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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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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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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.

Marshall McLuhan: The Medium is the Message

The High Priest of Pop-Culture

In this article we will begin an examination of someone who most people do not know, but who is considered by many to be the first father and leading prophet of the electronic age, Marshall McLuhan. A Canadian born in 1911, McLuhan became a Christian through the influence of G.K. Chesterton in 1937. He wrote his monumental work, one of twelve books and hundreds of articles, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man,* in 1964. The subject that would occupy most of McLuhan's career was the task of understanding the effects of technology as it related

to popular culture, and how this in turn affected human beings and their relations with one another in communities. Because he was one of the first to sound the alarm, McLuhan has gained the status of a cult hero and "high priest of pop-culture".{1} This status is not undeserved, and McLuhan said many things that are still pertinent today.

His thought, though voluminous, is frequently reduced to one-liners, and small sound bites, which sum up the more complicated content of his probing and rigorous examination of the *media*, a word that he coined. Concerning the new status of man in technological, and media-dominated society, he said:

> *If the work of the city is the remaking or translating of man into a more suitable form than his nomadic ancestors achieved, then might not our current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information seem to make of the entire globe, and of the human family, a single consciousness?{2}*

In statements like this, McLuhan both announces the existence of a *global village*, another word he is credited for coining, and predicts the intensification of the world community to its present expression. All of this was done in the early 1960s at a time when television was still in its infancy, and the personal computer was almost twenty years into the future.

McLuhan is announcing what Lewis H. Lapham says is a world of people who worship the objects of their own invention in the form of fax machines and high speed computers, and accept the blessings of *Coca-Cola* and dresses by Donna Karan as the mark of divinity.{3} The fact that more people watch television than go to church is nothing new to us, but it was one of the tell-tale signs of a cultural shift in history for McLuhan; a shift which has been imperceptible to most, and devastating to all. If anyone doubts McLuhan's warning that "we become what we behold," he should reflect on the consuming desire of many

average teenagers to be like Michael Jordan, Madonna, or Britney Spears: a desire that has resulted in a culture of plastic surgery and drive-by shootings to obtain tennis shoes.

Objects of Desire

In our continuing examination of Marshall McLuhan, the patriarch of media criticism, we will explore the totalitarian techniques of American advertising and market research on the unsuspecting consumer.{4} How this is accomplished, and the effects it has, were outlined in *The Mechanical Bride*, first published in 1951. The book dealt with the influence of print media on the male and female psyche. The objective of advertising men, said McLuhan, is the manipulation, exploitation, and control of the individual.{5} If this is true, then who, one might ask, was doing the controlling, and what was the desired effect?

The advertising companies were doing the controlling, and the desired effect was nothing loftier than selling products to unsuspecting customers. Making women into objects of desire by men, and then in turn selling the women the products to help them achieve the effect of desirability, accomplished the entire enterprise. The advertising men succeeded in creating a market where one did not previously exist. The purpose here, and earlier for McLuhan, is not to vilify the advertising industry, rather it is to provide insight into how media functions. One such insight is McLuhan's description of the contemporary mindset of a woman under the influence of advertising geniuses. He said:

> *To the mind of the modern girl, legs, like busts, are power points, which she has been taught to tailor, but as parts of the success kit rather than erotically or sensuously. She swings her legs from the hip . . . she knows that a "long-legged girl can go places." As such, her legs are not intimately associated with her taste or with her unique self but are merely display objects like the grille on a car. They*

> *are date-bated power levers for the management of the male audience.{6}*

What McLuhan correctly ascertains is not the fact that women try to look attractive for men (presumably women have been doing this for a long time), but the idea of "polishing" each and every part for a kind of optimal performance. The modern woman has been taught through advertising bombardments that every feature of her physical makeup can be enhanced for the specific purposes of gaining a husband, a promotion, or just getting a door opened.

As one might suspect, there is a male counterpart to this advertising bombardment. The overwhelming superwoman, the possessor of beauty and grace in degrees hitherto unimaginable, demands an impossibly high standard of virility from her male counterpart. The result says McLuhan, are men who are readily captured by the gentleness and guile of women, but who are also surrounded by a barrage of body parts. The man is not won over, but slugged, and beaten down in defeat.{7}

Technology as Extensions of the Human Body

In our continuing look at Marshal McLuhan, the man who coined the term "global village" and the phrase "the medium is the message," we will reflect on what he had to say about the various ways human beings *extend* themselves, and how these extensions affect our relationships with one another. First, we must understand what McLuhan meant by the term "extension(s)."

An extension occurs when an individual or society makes or uses something in a way that extends the range of the human body and mind in a fashion that is new. The shovel we use for digging holes is a kind of extension of the hands and feet.

The spade is similar to the cupped hand, only it is stronger, less likely to break, and capable of removing more dirt per scoop than the hand. A microscope, or telescope is a way of seeing that is an extension of the eye.

Considering more complicated extensions, one might think of the automobile as an extension of the feet. It allows man to travel places in the same manner as the feet, only faster and with less effort. In addition, this extension enables one to travel in relative comfort in extreme weather conditions. Most individuals already understand the concept of extension, but many are unreflective when it comes to what McLuhan calls "*amputations;*" the counterpart to extensions.

Every extension of mankind, especially technological extensions, have the effect of amputating or modifying some other extension. An example of an amputation would be the loss of archery skills with the development of gunpowder and firearms. The need to be accurate with the new technology of guns made the continued practice of archery obsolete. The extension of a technology like the automobile "amputates" the need for a highly developed walking culture, which in turn causes cities and countries to develop in different ways. The telephone extends the voice, but also amputates the art of penmanship gained through regular correspondence. These are a few examples, and almost everything we can think of is subject to similar observations.

McLuhan believed that mankind has always been fascinated and obsessed with these extensions, but too frequently we choose to ignore or minimize the amputations. For example, we praise the advantages of high speed personal travel made available by the automobile, but do not really want to be reminded of the pollution it causes. Additionally, we do not want to be made to think about the time we spend alone in our cars isolated from other humans, or the fact that the resulting amputations from automobiles have made us more obese and generally less healthy. We have become people who regularly praise all

extensions, and minimize all amputations. McLuhan believed that we do so at our own peril.

The Dangers of Over-extended Technology

We have discussed the idea of extensions and amputations caused by new technology, which is introduced into society. The automobile was previously mentioned as an extension of the foot. The car allows one to travel, just as the foot does, only faster and with less effort. The amputations which result would include loss of muscle strength in the under-utilized legs, and the reduction in the quality of air we breathe.

Something occurs when a medium like the automobile, used for transportation, becomes over-extended. The resulting amputations such as muscle atrophy, smog, and high-speed fatalities increase at a rate that challenges the benefits initially gained. Automobile fatalities, lung disease, and obesity caused by modern transportation begin to outweigh the benefits of getting to our destinations quicker and with less effort. The final movement is the reversal of the benefits. McLuhan said:

> *Although it may be true to say that an American is a creature of four wheels, and to point out that American youth attributes much more importance to arriving at driver's-license age than at voting age, it is also true that the car has become an article of dress without which we feel uncertain, unclad, and incomplete in the urban compound.{8}*

To this observation might be added the fact that we train children from a very young age to stand within a few feet of high-speed vehicles without being afraid. Less than two hundred years ago a screaming locomotive or a high speed automobile would have caused a person to flee in terror for their lives. We have slowly conditioned ourselves to not be afraid of something that is in fact extremely dangerous.

