, more homes have TV sets (98 percent) than have indoor plumbing. In the average home the television set is on for more than six hours a day. Children spend more time watching television than in any other activity except sleep.{1} Nearly half of elementary school children and 60 percent of adolescents have television sets in their bedrooms.{2}

But that is just the beginning of the media exposure we encounter. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* estimates that the average teenager listens to 10,500 hours of music during their teen years.{3} Families are watching more movies than every before since they can now watch them on cable and satellite and rent or buy movies in video and DVD format.

The amount of media exposure continues to increase every year. Recent studies of media usage reveal that people spend more than double the time with media than they think they do. This amounts to nearly twelve hours a day total. And because of media multitasking, summing all media use by medium results in a staggering fifteen hours per day.{4}

Student use of the Internet has been increasing to all-time levels. A study done at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst found the following:{5}

- Nearly 90 percent of the students access the Internet every day.
- Students spent over ten hours per week using IM (instant messaging).
- Those same students spent over twenty-eight hours per week on the Internet.
- Nearly three-fourths spent more time online than they intended.

In addition to concerns about the quantity of media input are even greater concerns about the quality of media input. For example, the average child will witness over 200,000 acts of violence on television, including 16,000 murders before he or she is 18 years old. And consider that the average child views 30,000 commercials each year.

A study of adolescents (ages 12-17) showed that watching sex on TV influences teens to have sex. Youths were more likely to initiate intercourse as well as other sexual activities.{6}

Over 1000 studies (including reports from the Surgeon General's office and the National Institute of Mental Health) "point overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children."{7}

To put it simply, we are awash in media exposure, and there is a critical need for Christians to exercise discernment. Never has a generation been so tempted to conform to this world (Rom. 12:1-2) because of the growing influence of the proliferating forms of media.

Biblical Discernment

Although the Bible does not provide specific instructions about media (you can't find a verse dealing with television, computers, or DVDs), it nevertheless provides broad principles concerning discernment.

For example, the apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 2:22 instructs us to “Flee from youthful lusts.” We should stay away from anything (including media) that inflames our lust. Paul also goes on to say that in addition to fleeing from these things, we should also “pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace.” We should replace negative influences in our life with those things which are positive.

Paul says in Colossians 3:8, “But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.” Now, does that mean you could never read something that has anger or rage or slander in it? No. After all, the Bible has stories of people who manifest those traits in their lives.

What Paul is saying is that we need to rid ourselves of such things. If the input into our lives (such as through media) manifests these traits, then a wise and discerning Christian would re-evaluate what is an influence in his or her life.

Paul tells us in Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” We should focus on what is positive and helpful to our Christian walk.

We are also admonished in Romans 13:13 to “behave decently as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.”

As Christians, we should develop discernment in our lives. We can do this in three ways: stop, listen, and look. Stop what you are doing long enough to evaluate the media exposure in your life. Most of us just allow media to wash over us everyday without considering the impact it is having on us.

Second, we should listen. That is, we should give attention to what is being said. Is it true or false? And what is the message various media are bringing into our lives?

Finally, we should look. We need to look at the consequences of media in our lives. We should rid ourselves of influences which are negative and think on those things which are positive.

Worldview of the News Media

Of all the forms of media, the news media have become a primary shaper of our perspective on the world. Also, the rules of journalism have changed in the last few decades. It used to be assumed that reporters or broadcasters would attempt to look at events through the eyes of the average reader or viewer. It was also assumed that they would not use their positions in the media to influence the thinking of the nation but merely to report objectively the facts of an event. Things have changed dramatically in the news business.

The fact that people in the media are out of step with the American people should be a self-evident statement. But for anyone who does not believe it, there is abundant empirical evidence to support it.

Probably the best-known research on media bias was first published in the early 1980s by professors Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman. Their research, published in the journal *Public Opinion*{8} and later collected in the book *The Media Elite,*{9} demonstrated that reporters and broadcasters in the prestige media differ in significant ways from their audiences.

They surveyed 240 editors and reporters of the media elite—*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, ABC, NBC, and CBS. Their research confirmed what many suspected for a long time: the media elite are liberal, secular, and humanistic.

People have always complained about the liberal bias in the media. But what was so surprising is how liberal members of the media actually were. When asked to describe their own

political persuasion, 54 percent of the media elite described themselves as left of center. Only 19 percent described themselves as conservative. When asked who they voted for in presidential elections, more than 80 percent of them always voted for the Democratic candidate.

Media personnel are also very secular in their outlook. The survey found that 86 percent of the media elite seldom or never attend religious services. In fact, 50 percent of them have no religious affiliation at all.

This bias is especially evident when the secular press tries to cover religious events or religious issues. Most of them do not attend church, nor do they even know people who do. Instead, they live in a secularized world and therefore tend to underestimate the significance of religious values in American lives and to paint anyone with Christian convictions as a "fundamentalist."

Finally, they also found that the news media was humanistic in their outlook on social issues. Over 90 percent of the media elite support a woman's so-called "right to abortion" while only 24 percent agreed or strongly agreed that "homosexuality is wrong."

For a time, members of the media elite argued against these studies. They suggested that the statistical sample was too small. But when Robert Lichter began to enumerate the 240 members of the news media interviewed, that tactic was quickly set aside. Others tried to argue that, though the media might be liberal, secular, and humanistic, it did not affect the way the press covered the news. Later studies by a variety of media watchdogs began to erode the acceptance of that view.

A second significant study on media bias was a 1996 survey conducted by the Freedom Forum and the Roper Center.{10} Their survey of 139 Washington bureau chiefs and congressional correspondents showed a decided preference for liberal

candidates and causes.

The journalists were asked for whom they voted in the 1992 election. The results were these: 89 percent said Bill Clinton, 7 percent George Bush, 2 percent Ross Perot. But in the election, 43 percent of Americans voted for Clinton and 37 percent voted for Bush.

Another question they were asked was, "What is your current political affiliation?" Fifty percent said they were Democrats, 4 percent Republicans. In answer to the question, "How do you characterize your political orientation?" 61 percent said they were liberal or moderately liberal, and 9 percent were conservative or moderately conservative.

The reporters were also asked about their attitudes toward their jobs. They said they see their coverage of news events as a mission. No less than 92 percent agreed with the statement, "Our role is to educate the public." And 62 percent agreed with the statement, "Our role is sometimes to suggest potential solutions to social problems."

A more recent survey by the Pew Research Center further confirms the liberal bias in the media. They interviewed 547 media professionals (print, TV, and radio) and asked them to identify their political perspective. They found that 34 percent were liberal and only 7 percent were conservative. This compares to 20 percent of Americans who identify themselves as liberal and 33 percent who define themselves as conservative.{11}

It is also worth questioning whether a majority of media professionals who labeled themselves as moderate in the survey really deserve that label. John Leo, writing for *U.S. News and World Report*, says that it has been his experience "that liberal journalists tend to think of themselves as representing the mainstream, so in these self-identification polls, moderate usually translates to liberal. On the few

social questions asked in the survey, most of the moderates sounded fairly liberal."{12}

Once again we see the need for Christians to exercise discernment in their consumption of media.

Dealing with the Media

Christians must address the influence of the media in society. It can be a dangerous influence that can conform us to the world (Rom. 12:2). Therefore we should do all we can to protect against its influence and to use the media for good.

Christians should strive to apply the following two passages to their lives as they seek discernment concerning the media: Philippians 4:8, which we quoted above, and Colossians 3:2–5:

> Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

Here are some suggestions for action.

First, control the quantity and quality of media input. Parents should set down guidelines and help select television programs at the start of the week and watch only those. Parents should also set down guidelines for movies, music, and other forms of media. Families should also evaluate the location of their television set so that it is not so easy to just sit and watch TV for long hours.

Second, watch TV with children. One way to encourage discussion with children is to watch television with them. The plots and actions of the programs provides a natural context for discussion. The discussion could focus on how cartoon

characters or TV characters could solve their problems without resorting to violence. What are the consequences of violence? TV often ignores the consequences. What are the consequences of promiscuous sex in real life?

Third, set a good example. Parents should not be guilty to saying one thing and doing another. Neither adults nor children should spend long periods of time in front of a video display (television, video game, computer). Parents can teach their children by example that there are better ways to spend time.

Fourth, work to establish broadcaster guidelines. No TV or movie producer wants to unilaterally disarm all the actors on their screens for fear that viewers will watch other programs and movies. Yet many of these TV and movie producers would like to tone down the violence, even though they do not want to be the first to do so. National standards would be able to achieve what individuals would not do by themselves in a competitive market.

Fifth, make your opinions known. Writing letters to programs, networks, and advertisers can make a difference over time. A single letter may not make a difference, but large numbers of letters can even change editorial policy. Consider joining with other like-minded people in seeking to make a difference in the media.

While the media has a tremendous potential for good, it can also have some very negative effects. Christians need wisdom and discernment to utilize the positive aspects of media and to guard against its negative effects.

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Mel Gibson’s Passion Film Ignites Passions

The storm of controversy surrounding Mel Gibson’s film about Jesus death has had many facets. Is the movie anti-Semitic? Too violent for kids? Would Gibsons Jesus get married?

Representatives of the Jewish Anti-Defamation League and the Simon Wiesenthal Center feared provocation of anti-Jewish feelings and violence. Prerelease screenings found warm response from leaders including Vatican officials and Billy Graham. Others remained skeptical.

Much of the controversy centers on two questions about the film and the history it depicts: Were Jewish people responsible for Jesus death? And, if so, are all Jewish people thereby Christ killers? Anti-Semitisms ugly stains make certain fears understandable.

Raised as a Gentile in Miami, I had many Jewish friends. Miamis Jewish population exceeds that of many cities of Israel. My classmates talked of Hebrew school, synagogue, and bar mitzvahs. In school we sang Hanukah songs and Christmas carols. My parents taught and modeled respect and tolerance. Anti-Semitism makes my blood boil.

