

THEOLOGY | CRITIQUE | REVIEW | ESSAY | CULTURE

# salt&light

2nd Quarter 2012



## THE LAST ENEMY

PEGGY DRINKARD

PLUS:

RETURN TO DAUPHIN/SAND ISLAND

THE CORNUCOPIA OF GOD

THE GOSPEL & PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS

WHY THE GOSPEL IS NOT A MUSICAL COMEDY

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Cover Image: *Saint George and the Dragon*  
by John Howe

# FROM THE EDITOR

Ah, summer in the South. Nothing like it. Vacation at the beach or the mountains, both within easy driving distance. If you need some vacation reading, or just want to relax in the shade or air conditioning with a cold drink when the temperatures soar, pick up the Summer 2012 issue of the *Salt & Light* and be enlightened, and perhaps inspired.

Our lead article is from our Director of Children's Ministries, Peggy Drinkard, who meditates on what is, or should be, the farthest thought from her object of ministry, death. She writes with tenderness and perspicacity in *The Last Enemy* on the terribleness and triumph of the Christian and death. Peggy is a fine writer of keen intellectual and theological insight and her meditations are not to be missed.

The disastrous Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico has been back in the news with lawsuits, recriminations, and recently, plans to renew drilling the deep water oil wells in the area. Thomas A. Howard, in *Return to Dauphin/Sand Island* is a meditative and evocative piece on God, the area and damage caused by man. We publish it here as an entry in the debate that really has never ended.

Scarlett and Hunter Sims were in their apartment on the afternoon of April 27th, 2011, and survived in their bathtub as the maelstrom passed by. In *The Cornucopia of God*, Scarlett speaks to the experience and the insight and gifts that came from it. You have never read anything like this short, beautiful, profound article, and you won't forget it.

The earth endures. We do not, and, more than that, we leave no trace on the earth as we pass through it. In *Permanence*, I have considered the angst that this causes man and delineated answers Christianity provides through the knowledge and power of our Lord.

American Reformed Christians are going through a presidential election year and all that entails. Ruling Elder Bob Thornton considers the vitriol that currently rules from a Christian perspective and considers how we should respond to the various controversies that arise in *The Gospel and Presidential Politics*.

In *The Specialness of Sunday Morning*, Dana Miller reminisces about the Sundays of her youth and meditates on those of her adulthood as she contemplates Sunday morning worship. You will enjoy this beautiful paean to the worship we hold so dear.

In *Why the Gospel Is Not a Musical Comedy*, Brian Watkins looks at why Christians must examine and interact with the culture that surrounds us and shows that any attempts toward censorship and exclusiveness are damaging to our mission. This is a must read with much to consider for the post-modern Christian.

Our Finale piece uses the poem, *A Marriage* by Michael Blumenthal to speak to the work and love that go into any successful marriage.



# THE LAST ENEMY

## The Christian and Death

by Peggy Drinkard

A disclaimer is in order right up front. I am not a writer, not in the sense that I can sit down with an assignment, choose a topic, organize material, make outlines and, “bibbity-bobbity-boop,” an article or essay worth reading appears. Douglas Wilson once observed that C.S. Lewis could write about lead pipes and make it interesting...even gripping, but that is not true of me. I fail at taking raw material and, with the application of thought and time, producing something coherent and convincing. How I lament not having had a good education, a real education in the classical sense, an education that would have better equipped me. Have you ever read any of those “letters home” from eighteen and nineteen year old boys during the Civil War? They have the ring of Shakespeare and certainly speak of a more civilized time. As literature, they are beautiful.

And somehow most of them were able to write that well with about eight years of schooling. Think of the eighteen and nineteen year old boys you know. I am reminded of this observation from Flannery O'Connor: “Everywhere I go I'm asked if I think the university stifles writers. My opinion is that they don't stifle enough of them. There's many a best-seller that could have been prevented by a good teacher.”

No, if I write anything it can only be about things I know in my soul if it is to turn out well at all.

In his fictional work *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Robert Heinlein writes of a young man, Michael

Valentine Smith, who is the son of two astronaut-scientists who perish in the first earth expedition to Mars. Michael is the only survivor of the ill-fated mission and is reared by Martians. The plot revolves around his unique “take” on life as he returns to earth as a young adult. Mixed with the English he is learning, Michael uses a unique word, “grok,” which those caring for him come to understand as meaning “to know” or “to understand.” As time progresses, they come to realize that “grok” means something much deeper than simply having the knowledge of something or understanding it in some fundamental way. “Grok” implies knowing in a fuller, richer sense, much as the Bible uses the term “know” when it describes the sexual union of the patriarchs and their wives. Genesis 4:1 says, “And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bore Cain....” And

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think of what it encompasses in the notion of God's knowledge of us. There are different kinds of knowing. You can read about China. You can travel to China. You can be born and raised in China. You can be Chinese. In all these situations, you “know” something of China, but obviously, some knowledge is fuller than others. That is what I mean when I say I need to know something before I can write about it effectively. I need to grok it. To try and convince others, I

need to be convinced first. And that leads to the subject of this article.

For over a year now, I have been pondering the nature of time: how we handle time, how God sees



time, how Jesus reacted to being “in time,” what he said about time, the varied dimensions of time, and more. My intention was to write an article about time, at least until the deadline drew near. The more I study, the more I realize I have not come to “grok” time. I’ve learned a lot, and I am continuing to enjoy chewing that cud, but the time to write about it is not here yet. I know that much. That’s an article that needs to keep ripening. Yikes, a dilemma! What should I write about, then? In God’s good providence and timing, (yes, I’m obsessed) it became clear.

Yesterday God gave me the gift and privilege of sharing time and conversation with someone who just walked through the experience of death with their spouse. (Yes, our own beloved Amanda Brown, whose permission I received to share some of our conversation.) It was a long and painful walk, and not nearly “over” on our end, but because of good theology, (and by that I mean an understanding born of truth) we were able to laugh, comfort, and encourage one another in the face of that most dreaded enemy, death. I reflected on our conversation in the wee hours of the morning and knew that the subject of death was something I could write about. Because of the immutable, perfect, and good will of God, death has not been a stranger to my life.

