

Video Games – Evaluating Them From a Christian Perspective

Grand Theft Auto

The best-selling video game in America last year was “Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas.” The recent controversy over this popular video game is just another reminder of the deception of ratings and the need for parental direction and discernment when it comes to buying video games.

The game in question already has a bad reputation. The National Institute on Media and the Family described it this way: “Raunchy, violent and portraying just about every deviant act that a criminal could think of in full, living 3D graphics. Grand Theft Auto takes the cake again as one of the year’s worst games for kids. The premise—restore respect to your neighborhood as you take on equally corrupt San Andreas police.”^{1}

Ironically what caused the controversy over the game was not its overt violence and sexuality. What caused a national stir was what was hidden within the game. Those playing the game (known as gamers) could download a modification of “Grand Theft Auto” that would allow them to see graphic sex scenes on screen.

Initially the distributor distanced itself from what hackers could do with their product once it was on the market. But that argument fell flat when it was found that the downloaded modification merely unlocked pornographic material already within the game. It now turns out that skilled players can unlock the pornographic content without downloading the key from the Internet. The game initially had a “Mature” rating. The Entertainment Software Ratings Board now requires that it

be labeled "Adults Only."

"Grand Theft Auto" has already been a lightning rod for controversy because it rewards players for committing crimes and engaging in dangerous and immoral behavior. Gamers can buy and sell drugs, steal cars, run down pedestrians, even feed people into a wood chipper. Nevertheless, the game has sold more than five million copies in the United States.

Who is buying this game? Some are adults buying the game for themselves, but a large percentage of the people buying this game are parents or grandparents buying the game for their kids or grandkids.

Columnist Mona Charen points out that the original concerns about this game surfaced when a Manhattan grandmother bought the game for her fourteen-year-old grandson. Then she was shocked to find out that he could modify the game by downloading material from the Internet. Charen asks, "So, a kindly eighty-five-year-old lady has no qualms about purchasing a gang-glorifying, violence-soaked, sick entertainment for her teenage grandson, but is shocked when it turns out to contain explicit sex? Wasn't the rest enough?"[\[2\]](#)

In most cases, parents and grandparents are buying these games and need to exercise discernment. Many games are harmless and even can help stimulate the mind. Some are questionable. And others are violent and sexually explicit. We need to use discernment in selecting these games.

Benefits of Video Games

A recent article in *Discover* magazine talked about the perception most people have of video game players. It said this is "the classic stereotype of gamers as attention-deficit-crazed stimulus junkies, easily distracted by flashy graphics and on-screen carnage."[\[3\]](#) Yet new research shows that gaming can be mentally enriching with such cognitive

benefits as: pattern recognition, system thinking, and even patience.[{4}](#)

One of the best-known studies (done by Shawn Green and Daphne Bavelier) found that playing an action video game markedly improved performance on a range of visual skills related to detecting objects in briefly flashed displays. They found that gamers exhibit superior performance relative to non-gamers on a set of benchmark visual tasks.[{5}](#)

What they found was the action video gamers tend to be more attuned to their surroundings. While this occurs while performing within the video game, it also transfers to such things as driving down a residential street where they are more likely than a non-gamer to pick out a child running into the street after a ball.

They found that gamers can process visual information more quickly and can track 30 percent more objects than non-gamers. These conclusions came from testing both gamers and non-gamers with a series of three tests.

The first test flashed a small object on a screen for 1/160 of a second and the participant would indicate where it flashed. Gamers tended to notice the object far more often than non-gamers.

The second test flashed a number of small objects on a screen at once. The subjects had to type the number of objects they saw. Gamers saw the correct number more often than non-gamers.

The third test flashed black letters and one white letter on a screen in fast succession. The one white letter was sometimes followed by a black "X." Gamers were able to pick out the white letter more often than non-gamers and could more accurately say whether it was followed by a black "X."

The researchers also wanted to know whether the superior performance of gamers was acquired or self-selected. In other

words, do video games actually improve visual attention skills or is it possible that visually attentive people choose to play video games?

Green and Bavelier trained a selection of non-gamers on one of two video games. One group played the World War II action video game “Medal of Honor.” The other group served as the control group and played the puzzle game “Tetris.” The researchers found that after two weeks, the group trained on the World War II game showed a marked increase in performance over the control group.

The researchers therefore concluded: “By forcing players to simultaneously juggle a number of varied tasks (detect new enemies, track existing enemies and avoid getting hurt, among others), action-video-game playing pushed the limits of three rather different aspects of visual attention.”[\[6\]](#)

Video games can also train our brain to be more efficient. In the early 1990s, Richard Haier (University of California at Irving’s Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior), scanned the brains of “Tetris” players. He found that in first-time users, the brain requires lots of energy. In fact, cerebral glucose metabolic rates actually soar. But after a few weeks, these rates sink to normal as performance increases seven-fold.[\[7\]](#) In essence, “Tetris” trains your brain to stop using inefficient gray matter.

Types of Video Games

Let’s now focus on the rating of video games and the major video game categories. As we mentioned earlier, the video game industry is self-regulated, so we need to exercise discernment.

EC – Early Childhood (age 3 and older) – These games are appropriate for anyone who can play a video game and contains no inappropriate material.

E – Everyone (age 6 and older) – These games are designed for younger players and are the equivalent of a PG movie.

T – Teen (age 13 and older) – Generally these games are not appropriate for younger ages and are equivalent of a PG-13 movie.

M – Mature (age 17 and older) – These games are not appropriate for children. They may be rated as such because of overt violence, sexual content, and profanity.

A0 – Adults Only (ages 18 and older) – These games involve excessive violence, sexual content, and explicit language.

There are a number of different types of video games.

Puzzles – Puzzle games are usually acceptable for all ages and generally are rated “E.” These games involve logic and spatial arrangements. The best known puzzle game is “Tetris.”

Strategy – These games may be as straightforward as “Chessmaster” or involve the use of tactical moves of troops or players such as “Advanced Wars.”

Simulation games – Some games like “SimCity” require creativity and advanced problem-solving skills. Others involve driving or flying simulations that can be relatively tame or highly offensive such as the “Grand Theft Auto” series of video games.

Arcade games – The classic arcade games include such favorites as “Pacman” or “Frogger.” However, the newer arcade games may include games like the violent “Street Fighter.”

Role playing games – This is a type of game where players assume the roles of via role-playing. Although these games may be less graphic, they often involve fantasy and even the occult.

Action games – These games most often have an “M” rating. Many

of these action games involve point-and-shoot games that are especially dangerous.

Violent Video Games

There is cause for concern about violent video games. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, playing violent video games increases the likelihood of adolescent violent behavior by as much as 13 percent to 22 percent.[{8}](#)

A 2005 meta-analysis of over thirty-five research studies (that included 4000 participants) found that “playing violent video games significantly increases physiological arousal and feelings of anger or hostility, and significantly decreases pro-social helping behavior.”[{9}](#) Another study has shown a relationship between playing violent video games and being involved in violent acts.[{10}](#)

Testimony before the United States Senate documents the following: (1) that violent video games increase violent adolescent behavior, (2) that heavy game players become desensitized to aggression and violence, (3) that nearly 90 percent of all African-American females in these games are victims of violence, and (4) that the most common role for women in violent video games is as prostitutes.[{11}](#)

One of the people speaking out against violent video games is Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, whom I have interviewed on a number of occasions. He is a former West Point professor and has written books on the subject of killing.[{12}](#) He has also testified that these violent video games are essentially “killing simulators.”

Grossman testified on the shooting in Paducah, Kentucky. Michael Carneal, a fourteen-year-old boy who had never fired a handgun before, stole a pistol and fired a few practice shots the night before. The next morning he fired eight shots and had eight hits (four of them head shots, one neck, and three

upper torso). This is unprecedented marksmanship for a boy who only fired a .22 caliber rifle once at a summer camp.