After finding faith as a university student, I explored concerns about anti-Semitism in biblical accounts of Jesus death. Jesus was Jewish, as were his early followers. Jewish people who opposed him aligned against Jewish people who supported him. This was essentially a Jewish-Jewish conflict. One faction pressured Pilate, a Roman ruler, into executing Jesus.

Jewish leaders did not physically hang him on a cross; Roman executioners did that. But some Jewish people were part of the mix.

Should all Jewish people bear the guilt for Jesus execution? Of course not. Neither should all Germans bear guilt for the Holocaust nor all Christians for racism or anti-Semitism, pedophilia, corruption, or other outrageous acts of Christians. We all bear responsibility for our own decisions.

But there is another facet to the guilt question. After I spoke in a University of Miami anthropology class, one student asked if Jews are responsible for the death of Jesus. Absolutely, I replied. Jews are responsible for Jesus death. And so are Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, atheists and agnostics.

Jesus said he came to help plug people into God, to give his life as a ransom for many. He believed his death would pay the price necessary to provide forgiveness for all who would accept it, becoming a bridge linking them to eternity.

According to this perspective, we – all of us – and our flaws are the reason Jesus went to the cross. Are we guilty of physically executing him? No. Was it because of us that he suffered? By his reasoning, yes.

Gibsons film is significant. Of course, I brought my own biases to the screening. I left impressed with the terrible pain Jesus endured, especially poignant because I believe he endured it for me.

Rembrandt, the famous Dutch artist, painted a memorable depiction of the crucifixion. In it, several people help to raise the cross to which Jesus is nailed. Light emphasizes one particular face among the cross-raisers. The face is Rembrandts, a self-portrait. The painter believed he himself was part of the reason Jesus died.

Gibson told the Associated Press, “I came to a difficult point in my life and meditating on Christ’s sufferings, on his passion, got me through it.” The Passion film and story are worth considering and discussing among friends of any faith or of no faith.

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Animal House Revisited: Fraternity Fosters Faith

College fraternities don’t always have the best reputations. Wild parties, hazing, elitism, substance abuse, gang rapes and more help perpetuate the Animal House image that the film of the same name portrayed. Parents – and many students – might wonder why any sane person ever would want to join.

Though the weaknesses of university Greek-letter societies are often what grab headlines, numerous national fraternities and sororities try hard to change both their image and substance. Believe it or not, many were founded to promote character development and strong cultural values and are seeking to return to their roots.

For example, my own fraternity, Lambda Chi Alpha, has a vision “…to prepare and encourage collegiate men of good character, high ethics, and noble ideals to contribute positively to the world in which they live.” Lambda Chi’s annual North American Food Drive has raised over 10.5 million pounds of food for the needy since 1993.

The liability crisis is one factor motivating “Greeks” to focus on character. In today’s litigious society, a tragic

injury or death can prompt lawsuits that could put them out of business. Moderating local behavior helps perpetuate national survival.

But there is more going on here than mere survival. Often top leaders of national Greek organizations are deeply committed citizens who seek to live by and promote the principles their groups espouse.

Many Greek organizations were founded on biblical or quasi-biblical principles. Alpha Tau Omega (ATO) is one of the more prominent fraternities with over 240 active and inactive chapters and over 6,000 undergraduate members. ATO chief executive officer Wynn Smiley told me of his group's convictions.

It seems that ATO was founded in 1865 by a 19-year-old former Confederate soldier who wanted to promote brotherly love as a means of helping to reconcile North and South after the U.S. Civil War. The organization that young Otis Allan Glazebrook founded was not religious but sought to foster reconciliation and brotherhood based on the self-sacrifice and unconditional love demonstrated by Jesus.

Smiley and his colleagues emphasize these roots in their recruitment and educational development. "Jesus made the most radical statements on love," notes Smiley. An example: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you…."

Allen Wilson is ATO's Spiritual Leadership Consultant. Most chapters have chaplains and Wilson travels to help encourage spiritual development. ATO even has a devotional book with inspirational articles by alumni and others on practical themes like character, trust, humility, truth, servant leadership and persevering through disappointment.

Smiley readily admits that not every member or chapter

exemplifies such values. But he points out that hidden personal hurts – from family illness to depression – plus students' concerns for their own future, ethical dilemmas and faith raise questions that "brothers practicing brotherly love should help each other explore." He says that "ATO is committed to talking about issues of faith" and to providing "a loving, trusting environment for brothers to explore, discuss, argue and perhaps even on occasion resolve questions."

He is onto something significant here. Animal House, meet the competition.

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12 Films of 2003 – A Christian Reviews Key Movies

Lord of the Rings, *Whale Rider*, and *Winged Migration*

This year the first of twelve films from 2003 that were especially notable is the final installment of Tolkien's trilogy *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, directed by Peter Jackson. The conclusion of the final installment is structured around the hobbits Frodo (Elijah Wood), and Sam (Sean Astin) as they attempt to return the Ring to Mount Doom where it can be destroyed and save Middle Earth from those who would use the Ring for evil.

Gollum, the grotesque creature who was once a hobbit, continues to struggle with his dual nature; he loves both Frodo and the power of the Ring, but can only have one or the other. This is a valuable lesson for all persons who must make

decisions which will affect their lives for eternity. Unlike Gollum, Frodo, Sam, Gandalf, Arwen, and Aragorn are heroes who overcome great difficulties and extraordinary odds to do the right thing. They all simultaneously attempt to avoid the temptation of the Ring, and instead take the long road toward righteousness. Throughout all nine hours of the trilogy, and especially in this last installment, the epic battle in the heart of man and his nature to embrace evil instead of good serves as the thematic backdrop for some of the most amazing visuals in the history of film.

Those who enjoyed the *Lord of the Rings*, should also like *Whale Rider*. *Rider,* directed by Niki Caro, was the winner of audience awards at both the Sundance and Toronto Film Festivals. This film falls into categories of both coming-of-age films, and those which emphasize the triumph of the will. A young New Zealand girl named Pai (Keisha Castle-Hughes) is the surviving twin of a difficult birth which also claimed her mother's life. Koro (Rawiri Paratene) is the tribal chief and grandfather of Pai. Koro is a traditional male in a traditional New Zealand tribe, and Pai is a less than traditional young girl who challenges the accepted way of thinking and dares to believe that she can become the next chief.

Third in a series of extremely good films which can be recommended to all audiences is *Winged Migration*, a documentary about birds directed by Jacques Perrin. The birds in this film are all flying long distances for the winter, either north or south depending upon their hemisphere of origin. The entire picture is like a nature documentary on steroids; it has all of the wildlife footage one would expect, coupled with seamless shots from ultra-light planes and balloons. This is state of the art documentary that allows the viewer to experience the lives of birds as never before seen.

Luther and *Bonhoeffer*

A second group of notable films for 2003 is *Luther*, a dramatic rendering of one of the greatest of the sixteenth-century reformers, and *Bonhoeffer*: *Agent of Grace*, a historical documentary style drama about the German theologian who worked against the Nazis, and posthumously became one of the most important voices in twentieth-century theology.

The film titled simply *Luther* begins with the young reformer bargaining with God and vowing to enter the monastic order if his own life will be spared. He soon become the chief voice standing against the Holy Roman Church's practice of indulgences and overall spiritual blindness. The indulgences are a major form of income for the Catholic church, and Luther (Joseph Fiennes) finds himself in a kind of David and Goliath position. One of Luther's chief opponents was Leo XII (Uwe Ochsenknecht), who took the young monk's teachings and sermons to be a personal attack upon authority, as well as a financial threat to the empire. Fredrick the Wise (Peter Ustinov), the prince of Augsburg, begins to side with Luther's teaching, and a full scale religious schism erupts.

The film captures Luther's life from his call to become a monk through twenty five years of debate and persecution at the hands of the Roman Catholic Church, and ends with the start of what would become the Protestant Reformation.

Bonhoeffer: Agent Of Grace is a film about the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer from the late 1930s to his death in Germany at the end of WW II in 1945. Bonhoeffer is in America observing the African-American style of worship when the film opens. America would be a safe place to sit out the war, but Bonhoeffer returns to Germany and begins a rhetorical campaign against Hitler, the Nazi party, and even the leaders of the church for their role in the rise of the Third Reich and of the persecution of the Jews.

Bonhoeffer joins the resistance movement when he returns to Germany, and soon he is being watched by the Gestapo. As the "final solution," the extermination of the Jews during the Holocaust, is implemented, he is arrested after a failed attempt on Hitler's life. Bonhoeffer's prison writings are very pragmatic, but they are also the reflections of a devout Christian who is wrestling with ethical dilemmas arising from the war. During times of war and great political evils, Christians must struggle with how much violence and evil can be used to resist an ultimately evil person or situation. Bonhoeffer was eventually executed in 1945 at the age of thirty-nine believing that there is a difference between the "cheap" grace we lavish on ourselves, and the more "costly" grace which may demand a man's life.

Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World and *The Station Agent*

Our list of notable films from 2003 continues with *Master and Commander*, an epic sea adventure set in 1805 when the British boasted that the sun never set on their empire. The film is based on the novels of Patrick O'Brian, and does for the early nineteenth century what *Saving Private Ryan* did for WW II; the film really makes viewers feel as though they are sailing the high seas in search of adventure.

Set on the *HMS Surprise*, the plot line follows the *Acheron*, a French warship, as it tries to catch the *Surprise* which is commanded by Capt. Jack Aubrey (Russell Crowe). Aubrey is contrasted with his friend, Stephen Maturin, the ship's surgeon. Capt. Aubrey is a pragmatist who pursues noble adventure and a life of war upon the sea. Maturin is a very introspective intellectual who travels with the British warship so he can collect animal and biological specimens. The contrast is highly textured and extremely well developed, affording the viewer a rare insight into the psyche of two

very different, if not totally opposite, men. All of this and high sea adventure involving very violent war scenes make for a thoroughly delightful film.