When I was five my father, at the age of 46, died in a drowning accident. Whatever people may say, death is NOT natural. At least it was not in the original, perfect world of Eden before the fall, nor will it be in the redeemed, restored world of the new heavens and the new earth. As a child I would lie in my bed night after night, staring at the ceiling and asking God repeatedly, “Why?” That why encompassed many questions for which my spiritual infancy had

no answers. Obviously, it included “why did this happen to us?” But beyond that, it included the age old question of every doubter in the world: why suffering and death? Death is a consequence of the fall...the ultimate fallout from sin. Genesis 2 says, “And the Lord God took the man, and put him into

the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” As I have pointed out many times to the children in our church, Adam and Eve already had the knowledge of good. It was only evil they would gain by defying God’s command. Death is the result of our first father’s rebellion and disobedience. It is our common inheritance.

Hebrews 9:27 tells us, “It is appointed to man once to die, and then the judgment.” Ezekiel says, “The soul that sinneth, it shall die.” (Ezekiel 18:4) Then Paul reminds us in Romans 3, “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” The conclusion, and I quote Douglas Wilson again, is that “the mortality rate is 100%.” So, yes, death is common to all the sons of Adam. It is common, but that does not make it natural.

A week prior to Hurricane Katrina I sat with my family in a hospital in New Orleans. Over the space of two or three days we watched my brother’s weary body struggle to keep living. Holding his hand, I would look at this painful scene and could only think how wrong it was. One of the few times we are told Jesus wept was when he stood watching the effect of death on the pitiful band of friends gathered outside the grave of Lazarus. When someone we love dies, we are suddenly, dramatically, separated from them. We long for them. We want them to remain

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with us. Something inside of us, at least, I believe, in the heart of believers, naturally rebels against this unhappy reality. We feel angry at what sin has done, just as we do when we learn of some injustice. I don't mean death is unjust. Thanks be to God, for those in Christ there is only one death, the physical one. But in the face of death I think we realize that sin is a horrible, horrible thing and we are looking at its ultimate result when we are looking into the face of death.

Jesus was quick to note that there is a worse kind of death than the physical one. You will remember him saying to the young man who wanted to follow Him only after the death of his parents, "Let the dead bury the dead." Here he was implying a kind of death that exists even before the physical one sets in. That is, the death of the heart, spiritual death. I think of all those movies about the "walking dead," the "living dead," and zombies. As frightening and morbid as those images are, we might do well to contemplate them once in a while, because the death our neighbors and loved ones face if they become eternally separated from Christ is something much more horrible than anything Hollywood can produce. As C.S. Lewis so memorably noted in *The Weight of Glory*, "It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal." In some sense, we are all mortal. The root word in Latin is *mortalis*

and means death. From it we get morbid, morose, morgue, etc. Physically, since the fall, men are mortal, subject to death. But as Lewis said, we are not mere mortals. Underneath the flesh and bones lives a soul that will never cease to exist. It will either live eternally, growing and becoming more and more alive forever, or it will be set on a course of perishing that will never end. Eternal life and eternal death are the only possibilities for the souls of men. This should lead us to a deepened concern for the souls of those we know who are outside of Christ, and it certainly leads to our comfort in the death for those who are in Him.

In 1 Corinthians 15 the apostle Paul seems to look into the face of death and say, almost tauntingly, "Oh death, where is your sting? Oh grave, where is

your victory? For the sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." Earlier in the same chapter he assures us that when Christ delivers up the kingdom to God, the Father, he shall have put down all our enemies, and "the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death."

It would be foolish to pretend that in this life, in these bodies, death does not hurt and should not be viewed as an enemy. It is painful beyond description. But we can be comforted in the fact that, for those in Christ, this is the only death we will ever know,

and even in this, He walks beside us and guides and instructs us as we pass through it.

Amanda shared that when Warren Brown died, although it was unimaginably painful, it was also a beautiful and sweet experience in which they grew ever closer and were enabled to look at things

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through the lens of scriptural truth. Warren was at peace with God and ready, perhaps at times even eager, to go. In the devotional book, *Joy and Strength*, H.L. Sidney Lear is quoted, “Peace, and even joy, are quite compatible with a great deal of pain” when one is content with the will of God. While some would protest that his was, “a life cut short,” Amanda and Warren had the assurance of God’s word that “thine eyes did see my substance, yet being imperfect; and in thy book all my days were written when as yet there was none of them.” By this truth they were able to know and convey that Warren’s race had been run, that his life was fulfilled, that his death was no untimely accident, and that they could rest in the sovereign and perfect will of God. Psalm 116 assures us, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.” For the believer, death is the doorway, the passage of these earthly bodies into glorified ones, and, even better, the entrance into the living presence of Christ. We can hardly fathom just what that really means, but I think all of us yearn for it in one way or another.

One of my favorite reminders concerning the death of believers is by Anthony W. Thorold when he says, “Until our Master summons us, not a hair of our head can perish, not a moment of our life be snatched from us. When He sends for us, it should seem but the message that the child is wanted at home.” In similar fashion, Abraham Cheare says, “The work of God hath not lost them, if we take it in its most capacious, comprehensive acceptance. God hath a will to be done not in earth only, but also in heaven; they are not dismissed from the King’s business who are called from the camp to the Court, from being common soldiers to be Privy Councilors.” Revelation 7:15 describes the activity of

those saints who have gone before us. “Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them.” I can only imagine.

As believers in Christ and witnesses to Him in this world, we must concede that death is a reality that must come to all men. At the same time, we cannot accept it as natural or, as some put it, as “just a part of life.” Death is the opposite of life. It is an enemy. In the eighth chapter of Romans Paul tells us that not only men, but all of creation have been subjected to death by Adam’s fall. At the same time, he assures us that “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of

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God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.” There is a day when death, the final enemy, shall be utterly defeated. Until then, with Paul, we remain convinced that “neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Thanks be to God. ¶

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# RETURN TO DAUPHIN/ SAND ISLAND

## Damage and Disappointment on the Gulf Coast

by Thomas A. Howard

*The disastrous deep water oil spill from a ruptured well in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 is in the news again as the many court cases that developed from the damage it caused are now being negotiated and brought to court. In this piece, Thomas Albert Howard, the son of Tommy and Pat Howard, contemplates, reminisces and considers God, man and nature as he returned in 2010 to view the damage to an area he loved.*

For me, growing up in Alabama, the waters of the Gulf always held a certain charm. My family vacationed regularly on Dauphin Island, Alabama's large barrier island not too far from the Mississippi state line. Once part of "New France," the island was named after the heir apparent ("dauphin") to the Sun King, Louis XIV. Despite its regal beginnings, we knew perfectly well that this was not Malibu; it wasn't even the upscale white sand beaches of the Florida panhandle. This was beach-going in Alabama and that meant a certain grit; rundown motels with their blue-collar fishing clientele; a waterscape packed with remnants of piers ruined by hurricanes; water always a bit cloudy from the tangle of brackish rivers that pour into Mobile Bay from the Mobile-Tensaw Delta; shrimpers with their sun-baked skin, Miller Lite and cigarettes; brown pelicans preying on unsuspecting mullet; and afternoon downpours announced well in

advance by dark clouds galloping across the horizon.