The typical response in firing a gun is to fire at the target until it drops. Carneal instead moved from victim to victim just like he had learned in the violent video games he played.

The goal in these games is to rack up the “highest score” by moving quickly. Grossman points out that many of the games (such as “House of the Dead” or “Goldeneye” or “Turok”) give bonus points for head shots.[{13}](#)

Does that mean that anyone who plays these games will be a killer? Of course not. But Grossman says that the kind of training we give to soldiers (operant conditioning, desensitization, etc.) is what we are also giving to our kids through many of these violent video games.

Ironically, the U.S. Marine Corps licensed one of these popular video games (“Doom”) to train their combat fire teams in tactics and to rehearse combat actions of killing.[{14}](#) The video game manufacturers certainly know these are killing simulators. In fact the advertising for one game (“Quake II” that is produced by the same manufacturer as “Doom”), says: “We took what was killer, and made it mass murder.”

Biblical Discernment

If we look back at the list of different types of video games, it is pretty easy to see that it is possible to find acceptable games as well as questionable and even dangerous video games in just about any category. That is why parental direction and discernment are so important.

The latest controversy over “Grand Theft Auto” demonstrates that the video game industry has not been effective at self-regulation. And children cannot be expected to exercise good judgment unless parents use discernment and teach it to their

kids.

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

As Christians, we should develop discernment in our lives. See my article on “Media and Discernment” (www.probe.org/faith-and-culture/culture/media-and-discernment.html) for suggestions on how to develop discernment in your life and the life of your child.

Parents need to determine the possible benefits to playing videos and whether those benefits outweigh the negatives. Many of the games available today raise little or no concern. As one commentator put it, “The majority of video games on the best-seller list contain no more bloodshed than a game of Risk.”^{15}

But even good, constructive games played for long periods of time can be detrimental. Over the last few years I have been compiling statistics for my teen talk on media use. The number of hours young people spend watching TV, listening to music, surfing the Internet, going to movies, etc. is huge and increasing every year. Young people spend entirely too much time in front of a screen (TV screen, computer screen, movie screen).

So even good video games can be bad if young people are staying indoors and not going outdoors for exercise. Obesity is already a problem among many young people. And good video games can be bad if they take priority over responsibilities at home and schoolwork.

Parents should understand the potential dangers of video games and make sure they approve of the video games that come into their home. They may conclude that the drawbacks outweigh the

benefits. If their children do play video games, they should also set time limits and monitor attitudes and behaviors that appear. They should also watch for signs of addiction. The dangers of video games are real, and parents need to exercise discernment.

Notes

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11. Craig Anderson, "Violent Video Games Increase Aggression and Violence," U.S. Senate Testimony, Hearing on The Impact of Interactive Violence on Children, Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, 106th Congress, 1st Session.
12. David Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Little, Brown and Co, 1995) and David Grossman and G. DeGaetano, *Stop*

Teaching Our Kids to Kill: A Call to Action Against TV, Movie and Video Game Violence (New York: Crown Books, 1999).

13. Statement of Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman, given before the New York State Legislature, October 1999, www.fradical.com/statement_of_lieutenant_colonel_dave_Grossman.htm.

14. Ibid.

15. Johnson, *Discover*, 41.

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The Worldview of Star Wars – A Christian Evaluation

Dr. Zukeran takes a critical, balanced view of this popular movie series to help us understand the worldview it presents in light of a biblical worldview. From a Christian perspective, he points out the positive themes of the movies presented from a pantheistic worldview. We can use these movies to generate conversations about the differences between the worldview of Star Wars and a genuinely Christian worldview.

George Lucas

The *Star Wars* series has come to a climatic finale. Many of us can still remember the year 1977 when people stood in long lines at theaters several blocks long. It was not uncommon to hear of individuals who returned to see the movie, some over a dozen times. Few movies have generated the same excitement and following as this series. Through its production, special effects, and cinematography, *Star Wars* had a tremendous impact on the arts, setting a new standard for the movie industry.

Not only did *Star Wars* have an impact on the entertainment industry, it also opened our eyes to the worldview of pantheism. Pantheism comes from the Greek word “pan” meaning all and “theism” meaning God. It is the belief that the impersonal God is one essence with the universe. God inhabits all things. The universe is God and God is the universe. In other words, God is not separate from the universe but is contained within it. This worldview lies at the foundation of most Hindu, Buddhist, and New Age religions. This worldview gained popularity in the sixties, at a time when Eastern ideas began to enter the West. It drew public attention through celebrities such as The Beatles and Shirley McClain who embraced the teachings of the Eastern religions. *Star Wars*, with its success, continues to stir interest in the ideas of pantheism.

George Lucas borrowed themes from several religions and ancient myths in creating the story line for *Star Wars*. Lucas was not intending to introduce or promote a particular religion in his movie. However, he wanted young people to think about spiritual issues and the big questions about life. He created his movies to “. . . make young people think about the mystery. Not to say, ‘Here’s the answer.’ It’s to say, ‘Think about this for a second. Is there a God? What does God look like? What does God sound like? What does God feel like? How do we relate to God?’ Just getting young people to think at that level is what I’ve been trying to do in the films. What eventual manifestation that takes place in terms of how they describe their God, what form their faith takes, is not the point of the movie.”[\[1\]](#)

George Lucas should be commended in his desire to inspire people to wrestle with such issues. This is a movie rich in theology and deep in philosophical ideas that are sure to generate some profitable discussions. C.S. Lewis, J.R. Tolkien, and Fyodor Dostoevsky, in their classical fiction writings, presented answers to life’s questions from a

theistic worldview. In *Star Wars*, Lucas has accomplished a similar classic work presenting answers to life's questions from a pantheistic worldview. For this reason *Star Wars* is a fun movie that is full of theological ideas.

In the following sections, we will examine how Lucas' pantheistic worldview is illustrated in *Star Wars*, and present a biblical critique of this fine movie series.

The Worldview of Pantheism

What are some of the major tenets of pantheism?

First, there is the concept of monism, the notion that all things are essentially of the same nature or essence. In other words, God is the universe; he is not separate from the universe but is contained within it. The universe is eternal and flows out of the divine. Therefore, creation is *ex deo* (out of God), meaning out of the hands of God. The Greek philosopher Plotinus stated that everything flows from God, be it life or flower from a seed. Good and evil, light and darkness all flow out of God.

Pantheists also believe in the absence of a divine personal being who created the universe. Instead, they attest to a divine essence, an impersonal force, a cosmic energy that flows throughout all things in the universe. This energy is called "the One," "the divine," "Chi," or "Brahma." In *Star Wars*, it is called the Force.

Following their logic, if all is one in essence, all is divine. Hence, God and man are of the same essence, so man is essentially divine. Here is an illustration. God is the large ocean and we are all drops in that ocean. As a drop of water from a rain cloud must make its journey to unite with the ocean, so every individual must make their journey to become one with the divine. Spiritual guru Deepak Chopra writes, "Your body is not separate from the universe, because at

quantum mechanical levels there are no well-defined edges. You are like a wiggle, a wave, a fluctuation, a convolution, a whirlpool, a localized disturbance in the larger quantum field. The larger quantum field – the universe – is your extended body.”[{2}](#) He also states, “In reality we are divinity in disguise, and gods and goddesses in embryo that are contained within us seek to be fully materialized. True success therefore is the experience of the miraculous. It is the unfolding of the divinity within us.”[{3}](#)

Since we are divine, true knowledge is attained by awakening the god within through an experience known as enlightenment. The One or the divine is not understood through the senses or rational thinking but by mystical union which is beyond the conscious self. This union comes through various means such as meditation, yoga, and channeling, among others. The process includes letting go of our conscious self and reaching out with our emotions.