Another fairly accessible film, but not one recommended for those under seventeen, is Thomas McCarthy's film, *The Station Agent*, which is centered around a dwarf named Finbar McBride (Peter Dinklage). McBride has a passion for trains, and uses that passion to protect himself from those who would mock and pester him. His devotion to all things relating to trains is fully realized when he inherits an old run-down train station in the town of Newfoundland, New Jersey when his only friend in the world, Henry Styles (Paul Benjamin), dies. Finbar moves into the train station seeking peace and solitude from a world that has a hard time understanding someone who appears to be so different, but who is actually more human than those people who intentionally and unintentionally persecute him.

Finbar's hope for solitude is first interrupted by Joe Oramas (Bobby Cannavale), who drives a coffee truck and is always willing to give unsolicited advice to others. Finbar's solitude is further disrupted by Olivia Harris (Patricia Clarkson), a divorced woman who is working through the death of a child. Olivia almost hits Finbar with her car as he is coming and going from a nearby convenience store, presumably to emphasize his near invisibility to others. Like a good Flannery O'Connor short story, *The Station Agent* closes with a scene that will cause all viewers to examine their attitudes toward people who are different.

Elephant and *Thirteen*

Two films from 2003 that deal with teenagers are *Elephant*, from Gus Van Zant, and *Thirteen*, directed by Catherine Hardwicke.

Elephant's title comes from the familiar reference to an

elephant being in the room, and everyone pretending that it is not there. The film is a chronicle of one day in a Columbine-like high school, and the complete inability of those involved, as well as those viewing the film, to comprehend what is happening. The camera simply tracks the activities of the killers and their victims in the hours that lead up to the massacre. Then the viewer gets a front row seat to the killings that any reporter would love to have for a spot on the evening news. Van Zant is uses violence to protest violence, presumably believing that much of the violence we have in this country is due to not understanding how pervasive and real such violence is, or that it could happen to anyone.

The killers laugh and carry on in such an unconcerned manner that the viewer cannot believe they would strike out against their world by shooting their classmates. Christian viewers, however, should be able to watch the film knowing that the explanation for such behavior rests in the doctrine of original sin and man's fall from grace. It can also remind people that things happen that do not always follow our expectations.

In *Thirteen,* another film dealing with teenagers, the emphasis is on the difficulties faced by many adolescent girls. Evie (Nikki Reed) is a wild child who loves to flirt with danger, and is exactly the kind of girl you would not want your daughter to have as a friend. She is popular, sexually experienced, and lives without shame or worry. Evie's character is a sharp contrast with that of Tracy (Evan Rachel Wood), the good and unassuming girl who just wants to be cool and hang out with a more popular crowd. Evie begins to relate stories of sexual conquests and shoplifting sprees that are particularly impressive to Tracy. It seems as though Evie wants to clone herself as many times as possible.

Melanie (Holly Hunter), Tracy's mother, is a divorcée and recovering alcoholic who can barely make ends meet. She is a little naïve concerning her daughter's behavior, but begins to

have suspicions when Evie comes to live with them. Evie's behavior goes from bad to worse until a culminating scene where her lies are exposed, and Tracy begins to see the wisdom of her mother's advice.

Both *Elephant* and *Thirteen* are films which should be approached with caution. And while they are not for everyone, some people will find them to be among of the best examples of teen angst in recent years.

Mystic River, *Stone Reader*, and *Finding Nemo*

The last three films recommended as notable features from 2003 are *Mystic River*, *Stone Reader*, and *Finding Nemo*. *Mystic River* is Clint Eastwood's twenty-fourth film, and one of the handful he has directed but not also starred in. The story is centered around the lives of three boyhood friends who grow up, get married, and live normal if not boring lives.

The three friends, Jimmy, Dave and Sean (played by Sean Penn, Tim Robins and Kevin Beacon respectively), have tried to forget the time when one of them was molested by a man in their Boston neighborhood. The emotional trauma the young boys suffered is revisited when Katie, Jimmy's daughter, is brutally beaten to death. The two main suspects are Brendon, Katie's boyfriend, and Dave, who came home mumbling about beating up a mugger and was covered in blood.

Jimmy takes the law into his own hands when he believes he has discovered Katie's murderer. There is a connection between the revenge Jimmy executes and the molestation the men witnessed when they were young. There is a "mystic river" that flows in a man's life, and rarely is the destination reached the same as the one hoped for. *Mystic River* finishes as a meditation on time, growing old, and the way in which the past continually affects the future.

Stone Reader, a documentary by filmmaker Mark Moskowitz, opens with a search for Dow Mossman, an author who wrote a single novel only to "retire" and disappear into obscurity. There are plenty of films based on books, and others with authors as major or minor characters, but there are very few films so purely about books, authors, editors, and the difficult task of seeing even a single novel through to publication.

Editors and publishers provide some of the most interesting dialogue, discussing everything from the difficulties of publishing, to the classic, but real, anxiety of the author, and the plight of the one-novel wonder.

The documentary is also a quest and road film. It is a kind of odyssey for anyone who has loved a particular novel or its author, and wondered what became of them years later.

Finally, no list of notable films from 2003 would be complete without *Finding Nemo*, the animated film from Pixar, the studio responsible for *Toy Story*. In *Nemo,* the action is centered around an overprotective father and his son who are both fish. As in *Toy Story,* where the world of toys were brought to life, the Pixar people take viewers into the highly colorful world of the ocean. The viewer will be rooting for little Nemo as he is caught by a diver and is pursued by a loving father.

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Fahrenheit 9/11

Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*

Fahrenheit 9/11, Michael Moore's new documentary, has been

raising much concern since its mid-summer release from a number of groups. These groups represent a large demographic, and no one appears to be lukewarm to the film; people either love it or hate it. Rated "R" for scenes from the Iraq war, and a split second clip showing the execution of a prisoner by the government of Saudi Arabia, *Fahrenheit* is an exercise in cut-and-paste film making that poses as a traditional documentary, but is really a thinly veiled and vehement anti-Bush propaganda piece.

The film won the Palme de'Or at this year's Cannes Film Festival, the first documentary film to ever capture the prize. A quick survey of some of the films in the past that have received the award, (among them Orson Welles' *Othello*, Antonioni's *Blow–Up*, Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* to name just a few) raises the question of what makes this particular work worthy of one of the most coveted honors in cinema. I have been professionally involved in film criticism for almost ten years, and this is one of the worst documentaries I have ever seen. Moore's film is undeserving of a place among these heavyweights, but we appear to be in a time when anything that bashes America, its perceived imperialism, or the Bush administration, is not only good, but is something to be revered.

The film begins with the 2000 presidential election and the efforts to decide if Bush or Gore won. Moore claims in his film that several investigations uncovered the fact that Gore actually won. However, he fails to give us the sources of those "investigations." He does not acknowledge that newspapers as credible as the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times* declared that Bush won the electoral vote, even if he did not win the popular vote (it should be kept in mind that the final count on the popular vote may never actually be known). The film plays to all of those who believe that Bush "stole" the election, and ignores the fact that the Supreme Court awarded Bush the election after law suits from both

parties were settled.

Moore then directs the viewer's attention to the House of Saud. In this segment, Moore concentrates his energies on the connection between the Bush administration and the Royal Saudi family. He equates being involved with the Royal Family as being involved with terrorists. Moore groups all of the people from a certain ethnic group into one neat category, and maintains that association with that group is wrong. This is just an introduction to Moore's casual handling of facts that will follow in the rest of the film.

President Bush on September 11

The continuing enthusiasm for Moore's "documentary" needs to be examined in the light of the misinformation, poor research, and disregard for the facts that constitute the main body of the film. Dave Kopel has written an excellent review of the film titled "Fifty-nine Deceits in *Fahrenheit 9/11*" that can be found at www.davekopel.com. It is a forty-page exposition with detailed information concerning the specific factual errors found throughout Moore's film, and is the basis of much of the information summarized in the four or five points we will consider.

In one of the early scenes in the film, President Bush is shown reading from the book *My Pet Goat* to an assembly of elementary school children after he had already received the news that the September 11 attacks were occurring (actually it was a chapter from *Reading Mastery 2* that Bush was reading to the children). Moore's voice-over, a technique that is uniformly suspicious with film makers as an indication of a poor film that needs rescuing or explaining to its audience, suggests that Bush sits quietly in a state of bewilderment wondering what he should do. The insinuation is that Bush is an incompetent and unprepared leader who has been dumfounded

by the surprise attack. Moore goes on to say that Bush clearly did the wrong thing, and that he should have been prompted into action immediately.

Moore does not suggest what the president should have done; he merely derides his hesitation after hearing the news. Moore also leaves out the fact that the principle of the school, Gwendolyn Tose-Rigell, gave Bush high praise for his calm handling of the situation saying, "I do not think anyone could have handled the situation better." This praise came from someone who understands that children are easily alarmed and in this instance needed a calming voice from someone in charge.

Moore belittles the president for being dumbstruck by the attack. The insinuation is that a better leader would have taken control of the situation and rushed into action to address the emergency. One could easily view the same clip and come to the conclusion that here was a man who was extremely disturbed by what he knew, and realized that all of the forces of American intelligence from the FBI, the CIA, and certainly the Pentagon were being called into immediate action, and that there was little that could be accomplished by rushing out of the room. What this segment of the film does is merely make fun of the president's facial expressions, and, in effect, for not stirring the young children, their parents, and the nation into a state of panic.

The Saudi Connection

Let's turn next to the relationship between President Bush and Prince Bandar of Saudi Arabia. Moore attempts to make a case that the Bush family is in a cozy and financially beneficial relationship with prince Bandar, and that this relationship could not help but interfere with United States' interest, especially during a crisis on the scale of the 9/11 attacks.

This claim or insinuation fails to point out that Prince Bandar has participated in a bipartisan relationship with both parties in Washington for decades. Elsa Walsh, in an article in *The New Yorker* magazine from March 24, 2003, gives a detailed account of former president Bill Clinton frequently turning to Prince Bandar for advice on Middle East agendas. She goes on to show how Bandar has become an "indispensable operator" for both parties.