Similarly, we know that speed limits of twenty miles an hour would almost certainly eliminate most car fatalities, but we also consider the advantages of getting to our destinations quicker to be worth the resulting death rate. Proof of this casual acceptance of the disadvantages of the car could be imagined if one were to consider the fate of a political candidate who ran on a platform of reducing the national speed limit to twenty miles per hour. We know the advantages, even before implementation, but we choose to accept the disadvantages because there is a privileging of all types of technological extension, even deadly and horrific forms.

We are now prepared to consider the specific types of extensions realized by the television, mobile phone, and computer. If we take McLuhan's lead then all of these must be simultaneously considered as extensions with both positive and negative amputations of previous technologies.

Four Questions Applied to Media

We are concluding our considerations of Marshall McLuhan's pertinence with an examination of ideas found in his last work, *The Global Village,* published in 1989, twenty-five years after his monumental *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.* In his early works McLuhan focused on the rapid change in the five centuries since the development of the printing press and movable type, and the especially rapid developments of the twentieth-century. McLuhan died in 1980 and was beginning to see the first fruits of the television generations as well as the fulfillment of some of his predictions. He was deeply concerned about man's willful blindness to the downside of technology, yet McLuhan was not an irrational alarmist.

In his later years, and partially as a response to his critics, McLuhan developed a scientific basis for his thought around what he termed the *tetrad*. The *tetrad* allowed McLuhan to apply four laws, framed as questions, to a wide spectrum of mankind's endeavors, and thereby give us a new tool for

looking at our culture.

The first of these questions or laws is “What does it (the medium or technology) extend?” In the case of a car it would be the foot, in the case a phone it would be the voice. The second question is “What does it make obsolete?” Again, one might answer that the car makes walking obsolete, and the phone makes smoke signals and carrier pigeons unnecessary. The third question asks, “What is retrieved?” The sense of adventure or quest is retrieved with the car, and the sense of community returns with the spread of telephone service. One might consider the rise of the cross-country vacation that accompanied the spread of automobile ownership. The fourth question asks, “What does the technology reverse into if it is over-extended?” An over-extended automobile culture longs for the pedestrian lifestyle, and the over-extension of phone culture engenders a need for solitude.

With the radio and television we have simultaneous access to events on the entire planet. However, television culture diminishes, or amputates, many of the close ties of family life based on oral communication. The simple act of turning on a television can reduce a room of people to silence. What is retrieved is the tribal or interrelated view of man. What it becomes or returns to is the global theater, where people are actors on a stage. One need only witness the event status of an airplane crash or weather disaster.

On McLuhan’s gravestone are the words “The Truth Shall Make You Free.” We do not have to like or even agree with everything that McLuhan said, but we should nevertheless remember that his life was dedicated to showing men the truth about the world they live in, and the hidden consequences of the technologies he develops.

Notes

1. 1969 interview in *Playboy* magazine originally titled "A Candid Conversation with the High Priest of Popcult and Metaphysician of Media," pp. 53-74, in *The Essential McLuhan*, Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (ed.), (New York: Basic Books, 1995), pp.233-69.

2. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), p.61

3. Lewis H. Lapham in the introduction to the thirtieth anniversary edition of *Understanding Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), pp.xx-xi.

4. See McLuhan's work *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1951). This is an intensive examination of the effects of advertising and comics in producing new perceptions about what we should and do desire, as well as why we believe these things will bring us happiness.

5. "The Mechanical Bride," in *The Essential McLuhan*, Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (ed.), (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p.21.

6. "The Mechanical Bride," in *The Essential McLuhan*, p.24.

7. Ibid. p.25.

8. *The Essential McLuhan*, p.217.

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The Need to Read: G. K.

Chesterton

Continuing in 'The Need to Read' series, Todd Kappelman examines the writings of G.K. Chesterton, a writer admired by both C.S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer.

A Christian for the Twentieth Century

This article is another installment in our continuing *Need to Read* series. The purpose of the series is to introduce people to authors they might enjoy and to offer some help by way of navigating through the themes developed in the works written by these individuals. It is regrettable that many people who enjoy C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer neglect the writings of Gilbert Keith, or G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), a man who was admired by both Lewis and Schaeffer. George Bernard Shaw called him a "colossal genius" and Pope Pius XI called him "a devoted son of the Holy Church and a gifted defender of the faith."{1}

Until his death at the age of seventy-two, Chesterton was a dominant figure in England and a staunch defender of the faith, and Christian orthodoxy, as well as an enthusiastic member of the Roman Catholic church. In addition to nearly one hundred books, he wrote for over seventy-five British periodicals and fifty American publications. He wrote literary criticism, religious and philosophical argumentation, biographies, plays, poetry, nonsense verse, detective stories, novels, short stories, and economic, political, and social commentaries.{2}

An excellent introduction to Chesterton can be found in a book titled *Orthodoxy*, published in the United States in 1908, and affectionately dedicated to his mother. In *Orthodoxy* Chesterton gives an apologetic defense of his Christian faith. He believed this defense was necessary to answer some of the criticism directed at his previous book, *Heretics*.{3}

Before Schaeffer wrote *Escape From Reason*, Chesterton titled the third chapter of *Orthodoxy* "The Suicide of Thought," a chronicle of the demise of modern man.

Chesterton believed that what we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. "Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled on the organ of conviction; where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert, is exactly the part he ought to doubt¾himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt—the Divine Reason."{4}

Chesterton believed that man's autonomy had been elevated beyond the reason of God; each individual has become his or her own master. The sages can see no answer to the problem of religion, but that is not the trouble with modern sages. Modern man, and his sages, said Chesterton, cannot even see the riddle.

Modern men, he believed, had become like small children who are so stupid that they do not even object to obvious philosophical contradictions.{5} Chesterton, like C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer after him, understood that religion in the twentieth century would become very philosophical even for the average man. Chesterton reminds us that Christians would be living in a time when many of their friends, family, and neighbors, as well as their co-workers and spouses, would no longer be living as though man had to be reasonable. Later Francis Schaffer would call this same cultural phenomenon the age of *non-reason*.

Chesterton was very proud of being a Roman Catholic, and frequently defended his denomination as much as he did the faith in general. He was a Roman Catholic who was also deeply concerned about the universal church and will probably be enjoyed by most people who like C. S. Lewis and a "Mere

Christianity" type of approach to the faith.

Chesterton and a Reasonable Christianity

In his book *The Everlasting Man* one can find the mature Chesterton. It was written in 1925 just three years after the Roman Catholic church had received him at the age of almost fifty. In this book Chesterton employs a style of argumentation called the *reductio ad absurdum*.{6} He assumes some of the claims of rationalists and agnostics to show the absurdity of their point of view. He begins with a demonstration that if man is treated as a mere animal the result would not only be ridiculous, but the world would not exist in its present state. Men do not really act as though there is nothing special and significant about human beings. They act as though man is unique and that he is the most superior and crowning achievement in the known universe.

In a section titled "The Riddles of the Gospel" Chesterton attempts to show what it would be like if an individual were to approach the Gospels and really confront the Christ of history who is presented there. He would not find a Christ who looks like other moral teachers. The Christ presented in the New Testament is not dull or insipid, He is dynamic and unparalleled in history. The Christ of the Gospels is full of perplexities and paradoxes.