Then there was small Sand Island, a barrier island to a barrier island. Called "Pelican Island" on older maps, it rose enigmatically from the Gulf, a lonesome patch of windswept sand. You could get there only by boat, and once you arrived, there wasn't much to do but size up the mystery of being itself. Horseshoe crabs, unchanged for eons, occasionally washed ashore. Seagulls, nesting among sea oats, would squawk and dive if you got too close. In the shallow waters, you might see a whole school of stingrays, phantom-like platoons scurrying underwater. With luck, you might spot a dolphin just offshore. My family treated them like unicorns, rare and magical. "Look, there's one over there, right out in front of you."

Like many others, I was captivated by the tragedy of the oil spill this summer. On the PBS *NewsHour* web site, one could view six screens simultaneously showing oil gushing into the water, a wound in the very floor of the world. The underwater lighting and the pipes of the collapsed rig combined with the geyser to create an image both eerie and mesmerizing. Click the mouse and it went away; click it again and there it was, unchanging and irredeemable. I now live in New England, far away

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from Alabama and the Gulf Coast, but my sadness is not tempered by distance, especially when I consider the thousands of people—shrimpers, fishermen, oystermen, restaurateurs—for whom this has been an immediate, livelihood-threatening tragedy.

In August, I had the opportunity to travel back to the Gulf Coast. Sand Island has been transformed into a peninsula by recent hurricanes, but people persist in calling it an island. (Land changes faster than language.) Although the oil leak is now capped, the mood on the Gulf remains tense and uncertain. The tourist industry has been devastated; a local real estate broker informed me that the island lost 90 percent of its summer rental business. My kids had the run of a condominium complex where we stayed. Driving around the island, you often felt as if you were in a ghost town. Some residents blame BP; some, the government. Others complain about the "media hype" over a horrible but manageable spill.

In the Christ-haunted South, disasters can result in calls to repentance and revivalism. You see a lot of church signs reminding the faithful of one Old Testament verse in particular, *2nd Chronicles 2:14*: *"If my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land."* Some churches contrast Jesus' sturdiness with human shoddiness. As one Baptist church puts it: "Man used WD-40 and duck tape. Jesus used nails."

Anyone following the news knows that shoddiness has not been in short supply. There's the shoddiness

that led to the spill, of course, and there's the shoddiness of the cleanup. Determining exactly how much oil was spilled and dispersant remains in the water and what to do about it now is an imprecise science, to say the least. The long-term ecological and economic consequences of the spill will weigh on the region for years, maybe decades.

Like anyone from the Gulf Coast, I want justice to be done. I want people to be fairly compensated, and nature restored. I appreciate the political dimensions of the event—how it can and should change some of our policies with respect to energy and the environment. But even as we aim at justice and reform, we should take some time just to gaze, unflinchingly, on the naked cruelty of the calamity, and allow it to purify our affections. Delight in creation meets hard limits in our finitude and ignorance. Sometimes what delights comes to a sudden and irremediable end, and there's nothing to replace it.

After the death of a childhood friend, St. Augustine was reminded of that fact. In book four of the *Confession*, he famously recorded his world-weariness and restlessness.

Not in pleasant groves, not in sport or song, nor in fragrant bowers, nor in magnificent banquetings, nor in the pleasures of bed or the couch; not even in books or poetry did [my soul] find rest. All things looked gloomy, even the very light itself. Thus I remained to myself an unhappy lodging where I could neither stay nor leave. For where could my heart fly from my heart!



It is important to remember that the oil spill, unlike the last calamity to befall the Gulf Coast wasn't a natural disaster. It was man-made, like the Ixtoc oil spill in 1979, Three Mile Island in the same year, and the Chernobyl disaster of 1986. As Reinhold Niebuhr reminded us, often our best, most advanced ideas and achievements incubate ironic and tragic consequences beyond our powers of anticipation. The Gulf oil spill should curb our confidence in technology and strengthen our commitment to prudent regulations, but it should remind Christians of what the medievals called the deep sadness of the world (*tristitia saeculi*). We will never be able to discern in advance all that we might later regret. "Who can unravel such a twisted and tangled knottiness?" Augustine wrote, "But I do long for thee, O Righeousness and Innocence, so beautiful and comely to all virtuous eyes—I long for thee with an insatiable satiety."

I thought about that passage from the *Confessions* as I walked around Sand Island one morning during my recent trip. As I neared the remotest tip of the island, a downpour came. Rounding a bend, I discovered more than a hundred pelicans huddled together in the rain. My presence created a stir, sending them aloft into the wet, grey air. We long for our Creator, who cannot fail us, but we also ache for this sometimes disappointing, disappointed world. ¶

*Originally published in the Commonweal magazine, 10/8/2010.  
Used with permission.*

# INTERACT WITH CULTURE

## RIVERWOOD BOOK TABLE

The Riverwood Book Table is located in the church narthex. Here the church provides books of interest to our members. These volumes include a wide range of subjects such as theology, biography, history, fiction and commentary. While many of these books are not classic "Presbyterian" texts, they have been found to be informative, helpful and are often classics. We believe that you and other Riverwood members will benefit from this cultural interaction.

## RIVERWOOD MOVIE NIGHTS

Movies are important purveyors of ideas and culture and are a part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century canon. At irregular intervals, Riverwood will have a Movie Night on Sunday evenings. We will screen a movie that is of interest to the Christian community and provide an opportunity to discuss it. Join us for profitable Christian interaction with the questions and ideas provided by movies.