Moore is either unaware or willfully omitting the relationship concerning Clinton's former Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Wyche Fowler, whose present job is chairman of The Middle East Institute. This institute is heavily supported by the Saudis, who have secretly donated over $1 million to the Clinton Library. The point in citing the Clinton administration's involvement with the Bandar family is not to absolve the Bush family of any wrongdoing, if in fact there is anything wrong. The issue is that if one administration is wrong in cooperating with the Prince, then both administrations are wrong. What is far more likely is that Prince Bandar is a necessary ally and advisor to the United States regardless of which party is in power. Moore is hypocritical to ignore such connections, and this is a prime example of what one finds throughout the film.

By mentioning Prince Bandar repeatedly in association with oil money, Moore takes the viewers so far down a path of conjecture that many will draw the conclusion that the Bush administration's foreign policy does not have the United States' interest as a top priority. However, there may be some good that can come out of this if the viewer comes away with a concern about our nation's dependence on foreign oil. At present it is very difficult for candidates at almost any level to get elected if they run on a platform that appears to threaten American's supply of cheap oil and petroleum products. Therefore, Moore is correct in making the connection that American foreign policy may be overly dependent on Saudi

interests. However, it is misleading at best to suggest that Saudi influence only occurs when Republicans are in office, and ignores the fact that both parties are influenced by Bandar and Saudi Arabia.

A Cavalier President?

Moore charges President Bush for being on vacation forty-two percent of the time during his first eight months as president. The calculation used to arrive at the number forty-two would be interesting in and of itself, but the fact that Moore ignores the concept of the "working vacation," or the fact that most presidencies could not fare well if they were subjected to such a calculation, is again very misleading.

In his article "Just the facts of *Fahrenheit 9/11´,*"{1} Tom McNamee exposes what may have been the source for Moore's forty-two percent figure. McNamee points out that of the fifty-four days Moore cites when Bush was at his ranch in Crawford, Texas, weekends were also included; a fact that Moore fails to point out. Another interesting source is Mike Allen's article in the *Washington Post*.{2} Allen notes that Camp David stays have traditionally been used for meetings with foreign dignitaries, ambassadors, and other heads of state, and are routinely reported on cable and network newscasts as work. This alone should be enough to raise a cautionary flag for viewers of the film. Moore is playing fast and lose with the facts, never giving Bush the benefit of the doubt or pointing out that many of Bush's so-called sins are standard behavior for any administration regardless of the party in power.

Moore continues the slanted montage of images with shots showing Bush relaxing at Camp David, working on his Crawford ranch, and driving golf balls while lightheartedly responding

to questions from reporters. The implication Moore wants the viewer to draw is that the leader of the free world is more concerned about his golf game than fighting terrorism and doing his job. The following Tuesday this clip was clarified by Brit Hume and Brian Wilson on the Fox News Channel. They reported that Bush was answering a question concerning an attack carried out by Israel in response to a Palestinian suicide bomber.

Moore evidently does not see the hypocrisy of failing to mention president Clinton hitting golf balls on the White House lawn moments after learning that Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin had been shot, and not knowing whether he would live or die.

Again, this is another example of how Moore is throwing together film clips, adding a voice over, and leading the audience astray. If this film were part of a graduate or doctoral research project of any form the candidate would be failed outright for false and misleading research and for failure to check his sources. Additionally, any reputable news organization making such a case would probably be sued for libel and slander.

Fahrenheit 9/11 and the Current Crisis

In this writer's opinion, it would be overly generous to just dismiss the film as composed of half-truths and misinformation. The film is not only a poor documentary undeserving of the prestigious Cannes Film Festival's highest honor, the Palm d'Or, but a potentially dangerous movie that may not be advantageous to our troops in Iraq.

Fahrenheit 9/11 is at best a propaganda piece that potentially played into the hands of al Qaeda, Saddam loyalists, and the coalition enemy operatives and terrorists who continue to back Saddam Hussein and are presently killing American soldiers and

targeting United States interests around the world. In his own words found at MichaelMoore.com, April 14, 2004, he said: "The Iraqis who have risen up against the occupation are not insurgents' or terrorists' or The Enemy.' They are the REVOLUTION, the Minutemen, and their numbers will grow – and they will win."{3}

It is irresponsible to call Iraqis "freedom fighters" who have opposed themselves to a free democratic nation that is sacrificing its sons and daughters so that others might live without the threat of a totalitarian dictator who kills his own people. Moore maintains that he is deeply concerned about American troops, but also lauds the efforts of the enemy insurgents who are killing those troops. One cannot have it both ways and remain rationally consistent.

Several efforts are presently underway to begin distribution of *Fahrenheit 9/11* through Middle East distributors. Hezbollah, a known terrorist organization, is assisting *Front Row* distributors in the promotion of Moore's film. Additionally, Nancy Tartaglion in *Screen Daily.com* (June 9th, 2004) and Salon.com both reported that *Fahrenheit* will be the first commercially released documentary in the Middle East, opening in both Lebanon and Syria soon (Syria is presently on the United States list of terrorist states). It could easily be argued that Moore is indirectly getting rich from the approval and support of known terrorist groups and enemies of the United States.

Our country is a stronger and better place because of the freedom of speech we enjoy, and Moore in some ways represents a long tradition of vocal and organized opposition to the wars and polices of our government. He does have a right to be heard, and one should not avoid the film just because he or she has a preconceived notion of its message. *Fahrenheit 9/11* may prove to be a very important piece of propaganda, both in this election year and in the future. It could also be very important that there are people out there who have seen the

film and can offer reasoned critiques to those who might otherwise be lead astray by this controversial and misleading documentary.

Notes

1. Tom McNamee, "Just the facts on 'Fahrenheit 9/11' *Chicago Sun-Times,* June 28, 2004.

2. Mike Allen, "White House On the Range. Bush Retreats to Ranch for 'Working Vacation'," *Washington Post,* August 7, 2001.

3.http://www.michaelmoore.com/words/message/index.php?messageDate=2004-04-14

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Athlete Ranks New Life Greater Than Olympic Gold

Suppose you had a chance to win a medal at the Athens Olympics. Could anything make you turn it down?

Olympic success can bring fame, lifetime honor and lucrative endorsement contracts. Olympic games usually bring many inspiring stories of victory through determination and achievement despite adversity. Stars are born and careers receive quantum boosts.

Consider British hurdler Tasha Danvers-Smith. She has been ranked sixth in the world in her event. Her Olympic prospects

looked bright.

But her ticket to the Athens track was never punched. It wasn't injury or defeat that kept her from competing in the games. It was her personal choice.

Tasha Danvers married her coach, Darrell Smith, in November 2003. In early 2004, she was in excellent physical shape and keenly focused on her training. Then, as she told the Telegraph newspaper, she felt tired all the time, feeling flat for no reason.

In the spring, a home pregnancy test showed positive and she learned she was nine weeks pregnant. "I was in shock, reports Danvers-Smith. I only took the test because I wanted to stop myself worrying about it. Not for one minute did I think it would be positive. The couple had not planned to start a family until after the Olympics.

Having a baby in December would eliminate her chances of competing in Athens in August. It would increase their expenses and mean lean times. They did not own a home and were living with her husband's parents. She – through her athletic competition – was the main source of income.

As she put it, When my body is my business, then if my body is not functioning, there is no business.

Feeling devastated, the couple considered an abortion. It would seem a simple solution to an inconvenient problem, a comparatively easy way to eliminate an obstacle to the success and recognition she sought.

The thought [of an abortion] did cross our minds as an option," recalls Danvers-Smith. But this line from the Scriptures kept coming into my head: 'For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?

She tried to convince herself that she should terminate her

pregnancy but struggled through her tears with an alternative she could not accept: “For me, the whole wide world was the Olympics. At the same time, I felt I would be losing my soul. It just wouldn’t fit well. It would be a forced decision . . . something that wasn’t going to make me happy at all.

Aiming now for the 2008 games, she seems happy with her choice and philosophical about her mixed metaphor situation: Life throws you curve balls and you just have to roll with the punches.”

Abortion is, of course, one of today’s most controversial issues. But regardless of one’s views on this emotionally explosive topic, it seems appropriate to admire the dedication of a woman who wrestled with an agonizing decision and made her choice to bear her child and postpone possible future glory and fortune.

Regardless of what success eventually comes her way, might that choice become Danvers-Smith’s lifetime golden moment?

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Five Films from 2002 – A

Christian Critic’s Review

2002 was a fantastic year for the cinema, so let’s review a few notable features.

Lord of the Rings

J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy continues with the second installment, *The Two Towers*, directed by Peter Jackson. The trilogy as a whole follows the struggle for possession of the One Ring created by the Dark Lord Sauron, which, if returned, will enable him to enslave the entire world.

The first film ended with the apparent death of Gandalf who was assisting the hobbits in their quest to destroy the ring. Another key figure, Boromir, who was assisting the hobbits, also died, compromising the strength of the fellowship which then splintered into three groups. In *The Two Towers,* Frodo and Samwise are in possession of the ring and are on the way to Mordor, while Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas is attempting to save Merry and Pippen as the elves wrestle with the question of whether they should intervene on behalf of mankind or leave them to suffer whatever fate should befall them. An additional character, Gollum, a loathsome creature (created as a completely digital character) who made only a brief appearance in the first film, becomes the most prominent feature of the second as an antagonist who vacillates between his conviction to help the hobbits and his urge to kill them and take the ring to fulfill his own selfish desires.

The film as a whole is a masterpiece of technical genius and creativity. One should not, however, get lost in the digital effects and panoramic landscapes and forget that at the heart of the story is an epic struggle between good and evil. Tolkien, a devout Christian, believed in the power of epic narrative to stir the soul to a greater understanding of life and man’s place in the universe. The *Rings* trilogy is not a

close allegory of the Christian narrative, but plays on the tension of the great cosmic battle taking place in all men which is being fought with high stakes and eternal consequences.

In one scene, Sam pleads with Frodo to continue their mission and destroy the ring in order to save man from a terrible fate. He says, “There is good in the world, and it is worth fighting for.” This is a reminder to all, especially the devout followers of Tolkien, that we too are in the midst of a great battle and everyone must do his part or evil will triumph.

One of the great values of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy can best be understood in light of Tolkien’s understanding of the fairy tale.