The ultimate destiny of man is to become absorbed into the divine. All individuals are involved in an endless cycle of reincarnation until they attain enlightenment and eventually break the cycle of reincarnation to be absorbed into the divine. These are some of the basic teachings of pantheism that are depicted in *Star Wars*.

God and The Force

George Lucas stated that he wanted *Star Wars* to inspire young people to ask spiritual questions about God. In *Star Wars*, the idea of God is found in the Force. Lucas states, “I put the Force into the movie in order to try to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people – more a belief in God than a belief in any particular religious system.”[{4}](#) Master Jedi Obi Won Kenobi first introduces us to the Force in 1977. Sitting in his desert hut, Obi Won explains to Luke Skywalker the nature of the Force. He states, “The Force is what gives the

Jedi his power. It is an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us, penetrates us, it binds the galaxy together." The Jedi Knights and their adversaries the Siths use this cosmic energy to perform supernatural feats.

The Force reflects one of the main tenets of the pantheistic worldview, the concept of monism, that all is in essence one. The Force is not a personal being. It is an impersonal energy that is made up of and resides in all living things. Therefore, all of life has the spark of divinity because all is essentially one unified entity.

George Lucas borrows a lot of his ideas from Eastern pantheistic religions. Chinese religions such as Taoism teach that this cosmic energy is called the Chi Force. Chi flows through all living things, and therefore the powers of the universe reside in each individual. Through meditation, yoga, and other techniques of altering one's consciousness, one can master this energy within and perform supernatural feats.

Some Christians have mistakenly equated the Force with the Holy Spirit; however, there are several major differences. First, the Force is an impersonal energy field while the Holy Spirit is a personal being, the third member of the Trinity. He has a personality, intelligence, and will. Second, the Force is made up of all living things in the universe while the Holy Spirit is not contained in the universe. The Holy Spirit is an eternal being who was involved in creating the universe out of nothing (Genesis 1). Being God, the Holy Spirit is involved in the universe but He is not contained in the universe and exists independent of living things. Third, the Force can be manipulated by the Jedi who use it to accomplish their will, but the Holy Spirit cannot be manipulated by those He indwells. Instead He guides, teaches, and empowers them to do the will of God the Father. Christians do not master the Holy Spirit to accomplish their will, but rather the Holy Spirit guides them to do His will. Finally, the Force has a good side and a dark side which exist in a

state of balance while the Holy Spirit has no dark or evil side but only the attributes consistent with a holy and good God.

Salvation

The story of *Star Wars* centers on one figure, Anakin Skywalker, who is identified by the master Jedi Qui Gon Jinn as the "chosen one." Anakin's birth was miraculous in that he was born of a virgin and his body has a high level of metachlorines. Qui Gon states that as the chosen one, Anakin will restore the "balance of the Force," a hope anticipated throughout the entire series. What does Lucas mean by this statement?

As stated previously, Lucas illustrates the teachings of the pantheistic worldview throughout the movie series. He borrows several concepts from Taoism, one of them being the idea of restoring the balance of the force.

Taoism teaches that there are equal and opposing forces throughout the universe that balance one another. This is known as the yin/yang duality. Opposing forces such as positive and negative energy, light and darkness, life and death, have always been in a state of opposition. Neither side has dominance over the other, but there is a balance of these opposing forces. These forces are mutually dependent, and one cannot be known apart from the other. When these forces are not in balance, there is disharmony. When they exist in a balance, there is harmony.

Every individual must accept and live in harmony with this balance of opposing forces. When there is an imbalance of one over the other in a person, there is disharmony in one's life. When disturbed, this balance must be restored in the individual and in the world. Once balance is restored, harmony and peace returns. Darkness, death, and evil, are never

defeated; they are only to be brought into balance with the opposing forces of light, life, and goodness. In *Star Wars*, the Force has two sides, a good side and a dark side. Imbalance has occurred because one side, the dark side, has become too pervasive and must be brought into balance by the opposing force of good. The dark side is not to be defeated permanently by the good but balance is to be restored to the Force. This is the concept George Lucas presents throughout the series.

In the Bible, the universe is not eternal but was created by God from nothing. The original creation was good. Evil, death, and suffering came as the result of the fall, which marred creation. The conflict between light and darkness, life and death, good and evil has not been an eternal struggle. The two forces are also not equal and in a balance. The Bible teaches that God is light, holy, good, and the life. He is not locked in an eternal struggle with opposing forces. One day at His appointed time, He will not bring balance but restoration to the universe. This will occur when God judges the world, defeats evil permanently, and establishes a new heaven and earth where sin and its effects are no longer present.

The Jedi Masters

The heroes in the *Star Wars* are the Jedi Knights. These select few individuals have mastered the Force and are powerful warriors. They function as the guardians of peace in the galactic empire and use their powers only in times of danger. Where did Lucas get his idea for the Jedi?

In a Discovery Channel documentary entitled "The Science of *Star Wars*," Lucas reveals the source of his idea. Once again, he borrows concepts from the pantheistic religions. Lucas reveals that his idea came from studying the Shao-Lin monks of China. The Shao-Lin monks are priests known for originating and becoming the masters of the martial arts. Their fighting

skills were legendary throughout the land of China.

Not only are the Shao-Lin monks skillful fighters, they were also men who mastered the use of the Chi force. As previously mentioned, Chi is believed to be the cosmic energy that flows through all things including individuals. The Shao-Lin monks teach that through altering one's consciousness in meditation and other exercises, one can tap into the power of the Chi resident in each individual and use it to perform superhuman feats.

Using the Chi force, Shao-Lin monks believe they can deliver punches and kicks with devastating force. They are also able to withstand punishing blows from opponents and objects. Some even believe a master can strike down an opponent without physical contact by simply utilizing Chi energy.

In Star Wars, we see this parallel. The Jedi are dressed in garments similar to the Shao-Lin monks, are headquartered at the Temple, and are masters of the Force. Using the Force, they are able to move objects, foresee future events, manipulate people's thoughts, and strike down opponents without any physical contact. For the Jedi, truth is ultimately found in their feelings. When questions arise, the phrase among the Jedi is, "Search your feelings. What do they tell you?" True knowledge for the Jedi is beyond the rational and instead found in feelings and intuitions beyond the rational mind. The Jedi are another example of Lucas' pantheistic worldview.

There is much to like regarding the Jedi. They are noble heroes who are self-sacrificing, disciplined, and courageous. However, Christians should reject the idea of the Force that is the power behind the Jedi. The Bible does not teach that there is a cosmic energy or Chi that flows through objects and individuals. Throughout their training, Jedi are taught to let go of the conscious mind and reach out with their feelings. Christians are taught to love God "with all your heart, with

all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). Christians do not abandon their mind but develop it to understand truth and God's will (Romans 12:1-2). The mind and heart work together through prayer, study of the Word, and guidance of the Holy Spirit to discern truth and God's will in situations.

What Happens After Death?

What happens after death? This is another question George Lucas hoped young people would ask as they viewed this series. *Star Wars* presents an answer that once again reflects the teaching of pantheism. Pantheism teaches that we are all in an endless cycle of reincarnation until we attain enlightenment. It is then that we escape this cycle and become one with the divine meaning and become absorbed into the cosmic energy of the universe.

In *The Revenge of the Sith*, Anakin Skywalker is haunted with nightmares of his wife Padme dying at the birth of their child. Tormented by this dream he seeks the counsel of Yoda, the master of the Jedi. Yoda imparts to Anakin that death is a natural part of the universe. In other words, we should accept it without emotion. He adds that one should not grieve for those who have died and become part of the Force. Anakin must not become attached to things, including people, for attachment to objects leads to jealousy and the dark side of the Force. One must release all feelings from things, for it is only then that one's thinking will be clear.