*Places in  
the Heart*

*True Grit*



# THE CORNUCOPIA OF GOD

## Power Twice Displayed

by Scarlett Sims

I received a gift I never asked for. Or, to be more accurate, a gift I didn't know I had asked for. It wasn't on my Amazon Wish List, and I would never confide my desire to a jolly old elf. The gift was a catalyst for spiritual growth dressed in the trappings of a murder weapon. And really, I wasn't given something so much as stripped of a burden I didn't know I had.

Picture, if you will, a backpack. It's a large backpack, the name of the Swiss Army Officer who once carried it still visible on a faded tag. Inside the backpack is a laptop computer, a few pairs of underwear, two t-shirts, a book of wedding photos, an Urban Decay eyeshadow palette, and some expensive jewelry. This, the items in my purse, and a six-pack of Abita Strawberry were literally the only things I owned. I didn't know that at the time, though; my only concern was where I could go, where I could sleep.

If I had known I would never go back, what might I have taken with me instead? My wedding dress wadded into a ball and stuffed into the backpack, surely. My teddy bear, Sophia, named after the *Golden Girls* matriarch when I was still in elementary school. The setlist from the first Mountain Goats concert I went to with my husband. A *Quantum Leap* VHS tape signed by Scott Bakula. My artwork, my t-shirts, my shoes—even among the irreplaceable things, there seems to be a never-ending supply of items that pop into my head unbidden. My now-deceased grandmother's silk scarf. An embroidered Chinese silk robe from the 1950s, et cetera.

I am often sad that these things are gone, but more than sad (although perhaps not more often), I am thankful. On a basic level, I am glad I never had to

make a choice. I couldn't have left anything behind. I would have clung to every atom, considering what made it special and why I needed it. The biggest gift God gave me that day, aside from a place a few feet outside of the direct path of destruction, was the indiscriminate removal of 99% of my material world.

The forced removal of my possessions was not the only gift I received that day. I now have a better, though still imperfect, picture of what I need. I don't own a blender, a wooden spoon, or a pair of sandals. If I didn't need it right away, chances are I don't have it. If I've survived a year without a hair dryer, why would I need one now? I will always be an American and will be the first to admit that I don't need my huge TV or my red polka-dot pumps, but I have gained a better understanding of why I shouldn't buy something just because I can. Having fewer things has made me want fewer things and think more carefully about what takes up space in my life.

After I became a teacher (this vocation yet another fruit spilled from the cornucopia that spun over my head) children asked me, "Why did God send the tornado?" I can't know every way this ostensible disaster affected the lives of Alabamians. I don't even know all of the ways it affected my life. But even more overwhelming than the sounds of glass breaking and a freight train over my head is the fact that at the foundation of the world, God knew that Scarlett Sims would be better able to praise and glorify him after that day. ¶

*Scarlett Sims is a member of Riverwood Presbyterian Church. You may contact her at [scarlettpedersen@gmail.com](mailto:scarlettpedersen@gmail.com).*



# PERMANENCE

## Searching for the Unspoken

by Jimmy Hopper

*There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after. Ecclesiastes 1:11*

There is a sense in which the driving force in human endeavor is a search for permanence. Everything we do, our striving for a financial status we believe will protect us from disastrous circumstances and chance, our desire for land and property, love and marriage that lasts and in fact is "forever," the wish for progeny and the carrying forward of our name, the striving for something, anything that will cause us to be remembered after we're gone, all of these things are hard wired within us. They are often unspoken and usually subconscious but they drive us as humans who know that we are transients on an enduring earth. On a macro level, they contribute to the city, government, patriotism, and empire-building-instinct in man.

The ultimate example perhaps in literature of the futility and impermanence of life is Percy Shelley's poem, *Ozymandias*. There is a ruined statue on the desert sands, a pedestal and two huge legs. The rest of the statue lies on the ground, half covered by sand. The inscription reads:

*My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:  
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!*

Only these arrogant words remain of what must have been a ruler of a mighty empire, whose name is

thought to be a Greek version of the name of the Egyptian Pharaoh, Ramesses II, the Pharaoh of Moses' day. Whoever it was, the truth remains: fame, power, and influence is all fleeting and is not permanent. Shelley ends his poem with these lines:

*Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away*

The impermanence of life and of everything in life was recently brought vividly to my mind.

From my earliest childhood, my mother's family was at the center of a feeling, even a vision, of permanence. My father's family was scattered to the four winds and we seldom saw many of them but Mother's family was different. My grandparents still lived on the Hale County farm on which the children, six girls and one boy, were raised. On each holiday and special occasion, everyone, children, spouses and grandchildren, returned to the farm, to the house with the circular driveway on a hill that faced the cotton fields and one of the two tenant houses across the road that belonged to my grandfather. The house and land had been in the family for several generations. One of my aunts had a document stating that the family was, officially, I guess, a "Pioneer Family."

The current house, the house that I, as a child knew and was a part of the feeling of permanence, was

**It was...an almost palpable sense of loss,  
of lost time, love lost, lost youth, lost people....  
Something I had thought to be permanent  
had disappeared forever**



# **Going to your faith...some might say ...is nothing but an escape....The delusion that meaning exists when there is none, permanence exists instead of impermanence.**

actually relatively new. The older, larger house, big in their memory, built when cotton brought a dollar a pound, had burned down and been replaced by a smaller house since it was built in the Depression years when cotton sold for a nickel a pound and life had become very difficult.

My cousin, my brother, and I would come to the farm for two weeks in the summer and would roam the deep woods and hills behind the house. We learned to swim in the mill pond, made by an ancient dam of creosoted timbers next to where a grist mill had existed and used the water power of a creek for grinding corn. We picked dewberries and wild plums for Grandmother to make wonderful jellies from, and we picked the vegetables in the one acre garden behind the house for supper and for canning. We brought up the whole milk from the spring house under the hill and watched her churn it into butter and buttermilk for the biscuits and cornbread she made daily.

When the entire family was there it was filled with bursting with people, with the smell of wonderful Southern food, with conversation, laughter, and love. Even my taciturn (to a fault) Grandfather would smile and join the conversation. As a child, I was a part of it. I belonged. Every time we came, it was the same with only small variations. It was permanent, the house, the family, as permanent as the red earth it rested upon. From my earliest childhood, it was something I could depend upon being there in a sense that the rented house we lived in didn't possess.