> *“The realm of the fairy-story is wide and deep and high and filled with so many things: all manner of beasts and birds are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and ever present peril; both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords.”{1}*

The *Rings* trilogy is not a “fairy-story” in this sense, however it does contain a fairy-story in the background (*The Hobbit*) that challenges the reader to suspend his or her disbelief and entertain ideas of magic, miracle, and unseen powers and forces. In doing this, one is indirectly prepared to entertain the gospels which are filled with accounts of beings who come down and intervene in the affairs of men (angels), a virgin birth, nature miracles, resurrections form the dead, and ascensions back to heavenly realms.

The Two Towers concludes with a cliffhanger that should be resolved in the third and final installment, *The Return of the King,* next year. In the meantime it is advisable to read the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in order to better understand the true grandeur of Tolkien’s visionary masterpiece.

Far From Heaven

Todd Haynes' *Far From Heaven* portrays the lives of a typical, upper-class Caucasian family of the 1950s that by all outward appearances have a life made in heaven. Upon closer view we see that, in reality, their lives are far from paradise. This story is not intended as entertainment for the masses. Everything does not work out well and no one lives happily ever after. In modern American culture we often tend to idealize past times and places, remembering them the way we wish they had been, and forgetting the darker currents that made up that particular era. *Far from Heaven* is stylistically a tribute and homage to the Technicolor films of the fifties with a serious examination of post-war American life with all of its blemishes in which Haynes accurately creates a picture of a culture turning away from tradition, family, and church.

Cathy Whitaker (played by Julianne More) is a classic "June Cleaver" housewife and mother of two in the mid-fifties with a seemingly typical husband, Frank (played by Dennis Quaid), who may be compared with Thomas Wrath, the character played by Gregory Peck in *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*. Neither is quite comfortable in his job, home, or marriage to an idyllic fifties housewife. However, while Wrath returns in the end to family, tradition and home, Frank begins to exercise his latent homosexual tendencies and is caught by his wife in a passionate embrace with another man. Frank agrees to attend counseling, but continues to engage in this adulterous affair and in the end leaves his family. The film tragically concludes with a scene of Frank at peace with himself and his male lover in a hotel room.

When Cathy, who is a Caucasian American, cannot confide in her daiquiri-drinking, bridge-playing socialite friends about her homosexual husband, she seeks solace in her gardener Raymond (played by Dennis Haysbert) who is African-American and a single parent. Soon Cathy and Raymond are seen walking

together in public, and on one occasion dancing and drinking in an exclusively black bar in a town that will tolerate a discreet affair, but not inter-racial relationships or homosexual adultery. Meanwhile the children fade into the background, cast aside like so many unused lifestyle accessories that, while once cherished, now seem more of an inconvenience.

As the film concludes, the lights go down on a family and a community in the early postwar decades that would soon become more promiscuous and sinful. *Far From Heaven* should be viewed as a kind of history lesson, a reminder of the far-reaching consequences of the moral decline of the last half of the twentieth century.

A Walk To Remember

A welcomed surprise in our list of notable films for 2002 is *A Walk to Remember*, based on the novel by Nicholas Sparks and directed by Adam Shankman. The film begins with a painfully stock set of characters, but moves beyond the formulaic to create a story that is not only a pleasant surprise, but is truly inspirational. Landon Carter (played by Shane West) is the obligatory renegade cool guy at his school. When he participates with friends in a prank that results in the serious injury and near death of another student he is sentenced to tutor younger students at the school on Saturdays and act in the annual school play.

As Landon is no Laurence Olivier as an actor, he reluctantly but desperately enlists the help of Jamie Sullivan (played by pop singer Mandy Moore), a conservative and rather plain-looking girl who seems to be the antithesis of what he and his friends consider to be cool. She lives quietly with her widowed father, the town minister. Jamie, who wears plain clothes and the same drab sweater every day, is immune to the taunts of her peers and rides the school bus with her Bible in her lap. Her confidence is drawn from a very mature faith in

God, and from wisdom gained from facing some very adult situations early in life.

Despite Jamie's warning, Landon falls in love with both her simple charm and the strange confidence she possesses. His friends, who seem to be opposed to any form of spiritual pursuits, shun him for his association with someone who so fearlessly lives a Christian life. Reverend Sullivan, Jamie's father (Treat Williams), is not impressed with his would-be son-in-law. He sees the union between Jamie and Landon as impulsive and non-scriptural. Landon's mother (Daryl Hannah) is also doubtful about her son's relationship, but appears to lack the spiritual depth to understand or guide him. When Landon confronts his estranged father who has remarried the conflict grows to the point of crisis. This misguided young man can find no one to support or direct him.

Before wedding bells can ring, Jamie must reveal a secret that will change the course of everyone's lives. Even after Jamie's devastating revelation, Landon decides he cannot pass up a once in a lifetime opportunity to marry this remarkable Christian girl and discover a spiritual side to himself he did not know existed. In the end, her influence challenges and alters his life in a miraculous way as her source of strength becomes his. Landon finds healing for relationships and hope for a future that he had previously been unable to conceive.

A Walk to Remember offers a positive portrayal of Christians and well developed characters that struggle with very mature issues.

My Big Fat Greek Wedding

My Big Fat Greek Wedding, the low budget independent film directed by Joel Zwick that celebrates all things Greek, crossed over into the main-stream movie market and became a favorite of both critics and audiences in America. Toula Portokalos (played by the film's writer Nia Vardalos) is the

film’s central character: a 30-year-old Greek woman who feels that she is at least ten years past the date for meeting her family’s matrimonial expectations, and with no prospects on the horizon. The family will not let her forget that Greek women are on the earth for three things: to find a Greek husband, to have Greek children, and to feed everyone until the day they die. This light-hearted comedy tells the story of Toula’s quest for a husband and her transformation from a rather drab old maid into a truly beautiful bride.

As the film opens, we meet Toula, a “seating hostess” (which she insists should not be confused with a mere waitress) at the family restaurant that is appropriately called *Dancing Zorbas*. One day Ian Miller (played by John Corbett), a kind of hipster vegetarian, sees Toula, and there is a natural mutual attraction that soon leads to full blown love and one very big fat Greek culture shock for Ian and his family. Before her family will bless the marriage, though, there is a last ditch effort to match Toula with a genuine Greek man that results in one of the most hilarious parade of fools ever assembled. Having done their best to preserve the purity of their Greek bloodline, the family gives in and begins to warm up to Ian.

Ian watches in amazement as his soon-to-be father-in-law, Gus (Michael Constantine), uses Windex to cure everything from minor cuts and burns to arthritis and sore ligaments. Another Greek custom that is extremely foreign is the practice of spitting on a bride for good luck, an act that disgusts the middle class parents of the groom. When Ian’s parents bring a bundt cake to a family party, the Greeks cannot understand why someone would make a cake with a hole in the center. The cake reappears later with a potted plant in the center for presentation. Misunderstandings between two very different families are the driving force behind hilarious cultural awakenings. However, their desire to understanding one another makes the characters both endearing and truly human. *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is a great example of how the differences we

have with one another can be overcome by true love and a recognition of the greater number of similarities we share as human beings.

Kandahar

Kandahar is a hybrid of documentary, historical, and biographical narrative, that is based on the real-life situation of Nelofer Pazira who plays Nafas, the lead character in the story. Mohsen Makhmalbaf (best known for *Gabbe* and *The Apple*), directs the film that was shot just prior to September 11 without professional actors and literally in the minefields of the Iran-Afghanistan border. Makhmalbaf has been directing films for almost twenty years, and *Kandahar* is his best work to date.

Nafas is a female Canadian journalist who is returning to Afghanistan because the sister she left there was maimed by a land mine and is threatening to commit suicide during the final solar eclipse of the twentieth century. The film simultaneously navigates through themes of the oppression of women, widespread poverty and hunger, and the ever-present realities of landmines in one of the most war-torn regions of the world.

It is not exactly clear on which of these themes Makhmalbaf would have the viewer concentrate, but this becomes a strength rather than a weakness. *Kandahar* is a kind of slow walk through the unseen side of Afghanistan before the West knew very much about it, and before it had been labeled an “evil empire” by those who only learned about it after September 11th. The Afghanistan we see in the film is the one where someone has died every five minutes in the past twenty-five years from land-mines, wars, famine or draught. It is a region in which young girls must be trained not to pick up the dolls that have been placed over the mines as bait for young children.

Nafas's effort to return behind the Muslim Iron Curtain takes her through a land of refugee camps that are populated almost exclusively by amputees. In one of the many surreal scenes, hoards of one-legged men run a foot race across the desert to retrieve prosthetic legs that are parachuting from the sky. The limbs, referred to simply as "legs," are coveted items that had been ordered a year earlier; such items rarely find their way back to the originally intended patients. This scene and many others remind the viewer of what daily life in a war-torn third world country is like.

America is now winding down a war with a middle eastern people that few of us understand with great clarity, and many view with nothing but bewilderment. Many people believe that we will be rebuilding Iraq soon, and that there may also be opportunities to participate in a dialogue with them concerning spiritual values, worldviews, and religion. *Kandahar* is a film that offers us an opportunity to understand people who have vastly different worldviews. Before we can presume to minister to a people, or to criticize them, we should look at the world from their perspective and at least make some effort to understand their plight. Many countries throughout the world have welcomed the liberation and freedoms that followed American intervention and occupation. *Kandahar* allows us to see the plight of people who need someone to hear their cries and identify with their pain; a people desperately in need of help.

Nafas serves as a kind of poster-child for the millions of women who live in exile behind the veil of the burka—a symbol now used world wide to plead the case of oppressed women. *Kandahar* may serve as a valuable lesson for many who would like a different look at the problems of Afghanistan.

Notes

1. "On Fairy-Stories", *The Tolkien Reader*, Ballantine, 1966.

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Christianity and Racism – Was Jesus a Racist?

Rusty Wright takes a hard look at this question: does Christianity promote racism? He looks at the lives and teachings of Jesus and Paul to see if they taught equality of all races or promoted racism. He finds that it is not the teachings of Christianity that promote racism. A biblical worldview will create a love for all people and a desire to help them develop personal faith.