Thus, in *Star Wars* those who die become absorbed into the Force. We also learn that the Jedi are able to delay this absorption and appear as spirit guides to aid those in the physical world. Those with special insight may learn how to communicate with these ascended masters.

This teaching is another fundamental tenet of pantheistic

religions. Pantheism teaches that the material world is an illusion. Therefore, one should not grow attached to earthly things for they are merely an illusion and are not permanent. Several schools of Hinduism and Buddhism teach that this world is an illusion and, as such, we must rid ourselves of all desires. The most holy of followers will therefore live lives of celibacy and poverty, releasing themselves from any desire and spending their days in meditation and study. At death, some holy men will delay their union with the divine and remain as spirit guides to aid those on the journey to enlightenment.

The Bible teaches that at death, we will not be absorbed into an impersonal energy field but we will retain our personhood and stand before God in judgment. There is no reincarnation or second chance. Hebrews 9:7 states that "It is appointed for each person to die once and then comes the judgment." Those who know Jesus will spend eternity with the Lord and fellow believers for all eternity. Those who have rejected Christ will spend eternity separated from God in Hell. The Bible presents a destiny that is just, but also filled with hope for those who know Jesus.

The answer presented in *Star Wars*, the annihilation of one's consciousness and absorption into a cosmic energy field, is a false one that even if true, would provide insufficient hope.

How to Watch *Star Wars*

When it comes to movies, there are three basic responses among Christians. Some choose to avoid any movie that may teach contrary beliefs for fear that they or their children may be negatively influenced. Others are consumers and watch any movie believing it is harmless fun and entertainment. A third option is to select appropriate movies and then view them with discernment. I take the third position. The arts are meant to be enjoyed and to glorify God. Creation itself reflects the creative mind of God who designed man with the capacity to

produce art. Man, however, many times uses the arts for less than noble reasons. However, Christians can learn valuable lessons about other belief systems and use movies as great teaching tools to help younger believers become more discerning and understand other worldviews.

In *Star Wars* we have a great teaching and discussion topic. There is much we should commend George Lucas for in this series. *Star Wars* is creative, entertaining, and family-friendly. It also promotes several good themes such as friendship, courage, and the dangerous corrupting power of selfish ambition. We should furthermore commend Lucas on his desire to make a movie that would inspire young people to think about deeper issues in life.

In the *Time Magazine* interview, Lucas states that he wanted young people to think about spiritual issues and the big questions about life. I certainly agree with Lucas, and wish more movies were designed for such purposes.

Star Wars is a great discussion piece because it creatively reflects the tenets of pantheism. Christians can use this film to discuss spiritual lessons revealed in the series. I have had profitable discussions with teens and adults on the spiritual principles illustrated in *Star Wars*. Questions such as "What do you think about the whole idea of the Force?", "Is there such a thing as a cosmic energy field?", "Can we master the power of this energy?", "What did *Star Wars* teach regarding what happens after death?", or "What do you think really happens after death?" have arisen in conversations.

Answers to these questions often lead to great discussions regarding worldviews, the nature of truth, and eternal life. *Star Wars* offers answers from a pantheistic worldview, which Christians can point out and explain why these answers are false. Movies like *Star Wars* can be a great teaching tool when Christians are equipped and informed to discern truth from error.

Notes

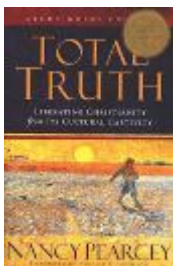
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2. Deepak Chopra, *Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*, p.68, quoted in Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods*, (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 2000), 68.
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4. Ibid., 92.

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Total Truth – The Importance of a Christian Worldview

Total Truth is a book about worldview, its place in every Christian's life, and its prominent role in determining our impact on a culture that has hooked itself to the runaway locomotive of materialism and is headed for the inevitable cliff of despair and destruction.

Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity



"This is a book of unusual importance by an author of unusual ability."[\[1\]](#) This is a strong recommendation from any reviewer, but when the reviewer is best-selling author and Darwinian critic, Phillip Johnson, people pay

attention. As well they should. Nancy Pearcey's *Total Truth* is probably the most significant book of 2004. I pray its influence and impact will be felt for decades.

This is a book about worldview, its place in every Christian's life, and its prominent role in determining our impact on a culture that has hooked itself to the runaway locomotive of materialism and is headed for the inevitable cliff of despair and destruction.

While the concept of worldview has wiggled its way into the consciousness of some in the Christian community, it remains largely a buzzword used in the context of political discussions and fundraising for Christian parachurch organizations. But politics only reflects the culture, so working to change the political landscape without changing the way we think is not as productive as some thought it would be.

One of the extreme threats to Christianity in this country is the effect of the culture on our youth and, consequently, on the future of the church in America. Pearcey says, "As Christian parents, pastors, teachers, and youth group leaders, we constantly see young people pulled down by the undertow of powerful cultural trends. If all we give them is a 'heart' religion, it will not be strong enough to counter the lure of attractive but dangerous ideas... Training young people to develop a Christian mind is no longer an option; it is part of their necessary survival equipment."[\[2\]](#)

Here at Probe Ministries we have recognized this threat for all of our thirty-two years of ministry. We continue the fight with our Mind Games conferences, Web site, and radio ministries. We address young people particularly in our week-long summer [Mind Games Camp](#). Students are exposed to the competing worldviews and challenged to think critically about their own faith, to be able to give a reason for the hope that they have with gentleness and respect.

In the rest of this article we will look at the four parts of Pearcey's *Total Truth*. In Part 1, she documents the attempts to restrict the influence of Christianity by instituting the current prisons of the split between sacred and secular, private and public, and fact and value. In Part 2 she deftly shows the importance of Creation to any worldview and summarizes the new findings of science which strongly support Intelligent Design. In Part 3, she peels back the shroud of history to discover how evangelicalism got itself into this mess. And in Part 4, she revisits Francis Schaeffer's admonition that the heart of worldview thinking lies in its personal application, putting all of life under the Lordship of Christ.

The Sacred/Secular Split

In the first part of the book, Pearcey explores what has become known as the sacred/secular split. That is to say that things of religion, or the sacred, have no intersection with the secular. Another way of putting it is to refer to the split as a private/public split. We all make personal choices in our lives, but these should remain private, such as our religious or moral choices. One should never allow personal or private choices to intersect with your public life. That would be shoving your religion down someone else's throat, as the popular saying goes.

One more phrase of expressing the same dichotomy is the fact/value split. We all have values that we are entitled to, but our values are personal and unverifiable choices among many options. These values should not try to intersect with the facts, that is, things everyone knows to be true. The creation/evolution discussion is a case in point. We are told repeatedly that evolution is science or fact and creation is based on a religious preference or value. The two cannot intersect.

The late Christopher Reeve made this split quite evident in a speech to a group of students at Yale University on the topic of embryonic stem cell research. He said, “When matters of public policy are debated, no religions should have a place at the table.”[{3}](#) In other words keep your sacred, private values to yourself. In the public square, we can only discuss the facts in a secular context.

Far too many Christians have bought into this line of thinking or have been cowered into it. Pearcey tells of a man who was a deacon in his church, taught Sunday School, tithed generously and was looked upon as a model Christian. Yet his job at the law firm was to investigate the contracts with clients no longer wanted by the firm to see what loopholes were available to get them out of the contract. He saw no link between his Christian faith and his work.[{4}](#)

We fall into these thinking traps because we don't understand worldviews in general and the Christian worldview in particular. Pearcey outlines a threefold test of any worldview to help get a grasp on what they mean for thought and life: Creation, Fall, and Redemption. Every worldview has some story of where everything came from – Creation. Then each worldview proceeds to tell us that something is wrong with human society – the Fall – and then each worldview offers a solution – Redemption. Using this tool you will be better able to diagnose a worldview and whether it speaks the truth.