As I grew up, all of this gradually changed. The extended family became too large for the holiday visits. In time, each child had his own family and

these satellite families comprised the extended family gatherings. Then my grandparents died and later my aunts and uncles passed away, one aunt very young and the others after a long life. My mother and father died somewhere in the middle. As is always the case, my search for permanence became preeminent in my own life with a wife, children, and career.

Recently, on a whim, I drove down to Moundville, made the left turn where my uncle's store had been, and drove out to the home place. After my grandparent's death, an elderly aunt lived there but then she also had passed, and the house and land had been sold. As I drove, I saw that the red clay fields were now pasture and woodland instead of the plowed fields and rows of cotton I knew as a child. I came to the site of the house. It had been torn down and the rubble cleared away. There was nothing there. I parked and stood under the familiar cedar tree and listened to the wind in the pines in the late afternoon air as I had as a boy sitting in the porch swing that would have been a few yards away.

As I stood there, I was shocked by the feeling of loss and rootlessness I felt. As I considered it, it seemed to be the old "sunset feeling," because it had always come on me the seven or eight times I had experienced it in my lifetime at that time of day. There was a sense of yearning, of something disappearing with the setting sun, or something that could have happened not happening. Now it was even sharper, an almost palpable sense of loss, lost time, lost love, lost youth, lost people, all unredeemable, never to be again. Something I had once thought to be permanent had disappeared forever.



On the way back and later I began thinking about permanence. Again from the Preacher in Ecclesiastes: *What does a man gain by all the toil? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth endures forever.* The thought came that a generation had gone that seemed permanent. Even my generation was going. Another generation was coming, and there was no mark on the earth to represent our passage. The sun also rises, and the sun goes down.

Christians go to God. We do it blindly and instinctively in our seeking. There have been much greater events in my life than this moment at sunset that have shaken and torn at me with a savagery that seemed unbearable. In those times, I desperately sought Him, and He has come to me. Literally, there was no other place to go but to sink into the abyss of pain and depression.

Going to your faith in the midst of even these thoughts of loss is easy, some might say; they would say in fact that it is nothing but an escape. To paraphrase Karl Marx, "religion is the opium of the people," the delusion that meaning exists when there is none, that there is permanence instead of impermanence. In actuality, we go to our faith not seeking escape but seeking relief.

We go to our faith believing that God exists and that He has given us knowledge, both in His Word and through His Spirit, of His existence and from it, He has given us knowledge of our circumstances, knowledge that He is, that He has always been, that He is permanent. In times of doubt, in times of pain, we seek Him out.

When we seek Him out, we do so front loaded with information He has given us. *In the beginning God* (before anything was, God was there) *created the heavens and the earth* (everything that exists was created by Him). In another place, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word **was** God* (Jesus was there at the beginning of even time, and He was the agent of time and of creation). This knowledge gives us insight into His entry into His creation to redeem it. Why would He not redeem it? It is His. We know these things as a matter of practical knowledge and can thus depend and act upon them.

We know other things. We know we are guilty. We carry our guilt day and night and our conscience continually reminds us. We also know that we have been absolved of our guilt; that information has also been given to us. Our guilt is such (and it continues, to our dismay) that we have to continually remind ourselves of our absolution, remind ourselves that of its permanence. The most permanent part of our lives is that we are not guilty, and, wondrously, that this is our salvation *from* impermanence. The work of Jesus, who **was** God, cannot be undone and His promises are sure.

A man of my age has seen a large number of deaths, the ultimate impermanence to humanity. A recent death in our church family addressed in another part of this issue made a strong impression on me. There was the unforgettable statement during a prayer time with the officers of the church in which the dying brother said, "I will be healed, either here and now or when I am with the Lord." There was a sureness, a permanence in that statement. I'm not going anywhere. I will always exist, and it will be an

**we have to continually remind ourselves of our  
absolution, remind ourselves of its permanence,  
...our salvation from impermanence**



existence of wholeness and peace. This is the voice of the Christian at the hour in which impermanence should rule.

Recently we discovered that my wife's aunt had terminal liver cancer. Treatment would be a desperate attempt to gain a few extra months and she chose not to go through it. We drove the fifty miles to Birmingham on a beautiful spring afternoon to visit with her and her daughters. She is an elegant lady, a widow, and she met us at the door with a smile. We visited together for two hours, speaking of family, the past, good vacations, her grandchildren, everything but her illness. When time came to leave, we got up to say goodbye.

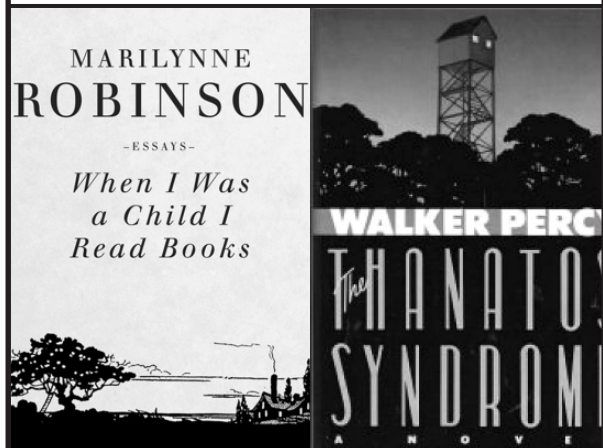
As we left, I went up to her to hug her. She whispered in my ear: "I'm going to be all right." Her eyes were shining and there was the slightest trace of a smile on her face. I'm not sure why she said this to me. Perhaps it was an attitude I conveyed of worry or concern during our visit. Perhaps it was because she knew I was a Believer and she wanted to reassure me. I was concerned about her physically and perhaps even emotionally but I did know that she was a Believer. I looked at her and smiled myself as I responded, "Yes. Yes you are. Isn't it wonderful." She smiled again, a soft, sweet smile and squeezed my hand in an attitude I can only call joyful.

Her search was near the end. She was confident that she had found it.