Does Christianity Promote Racism?

Thirty years after the heyday of the Civil Rights movement, racial issues in the US remain sensitive. Racial quotas in the workplace and academia continue to be controversial. Prominent corporations are accused of racist practices. Certain supremacy groups promote the Bible, God and the white race. Race and politics interact in ways that carry both national and international significance.

A few years back, the Southern Baptist Convention made headlines for renouncing racism, condemning slavery and apologizing for the church's intolerant past. That laudable contrition raised a deeper question: Why would Christianity ever be associated with racial oppression in the first place? How did the faith whose founder told people to "love one another" ever become linked with human bondage and social apartheid?

African-American theologian James Cone notes that “In the old slavery days, the Church preached that slavery was a divine decree, and it used the Bible as the basis of its authority.”{1}

“Not only did Christianity fail to offer the … [Black] hope of freedom in the world, but the manner in which Christianity was communicated to him tended to degrade him. The … [Black] was taught that his enslavement was due to the fact that he had been cursed by God. … Parts of the Bible were carefully selected to prove that God had intended that the…[Black] should be the servant of the white man….”{2}

As a white baby boomer growing up in the South, I experienced segregated schools, restrooms, drinking fountains and beaches. My parents taught and modeled equality, so the injustice I saw saddened me deeply. I was appalled that the Ku Klux Klan used the Bible and the cross in its rituals.

During college, a friend brought an African-American student to a church I attended in North Carolina. The next Sunday, the pastor announced that because of “last week’s racial incident” (the attendance of a Black), church leaders had voted to maintain their longstanding policy of racial segregation. Thereafter, any Blacks attending would be handed a note explaining the policy and asking that they not return. I was outraged and left the church. (Postscript: A few years ago I learned that that white church had folded and that an African-American church came to use the same facility. Maybe God has a sense of humor.)

Does Christianity promote racism? Is it mainly a faith for whites? This article will examine these two burning questions.

Was Jesus Racist?

Does the Christian faith promote racism? Is it mainly for whites? Certain extremists think so. Some slavery-era

ministers wrote books justifying slavery. George D. Armstrong wrote in *The Christian Doctrine of Slavery*, "It may be… that Christian slavery is God's solution of the problem [relation of labor and capital] about which the wisest statesmen of Europe confess themselves at fault."{3}

Consider another book, *Slavery Ordained of God*. In it, Fred A. Ross wrote, "Slavery is ordained of God, … to continue for the good of the slave, the good of the master, the good of the whole American family, until another and better destiny may be unfolded."{4}

Those words seem quite different from the biblical injunction to "love your neighbor as yourself," a statement with equally poignant historical roots.

In first-century Palestine, the Jews and Samaritans were locked in a blood feud. Divided by geography, religion and race, the two groups spewed venom. Each had its own turf. Jews considered the Samaritans to be racial "half-breeds." The two groups disputed which followed the Bible better and on whose land proper worship should occur.

The Samaritans were often inhospitable to{5} and hostile toward the Jews. Many Jewish pilgrims deliberately lengthened their journeys to bypass Samaria. Jews publicly cursed Samaritans in their synagogues, would not allow Samaritan testimony in Jewish courts, and generally considered Samaritans excluded from eternal life.{6}

Once a Jewish lawyer asked Jesus of Nazareth, "Who is my neighbor?"{7} Jesus, who as Jew surprised people by mixing freely with Samaritans, told him a now famous story. Robbers attacked a Jewish traveler, beating him and leaving him half-dead. Two Jewish religious leaders ignored the injured man as they passed by. But a Samaritan felt compassion for the Jewish victim – his cultural enemy – and bandaged his wounds, transported him to an inn and provided for his care. Jesus'

point? This “Good Samaritan” was an example of how we should relate to those with whom we differ.

The founder of the Christian faith was no racist. He told people to get along. What about a chief expositor of the Christian faith? And why is eleven o-clock Sunday morning often the most segregated hour of the week? Let’s turn now to these important questions.

Was A Chief Expositor of the Faith A Racist?

Does Christianity promote racism? As we have seen, Jesus of Nazareth was no racist. Living in a culturally and racially diverse society that was in many ways analogous to ours, He promoted harmony by His example and His words. What about Paul, one of the chief expositors of faith in Christ?

Paul often had to counsel members of the communities he advised about diversity issues. Some in the groups with which he consulted were Jews, some were non-Jews or “Gentiles.” Some were slaves and some were free. Some were men and some were women. The mix was potentially explosive.

From prison, Paul wrote to a friend whose slave had run away, had met Paul, and had come to faith. Paul appealed to his friend on the basis of their relationship to welcome the slave back not as a slave but as a brother. He offered to repay any loss from his own pocket. The letter survives in the New Testament as the book of “Philemon” and is a touching example of a dedicated believer seeking to internally motivate a slaveholder to change his attitudes and behavior.{8}

Paul felt that the faith he had once persecuted could unify people. He wrote to one group of believers that because of their common spiritual commitment, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one….”{9} Paul, a Jew by birth, wrote to some non-Jewish

believers that “Christ himself has made peace between us Jews and you Gentiles by making us all one people. He has broken down the wall of hostility that used to separate us.”{10}

Paul exhorted another group of believers to live in harmony. He wrote, “Since God chose you to be the holy people whom he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. You must make allowance for each other’s faults and forgive the person who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. And the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony.”{11}

Paul promoted harmony, not discord. If the founder of the faith and its chief expositor were not racists, why is eleven o’clock Sunday morning often the most segregated hour of the week?

True Followers?

Why is Christianity often associated with racism? The short answer is that some that claim to be followers of Jesus are not really following Him. They may have the label “Christian,” but perhaps they never have established a personal friendship with Christ. They may be like I was for many years: a church member, seemingly devoted, but who had never accepted Christ’s pardon based on His death and resurrection for me. Or they may have genuine faith, but haven’t allowed God into the driver’s seat of their life. I’ve been there, too.

I shall always remember Norton and Bo. Norton was a leader of the Georgia Black Student Movement in the 1970s. Bo was a racially prejudiced white Christian. Once during an Atlanta civil rights demonstration, Bo and some of his cronies beat Norton up. The animosity ran deep.

Norton later discovered that Christianity was not a religion

of oppressive rules, but a relationship with God. As his faith sprouted and grew, his anger mellowed while his desire for social justice deepened. Meanwhile, Bo rejected his hypocrisy and began to follow his faith with God in control. Three years after the beating, the two unexpectedly met again at a Christian conference. Initial tension melted into friendship as they forgave each other, reconciled and treated each other like brothers.

Of course not all disobedient Christians are racists. Nor is everyone not aligned with Jesus a racist. But faith in Christ can give enemies motivation to reconcile, to replace hatred with love.

Historical examples abound of true faith opposing racism. John Newton, an 18th-century British slave trader, came to faith, renounced his old ways, became a pastor, and wrote the famous hymn, “Amazing Grace.” Newton encouraged his Christian friend, William Wilberforce, who faced scorn and ridicule in leading a long but successful battle in Parliament to abolish the slave trade.

Does Christianity promote racism? No, true Christianity seeks to eliminate racism by changing people’s hearts.

After I had spoken on this theme in a sociology class at North Carolina State University, a young African-American woman told me, “All my life I’ve been taught that white Christians were responsible for the oppression of my people. Now I realize those oppressors were not really following Christ.”

Is Christianity just for whites? Norton, the Black activist, certainly did not think so. Let’s look further at the faith that crosses racial divides.

The Heart of the Matter

Is Christianity just for whites? Jesus and Paul said anyone who believed would be plugged into God forever. Africa has

millions who follow Jesus. Koreans send missionaries to the US. And don't we need them!

In Cape Town, South Africa, Saint James Church has been a beacon of diversity and social concern with its white, Black, Asian and biracial members. One Sunday evening, radical Black terrorists sprayed the multiracial congregation with automatic gunfire and grenades. Eleven died and 53 were wounded, some horribly maimed. The world press was astounded by the members' reaction.

Lorenzo Smith, who is biracial, saw his wife, Myrtle, die from shrapnel that pierced her heart as he tried to shield her. Yet he forgave the killers. "I prayed for those that committed the crime," he told me, "so they, too, can come to meet [the Lord]."

The president of the West African nation of Benin came to the US a few years back with a message for African American leaders: His compatriots were sorry for their ancestors' complicity in the slave trade. An often-overlooked component of slavery's historical stain is that Black Africans sold other Black Africans into slavery. When rival tribes made war, the victors took prisoners and made them indentured servants, often selling them to white slave merchants.

Benin's President Kerekou, who in recent years had made his own commitment to Christ, invited political and church leaders to his nation so his tribal leaders could seek reconciliation with African Americans.

Brian Johnson, an African-American organizer, said the realization that Blacks sold other Blacks into slavery has been difficult for many African Americans to handle. "This made it difficult to hold the White man responsible," he explained as we spoke. "This creates some problems in our own psyche. We have to deal with another angle to this…. It's not merely a Black-White thing."

The problem is in human hearts, Johnson believes. “All have sinned,” he claims, quoting the New Testament.{12} “All of us need to confess our wrong and appeal to [God] for forgiveness.”

Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy lamented that “Everybody thinks of changing humanity, but nobody thinks of changing himself.”{13} True Christianity is not just for whites, and it does not promote racism but seeks to eliminate it. Changing corrupt institutions is very important. An ultimate solution to racism involves changing individual hearts.

Notes

1. James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), p. 74.

2. E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: Collier Books, 1965), p.115. Quoted in ibid. Bracketed words are mine.

3. Quoted in Frazier, loc. cit.; quoted in Cone loc. cit. Neither emphasis nor bracketed words are mine. Emphasis is likely Frazier’s or Armstrong’s. Bracketed words could be either Frazier’s or Cone’s.

4. Quoted in Frazier, loc. cit.; quoted in Cone loc. cit.

5. Luke 9:52-53.

6. Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957, 1961, 1966), pp. 958-960. See also John 4:1-45.