The Importance of Beginnings

The second part of Pearcey's book discusses the vitally important controversy over evolution and how it is taught in our schools. There is a clear philosophical filibuster masquerading as science in classrooms around the country.

In the opening chapter of this section, she tells the all too familiar story of a religious young man who is confronted with

evolution in the seventh grade. Seeing the immediate contradiction between this theory and the Bible, the young man receives no help from teachers or clergy. He is left thinking that his "faith" has no answers to his questions. By the time he finishes school in Harvard, he is a committed atheist.{5}

The same story is repeated thousands of times every year. The faith of many young people has been wrecked on the shoals of Darwinism. Whoever has the power to define the story of creation in a culture is the *de facto* priesthood and largely determines what the dominant worldview will be.

On *Probe* we have discussed the problems of evolution and the evidence for Intelligent Design numerous times. Now Pearcey makes the case that this is far more than a scientific discussion. It is at the heart of the culture war we are immersed in. Darwinism has had a far reaching impact on American thought, and we need a better grasp of the issue to better fight the battle we are in.

To show the prevalence of naturalistic Darwinian thinking Pearcey quotes from a Berenstain Bears book on nature titled *The Bears Nature Guide*. "As the book opens, the Bear family invites us to go on a nature walk; after turning a few pages, we come to a two-page spread with a dazzling sunrise and the words spelled out in capital letters: Nature... is all that IS, or WAS, or EVER WILL BE." {6} Clearly this is presented as scientific fact and should not be doubted.

Pearcey guides the reader through a well presented description of the major problems with the evidence concerning Darwinism. But more importantly, she clearly shows that the problem is not just the evidence. Most Darwinists accept the meager evidence because their worldview demands it. Naturalism requires a naturalistic story of creation, and since they are convinced of naturalism, some form of evolution must be true. She quotes a Kansas State University professor as saying, "Even if all the data point to an intelligent designer, such

an hypothesis is excluded from science because it is not naturalistic.”[\[7\]](#)

Pearcey goes on to show that Darwinism has continued to progressively influence nearly all realms of intellectual endeavor. From biology to anthropology to ethics to law to philosophy to even theology, Darwinism shows its muscle. Darwinism is indeed a universal acid that systematically cuts through all branches of human thought. We ignore it at our peril.

How Did We Get in This Mess?

Nancy Pearcey titles the third section of her book, “How We Lost Our Minds.” She begins with a typical story of conversion from sin of a young man named Denzel. As Denzel seeks to grow and understand his newfound faith, he is stymied by leaders who can’t answer his questions and is told to just have faith in the simple things.

When Denzel gets a job, he is confused by those from other religions and cults who all seem to have answers for people’s questions. Only the Christians are unable to defend themselves from skeptics and believers of other stripes. Eventually he finds work at a Christian bookstore and finds the nectar he has been hungry for. But he had to look and look hard. Denzel has learned that many in the evangelical movement have a largely anti-intellectual bias.

Where did that come from? Today one can still hear preachers of various stripes make fun of those of higher learning whether philosophers, scientists, or even theologians. The root of this anti-intellectualism is found in the early days of our country. America was founded by idealists and individualists. Many had suffered religious persecution and were looking for someplace to practice their faith apart from ecclesiastical authority. The democratic ideals of the

original colonies and the newly independent United States of America seemed like just the right place.

When the early American seminaries became infected with the theological liberalism spawned by the Enlightenment, many rebelled against any form of church hierarchy, believing it couldn't be trusted. With the opening of the great frontiers, great opportunities for evangelism sprouted at the same time. Out of this came the First Great Awakening. The early revivalists directed their message to individuals, exhorting them to make independent decisions, Jonathan Edwards being a notable exception. Emotional and experiential conversions brought bigger crowds. Some began to even see a formula that brought about large numbers of conversions.

There arose a suspicion that Christianity had become hopelessly corrupted sometime after the apostolic age. The task at hand was to leapfrog back 1,800 years to restore the original purity of the church. Suddenly, the great works of Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and others were seen as unnecessary.[\[8\]](#) Evangelicals were cut off from their historical and theological roots. The evangelical movement as a whole became focused on rugged American self-interest and self-assertion, a strong principle of Darwinian naturalism.

This is still evident today in the prevalence of church-hoppers. Many view their church through an individualistic grid which says if the church leadership doesn't do things the way I would prefer and doesn't listen to me, I will take my family and go elsewhere.

The roots of anti-intellectualism run deep and find surprisingly fresh support from Darwinian naturalism. So how do we recover?

Living It Out

In the final chapter of *Total Truth*, Pearcey rings out a call to authenticity, not just with respect to the intellectual underpinnings of the Christian worldview, but also to how we live it out.

On the final page she cites a Zogby/Forbes poll that asked respondents what they would most like to be known for. Intelligence? Good looks? Sense of humor? Unexpectedly, fully one half of all respondents said they would most like to be known for being authentic.

Pearcey concludes: “In a world of spin and hype, the postmodern generation is searching desperately for something real and authentic. They will not take Christians seriously unless our churches and parachurch organizations demonstrate an authentic way of life – unless they are communities that exhibit the character of God in their relationships and mode of living.”[\[9\]](#)

For most of the chapter Pearcey highlights examples of both sides of this call, people and ministries who claim Christ but use the world’s naturalistic methods, particularly in fundraising, marketing, and focusing on a personality rather than the message. She also points to people such as Richard Wurmbrand and Francis Schaeffer who lived out their Christian worldview without flashy results and hyped conferences and campaigns.

Most of us at Probe Ministries were heavily influenced by Francis Schaeffer, his ministry at L’Abri Switzerland, and his books. Many Christians whose youth spanned the turbulent ‘60s and ‘70s found Schaeffer a glowing beacon of truth and relevance in a world turned upside down by protests, drugs, war, crime, racism, and skepticism. Essentially, Schaeffer believed the gospel to be total truth. If that was the case, then living by a Christian worldview ought to be able to give

real answers to real questions from real people.

We believe that what the postmodern world is searching for, what will most satisfy its craving for authenticity, is the person of Jesus Christ. They can only see Him in our lives and our answers to real questions. Our Web site at Probe.org is filled with the total truth of the Christian worldview. In our ["Answers to E-Mail" section](#) you can see authenticity lived out as we answer real questions and attacks with truth, respect, and gentleness.

We're certainly not perfect. We have much to learn and correct as we search out the answers to today's questions. We struggle with the funding and marketing of our ministry using methods that work but do not manipulate, coerce, or misrepresent who we are and what we do. Nancy Pearcey has challenged all of us in ministry, no less those of us at Probe Ministries, to always put Jesus first, people second, and ministry third.

Notes

1. Phillip Johnson, in the Foreword to Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2004), 11.
2. Pearcey, 19.
3. Christopher Reeve quoted by Pearcey, 22.
4. Pearcey, 97-98.
5. Ibid., 153-154.
6. Ibid., 157.
7. Ibid, 168.
8. Ibid., 280-281.
9. Ibid., 378.

The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands: A Christian View

Sue Bohlin looks at this important book from a distinctly Christian perspective. Filtering the advice through a biblical worldview increases the purity and strength of the message on how to minister effectively to your husband.

Why We Need This Book

Talk show host Dr. Laura Schlessinger has written a book that is improving thousands of marriages: *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands*.^{1} We need this book because millions of wives either don't know how to love their husbands wisely and well, or they're too self-centered to see it as important. Dr. Laura credits this dismal condition to forty years of feminist philosophy, "with its condemnation of just about everything male as evil, stupid, and oppressive, and the denigration of female and male roles in families."^{2} While the women's movement certainly had a hand to play in the disintegration of relationships and the family, I believe the core cause is our sinful self-centeredness, just as the Bible says.^{3}

Which is why we need help, and God instructs older women to train younger women to love their husband and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.^{4} *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands* is a great resource for learning these important values and skills.