The *freethinker* and many nonbelievers, said Chesterton, object to the apparent contradictions found in the Bible, especially as it pertains to Christ. Jesus admonished His followers to turn the other cheek and take no thought for tomorrow. However, He did not turn the other cheek with respect to the money changers in the Temple and was constantly warning people to prepare for the future. Likewise, Christ's view of the marriage bond is unique and unparalleled in history. Jews, Romans, and Greeks did not believe or even understand enough to disbelieve the mystical idea that the man and the woman had become one sacramental substance in the matrimonial union.{7}

Christ's view of marriage is neither a product of His culture or even a logical development from the time period. It is an utterly strange and wonderful teaching which bears the stigma of being from another world.

Before C. S. Lewis had formulated his observations that Christ is either a liar, a lunatic, or Lord, Chesterton had laid out the very same problem. The Christ of the New Testament, said Chesterton, is not a mere mythical figure. He cannot be merely another ethical teacher or even a good man; these options are not open to anyone who would honestly consider the Christ who is encountered in the Scriptures. The question remains, Who is Christ?

In *The Everlasting Man* Chesterton maintains that each of the aforementioned explanations are singularly inadequate. The belief that Christ was a delusional lunatic, or even a good teacher, suggests something of the mystery which they miss.{8} There must be something to a person who is so mysterious and confusing that he has inspired as much controversy as Christ.

Christ is who He said He was and is infinitely more mysterious than the finite human mind can fully comprehend. In his writings G. K. Chesterton demonstrates that he is a Christian writer who possessed those rare and necessary gifts which allow difficult theological and philosophical problems to be understood and discussed by the average man.

Chesterton's Reflections on America

Chesterton's writings cover theological, philosophical, social, political, and economic trends simultaneously with particular attention to a Christian worldview. In the two works *What I Saw In America* and *Sidelights,* Chesterton offers the reader his reflections on America during the early part of the twentieth century.

On January 10, 1921 Chesterton and his wife Frances began a

three month tour of America. Their first stop was in New York City. Here Chesterton examined the lights of Broadway and proclaimed: "What a glorious garden of wonders this would be to anyone who was lucky enough to be unable to read."{9} This begins the great man's observations and impressions of the New World, skyscrapers, rural America, Washington politics, and the nation's spiritual condition.

Some of the central themes that emerge in *Sidelights*, and especially in *What I Saw In America,* are Chesterton's views of the effects of rationalism, commercialism, and the general spiritual poverty of many Americans. Although he is painting with extremely large brush strokes, there is much that can be learned about who we were at the early part of the twentieth century and how we became what we are today.

Chesterton was able to see both sides of the American experiment: the dream as well as the nightmare. He appears to dwell on the down side to balance the kind of utopian optimism that frequently blinds Americans to the true realities of their living conditions. Chesterton said that his first impression of America was of something enormous and rather unnatural, and was tempered gradually by his experience of kindness among the people. Additionally, and with all sincerity, he added that there was something unearthly about the vast system which seemed to be a kind of wandering in search of an ideal utopia of the future. He said "the march to Utopia, the march to the Earthly Paradise, the march to the New Jerusalem, has been very largely the march to Main Street. [T]he latest modern sensation is a book," referring here to Sinclair Lewis's 1920 novel *Main Street*, "written to show how wretched it is to live there."{10}

Chesterton thought about America frequently and she would be one of his favorite subjects for almost twenty-five years after his first visit. His frequent discussion about drinking and smoking may strike many readers as peripheral, a kind of antiquated masculine fun. But these matters were crucial to

Chesterton's view of a complete life and for him represented a misguided moralism in the United States. The puritanical incongruity of Americans would serve Chesterton as a point of departure for all of his thinking about the New World.

Chesterton was an Englishman and is in a position to offer criticism from the point of view of a foreigner without the difficulties of a language barrier. Although he understood that his native England and Europe at large were going through the same philosophical and social changes, it is the speed at which America was rushing to embrace all things new that alarmed him. In *What I Saw in America* one will really discover what Chesterton found alarming and dangerous about our country in the early twentieth century.

Chesterton was confronted with prohibition on both of his trips to America and was deeply concerned with its effects on both Christian and secular aspects of society. He never tired of the extended metaphor of prohibition as the condition of religion in the United States. Making a comparison between the Carrie Nation style of saloon smashing prohibition and the Nonconformists in his native England, Chesterton believed that both groups suffered from an astoundingly fixed and immovable notion of the nature of Christianity.{11}

Chesterton saw in this legalistic stance toward liquor an indicator of what was truly wrong Protestant religion in America. He said it is a pretty safe bet that if any popular American author has mentioned religion and morality at the beginning of a paragraph, he will at least mention liquor before the end of it. To men of different creeds and cultures the whole idea would be staggering.{12} The natural result was that the man on the street frequently equated Christianity with a strong stance against drinking, smoking, and gambling. As a consequence, salvation has as much to do with abstinence as it does with regeneration.

The Victorian hypocrisy was that there were family prayers and

the form of religion, but only so far as it was a cover-up for an anti-traditionalist mentality. The average Christian, believed Chesterton, was professing his religion on the one hand and embracing a pervasive and destructive industrial commercialism on the other.{13} The astute observation of Chesterton was of a man witnessing a strange new phenomenon, Christians reconciling their prosperity with their faith.

In spite of a Great Depression, one World War that would soon lead to another, and numerous social injustices, the twentieth century in the early thirties was still a time when personal ownership of cars, regular vacations, and numerous other opportunities were increasingly available to more Americans. This was the true formation of the American dream, and it would be closely tied to materialism in the most crass form.

Chesterton was vindicated in his harsh observations about America on several fronts. First, there was then and still remains a large segment of the Christian population that believes Christian faith to be little more than a list of prohibitions. It is not that there are not things Christians should and should not participate in, rather it is the stifling of the Christian imagination with respect to the many ways which faith can manifest itself. For Chesterton the belief that good Christians do not drink would be tantamount to saying that one must wear a tie on Sunday morning to be in good standing in the faith. In the same way that some consider the latter statement to be ridiculous it was puzzling to Chesterton, as well as C. S. Lewis, why some American Christians failed to recognize the same in the former statement.

As for the American dream, Chesterton's words are still a sober warning for the unique way in which Americans, both Christian and non-Christian, have largely become a nation of consumers. We may read his words during the early part of the twentieth century as warnings not to repeat the same mistakes now.

The Unreasonableness of Modern Man

Chesterton was a prolific journalist whose books and contributions to over one hundred American and British journals and periodicals continue to be read by Christians throughout the world. The need to return to this seminal thinker can be seen in the relevance some of his shorter works still have today.

In the *T. P. Weekly* in 1910, Chesterton wrote a small piece titled *What is Right with the World?* In it he acknowledges the fact that the world does not appear to be getting very much better in any vital aspects and that this fact could hardly be disputed.{14} However, Chesterton does not leave the reader with the pessimistic observation that the world is not a very nice place. He adds that the only thing that is right with the world is the world itself. Existence itself as well as man and woman are right inasmuch as they were created right. The fact that so much is wrong did not distress Chesterton; it was merely an occasion

to demonstrate that the world bears the stigma of having been good at one time and now being evil. The blackness of the world, said Chesterton, is not so black if we recognize how and why things are like they are.