Permanence. ¶

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# INTERACT WITH CULTURE



## RIVERWOOD BOOK GROUP

This group meets each Monday evening at 7:00 pm in the Church library to discuss books we have chosen to read together. We cover a wide range of theology, fiction, history and commentary, looking at all subjects through the lens of the Gospel and "sharpening each other" in our interaction. If you enjoy books, Christian fellowship and good coffee, please join us. All are invited. Upcoming selections include *The Thanatos Syndrome* by Walker Percy and *When I Was a Child, I Read Books* by Marilynne Robinson.



# THE GOSPEL AND PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS

## Toward a New Christian Perspective

by Dr. Robert Thornton

*Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away. (Matthew 22:15-22 ESV)*

Working nights has afforded me a new interest. Because I have a hard time sleeping in a strange bed, during the off times on the job, I have taken to viewing or sometimes listening to CNN or Fox News from the very uncomfortable bed in the call room while attempting to catch some shuteye. Since this is an election year, the talk on these programs has been the Republican primaries and the upcoming general election. At the time of this writing, it appears that Mitt Romney will oppose President Obama in the fall election.

What has fascinated me is the anger and vitriol which each

party seems to hold for the other. If you're a Republican, Obama and the Democrats are driving the country toward a socialistic totalitarian state. And, if you belong to the Democratic Party, the Republicans want to reward rich industrialists with huge tax breaks at the expense of the working man, leaving him in no better shape than the workers of the sweat shops of the 1920's. Obviously, the truth lies somewhere between these two extremes.

Where did this enmity begin? Historically, I'm not exactly sure, but I can at least date when I first became aware of the problem. It was during the election of 1976 when Jimmy Carter was running against Gerald Ford. Right after a Bible study in a fellow church member's home the talk drifted into presidential politics. I made the mistake of stating that we should vote for Jimmy Carter as he was a professing Christian. He roundly set me straight. Carter was a Democrat and therefore, despite his profession of faith, was a liberal politician and someone a true conservative Christian could never vote for.

**as Christians  
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Ambassadors  
of a greater  
government**

Thus, for me, began the fall from that slippery political slope of casting the opponent as the "friendly opposition" to that of the hated enemy. Recalling elections prior to 1976, such as Kennedy versus Nixon or Johnson versus Goldwater, I could not recollect any real name calling or political smearing to the degree that has gone on in recent years.



Since then, I've witnessed George H. W. Bush refer to Clinton as "Bozo" and Gore as "Ozone Man" during the 1992 election. And, recently Romney has been chastised as a high school bully while Obama has been accused of being born outside the United States, therefore not eligible to hold the office of President.

Now, before I'm accused of being naive about presidential politics, I will confess that I understand that contention has gone on between political parties since the founding of this country. For example, during the election of 1848 the Democrats cast Zachary Taylor as cruel, uneducated, vulgar, and greedy. And the Whigs accused his opponent, Lewis Cass, of graft and dishonesty. As another example, during the election of 1912, the Socialist Candidate, Eugene Debs, accused the Progressive candidate, Theodore Roosevelt, of being "a charlatan mountebank, and fraud, and his Progressive promises and pledges as the mouthings of a low and utterly unprincipled self-seeker and demagogue."

What's the big fuss? I've noticed that some Christians seem to buy into the name calling and criticism, placing an inordinate amount of emphasis on politics, as if voting for the correct candidate was as important doctrinally as believing Christ is the Second Person of the Trinity. I get the feeling that if their candidate lost they'd be willing take a four-year sabbatical in Canada.

Scripture commands us to live in obedience to human authority, as it is God's will to do so. *I Peter 2:13-17 states: Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*

Perhaps I'm being too sensitive. Scripturally, we should be good citizens and that means being aware of each candidate's platform and being able to make a cogent argument for why we vote the way we do. But, it doesn't mean pinning all our hopes on one man's election to office. Being a Christian isn't defined by party affiliation. It transcends party politics.

As Christians we live in this country and on this Earth as ambassadors of a *greater* government ruled by an omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient King. Fittingly, our concern should be for the welfare of people everywhere as creatures created in the image of God and for fellow believers bought by the Blood of Christ. And, within that context, voting for the right candidate is altogether fitting and proper.

As Christians we are not some voting block, demographic, or focus group. We are bought with a price, loved beyond measure by the Creator of the Universe. Some people believe that we must bring our Country back to Christ and see electing the "right" candidate as a legitimate way of doing so. The way we bring this country back to Christ is by going to our knees and not to the voting booth. And our prayers should continually be that we would be conformed to the will of Christ, not necessarily to make politicians do our bidding.

Where Presidents are in office for four to eight years, our God reigns forever. Where policies change with administrations, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And, where Presidents are sinful men (sometimes glaringly so), we have a Savior who knew no sin, yet became sin for us.

Oh, yes, and one more thing. Don't forget to vote. ¶

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# THE SPECIALNESS OF SUNDAY MORNING

## Tradition and Peace in Corporate Worship

by Dana Miller

As a little girl, I remember getting ready for church on Sunday mornings. Honestly, some days it felt a bit like the devil's dance hall as everything that could possibly go wrong did. More often than not, though, it was a different day.

My dad, who worked shift work, was usually home—especially when we were young. Mom had Sunday lunch planned. The house often began smelling of pot roast and rising homemade rolls long before we left for church.

Our “Sunday” clothes had been pressed the night before and were hanging neatly, complete with socks, shoes, and, in the case of Easter, a special purse or pair of gloves.

I remember when I realized that we sat in the same pew that my grandparents had always occupied. There was something about sitting in the Anders pew that was special.

Now, to be sure, some of my memories are more sentimental than anything else. But, what I value now as an adult is the idea that Sunday morning was different. It wasn't like every other day of the week.

Everything about it, from the way we prepared, to what we did, to what we ate, to the things that happened on that day, was different from the other six days of the week.

I have only recently begun to really value these early experiences, because I've come to learn that it isn't just about the dress and the lunch. In fact, it's not about those at all.

Sunday morning is the time set apart by God for worship, not simply going to church, but worship – corporate worship. Most of us realize that worship requires an object and most of us are quick and correct to verbalize that the object of our worship is God – worship of the living God with other believers.

During his weekend conference here at Riverwood, Doug Wilson made the statement that when we enter into worship on Sunday morning we should imagine the roof being rolled back and that we are standing in the presence of God. That has stayed with me for many reasons and we are, rightly I think, reminded of that quote often by our elders. One of the reasons that it has stayed with me is that rolled back roof idea joins us, in effect, with believers around the world and saints from decades past.