7. Luke 10:29 ff.

8. Philemon 1-25.

9. Galatians 3:28 NIV.

10. Ephesians 2:14 NLT.

11. Colossians 3: 12-14 NLT.

12. Romans 3:23 NIV.

13. *World* Christian magazine (February 1989), p. U8.

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We Are Television

Todd Kappelman makes a powerful argument for the elimination of TV from an industry insider's perspective.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

In 1977 Jerry Mander wrote *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, a work that has since gained a cult following. It is a voice for all of those who know that something has gone terribly wrong, and that the television is a major part of the problem. It is not, as one might suppose, the ramblings of a Luddite or lunatic, but the careful considerations of an economics major who spent fifteen years as a partner at the prestigious advertising firm Freeman, Mander & Gossage in San Francisco. He has an insider's perspective on the advertising business and how it relates to television and the culture at large.{1}

Mander says that according to statistics in the 1970's ninety-nine percent of homes in the country already had at least one television set. On an average evening more than eighty million people would be watching television and thirty million of those would be viewing the same program. During special events approximately 100 million viewers would simultaneously be tuned in to the same broadcast.

These millions of individuals believe they have blissfully escaped into their own unique ideal world in the comforts of their living rooms, isolated from interaction with the rest of society. Mander claims that this notion is an illusion manufactured by the television industry. In reality, each individual has been manipulated into a group activity mechanically lured into the same identical viewing experience of their peers, yet isolated from all spheres of influence outside of the staged television performance. He believes that this phenomenon, which he calls the unification of experience, is a strategic tactic created and skillfully used by the advertising industry to maneuver people into a controlled environment where they can be indoctrinated with the gospel of consumerism. The individual experience dissolves into the melting pot of the media's manufactured virtual world where they visually ingest their false idea of reality and accept it as the really real. A strategy this powerful and potentially destructive certainly merits our attention as our future individuality will be altered by our participation in or resistance to the media's attempt to dominate our minds.

In this article we will examine Mander's four arguments for the elimination of television to determine the relevance for our current culture and some possible responses. The first section considers how the media impacts our perceptions and interpretations of life experiences. The second and third arguments focus on the role of advertising in television programming and how it affects society and culture. The fourth and final arguments looks at the advertising industry's method for usurping our attention in order to dominate collective consciousness. The conclusion will challenge Christians to consider a fast or hiatus from television as an act of moral responsibility.

The Mediated Environment

In his first argument Mander asks us to examine the

implications of the television viewing experience as man's removal from his natural environment to an artificial one. He holds that television programming inherently deprives man of his natural sensory experiences of taste, smell and touch, replacing them with an artificial visual and auditory experience capable of capturing our attention and altering our desires and self perceptions.

The medium of television is psychologically programmed to isolate the viewer into a kind of sensory deprivation chamber where the experience of nature is recreated into the pixel-points on our screens. For example, we "see" the grass moving but do not experience the sensations of the wind on our skin, the gentle rustling, the dampness of the ground or the scent of the blades and decomposing material underneath. Television facilitates only a visual experience that is a highly reinterpreted experience from an artificial perspective. This simulation becomes our own new reality. We abandon the natural world created by God in favor of the one recreated by man. Rather than turn off the virtual reality machine to return to the natural world and walk barefoot in the grass, we choose to return again and again to the artificially simulated sensory deprivation chamber. Outside influences are illuminated and our environment is strategically replaced by the new television world. It is not long before the only world we know is the television world. The television news becomes our source for information, the nature program our new environment, and the sit-com and serial dramas our entertainment. The knowledge we once gained through personal experience has been reformatted into outline form, psychologically modified, packaged and delivered with a smile by the most beautiful host the advertising dollar can buy. Mander's sarcastic list of the things we learn from television will serve as an illustration of how absurd and horrible things have become.

"Mother's milk is unsanitary. Mice like cheese. Mars has life

on it. Technology will cure cancer. The stars do not have influence on us. A little X-ray is okay. Mother's milk is healthy. Mars has no life on it. Technology will clean up pollution. Preservatives do not cause cancer. Swine flue vaccine is safe. Swine flu vaccine causes paralysis. Humans are the royalty of nature. We have the highest standard of living. Touching children is good for them. And so it goes."{2} After sustained quantities of television viewing it is very likely that we may find ourselves people who are blown about by every wind of doctrine and unable to distinguish fact from fiction.

Television and the Commodity Man

The television is extremely instrumental in our understanding of our natural environment. It frequently satisfies us with artificial experiences of our world and drives us to understand reality as it is spoon-fed to us through images. We know that mother's milk is good for infants not because we made our own comparisons, but because the lead story on the evening news has assured us of this fact based on the latest study from the most prominent universities and specialists.

If our understanding of the external world has been significantly altered we should also suspect that television is capable of altering our self-perspective. In *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* Jerry Mander argues that we have for some time treated the individual as a commodity, and now television allows this to be accomplished with an amazing efficiency.

Under a kind of spell, adults see people on television who are beautiful, driving fancy cars, live in magnificent homes, wear the best clothes, and live every imaginable life style in full autonomy and frequently without condemnation for any behavior. Adults and children both ingest media images that dictate what they should want, however it is the adults who have the power to go out and transform the world into a reality that will

deliver the goods. Who it may be asked has the greater responsibility here? Television is used by the advertising agencies to create value by portraying human nature as something artificial and constructed rather than created by God. The natural state of man is characterized by those who would, or at least could, be reasonably satisfied with family, friends, and modest living accommodations. The unnatural man is a new standardized individual who wants the same cars, homes, and clothing that everyone else wants. We not only want to keep up with the Joneses who live next door, we now want to keep up with the Joneses who "live" in the television world.

The only problem with this scenario is that the real family must earn a living and pay the bills, while the television family is provided with a new Ford, clothes from The Gap, and a beautiful home that they did not purchase. We literally cannot win against, or catch up with these people. The TV generation finds itself in a never-ending quest to be remade into the image it sees on the television screen. Although it is cliche to say that "we are what we eat," it seems necessary to remind ourselves that we also are what we watch.

Man Made into a New Image

In the third argument Mander argues that the television media uses the power of the image to transform an individual into a copy of what he or she watches on television.

In a section titled *Imitating Media* Mander recounts an early experience on a first date when he kissed a girl. Having witnessed very little real life kissing, and using the television as his only guide he imitated what he had seen.{3} The media kiss became the primary model for the real. The result is that the imitation and mastery of television behavior becomes the standard by which we can judge success and failure. If a man can kiss a woman like Tom Cruise, or shoot a gun like John Wayne then he has passed the test for what a real man is according to television standards.

Like the child, the adult sees people on television who are beautiful, drive fancy cars, live in magnificent homes, wear the best clothes, and again the list continues. Adults and children ingest media images that dictate what they should want, however it is the adult that has the greatest moral responsibility and the power to initiate change.

The desire for all of these possessions is bought at a price far greater than the mere dollars used to purchase them. Parents frequently work long hard hours at jobs they dislike in order to provide such luxuries while they drown in massive consumer debt. This workaholic syndrome leads to strained family relationships and divorce. The failure to achieve the kind of computerized synthesized beauty found in the television world is viewed as a tragedy so profound that young and old alike resort to eating disorders, develop neurosis, and practice self-medication in order to cope.

As children watch television they become products of an image factory that tells them how to behave toward their parents and peers. They are also told what to want, what to ask for, what to expect, and even what to demand from others. It is no wonder that young people have such a profound sense of entitlement. They have come to believe the world should give them many luxuries as a birthright, that parents should pay for cars, clothes, and college, that only the latest fashion is really fashionable, that the beautiful people are inherently more valuable than the average, that a good Christian really can look and act like Brittney Spears, Tom Cruise, or “gangsta” rappers without any moral dilemma, that junk food is the primary food group for most people, or that a happy meal will make you happy.

Television Biases and the Culture of Death

Mander’s thesis throughout the book is that television is

basically an irredeemable medium, and the belief that this particular technology is neutral (an idea popularized by the late Marshall McLuhan) is erroneous.{4} We realize this is extreme, and would like to acknowledge that television can be used in a variety of ways that are believed to be good and profitable. However, Mander points out that in the thousands of books he consulted regarding television, he only found one that actually advocated abandoning the medium altogether. His thesis is a minority opinion but worthy of attention.

Mander's background is in advertising, and while working on a campaign to promote awareness of the redwoods that were being cut down in California he noticed something that we all seem to be aware of, but are not certain why. Death is the world's number one bestseller. This conclusion was drawn from the fact that when television pictures of redwood forests were shone in an effort to promote awareness of the problem and gain sympathy for the cause, few people responded. However, when pictures of acres and acres of stumps from a clear cutting were shown people wanted to know more. The same sympathy resulted with respect to the civil rights movement and Vietnam. Insiders in the media have characterized this phenomenon with the phrase: "if it bleeds, it leads."

Businessmen, television executives, and advertising people learned a valuable lesson; death sells. Negative emotions, violence, and carnage get the viewer's attention faster and hold it longer than the positive, the peaceful, or the beautiful. When we add to this the fact that the corporate structure behind television exists to make money through selling advertising space, we see that it is only a secondary concern, if it is a concern at all, that the viewers become enlightened about the humanities, the natural environment or religion. The purpose of the advertising is not to pay for the programming, as we are led to believe. The purpose of the programming is to isolate people in their living rooms in order to show them commercials in the hope that consumers will

rush out to buy the products they have seen.

The conclusion of this examination should lead Christians, and all people, to seriously consider the cost benefit ratio of the medium. Mander may be correct in thinking that the elimination of television will have only beneficial effects.{5} We could do little harm by calling for something along the lines of a television fast, remembering that the purpose of fasting is to mortify the desires of the flesh.

Notes

1. Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for The Elimination Of Television,* (New York, N.Y.: Quill Press, 1978), 13-28.
2. Ibid., 85.
3. Ibid., 236.
4. Ibid., 347-357.
5. Ibid., 356.

Elvis Has Left the Building

Elvis Lives!