At one point in a work titled *The Common Man* Chesterton attempts to show why it is necessary for every individual to have a philosophy. The best reason being that certain horrible things will happen to anyone who does not possess some kind of coherent worldview.{15} Sounding very much like a contemporary Christian apologist, Chesterton said that a man without a philosophy would be doomed to live on the used-up scraps of other men's thought systems.{16}

Chesterton continues to challenge the idea that philosophy is for the few, arguing that most of our modern evils are the result of the want of a good philosophy. Philosophy, he said,

was merely thought which had been thoroughly thought through. All men test everything by something. The question is whether the test has ever been tested.{17} One can see in Chesterton the same vigorous call to reflective thinking that Francis Schaffer used fifty years later to call an entire generation of Christians to become more philosophic and begin engaging the culture at a more substantive level.

We have been attempting to make a case for the need to read G. K. Chesterton's works, and have urged those who enjoy C. S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, Os Guinness, or Peter Kreeft to give Chesterton a look. In closing, Chesterton's poem *The Happy Man* from his book *The Wild Night* will serve as a conclusion.

> To teach the grey earth like a child,
> To bid the heavens repent,
> I only ask from Fate the gift
> Of one man well content.
> Him will I find: though when in vain
> I search the feast and mart,
> The fading flowers of liberty,
> The painted masks of art.
> I only find him as the last,
> On one old hill where nod
> Golgotha's ghastly trinity—
> Three persons and one God.

Notes

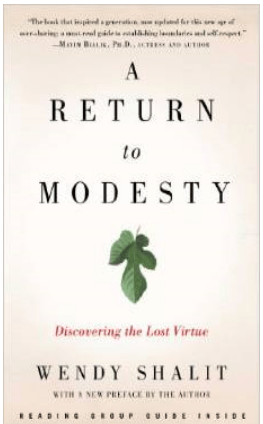
1. J.I. Packer, forward to *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy,* by Francis Schaeffer (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), xiv.
2. Hosea 4:6.
3. Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy* (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), 109-114.
4. Ibid., 196.
5. Ibid., 217-224.
6. Ibid., 225-236.

7. Ibid., 261-270.
8. Ibid., 207-208.
9. Francis Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy* (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), 277.
10. Ibid., 275-290.
11. Ibid., 291-302.
12. Ibid., 211.

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A Return to Modesty

The Loss of the Virtue of Modesty



This article is an examination of Wendy Shalit's book *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue*. The book was written in 1999 and addressed to her "parents, and anyone who has ever been ashamed of anything." *A Return to Modesty* is an examination of public and personal attitudes toward the problems faced by young women at the end of the twentieth century, and the beginning of the twenty-first.

Shalit's starting point is the change from a healthy modesty

toward sexual experience to a sheer embarrassment at the lack of experience. Her book is not a call to a prudish, Victorian sexuality, but a reminder of the value inherent in female modesty and the rewards for those who wait until marriage to become sexually active. Arguing against a culture which systematically attempts to rid us of our romantic hopes and natural embarrassments, Shalit offers young women an open invitation to cultivate one of the most feminine of all virtues, and to do so without shame or regret.

A Return to Modesty is divided into three parts: the first concerns our present view of sexual modesty and the problems with this view. The second section surveys the intellectual battles which led to our present situation. And the third is a look at women who are saying "no" to contemporary values and returning to an earlier conception of modesty.

The War on Embarrassment, the title of the first chapter, looks at the early and middle '80s when sex education in grade schools was beginning to become more commonplace in the United States. Young girls ten and eleven years of age sat in mixed company as instructors discussed the particulars of intercourse, venereal disease, and birth control. The result, argues Shalit, is that subjects that had been discussed privately among the separate genders are brought into the open in such a way that all modesty is systematically removed. Preteen girls are taught to be ashamed if they are embarrassed, and embarrassed if they are ashamed. The ensuing confusion leads to a schizophrenic approach to sexuality which will follow the young girl through puberty and into young womanhood.

The impact of this early exposure to sexuality is discussed in the second chapter, *Postmodern Sexual Etiquette.* Here the

modern dating scene is shown to be a direct revolt against the supposedly debilitating sexual disease of Puritanism and the Judeo-Christian ethic.{1} The traditional maturation cycle of courtship, love, and marriage has been replaced by a sequence of hook-ups, dumpings, and post-dumping checkups. The result, which we will discuss, has been that women are generally disrespected, trivialized, and abused in ways that should concern us all.

The Normalization of Pornography

As we continue our examination of modesty, I would like to cover the statistical fallout from our behavior during the last half of the century.

Stalking, rape, and harassment of women in the work place and at home all increased dramatically during the latter part of the twentieth century. But nothing is as alarming an indicator, says Shalit, as the "normalization of pornography."{2} The contemporary debate is little more than a "ping-pong" game over censorship with feminists and conservatives crying "yes," and the civil libertarians volleying back "no." What is missing is the realization of how our views of pornography have shifted and a recognition of the impact that this has on the lives of ordinary men and women.{3}

One indicator of our growing acceptance of recreational pornography is the increase in strip clubs in the past decade, up over 100 percent from 1992. Strippers have become a kind of cultural wallpaper, and are present to such an extent that they are no longer shocking.{4} Women who object to their husbands and boyfriends looking at porn are accused of being prudish and full of hang-ups. The result has been a plethora of diseases and disorders as women attempt to look like the airbrushed super models seen in magazines and film.

A young woman named Jennifer Silver was concerned that her

boyfriend was reading *Playboy* magazine, but she and her friends were reluctant to say anything which would make them seem prudish or un-cool. In a porn-friendly culture Miss Silver's opinion was only valued if it was sympathetic to the norm. She said in an article to *Mademoiselle* magazine:

> *The real reason I hated Playboy was that the models established a standard I could never attain without the help of implants, a personal trainer, soft lighting, a squad of makeup artists and hairdressers, and airbrushing. It's a standard that equates sexuality with youth and beauty. I didn't want my boyfriend buying into Playboy's definition of sexuality.{5}*

Her boyfriend discontinued his reading in light of Miss Silver's observations, but many men, even Christian men, do not see the harm in this kind of indulgent and sinful behavior.

It is not enough to say we want to return to a more modest culture; we must actively strive to create such a culture. If women are ever going to be able to be modest, men will have to value that modesty, and one way to do so is by allowing women to be who they are and not place impossible demands on them.

The Intellectual Landscape

In part two of her book Shalit takes aim at the intellectual battles which have led to the present crises in virtue. Under the guise of "being comfortable with our bodies," our universities, advertising companies, and even fellow Christians have urged women in the last half century to "let it all hang out." Indicative of this attitude is a quote from *Bazaar,* a leading women's magazine, in response to a cover which offended some readers:

> *The barely revealed breast on our August cover wasn't meant to offend. It was meant to celebrate the beauty of the female*

> *form. Bazaar believes that women should feel comfortable with their bodies.*

The response to this reader's letter was in effect saying that, if one should choose to be modest, then it is a reflection of not being "comfortable with one's body." The result is that we've become so comfortable with the body that people feel free to dress immodestly from the beach to the grocery store.

Shalit continues her examination of the intellectual landscape of modesty with a glimmer of hope based on nation-wide surveys in some of the most prominent women's magazines. Her findings are that 49 percent of women wish they had slept with fewer men, and the happiest women were those who had the fewest partners.{6} In addition to these observations, one could add that the same women's magazines that frequently advocate a more progressive and immodest lifestyle are also full of the confessions of women who have low self-esteem and feel that they are ugly and do not measure up to an increasingly critical society.