That's simply breathtaking to me. And it further illustrates the idea that Sunday morning, with its rhythm, order, and sound is and should be distinct, set apart. From the liturgy to the sacraments to the music, it's all part of our worship of and to God with believers past and present.

Many of our creeds, confessions, and hymnody use

**that rolled back roof idea joins us...  
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# During worship, we receive. Beautiful, life-giving truths that we didn't even know that we needed.

words that are a bit stilted and may feel strange on our modern tongues. But with each, we are hearkened back to believers so many years before. We are reminded of the truths that God gave to other believers. And we are also reminded by the words and sounds that this is a different time of the week.

It doesn't feel like the bustle of everyday. It doesn't sound like everyday. The music and sounds I enjoy during my personal quiet time aren't what I hear at church. That's part of the beauty of Sunday morning. It is different. Its focus is different. It is corporate worship of God.

During worship, we receive. We receive from God, certainly. Through the preaching of the Word and through the sacraments, we receive beautiful, life-giving truths that we didn't even know that we needed.

But we also receive through those ancient creeds, confessions, and hymns. We are forced, sometimes through those stilted, ancient words to focus our mind and heart on something beyond ourselves. Those very words that feel a bit strange, that music that isn't "now" often aids our worship simply because it is different. It is special.


This is not intended as a salvo in the ongoing war of traditional vs. contemporary styles of worship. Rather, it is a statement on the fact that we as self-centered, sinful beings need cues for us to set our minds on the fact that worship is different from the pace and the noise of everyday. There is a place for more modern expression but to make Sunday morning sound like everything else we experience simply because it is popular or somehow more relevant is tantamount to tickling the ears of the

masses. It ends up cheapening that which should be most sacred.

We are not ever done receiving. We are not ever done worshiping. Every week we enter into the "same" worship service. We recite many of the same creeds and confessions and sing many of the same hymns. But something happens. And it happens every week. We receive something different—truth, healing, and loving discipline that meet us right where we are, when we need them, given by the One who has known us since the foundation of the world.

We are a needy people. God knew that. He knew that we needed a special, different, set apart time to worship Him, to be fed by Him, to grow in Him. He knew that we needed it often.

He knew that we needed a Sabbath. We need a time of corporate worship, a time when the focus isn't on ourselves. A time when roofs all over the world are rolled away and believers come into God's presence. A time to simply receive – to receive what we didn't know we needed and often from things so ancient and seemingly not relevant that they are sometimes tossed aside.

A time to focus on God. A time to be still. A time that is beautifully, purposefully different. 

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at [dgmiller87@gmail.com](mailto:dgmiller87@gmail.com).*



# WHY THE GOSPEL ISN'T A MUSICAL COMEDY

by Brian Watkins

Answer:

"It was too violent."

"It was too depressing."

"There wasn't enough hope."

"All I remember is that they cursed a lot."

"There was nothing redemptive about that story so I didn't like it."

Question:

What are common statements made by Christians after experiencing one of Hollywood's many violent or grotesque films?

Right you are Dick.

We've all made these comments, or at least known someone who has, after watching a particularly violent or shocking film. And it got me wondering: Why are we so put off by violence? It seems to me that there are two main reasons. The first reason is good. The second reason is bad.

The first reason is that, simply put, violence is violent. At its core, it is damaging. It is stress inducing and cruel. It destroys the things we love. This reason makes sense.

The second reason stems from the fact that we often impose an incorrect version of the Christian narrative onto our stories. This belief states that the

Christian narrative is clean and devoid of violence. This belief is wrong. In fact, the Christian narrative contains imagery far more violent than popular cinematic and fictional expressions. But the issue goes deeper than just violence.

If fictional stories are intended to be reflections on the state of the human condition, which centers on our heart-wrenching separation from God, why do we continually demand spotless fairy-tales? Why do we so often play the abominably dangerous game of "What is Christian and What is Not?"

Stuck in the annals of modernity we too often subscribe to talking about and referencing the cleanest stories for the cleanest people. This method of filtering out stories that don't smack of the latest upbeat worship song is a form of watering down the Gospel, polarizing to the secular world, and is far more dangerous than the art we are so quick to shy away from.

Scripture could be considered the original horror film. Just read Leviticus. Burning ague and diseased bowels abound generously. Our oldest stories

involve entire cities being annihilated in one divine fell swoop. Deception, incest, talking donkeys, men living inside whales. This is the stuff of the summer blockbuster.

**Why do we so often play the abominably dangerous game of "What is Christian and What is Not?"**



This is not to say that the Christian community hasn't embraced violence in cinematic form before. It's just only been when the subject matter is spot on, in a direct representation of the bible. But why do we apply a different line of logic to fiction?

With studios like Fox and Sony creating divisions solely committed to producing "Christian" or "faith-based" films, it's apparent what the secular world and private sector think Christians are "in to." The studio heads have implemented a philosophy that says Christians want their movies and entertainment to be cozy factories of feel-goodery, tucked away from the outside pitfalls of relativistic culture and foreboding evil. And, generally speaking, they are right. What we oftentimes fail to realize is that the practice of limiting our tastes to what we call "safe" and "redemptive" actually separates

us from the outside world, dragging us away from the cultural discussion table and therein sacrificing opportunities to speak up merely by having a piece of imagery to commiserate with in a great piece of art. Requiring art to always be entertaining and happy is like praying to win the lottery. It is narrow-minded and shallow and should be avoided at all costs.

If we limit our idea of hope in the artistic world to "something that makes us feel good" then we are completely missing scripture's very definition of the word. In Romans chapter 8 Paul tells us "[a] hope seen is no hope at all." Our logic doesn't line up if we expect our representational stories to be fulfillments of the hope that Paul explains to be a

*future* glory that the whole creation waits for with eager expectation, "inwardly groaning with the pains of childbirth." Later on in the chapter, he reminds us from Psalm 44:22 that this condition is perpetual: "[for] your sake we face death all day

long, we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." Hope is found in the lack of glory, more so than in its fulfillment; otherwise, it wouldn't be hope at all.