God gives us great power as women. Dr. Laura says, "Men are borne of women and spend the rest of their lives yearning for a woman's acceptance and approval. . . . Men admittedly are putty in the hands of a woman they love. Give him direct communication, respect, appreciation, food and good lovin',

and he'll do just about anything you wish—foolish or not.”{5}

We'll be looking at these aspects of the proper care and feeding of husbands in this article, starting with a man's need for *direct communication*.

- We can improve on communication by doing it less. God made us verbal creatures, which can frustrate men with the overwhelming amount of our words. Instead of expecting her husband to be a girlfriend (and men make wonderful husbands, but not girlfriends), the wise wife selects for true connecting value, gives the bottom line first, and chooses her timing well.
- Men make terrible mind readers, so be direct. Dropping subtle hints doesn't work with most men, and it doesn't mean a man is insensitive, uncaring, or oblivious.
- Spell out whether you want help and advice, or if you're just venting. God made men to want to be our heroes, so understand you can frustrate him if he can't fix what's hurting you because all you want is someone to listen.
- And finally, take whatever he says at face value. Women tend to overanalyze men when they are just not that complicated.

Respect

A listener to Dr. Laura's radio show named Edgar wrote, “There are a few things that men want so bad they would do anything for it. I think a good number of men want respect more than love. They like to feel they have some power. I nearly cry when you tell a woman caller to respect her husband. There is so much selfishness in the world—in marriages. Prosperity has allowed women to be so independent, and thus so selfish. I always feel as though I come last—my feelings come last, my needs come last.”{6}

"A good number of men want respect more than love." God knew this when He made us. His commands to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:33 reflects each one's deepest needs: "Each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband." Dr. Emerson Eggerichs of LoveandRespect.com points out that this verse commands a husband to love his wife. Why? She needs love like she needs air to breathe. This same verse commands a wife to respect her husband. Why? He needs respect like he needs air to breathe. [{7}](#)

- Respect means treating someone in a way that builds him up and doesn't tear him down, never denigrating or attacking. [{8}](#)
- Respect means always treating the other person with the dignity they deserve as a person made in the image of God.
- Respect means grasping that a man's needs and wants are every bit as valid and important as a woman's needs and wants.
- Respect means not venting to others, *especially* the children. One woman wrote to Dr. Laura, "No emotional outlet is worth damaging my husband's reputation." [{9}](#)

There are three A's that men long for from their wives: attention, affection, and affirmation. Respect involves paying attention to what they do simply because they're the ones doing it.

Respect means allowing the other person to be different and do things differently than you. One repentant wife told Dr. Laura, "And in the end, it doesn't much matter that they eat PBJ sandwiches for breakfast, lunch and dinner for a day or that one tooth brushing gets overlooked or whatever little thing that used to set me off!" [{10}](#)

One way to give respect is to give grace instead of resenting the things he does that complicate your life (like leaving drinking glasses in the living room or clothing on a chair).

Ask yourself, “Is he *intentionally* doing this to bug me? To make my life difficult? If he were to die tomorrow, what wouldn’t I give to have him back leaving these things out?”

Appreciation

Ask any woman what she wants, and near the top of her list she’ll tell you, “I want to be acknowledged and appreciated for the things I do.” Well, men want the same thing!

A man named Evan wrote to Dr. Laura: “My wife feels that if she doesn’t remind me again and again, something won’t get done. But the fact is, it makes me feel like her child and that Mommy needs to check up on me. It’s degrading. I want to be admired. I want to be acknowledged for being the breadwinner and making sure that we are all well taken care of. My greatest pleasure is when I feel like her hero. Like her ‘man.’ Not her boy.”[\[11\]](#)

It doesn’t matter what a husband’s primary love language is, every man wants to be shown appreciation for who he is and what he does.

I love to suggest to young wives and mothers, “Keep a gratitude journal to help you be on the lookout for the things your husband does that you appreciate. Every night, write down three things you noticed. And then *tell him* the kinds of things that are in your book!”

- Thank him for going to work every morning even when he doesn’t feel like it.
- Thank him for being faithful to you.
- Thank him for loving you.
- Thank him for giving you children—or even desiring to.
- Thank him for taking out the garbage, and changing the oil

in your car, and mowing the yard.

- Thank him for bringing home his paycheck and not spending it on gambling or booze or drugs or women.

And then there's the opposite of appreciation. The universal complaint of men who e-mailed Dr. Laura about her book "was that their wives criticize, complain, nag, rarely compliment or express appreciation, are difficult to satisfy, and basically are not as nice to them as they'd be to a stranger ringing their doorbell at three A.M.!"[{12}](#) So allow me to make some suggestions:

- Request, don't demand. Demanding is rude and disrespectful.
- Don't nag. If you have to ask more than once, ask as if it were the first time you were making the request.
- Keep your mouth shut about things that don't matter. Ask yourself, is this the hill you want to die on?
- Don't be controlling—which is micromanaging. Dr. Laura wrote, "When women micromanage, their husbands give up trying to please them, and then the wives complain that their men don't do anything for them."[{13}](#)

Proverbs says, "Kind words are like honey—sweet to the soul and healthy for the body."[{14}](#) (This is truer no place more than in marriage.) Let your words be kind and full of appreciation.

Support

A man named Roy wrote to Dr. Laura with some good advice for wives: "If you can't accentuate the positive, at least acknowledge it. The world is full of messages to men that there are standards we don't meet. There is always another man

who is more handsome, more virile, or more athletic than we are. None of that matters if the most important person in our life looks up to us, accepts us as we are, and loves us even though we aren't perfect. . . . All I know is that the husband who has a wife who supports him and praises him for the positive things he does is the envy of all the other men who have to live with criticism, sarcasm, and constant reminders of their failures." {15}

Men desperately want and need the support of their wives. This is reflected in what God reveals in His Word when He says, "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." {16} And through the apostle Paul, God instructs wives to relate to their husbands in a way that meets this need when He says, "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord." {17}

Submission is basically giving support with a willing, cooperative heart.

A wife's submission includes knowing her gifts and strengths, and using them to serve her husband and family.

Service has a bad name, but both husbands and wives are called to serve God first and then each other; husbands are called to sacrificially love and serve their wives with Jesus as their pattern. {18}

So what does support look like?

- Believing in him. Telling him, "You have what it takes." Being his #1 fan.
- Cultivating a cooperative heart.
- Being generous and openhearted—willing to use your gifts and strengths to help him succeed.
- Understanding the importance of making him look good: never saying anything negative in public.

- Creating a home that's a safe haven from the world.
- Having a warm heart with a positive, cheerful demeanor. Women set the temperature of the home; we are thermostats, not thermometers, of the family. (On the other hand, Proverbs says "A quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping on a rainy day; restraining her is like restraining the wind or grasping oil with the hand."[{19}](#))
- Being interested in him and his life.
- Showing thoughtfulness. What does he like? Do it.
- And though by no means exhaustive, it also means being a person of faithfulness and integrity. That means keeping your promises and being dependable. As Proverbs 31 puts it, "Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value."[{20}](#)

Good Lovin'

Dr. Laura writes that men need to feel the approval, acceptance and attachment from their women that comes from physical intimacy.[{21}](#) For women, emotional intimacy leads to physical intimacy. For men, it's the other way around; physical intimacy is the key to opening their hearts.

A man named Chris writes: "I don't understand why women don't understand that sex is a man's number one need for his wife. It's not just the act and sensation of pleasure, but it's the acceptance by a woman of her man. There's a communion that happens during intercourse that will bond a man to his woman, and he in turn will then begin to give of himself emotionally to her."[{22}](#)

Wives can discover that giving themselves sexually to their husbands with a warm, open-hearted, loving spirit, can be the most effective encouragement to getting their husbands to open

up emotionally.