Following the statistical surveys, Shalit examines the idea of "male obligation." In an unusual turn she says that it is difficult to expect men to be honorable. Many women send messages that men are no longer expected to behave like gentlemen.{7} The short skirts, plunging necklines, and pouty lips so popular today are an invitation for men to stare at and perceive women as objects. The honor women want from men, argues Shalit, begins with the signals that women send. Those interested in a clear guide to a return to modesty, in their own lives or that of their friends and daughters, will find such a guide in Shalit's book *A Return to Modesty.*

Modest Dress

In an effort to find a way back to a more modest approach to

sexuality, Shalit turns to some themes common in most religions. First she makes the observation that there is almost unanimous agreement among religions that modesty is inextricably linked to holiness.{8} In the first of several examples, Shalit quotes Christ's admonition: "Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked and then see his shame."{9} After this she recalls the occasion when Moses covers his face, and is afraid to look upon God. Finally, she considers the account of Isaiah when he sees the fiery angels surrounding the throne of God, and four of the six angels' wings are not functional because they are used to cover their feet. The rationale, says Shalit, is that in the presence of the Holy One, they should cover themselves.

In the section titled *The Return to Modest Dress,* Shalit documents the changing trends in women's dress. She discusses how women who have rebelled against the immodest dress characterized by spandex, push-up bras, and bikinis have found a new self-respect they never knew was available. In addition to this, these same women have found that they are attracting the kind of men they really desire as opposed to men who approach them for their outward beauty alone.

There is a difficulty for young women who choose to be a part of the counter-culture of modesty Shalit is advocating. We live in a time when the loss of one's virginity is considered a right of passage into maturity. Young women who choose to hold on to their virginity are often ostracized by other girls who wish to have partners in their loss. The result is that one must frequently choose between the loss of innocence, or the loss of fellowship with one's peers. This is a tragic choice to ask of a young, teenage girl who desperately wants to be accepted.

The problem is not confined to young women alone, but is played out among more adult women with the same dire consequences. Men no longer have to marry a woman to get them to sleep with them and the result has been a growing hostility

toward the institution of marriage.{10} The power to say "no" that women once collectively possessed, has been surrendered to the point that it is very difficult to reclaim. Shalit's book shows the way out of a dark forest of our own making.

How To Get There

"Loss of innocence is nothing new," writes Shalit, "but it is our assumption that there is now nothing to lose."{11} We frequently act as though previous generations have decided that young women need not value their innocence, and we are powerless to resist the pressures of society. However, we are told exactly the opposite throughout the Scriptures. We are told that we can, and must, resist the world. We are told that the individual can choose to behave differently than societal norms. And, we are reminded that the failure to resist the temptations and standards set by secular society is sin.

The first thing we must do in order to return to a more modest society is to believe that it is possible, and to voice our desires for such a return actively. The second thing we must do is realize that cultures differ about what exactly is modest. Shalit cites examples of eighteenth century France where women would not bare their shoulders, Chinese women shy about their feet being exposed, and native women of Madagascar who would "rather die of shame than expose their arms."{12}

Shalit proposes that we listen to the universal instinct within us which has been systematically suppressed. We know that we are naturally shy and sensitive to some things and should sometimes, but not always, cultivate our reservations rather than trying to overcome them. Quoting Francis Benton, Shalit writes:

> *Specific rules about modesty change with the styles. Our Victorian ancestors, for instance, would judge us utterly depraved for wearing the modern bathing suit. Real modesty, however, is a constant and desirable quality. It is based not*

> *on fashion, but on appropriateness. A woman boarding a subway in shorts at the rush hour is immodest not because the shorts themselves are indecent, but because they are worn in the wrong place at the wrong time. A well-mannered and self-respecting woman avoids clothes or behavior that are inappropriate or conspicuous.{13}*

In order for society, and especially Christians within a secular and hostile society, to return to modesty we must be willing to look a little awkward in our actions and appearances. God has called us to be a strange and peculiar people for His purposes. One of the easiest and most influential ways to do this is through our outward appearances and actions. We should return to modesty before it really is too late.

Notes

1. Wendy Shalit, *A Return To Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 26.
2. Ibid., 49-54.
3. Ibid., 49.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 52.
6. Ibid., 90.
7. Ibid., 104-105.
8. Ibid., 218.
9. Rev. 16:15.
10. Shalit, 227.
11. Ibid., 241.
12. Ibid., 232.
13. Ibid., 232.

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The Need to Read Francis Schaeffer

Todd Kappelman provides us with a compelling introduction to the thought and writings of Francis Schaeffer, one of the great Christian thinkers of the 20th century. As a Christian scholar and a visionary worldview thinker, Schaeffer applied Scriptural truth to the issues people are dealing with in the modern world. He demonstrated that Christ's truth is universal both across time and cultures.

The *Need to Read* series began several months ago with a program on C.S. Lewis . The rationale for this series is that many of the great writers who have helped many Christians mature are now either unknown or neglected by many who could use these authors insights into the faith.

This installment focuses on Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984), one of the most recognized and respected Christian authors of the twentieth century. He saw so much more in what he was looking at and agonized over it much more that the rest of us. He was one of the truly great Christians of our time.{1} If this is the case, and I and many others believe that it is, then this question follows: What was Schaeffer looking at? The remarkable answer to this question is all of human history and the long chain of events which have led to modern man as we see him today.

In a time when true scholarship is often equated with specialization in a particular period, people, or subject, Schaeffer was a grand generalist. He was a true Renaissance man who knew something about everything, as opposed to everything about something. In addition to his remarkable and encyclopedic knowledge of human history, he was able to

connect important events together such that Christians can see what has happened in human history, what is happening now, and what will happen if man continues on his present course. Schaeffer was a visionary who had an uncanny understanding of the times we live in and what mankind can expect in the near future.

Schaeffers greatest gift, like that of C.S. Lewis, was his concern for the average Christian. He believed philosophy, theology, and ethics should not be reserved for the conversation of learned academics; rather they should be the daily concern of the man on the street. The price for ignorance of the subjects could be our life, or more importantly, our very souls. The Scriptures are very clear concerning the price of ignorance. The prophet Hosea said that Gods people perish for lack of knowledge.{2} In light of this observation, Schaeffers genius was his ability to communicate extremely difficult philosophical and theological issues on a non- technical level. His writings provide Christians with access to some of the most pressing concerns of our times.

Several aspects of Schaeffers style and sweeping concerns will be discussed in this essay. First, he perceived the wholeness of the created order. There is a basic need in all human beings to know the answers to the great questions of life, and Schaeffer believed that God has given man the answers in the form of natural and specific revelation.

Second, Schaeffer believed that man has a natural inclination to desire the reasonable. Schaeffer argued that the Christian faith is not only true, but that it is the most plausible account for the existence of man and his place in the universe. He contended that an irrational faith is not what God intended to communicate to man.

Third, Schaeffer was one of the original cultural critics of the twentieth century. He believed that mankind, both Christians and non-Christians, was adrift on a sea of

irrationality. He further believed that this drift was intensifying to the point that true, orthodox Christianity was being lost.

Schaeffer and *The God Who Is There*

Francis Schaeffer developed some important themes in three of his books: *The God Who Is There, Escape from Reason,* and *He Is There and He Is Not Silent.*

Lets consider *The God Who Is There* first. The major thesis in this book is that modern man has abandoned the idea of truth, and that has had widespread consequences in every area of life.

In his argumentation, Schaeffer summarizes the last half of the twentieth century, tracing the development of the intellectual climate in Western society. Previous generations had grown up with a basic operational belief that the law of non-contradiction was true. What Schaeffer would have us understand about the law of non- contradiction is this: a statement cannot be both true and false in the same way at the same time. For example, you are either reading this essay or you are not. You cannot be both reading this and not reading it at the same time. Either you are or you are not—choose one.