Elvis lives. At least he does in the hearts of his fans. And they are everywhere.

Twenty-five years after his death, our culture is still fascinated with the raven-haired, swivel-hipped entertainer. His songs fill the airwaves. His face graces postage stamps and velvet paintings in the U.S. and abroad. Thousands of the faithful annually trek to Graceland, his Memphis home, to pay homage to the king of rock and roll.

August 16, 2002, marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of Elvis Presley's death. Memphis will be rocking during "Elvis Week." Pilgrims can enjoy concerts and eat their favorite Elvis food (probably heavy on the grease and sugar).

Meanwhile, impersonators abound. For instance, the "Flying Elvi" jump from 13,000 feet. (You read correctly. That's the "Flying *Elvi*." Scholars and real Elvis fans know that "Elvi" is the plural of "Elvis." We've got culture here at Probe.)

Featured in a hit movie, these Las Vegas daredevils combine skydiving with Elvis nostalgia. They are even available for Las Vegas weddings: "Why settle for just one Elvis look-alike," asks the ad, "when you can have the entire ten-Elvi team in attendance on your special day?"

Internet sites tout Elvis fan clubs and even Elvis baby food. Wine connoisseurs have sighted "Always Elvis Wine." Former NFL coach Jerry Glanville often left two tickets for Elvis at the will-call window on game days.

Even academics are into Elvis. The University of Mississippi has held International Conferences on Elvis Presley. Scholarly seminars included, "Civil Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and Elvis;" "Elvis: The Twinless Twins' Search for Spiritual Meaning" (Elvis' twin brother died at birth); and "Elvis 'n' Jesus."

America. What a country!

What is all this about, really? Why the obsession with a long-dead rock and roll star? In this article we will examine some reasons for Elvis mania. You might think that Elvis fans are crazy! But I suspect that you share some of the desires and hopes for life that seem to drive many of his fans. Their devotion borders on the spiritual. There is even a "First *Presley*terian Church."

What might all this fascination with Elvis tell us about

ourselves? Let us look at some clues in the next section.

Inside the Mind of an Elvis Fan

An event manager from Washington, DC, got hooked on Elvis at a 1973 concert. She has a batch of Elvis memorabilia ranging from Elvis lamps – complete with swinging hips – to a Franklin Mint medal.

Her prized possession is a photocopy of Elvis' final EKG (electrocardiogram), obtained from a nurse who worked in the Memphis hospital where doctors desperately tried to revive his corpse in 1977. The photocopy may be quite valuable. Elvis fans can be weird, she admits.

The child of alcoholics, this self-confessed enabler has fantasies that if only she had encountered Elvis, maybe she could have rescued him from the drugs and despair that brought his demise.

She is sorry that Elvis had no one in his life that would hold him accountable for his actions. Instead, groupies, politicians, and doctors bowed before him, granting him adoration, access, and prescription medicine. Fame can be a powerful aphrodisiac and willing women were plentiful.

What fascinates her with Elvis after all these years? Could it be romance? Rescue needs or hopes? She is single. Adult children of alcoholics often find themselves rescuing people, just like they tried to help their addicted parents.

Might any chords in your soul resonate with this fan, or with the life and death of this poor southern boy turned rock superstar, whose posthumous career length now has surpassed his live one? Most of us want to be loved. Some might envy Elvis' looks, voice, popularity, or fortune. Some, maybe many, are driven to obtain self-esteem by pleasing people.

Many feel that humans need to believe in something greater

than themselves. Some have described this need as a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person. Could worshippers of Elvis – or of sports stars, rock stars, movie stars, or athletic heroes – be seeking to fill such a vacuum?

What do you make of the Elvis phenomenon? Is it a national joke, or could it hold important insights into human nature? Let us examine a variety of reactions.

What's the Elvis Craze All About?

Why does Elvis still fascinate people? What is the enduring Elvis craze about, really? My own informal, nonscientific survey yielded fascinating analyses from many levels of society.

"It's a national joke," claimed a San Diego housepainter.

A Miami office manager said, "Our cat is named Elvis Presley. He's fat with a black coat, white collar, and eyes that glaze over – Elvis in his later years." Her husband quipped, "The other day, we had an Elvis sighting – in a tree."

A Sacramento van driver attributes today's craze to "all the lonely people who sit around and watch TV." "Besides," the driver says, "Elvis' grave wasn't marked right, and there's evidence he's not really buried there. I read it in the tabloids."

A California mayor feels people need to link up with something, to create a sense of belonging. "They could be seeking memories of better times," she reasons. "Some people wish he was still alive. My husband is an Elvis fan," she says. "He knows Elvis is dead, but he likes the music."

A southern California doctor wonders if fans may be bonding with a romanticized part of their youth. He adds, "People who don't have God make a god out of all sorts of things."

Indeed they do. Deep reverence and even worship characterize many pilgrims to Graceland. Some hold candlelight ceremonies, offer flowers, and display icons.

One scholar at the University of Mississippi's International Conference on Elvis noted, "without looking at spirituality, you can't explain the Elvis phenomena. . . . There's a tremendous force that brings people back to Graceland."{1}

Spiritual matters, of course, can be very controversial. More and more psychologists and psychiatrists emphasize the need to develop the total person – physically, emotionally and spiritually – in order to achieve a healthy life. Spiritual questions surface in many areas of society, from talk shows to hospitals.

Oprah Winfrey leads the pack of talk show hosts delving into the spiritual dimension. Respectable medical schools like Duke, Harvard, and Columbia study faith's impact on health.

Perhaps there is a spiritual void that Elvis worshipers and many others seek to fill with the objects of their devotion. Could that explain the Elvis phenomenon? Next we will consider the spiritual implications of Elvis worship.

Are You Lonesome Tonight?

Tell me now, really: Are You Lonesome Tonight? (Don't worry; I won't quote the whole song . . . at least not in this article!) Read what these Elvis fans have to say.

"I can get so depressed," admitted a Texas woman. "Anytime I've got anything bothering me, I can get in my car and turn the stereo on and listen to Elvis and just go into a world of my own. . . . It's like he's right there singing directly to me. . . . It's like he's always there to solve everything."{2}

"I sit and talk to him," claimed a New Jersey follower. "I feel he hears what I say to him and he gives me the will to go

on when things are really bad. . . . Somehow you talk to Elvis. . . . I know if anybody ever saw me, they would probably tell me that I was crazy, but I do . . . I love him, I talk to him and I know he understands and I feel so much better after. I think I always will."{3}

End of quote, I should emphasize. That was me quoting somebody else, folks, in case you began reading in mid-sentence.

Some fringers actually believe Elvis is still alive. My informal survey encountered no actual Elvis spotters, though a few claimed they had seen the Energizer Bunny.

Is the Elvis craze simply a zany fad? Or does it indicate something deeper about human longings? Some seek happiness through success, wealth, or relationships. Probably everyone has at least one "Elvis" in his or her life: a person, idea, team, goal, or possession that inspires the devotion and quest for fulfillment.

But human-based searches for ultimate happiness can be risky. For most of us, there will always be someone richer, more intelligent or articulate, better looking or more popular than we. Our teams will lose; our heroes will have flaws. Even if you reach the top . . .what then? Latest statistics show the death rate is still 100%. Is there something more?

You may not realize that Elvis' only Grammy Award for a single came for his 1974 recording of "How Great Thou Art," a famous hymn. The lyrics, which likely reflected his own spiritual roots, point to hope beyond human accomplishment. Next, we will look at how the message of this song might help meet the longings common to Elvis fans and to us all.

Someone Greater than Elvis

Merchants continue to cash in on Elvis' popularity. You can

buy “Barbie Loves Elvis” doll sets and Elvis mouse pads. Tupelo, Mississippi (Elvis’ birthplace) boasts an Elvis McDonalds.

The Elvis craze sometimes borders on worship, with fans seeking spiritual fulfillment in their departed king.

Many people, though, not just Elvis fans, feel a spiritual emptiness, a need to connect with something greater to replace inner loneliness with friendship, fear with love, and desperation with hope.

I will not enter the debate about Elvis’ personal spiritual convictions. But again consider the message of his only Grammy- winning single, the famous hymn “How Great Thou Art.” The lyrics speak in “awesome wonder” of the universe as a majestic display of God’s power.

The biblical God alluded to in this song is described elsewhere as a friend of those in need. “The Lord is my shepherd,” wrote an Israeli king. “I have everything I need. He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths.”{4}

If we allow Him into our lives, this God promises to be our friend, both when things are going well and when we are painfully lonely.

“How Great Thou Art” tells that this loving God sent His Son to die, to carry the burden of humanity’s injustices, selfishness, and wrongs.

God’s love is endless, and He offers us hope. When we tell Him our problems, unlike Elvis, He can do something about them. Not only can we rely on Him for our needs today, but the biblical documents promise eternal freedom from death, sorrow, crying, and pain.{5} Jesus Himself promised, “I assure you, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me

have eternal life. They will never be condemned . . . but they have already passed from death into life.{6}

Friendships, love, and hope — from one who cannot fail us. Sounds great. But is it true?

Jesus backed up His claims by rising from the dead. As somewhat of a skeptic, I examined evidences for the resurrection of Jesus and found it to be one of the best-attested facts in history.{7}

Elvis Presley is dead. Some therapists encourage their clients to get in touch with their "Inner Elvis." As the world commemorates the twenty-fifth anniversary of his passing, perhaps it would be more fruitful to look beyond our "Inner Elvis" to Someone greater.

Adapted from an article that first appeared in *Pursuit* magazine, Vol. VI, No. 1, 1997.

Notes

1. Gregory Rumberg, "I Know Your Elvis," *Contemporary Christian Music,* February 1997, 31.

2. Ralph Burns, "How Great Thou Art: Photographs from Graceland," California Museum of Photography, University of California Riverside Web site: http://www.cmp.ucr.edu/elvis/burns_intro.html, 1996.

3. Ibid.

4. Psalm 23:1-3, NLT.

5. Revelation 21: 1,4.

6. John 5:24, NLT.

7. See, for instance, Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict,* Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999.

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