“What attracts men to women is their femininity, and femininity isn’t only about appearance, it’s also about behaviors. Looking womanly and behaving sweetly and flirtatiously are gifts wives give to their husbands.” We see this modeled in the Song of Solomon, where the King’s bride displays her feminine charms in a holy seduction of her husband, and the way she tells him what she loves about his body.[{23}](#)

Instead, our culture has things backward; many unmarried girls and women flaunt their bodies with a total lack of modesty or propriety. Once they marry, it’s flannel nightgowns, wool socks, and no makeup.

Dr. Laura calls wives to give themselves sexually to their husbands, even when they don’t feel like it, as an act of love. It’s really no different, she points out, than the fact that they expect their husbands to go to work and earn money to support the family even on days they don’t feel like it.

She’s echoing what God said in 1 Corinthians 7 about husband and wife both fulfilling their marital duty to each other because each one’s body belongs not just to themselves but to each other. He also said not to deprive each other for extended periods of time lest we be tempted.

Consider the wisdom of radio listener Herb: “Sex is to a husband what conversation is to a wife. When a wife deprives her husband of sex for days, even weeks on end, it is tantamount to his refusing to talk to her for days, even weeks. Think of it that way, wives, and realize what a deleterious impact enforced sexual abstinence has on a good man who is determined to remain faithful.”[{24}](#)

I can’t recommend *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands* highly enough. In fact, I gave a copy to my new daughter-in-law! Let me close with one more piece of wisdom from Dr.

Laura: “[M]en are simple creatures who come from a woman, are nurtured and brought up by a woman, and yearn for the continued love, admiration and approval of a woman. . . Women need to better appreciate the magnitude of their power and influence over men, and not misuse or abuse it.”[\[25\]](#) Amen!

Notes

1. Laura Schlessinger, *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands*, New York: HarperCollins, 2004.

2. Schlessinger, 3.

3. Jeremiah 17:9

4. Titus 2:4

5. Schlessinger, xvii.

6. Schlessinger, 1.

7.

<http://www.loveandrespect.com/Articles/article.asp?aid=43&cat=1>

8. Schlessinger, 157.

9. Schlessinger, 159.

10. Schlessinger, 158.

11. Schlessinger, 31.

12. Schlessinger, 37-38.

13. Schlessinger, 57.

14. Prov. 16:24

15. Schlessinger, 47-48.

16. Gen. 2:18.

17. Eph. 5:22, 24.

18. Eph. 2:25, 28.

19. Prov. 27:15.

20. Prov. 31:11.

21. Schlessinger, 25.

22. Schlessings, 129.

23. Song of Solomon 5:10-16

24. Schlessinger, 119.

25. Schlessinger. 10.

The Five People You Meet in Heaven – A Biblical Worldview Critique

Written by Patrick Zukeran

Dr. Zukeran presents a biblical worldview critique of the story by Mitch Albom, The Five People You Meet in Heaven. Albom's story presents some interesting ideas about the afterlife, but falls far short of expressing a complete understanding of God's description of heaven. It misses the importance of being created in God's image, being redeemed to be able to spend eternity with our Creator, and the fellowship with God and all the saints for eternity.

Brief Synopsis

Eddie lives an insignificant life as a maintenance man for the rides at the Ruby Pier amusement park. One day a mechanical failure causes a fatal accident. Eddie rescues a young girl from her death but in the effort, he is killed. This is when the adventure begins.

Eddie enters heaven and discovers it is not a garden but a place where he will meet five people whose lives intersected with his in some significant way on earth, some readily known to Eddie and some unknown to him. These five explain the meaning of Eddie's life and the purpose of heaven. Through this best-seller fictional story, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, author Mitch Albom teaches us his understanding of the meaning of life.

In heaven, Eddie learns five key lessons from the five

individuals. First, every life is interconnected so each person impacts others throughout his or her lifetime in ways that may not be recognized. Second, we should live sacrificing for others, for such acts inevitably lead to good outcomes. Third, forgiveness is necessary to find inner peace. Fourth, love is a powerful virtue that lasts eternally. And finally, our life, as insignificant as it may seem, has a purpose.

Heaven is a place where we find inner peace with ourselves when we learn these lessons. Through this process, we are cleansed of negative thoughts and scars we carried in our lifetime and find true inner peace. After this, we will choose our heavenly dwelling. There we will wait for newcomers whose lives intersected ours on earth. We will be one of the five people they will meet as they learn the meaning of their life on earth.

What accounts for the popularity of Algom's work? He addresses two life questions that every individual wrestles with and desperately seeks answers to: What is the meaning of my existence? and What happens after death? In a creative way, here is a story that offers significance to each person's life and hope beyond the grave.

Algom is an excellent writer and is sincere in his effort. This story causes each one of us to wrestle with these key questions of our existence and eternal destiny, issues many choose to ignore but must inevitably face. He also teaches some valuable life lessons. For these reasons, the story is enjoyable and thought provoking.

But after reading the story, I found that Algom's answers fall short of providing satisfactory solutions to every person's dilemma. In some ways he gets us closer to the answer, but never really gets there. Christians will find that he gives us some appetizers, but fails to deliver the main dish. In what follows, I will present a biblical critique of this story and explain how Algom scratches the surface but never finishes the

quest for meaning, significance, and eternal hope.

The Quest for Meaning

What is the meaning of my existence? Does my ordinary life make a difference? Will I look back on my life with regret, feeling that I contributed nothing significant in my lifetime? These are issues most people ask throughout their lifetime and seek answers for.

In *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, Mitch Albom teaches that one does not have to be famous or powerful to impact the lives of others. Every person who has understanding can know his or her life was worthwhile.

In Albom's story, the meaning of life comes from understanding that everyone's life is interconnected. Therefore, even small decisions and actions we take can significantly affect the lives of others. In a CBS interview, Albom stated, "I think the meaning of life is that we're all kind of connected to one another. I'm living proof of the influence that one person can have on other people. Look at what Morrie did for me talking to me. And I wrote a book to try to pay his medical bills and went from one person to another person and people come up and say your book changed my life. How did that happen? I'm convinced that everybody has an effect on everyone."[\[1\]](#)

It is true that our life does affect others, some in very significant ways. However, we are still left empty at the end of the novel because Albom's proposed solution falls short of providing ultimate meaning for our existence.

In the story, the main character Eddie learns in heaven that he impacted the lives of others both positively and negatively, often unintentionally. Knowing our life led to another's tragedy or greater enjoyment still begs the question, "So what?" It may feel good temporarily to know I made a difference, but that will not bring everlasting

satisfaction. Why should we care if our lives affected others? Before we can answer the question, "What is the meaning of life?" we must first answer the question, "Why were we created?"

If we are a cosmic accident as Darwinian evolutionary theory teaches, there is no intended purpose for our existence. Therefore, our lives have no ultimate meaning, and impacting the lives of others is meaningless, for our final destiny is extinction.

If God created us for a purpose, then we need to find out why He created us. The answer to the meaning of life is directly tied to the origins question. Since Albom does not answer the origin question, he cannot provide an adequate answer for the meaning of life question. The Bible teaches that we were created by God to love Him, love others, and fulfill His calling upon our lives. Any answer that does not include God as a centerpiece of the answer will fall short, and Albom basically leaves God out of his version of heaven.

Albom's Heaven

Could the traditional Christian view of heaven be wrong? Albom gives us a very different picture. Albom developed his idea from a story his uncle, Edward Beitchman, told him when he was a child. One night his uncle was lying near death and woke up to see his deceased relatives standing at the foot of the bed. When asked, "What did you do?" his uncle responded, "I told them to get lost. I wasn't ready for them yet." [\[2\]](#) Albom remembered this story and began to develop his concept of heaven for the story.