When we hear something like this, our first reaction is of course we believe in this law of non-contradiction. We believe in it and live by it, even if we did not know what it was called until just a few moments ago. But Schaeffer points out that there has been a gradual decline of belief in this basic principle beginning with philosophy in the late eighteenth century. This first step in the movement away from reason is followed by second and third steps in the areas of art and music. These are, in turn, followed by the fourth steps of general culture and theology. There is much debate about which step came first and who followed whom. The important thing to realize is that after the seventeenth and eighteenth century

Enlightenment in Europe, and certainly before the height of the Industrial age, men in the highest positions of academic and artistic life began to think very differently.

In the first half of this century, Western man began to think in terms of mutually exclusive truths. In other words, we began to believe that two people could believe mutually exclusive truths simultaneously and both of them could be correct. This would be like two people seeing an object and one claiming that it existed and the other claiming that it did not exist. The two men shake hands and say that they are both right in their conclusions. Objective reality is completely undermined and nothing is true. The result of this thinking is that man begins to despair of his condition.{3} He doesnt know what is ultimately true.

Schaeffers ambition was to help Christians be salt and light in our world. And to do that, we have to understand how people think. Schaeffer also cautions Christians against capitulation to irrationality themselves.{4} In the spirit of cooperation, many Christians are choosing to remain silent when they hear people say that all religions are the same, or that Christianity may be true for one person, but not true for another. Christians cannot afford to remain silent in a world that is embracing irrationality. The unity of orthodox Christianity should be centered and grounded on truth. This is not always easy, but it is absolutely necessary.

Escape from Reason

In *The God Who Is There,* Schaeffers main thesis is that modern man is characterized by his willingness to live a life of contradictions. In the book *Escape from Reason,* he shows how we arrived at this position, and what can be done about it.

Francis Schaeffer believed that one of the great watershed periods of human history occurred in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The Reformation was a fifteenth

and sixteenth century movement, but it was religious in nature and ultimately resulted in the formation of the Protestant churches. The Renaissance, argues Schaeffer, largely emphasized human reason and the achievements of man. In sharp contrast, the Reformation emphasized the will of God and the authority of the Holy Scriptures. It must be remembered that Schaeffer is generalizing in much of what is said here and that both movements had good and bad aspects.

Schaeffer maintains that men in the Renaissance believed they were great because of the wonderful art, literature, and architecture they produced. The Reformation man believed he was great because of the God who had made him. Man was made to have a relationship with his creator, but the Renaissance man found himself more and more concerned with the things of this world.{5}

As the emphasis on man increased, the importance of God decreased. This movement was further facilitated by discoveries in the sciences which allowed man to understand the universe on purely naturalistic principles. The result of mans success in explaining some aspects of the universe through reason alone was that he began to try to explain every aspect of the universe through reason alone.

Men found that they were able to explain much through reason, but the larger philosophical questions proved to be too great. In addition, they discovered that there were many questions that could not be answered by reason alone. Some of these questions were: How did everything begin? Why is there something rather than nothing? What happens to us after we die? These questions are traditionally answered by theology, and the answers usually included an appeal to a divine being called God.

Modern man, thus, was faced with two possibilities. Either he could return to the answers found in the Scriptures, or he could live as though life had meaning even though he did not

believe that it really did.{6} Schaeffer argued that men in the Western philosophical tradition largely opted for irrational existence, escaping the requirements of reason, hence the title *Escape from Reason.* Schaeffers conclusion to this problem is that Christians must return to a serious belief in the Scriptures and their ability to answer the big philosophical problems, and that we must live our faith consistently in front of the world.{7} In addition, Schaeffer believed that the days are gone when the average man on the street would respond to the Gospel. The language has changed, and we must learn to speak in this new language.{8} We must educate ourselves and be ready to give an account of how modern man got into his present state of affairs.

He Is There and He Is Not Silent

In the analysis of the previous two books, we have seen that Schaeffer explains the development of modern history and how mankind has largely embraced non-reason in the area of morals. In *He Is There and He Is Not Silent,* Schaeffer outlines a solution for the predicament that faces modern man. He argues that there are three areas in which modern mankind has an absolute necessity for God: metaphysics, morals, and epistemology.{9} These are three areas of philosophy which have to do with, respectively, the problem of existence, the problem of mans moral behavior, and how man can come to a true knowledge of anything at all.

Prior to the seventeenth century, philosophy and theology recognized that they were dealing with the same basic questions. The only difference between the two disciplines was that the former appealed largely to reason and natural revelation, while the latter appealed mostly to reason and special revelation. In the middle ages, philosophy was said to be the handmaiden to theology. Theology was understood to be the queen of the sciences. When philosophy took the lead, it soon became apparent that it was not up to the task of

answering the big questions. The reality of God known through His revelation, however, does provide the answers for such questions.

Lets consider the areas of metaphysics, moral, and epistemology. The metaphysical need for the existence of God implies that there must be something or someone who is big enough, powerful enough, wise enough, and willing enough to create and maintain the universe we live in. If these requirements are not met, then man is forced to admit that he is here by chance occurrence and has no special destiny.{10}

The moral necessity of Gods existence centers on man as a personal being and a being who distinguishes between right and wrong. There are only two options. Either man was created from an impersonal beginning and his moral system is a product of his culture, or man had a personal beginning and was given laws to follow and an internal sense of right and wrong.{11} The moral necessity of God is founded on the philosophical need to account for why man is both cruel and wonderful at the same time. This can only be explained in terms of the biblical account of the Fall.

The epistemological necessity of Gods existence addresses our ability to know what is ultimately real. Much of the modern problem in the area of knowledge began in the seventeenth century. As the scientific revolution developed, the criteria for truth became that which could be demonstrated in a laboratory. The result was that belief in God and the miraculous, which cannot be demonstrated in a laboratory, came into doubt and were eventually dismissed by many. The final result was pessimism regarding theological truths and, more recently, any truth at all. We have all encountered the individual who asks, How do you know that? And often this question is repeated for every subsequent answer.

The only answer to these three dilemmas is an appeal to the God who is there, and to His natural and special revelation.

The basis of Christianity is the belief that God is there and that man can communicate with Him. If this is not true, then we are without a foundation.

Francis Schaeffer and "The Man Without a Bible"

The purpose of this discussion of the works of Francis Schaeffer is that we hope Christians will once again turn to this great apologist for the Christian faith and learn from him. In closing, we will address one of his lesser known works titled *Death In The City.* In chapter seven, The Man Without a Bible, Schaeffer offers some advice for Christians living in a post-Christian world. He argues very convincingly that the church in America has largely turned away from God and the knowledge of the things of God. This occurred in just a few short decades, from the 1920s to the 1960s.{12}

We must always bear in mind that many people do not believe that the Bible is inspired or authoritative. For these people the Bible is just another book. The dismantling of biblical authority has been very efficient in the last 150 years. Very few of our major secular universities treat the Bible as authoritative anymore. Yet many of these universities were founded at a time when no one would have doubted the importance of the Holy Scriptures. The majority of men at the end of this century hold vastly different views about the Bible than did their ancestors at the close of the previous century. So, how do we share the Christian message with the man without the Bible?