Albom states, "Somewhere, swimming in my head, was the image my uncle had given me around that table, a handful of people waiting for you when you die. And I began to explore this simple concept: what if heaven was not some lush Garden of

Eden, but a place where you had your life explained to you by people who were in it—five people—maybe you knew them, maybe you didn't, but in some way you were touched by them and changed forever, just as you inevitably touched people while on earth and changed them, too."

His idea that heaven is a reunion with five people who explain the meaning of your life is masterfully pictured in this work. With each encounter the main character Eddie is taught a new lesson that puts the pieces of his earthly life together so that it begins to make sense. Some lessons bring joy, others bring remorse, but the pain is a cleansing process that results in inner peace. After this, individuals will choose their happiest moment on earth and that will be their eternal abode where they await the opportunity to teach a recently deceased newcomer the meaning of that person's life.

If heaven was a place similar to Albom's story, we would be very disappointed, for it is too small and shallow. Our souls are much bigger than this. How quickly we would get bored once we discovered the impact our life made and then spent eternity in a heaven we dream up for our pleasure. Earthly pleasure becomes painful when we get too much of it. The heaven described in the Bible is very different from this earth. Our joy is not wrapped in repeating earthly pleasures but is found in a person, Jesus Christ, who is the center of all creation. Our present earth is fallen and suffers the effects of sin. In heaven, sin and its consequences are not present.

God is the main focus in heaven, but unfortunately, in Albom's story, God plays a very small role. Psalm 16:11 states, "You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." Only a heaven created by and centered on God will be big enough for our soul.

Do All People Go to Heaven?

Albom's bestseller presents a new and creative vision of heaven. I agree with Albom that there is a heaven and an existence beyond the grave. However, it appears that Albom implies that everyone will go to heaven, and with this I disagree.

Albom portrays realistic characters in his story, none of whom lived a perfect life. All are guilty of some sin and negative behaviors that have consequences, some greater than others. There is some remorse when individuals in heaven learn how their actions caused negative results, but there is not a just payment for their sin.

Albom appears to assume that everyone will eventually find peace when they learn their lessons from the five people they meet. Although this is a comforting note, it is not what the Bible teaches. Albom's story doesn't reveal the dilemma facing all human beings: sin, failing to perfectly live up to God's perfect standard. It is because of sin that the Bible teaches that not everyone can enter heaven. Jesus states in Matthew 7:13, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

The reason is found in the biblical understanding of human nature and God's nature. Man is sinful while God is holy, perfect, and without sin. The Bible teaches that all are guilty of sin and cannot enter into the eternal presence of a holy and just God. Romans 6:23 states, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." What is required is a perfect savior who will pay the price for sin. Albom does not deal with the true nature of God, man, heaven's purpose, man's dilemma of sin, and the solution that God freely offers.

The Bible also teaches that there is a price for rejecting God's gift of grace, Jesus Christ. Jesus states, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (John 3:17-18). All who reject Christ cannot stand before a holy God, and will be separated from Him eternally in Hell.

Fiction can often teach principles that are true. However in this work, Albom's foundational idea of heaven misses the mark because he does not present a proper understanding of human nature and God's holiness.

The People You Will We Meet In Heaven

Who will we really meet in heaven? Our answer is revealed in the Bible, the Word of God. The Bible is proven to be God's inspired word through miraculous confirmation and the testimony of Jesus Christ the Son of God. Jesus confirmed His claim to be God through His miraculous life and resurrection, and He affirms the authority of the Bible. The truth about heaven then is revealed not in a novel but in this divine revelation.

The next people we will meet in heaven are the saints of all the ages past (Rev. 7:9 and 19:1). There will be more than five; there will be a multitude! Along with them will be the angelic host.

Will we understand the meaning and see the impact of our life on earth? We will know everything about our life and much more. **We will come to a full understanding of God's plan for all of creation.** Only then will we see how our lives played a role in God's overall plan. We will see things from a renewed perspective because our minds will be transformed and freed

from the limitations that resulted from sin. 1 Cor. 13:12 states, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." If we knew the glory of the real heaven, we would say Albom's, and any human attempt to describe heaven, is too small.

Notes

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Media and Discernment

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

Media Exposure

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

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

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

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

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

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

In addition to concerns about the quantity of media input are even greater concerns about the quality of media input. For

example, the average child will witness over 200,000 acts of violence on television, including 16,000 murders before he or she is 18 years old. And consider that the average child views 30,000 commercials each year.

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

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

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

Biblical Discernment

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

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

Paul says in Colossians 3:8, "But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips." Now, does that mean you could

never read something that has anger or rage or slander in it? No. After all, the Bible has stories of people who manifest those traits in their lives.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Worldview of the News Media

Of all the forms of media, the news media have become a primary shaper of our perspective on the world. Also, the

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

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

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

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

People have always complained about the liberal bias in the media. But what was so surprising is how liberal members of the media actually were. When asked to describe their own political persuasion, 54 percent of the media elite described themselves as left of center. Only 19 percent described themselves as conservative. When asked who they voted for in presidential elections, more than 80 percent of them always voted for the Democratic candidate.

Media personnel are also very secular in their outlook. The survey found that 86 percent of the media elite seldom or never attend religious services. In fact, 50 percent of them

have no religious affiliation at all.

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

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

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

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

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

Another question they were asked was, “What is your current political affiliation?” Fifty percent said they were

Democrats, 4 percent Republicans. In answer to the question, "How do you characterize your political orientation?" 61 percent said they were liberal or moderately liberal, and 9 percent were conservative or moderately conservative.

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

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

It is also worth questioning whether a majority of media professionals who labeled themselves as moderate in the survey really deserve that label. John Leo, writing for *U.S. News and World Report*, says that it has been his experience "that liberal journalists tend to think of themselves as representing the mainstream, so in these self-identification polls, moderate usually translates to liberal. On the few social questions asked in the survey, most of the moderates sounded fairly liberal."[{12}](#)

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

Dealing with the Media

Christians must address the influence of the media in society. It can be a dangerous influence that can conform us to the

world (Rom. 12:2). Therefore we should do all we can to protect against its influence and to use the media for good.

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

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

Here are some suggestions for action.

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

Second, watch TV with children. One way to encourage discussion with children is to watch television with them. The plots and actions of the programs provides a natural context for discussion. The discussion could focus on how cartoon characters or TV characters could solve their problems without resorting to violence. What are the consequences of violence? TV often ignores the consequences. What are the consequences of promiscuous sex in real life?

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

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

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

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

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Mel Gibson's Passion Film Ignites Passions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But there is another facet to the guilt question. After I spoke in a University of Miami anthropology class, one student

asked if Jews are responsible for the death of Jesus. Absolutely, I replied. Jews are responsible for Jesus death. And so are Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, atheists and agnostics.

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

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

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

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

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

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Animal House Revisited: Fraternity Fosters Faith

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

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

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

The liability crisis is one factor motivating “Greeks” to focus on character. In today's litigious society, a tragic injury or death can prompt lawsuits that could put them out of business. Moderating local behavior helps perpetuate national survival.

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

Many Greek organizations were founded on biblical or quasi-biblical principles. Alpha Tau Omega (ATO) is one of the more prominent fraternities with over 240 active and inactive

chapters and over 6,000 undergraduate members. ATO chief executive officer Wynn Smiley told me of his group's convictions.

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

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

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

Smiley readily admits that not every member or chapter exemplifies such values. But he points out that hidden personal hurts – from family illness to depression – plus students' concerns for their own future, ethical dilemmas and faith raise questions that "brothers practicing brotherly love should help each other explore." He says that "ATO is committed to talking about issues of faith" and to providing "a loving, trusting environment for brothers to explore, discuss, argue and perhaps even on occasion resolve questions."

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

competition.

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 X (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. Frederick 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 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 loose 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 Tartaglione 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 policies 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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