Schaeffer cites three instances where Paul spoke to non-Christians and did not appeal to the Scriptures. These are found in Acts 14:15-17; 17:16-32, and Romans 1:18-2:16. The reason that Paul did not use the Scriptures on these three occasions is that the people he was addressing did not recognize the claims that the Holy Scriptures made on their

lives. In approaching these individuals, Paul appealed to the moral knowledge that men possess as a feature of their created being. Schaeffer refers to this as the manishness of man.

In Romans 1:18 we have the description of Gods wrath being poured out on man. Schaeffer believes that this is an ideal place to approach modern man. We may tell the modern non-believer that he knows that God exists and that he has suppressed this knowledge. (The knowledge of God must be understood here as natural revelation, and not the gospel.) Paul means that each and every man, regardless of what he says, knows that God exists. This knowledge of God that the non-believer possesses is supplemented by the moral argument for Gods existence. The fact that men hold beliefs about right and wrong betrays the fact that they know that God necessarily exists. Men willingly suppress this knowledge of God and this brings His wrath.

The man without the Bible has suppressed the natural revelation of God, not the special revelation found in the Scriptures. The man without the Bible has not followed his initial knowledge of God to the proper conclusions and therefore remains lost. The many men without the Bible present both an opportunity and a challenge for the Christian. The opportunity is that this man is lost and Christians can share their faith with him. The challenge is in showing these lost people how the world around them and the human nature within them point toward the existence of God.

Francis Schaeffer was wonderful at discussing Christian truths with non-believers without appealing to the Scriptures. It is our loss if we do not familiarize ourselves with, and use, the works of one of this countrys greatest Christian thinkers.

Notes

1. J.I. Packer, forward to *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy,* by Francis Schaeffer (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), xiv.

2. Hosea 4:6.

3. Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy* (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), 109-114.

4. Ibid., 196.

5. Ibid., 217-224.

6. Ibid., 225-236.

7. Ibid., 261-270.

8. Ibid., 207-208.

9. Francis Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy* (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), 277.

10. Ibid., 275-290.

11. Ibid., 291-302.

12. Ibid., 211.

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Christmas Film Favorites

Todd Kappelman highlights some favorite films of the Christmas season, encouraging Christians to enjoy the films while separating the sacred from the secular.

A Christmas Carol

In this article we will examine several classics of film and television that have become perennial favorites during the Christmas season. We'll start with a review of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. The 1938 Metro Goldwin Mayer version is our primary reference, although there are several remakes and versions that would be worthy of our attention. Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* remains one of the all-time favorite seasonal films and is worthy of an annual viewing for a number of reasons.



The primary reason that the *Carol* is still important is that Christmas has become a commercial disaster that tends to focus our attention on the material aspects of the season and neglect the spiritual and humanitarian dimensions. *A Christmas Carol* must be understood as the loud cry of a Victorian prophet sounding the warning of the evils of poverty. The settings in Dickens' stories, illustrating the abysmal conditions in nineteenth century England, have long been understood to be a valuable reminder of the social inequities during the industrial revolution. This is the background of the famous Christmas tale.

The film opens with Ebenezer Scrooge's nephew Fred playing in the snow with several young boys. One of the boys is Tiny Tim, the handicapped son of one of Scrooge's employees, Bob Cratchet. The story develops quickly as the merry and cheerful lives of every man, woman, and child in England are contrasted with the disgruntled and miserable life of Scrooge (Reginald Owen). Scrooge is a rich business man with want of nothing, and yet he cannot, or will not, find it in his heart to enter into the spirit of the season. At midnight on Christmas Eve all of this will change as he is visited by the three ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future.

The ghost of Christmas past shows Scrooge his childhood school and friends. He remembers the time as mixed with joy and confusion. Joy because of his friends, and confusion because his father does not participate in the season in the same manner as other families. It is at this point that he becomes hardened as a young man and turns to a life of greed.

When the ghost of Christmas present comes, Scrooge is shown how other people are spending the evening. This is where he learns that Christmas may be enjoyed in spite of being poor and that it is a time of opportunity for those who have material blessings to share with those who do not.

Finally, when the ghost of Christmas future comes, Scrooge is shown the grave that awaits him. He inquires whether one may not change his ways and thus alter his destiny. Although the ghost, who is actually the Grim Reaper, does not respond Scrooge surmises that this must be possible or the ghosts would not be visiting him in the first place. Scrooge learns his lesson in the end and has what amounts to a "conversion" for Dickens. The film and story conversion amount to a humanitarian change of heart and are thin on the Christian emphasis in spite of the presence of worship services and praying families. What we should take with us from the film is the fact that we can learn from the past and appropriate it in the present for a better future. Likewise we can use the Christmas season as an opportunity to focus on that which really matters, which for Christians is the birth Jesus Christ.

Miracle on 34th Street

Miracle on 34th Street, much like *A Christmas Carol,* is an example of the humanitarian variety of Christmas films.

Miracle on 34th Street opens during the Macy's Annual

Thanksgiving Day Parade. The man who has been hired to play Santa is drunk, and the organizer, a Mrs. Doris Walker (Maureen O'Hara), is desperate to find a suitable stand-in. Fortunately the real Santa, a.k.a. Kriss Kringle (Edmund Gwenn), has been wandering the streets of New York and reluctantly agrees to help out. After the parade is over he begins to work at Macy's as the store's Santa Claus and causes quite a commotion.

Being the real Santa Claus, Kringle puts the children first and the commercialism last among his job concerns. He has been instructed by the store manager to influence the children to ask their parents for toys that are in abundant supply and thus help to sell the store's surplus merchandise. Kringle laments the request and will have nothing to do with further commercializing the season.

Kringle elects instead to listen seriously to the children's requests and send their parents to rival department stores if necessary to secure the desired presents. This causes the store's manager and Mrs. Walker great concern about what Mr. Macy, the owner, will do when he finds out. The customers could not be happier with the store and it is considered a great humanitarian gesture on the part of Macy to put the children ahead of the profits. Other stores follow suit, and there is a citywide, then nationwide, movement to assist customers and children ahead of the store's interests.

There is a major plot twist when Santa is brought to a competency hearing in the New York County Court because he claims to be Santa Claus. His trial is front-page news, and everyone anxiously follows the story to see if the court will find in favor of the existence of Santa Claus or rule that it has all been a commercial hoax of the tallest order.

Mrs. Walker's daughter, Susan (Natalie Wood), has been watching the story unfold and serves as a prop for those who posture themselves more realistically to the Christmas myth of

Santa Claus and reindeer. The little girl has been raised by her divorced mother to accept nothing but the sober truth about life; there are no fairy tales, myths, or Santa for this young girl.

However, when Santa is found to exist in actuality by the court there is a new opportunity for both the girl and her mother to reconsider their skepticism. The mother willingly concedes the existence of Santa Claus, but the daughter is much more demanding concerning what is necessary for her to believe. The emphasis of the story is not Christian specifically, but rather humanitarian. The lesson is that if one will turn from one's crass commercialism and embrace one's fellow man the true spirit of the season can be enjoyed. As Christians we should be happy that a classic such as this warns us against the pitfalls of materialism, yet cautious about adding too much by way of Christianizing the story.

How the Grinch Stole Christmas

As we continue in our survey of Christmas films you will notice the difference between films such as Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, which have a more humanitarian emphasis, and films like *It's A Wonderful Life,* with a stronger Christian emphasis. The film we now turn to consider, Dr. Seuss' *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, conveys more of the humanitarian message. This is the first of two animated classics to be reviewed.

The tale is set in Whoville where the inhabitants are preparing for their Yuletide celebration. The Whovillians enjoy a classic Christmas similar to that of most middle-class suburbanites. There are plenty of presents for the children, snacks and food of every conceivable kind, trees, fireplaces and even "roast beast."

The Grinch (Boris Karloff, voice), a villainous creature with a twisted and defective spirit due to his tiny heart, lives in

the mountains of Whoville. He is devising a scheme to steal Christmas from the townspeople below by taking the trees and gifts and food. The Grinch's rationale is that Christmas is somehow dependent on these things. If he steals them it will cause the Whos to wake up on Christmas morning and "find out that there is no Christmas."

The Grinch pulls off the heist and returns to his mountain hideout with every tree, gift, and crumb of food from all the Who houses only to discover a most startling surprise on Christmas morning. The Whos in Whoville awaken and begin to sing songs in spite of having no presents or food. The Grinch cannot understand how Christmas can come "without ribbons and packages, boxes and bows." He had expected the Whos to "all cry boo-hoo." Instead, he finds that Christmas does not come from a store. At this discovery the Grinch's heart grows three sizes. He has seen the true meaning of Christmas.

There is an extremely important message in Dr. Seuss' cartoon classic. Christmas does not come from a store and we should not participate in the commercial trappings of the season to the detriment of the real reason we have cause to celebrate. The season is about Christ, the Savior of the world, and it should be used as an occasion to celebrate this fact with fellow Christians and witness to those who are lost. We can learn from the Whovillians that Christmas can come without all of the whistles and bells that have become so much of the emphasis in our contemporary celebrations.

The message that we should be careful of is the simple humanitarian turn that is so frequently substituted for the real message. The Grinch has a change of heart, much like the change of heart experienced by Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, and Mrs. Walker in *Miracle on 34th Street*. It should not be inferred that this is a complaint against Dr. Seuss for not rendering a Christian message; that was certainly not his intent. It is, however, a reminder that the Christmas season is not a success just because we use it as an occasion for

good will to our fellow men. It is true that the world needs more good will between men, from the nuclear family to international affairs. But Christ said that “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.” True abundant life and good will which will last for eternity are found in a personal relationship with Christ. Keep this in mind and have a truly merry Christmas.

It’s A Wonderful Life

We are offering a list of suggestions for films which may be enjoyed by the whole family as both a point of fellowship and an opportunity for reflection during the Christmas season. The film we’ll now consider is Frank Capra’s 1946 classic *It’s A Wonderful Life*. This film has achieved a cult status as the embodiment of why we should be thankful as well as a reflection on the dignity and value of every individual regardless of one’s perceived worth.

The film is the story about a young man named George Bailey (James Stewart) who is saved from suicide by a guardian angel named Clarence (Henry Travers). In the opening sequence the people in Bedford Falls are giving thanks to God for what George has meant to them. The scene of the action then changes to the celestial heavens where Joseph, Clarence, and God are discussing the need to intervene in George’s life.

George’s father, the owner and executive officer of Bailey Building and Loan, suffers a stroke at the beginning of the film and George, the eldest of two children, must assume his father’s position. George foregoes his desires to travel and go to college. Instead he remains in Bedford Falls and marries a childhood acquaintance named Mary Hatch (Donna Reed). He and Mary are poor but extremely happy during the early years of their marriage. The events in George’s life will become unbearable when the Building and Loan is in danger of a scandal and foreclosure through no fault on his part. Considering his life insurance policy, he concludes that he

would be better off dead than alive.

The dramatic action of the film shifts when Clarence, George's guardian angel, rescues him from his suicide attempt. In response to George's statement that everyone would be better off if he were dead, Clarence offers George a guided tour of what Bedford Falls would be like if he had never been born. One of the first and most startling discoveries George makes concerns Mr. Gower, a druggist whom he worked for when he was a young boy. George had prevented Gower from making a deadly mistake in filling a prescription that would have killed a patient. However, on this occasion George was not there to prevent the accident. Without George Bailey, Gower spent twenty years in prison and became an alcoholic.

The events continue to unfold as George learns that the men saved by his brother Harry in World War II were killed because George had not saved his brother from drowning when they were young. George's wife, Mary, has become an old maid and his children Zu Zu, Tommy, and Janie were never born. The town is no longer called Bedford Falls, but Pottersville, after George's arch rival and evil banker Mr. Potter (Lionel Barrymore). The entire town—from the druggist, to the girl next door, from the saloon owners to the librarian —is different as a result of George's having never been born. There is an oppressive cloud over the town as it mourns the loss of a citizen it never knew.

The idea that all men have a purpose can only be understood in light of a world created by a God who designed that purpose and gives all men a chance to fulfill their end. Frank Capra's classic *It's A Wonderful Life* can serve as a reminder to all this Christmas season that God puts each and every individual here for a specific purpose. It truly is a wonderful life!

A Charlie Brown Christmas

We conclude our series on films and television specials of the

Christmas season with what many believe to be one of the most overtly Christian programs in the genre, Charles Schultz's *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Thus far we have looked at *A Christmas Carol, Miracle on 34th Street, How the Grinch Stole Christmas,* and *It's a Wonderful Life*. The major division between these films and specials is that some have a merely humanitarian theme, and others have a more or less classic Christian interpretation of Christmas. We have mentioned that there is nothing wrong with the humanitarian emphasis as far as it goes, but Christians should understand the finer distinctions between the two renderings of the meaning of Christmas.

A Charlie Brown Christmas opens with Charlie Brown in his usual state of mild depression, searching for the meaning of something. This time it is the true meaning of Christmas. He proclaims to Lucy that it just does not feel like Christmas and that his problem is that he just doesn't understand it. Lucy charges Charlie Brown five cents and tells him nothing of any value; her solution is a naturalistic approach with a focus on monetary gain.

Charlie Brown's little sister, Sally, is a prototypical adolescent. She proclaims that all she wants for Christmas is everything that is coming to her; she wants her fair share. She represents the voice of all who equate Christmas primarily with a time of getting presents. It is sad when a child believes this about Christmas; it is tragic when an adult holds the same view. Lucy interrupts the exchange between Charlie Brown and his sister Sally to announce that we all know that Christmas is a big commercial racket. The truth here is that we all know that Christmas has become a big commercial racket; the tragedy is that we do so little about it.

The scene changes again when Charlie Brown is put in charge of the Christmas play and must find an appropriate Christmas tree. In true Charlie Brown fashion he selects a pitiful specimen that is losing all of its nettles and cannot support

itself. The tree becomes a symbol for Charlie Brown and the limp and pathetic status of our contemporary celebration of Christmas; something has gone terribly wrong. Lucy's jaded expectations and Sally's crass materialism have only led Charlie Brown to a deeper state of depression. The answers have failed to comfort him, thus the season looks bleak and hopeless. This leads to his final cry for someone who knows the true meaning of Christmas to come forward.

Linus, the blanket introvert virtuoso, enters and assumes center stage. As the existential hero of the story, the true meaning of Christmas has not eluded him. He tells Charlie Brown that he will now give an account of what Christmas means. In a direct quotation from Luke 2:10-11, Linus tells them of the annunciation by the angel concerning the birth of the baby Jesus.

> *And the angel said unto them, Fear not: For, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. (KJV)*

In this, the most overtly Christian of the Christmas specials we have discussed, there is a clear and unmistakable account of the true meaning of the Christmas season. Have a merry Christmas and a happy New Year!

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