The Coen brothers' grippingly first-rate film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's novel *No Country for Old Men* is one of the most realistically violent and Gospel-centered films in the last decade. From the beginning, *No Country...* stares us down with a directly Christian predicament that is remarkably straightforward: This is no country for old men. In fact, this is no place for anyone. Themes of the "inward groaning"

flourish in the barren and seemingly hopeless landscape of the Texas border. In its extremely violent characters, we are affronted with an old-testament-esque tenor of incessant damage. The character of Sheriff Bell articulates this early on in the story: "Somewhere out there is a true and living prophet of destruction and I don't want to confront him. I know he's real. I have seen his work."

We find a similar sentiment all throughout scripture: we don't belong here. There is a gap. Yet there is something deeper inside of us that hopes for something unseen. There is a future glory unrealized and we live as foreigners in this current world that has been broken by sin.

We find a similar sentiment all throughout scripture: we don't belong here. There is a gap. Yet there is something deeper inside of us that hopes for something unseen



What we've been given in the work of the Coen brothers and McCarthy is an honest (yet fictional) depiction of a broken world. A place so thickly riddled with the contaminant of the Fall that we can't help but admit to the universality of evil. In her essay "Catholic Novelists", Flannery O'Connor writes:

*I don't believe we shall have great religious fiction until we have again that happy combination of believing artist and believing society. Until that time, the novelist will have to do the best he can in travail with the world he has. He may find in the end that instead of reflecting the image at the heart of things, he has only reflected our broken condition and, through it, the face of the devil we are possessed by. This is a modest achievement, but perhaps a necessary one.*

When a "secular" piece of art admits this radically objective truth, it should be lauded and praised. Yet even when we're given such creative spiritual fodder we tend to toss these types of stories away because they aren't palatable to our strict moral movie-going standards, typically because there was "too much violence" or "too much foul language" or because "it was depressing."

By doing this we are telling the artists who created the piece that we would rather them gloss over the evil they see and commit to the good. This censoring of vision is ultimately something a true artist is incapable of doing, as their primary task is to interpret the world in front of them. To mutate the artist's perception is not possible. In fact, by inadvertently subscribing to a more sugary brand of

fiction we in turn exacerbate a growing sense of relativism. Though our aim in personal censorship might be well-intentioned, it is a fruitless effort that keeps us far too safe and distances us from the rest of society and biblical truth itself. We must no longer treat our artistic standards like a moral compass.

Now surely these are gross generalizations, made to emphasize a point and there are, of course, exceptions to be made. Sensationalism, for one, has

become a pop-culture favorite in the form of horror flicks and quasi-snuff films and is not the dramatic form I am trying to endorse. Although in rare cases effective, sensationalism is an anti-art in practice of great immoderation and any thinking person should be able to identify it at their local video store as "not worth their time." And surely there is content inappropriate for children and others that needs to be avoided, but a redemptive story with hope and happiness is not the one we should always be looking for.

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The surface idea that films today are devoid of redeeming qualities is a near-sighted stricture in practice of personal piety and misses the point entirely. The reality is that displaying a void of hope or lack of redemption in a film actually serves as a beautifully tooled juxtapositional device in which there is no hope seen, but a hope sought after. These grotesque displays of violence, foul language, and relationships wrought with sin might be difficult to sit through, but more importantly, they are universal declarations of the brokenness we live in and the limits of our capabilities for grace and compassion; a truthful affirmation, made through imagery and parable, of the need for something



larger than ourselves.

Flannery O'Connor explained this reality by saying, "[violence] is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace... This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world."

We should not be squeamish or put off by such shocking stories. In turn, we should try lining up with our bible studies to see films from the Coen brothers, Paul Thomas Anderson, and Martin McDonagh and discussing in our small groups the fiction of Cormac McCarthy and the plays of Tracy Letts and Adam Rapp, squirming and retching in community with one another. As a past article from this very publication reminds us: If we truly believe what we believe as Christians then we shouldn't be shocked by anything.

At the end of *No Country...*, after two hours of devastating violence, we are given a glimpse of this yearning for a hope fulfilled. McCarthy beautifully manifests it in an image of father and son that is wrought with spiritual implication:

*It was like we was both back in older times and I was on horseback goin through the mountains of a night. Goin through this pass in the mountains. It was cold and there was snow on the ground and he rode past me and kept on goin. Never said nothin. He just rode on past and he had this blanket wrapped around him and he had his head down and when he rode past I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that*

*cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up.*

This same quote was cited in *Critique's* earlier review of this movie, but given its sheer beauty, I think its something we all need to read more than once.

McCarthy's body of work, and the work of artists like him, serves as a reminder that the world of scripture is far bigger than the normal path to positive inspiration we often make it out to be. To not seek out its different manifestations would be a gross disservice to our neighbors and to ourselves. ¶

*Author and Acknowledgement:*

Brian Watkins is a writer and actor originally from Parker, CO, and currently living in Brooklyn, NY. His most recent play *High Plains* was produced at Emerging Artists Theatre in New York City. Other plays include *The Bison of Kiowa* and *Harold and Nettie*.

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# FINALE

## A Marriage

Modern American marriage is increasingly an institution disastrously shaped by popular entertainment: movies, television, magazines and romance novels. In these, marriage is the "happy-ever-after" with the music rising to a crescendo and the supposed knowledge that all impediments have been conquered and now only love matters. Either this or the alternate view: it is a trap keeping you from happiness and fulfillment, often fulfillment with another who now is the desired "ever after" party. This caught-in-a-trap syndrome is horribly depicted in the Richard Yates novel (and recent movie), *Revolutionary Road*, and it exists throughout the land.

The dreams of happiness are forever gone, whether it's lost romanticism or the trap, and statistics bear this out. The popularity of marriage is at a new low in the United States. People live together unmarried with the usual, "we don't need a license to love." In addition, the divorce rate for new marriages is now approaching 55% as more and more people discover that marriage is intimate far beyond what they imagined, and an intimacy like this is untenable. As Eric Venable said in an article in this magazine last winter, "There just isn't any place to hide in marriage from your own sin or the sin of your spouse."

The most important thing that people don't realize about marriage is that it is worthwhile in itself first, and that it is hard, hard work to maintain. This poem by Michael Blumenthal speaks to these two things. First, the house *must* not fall, and second, marriage

is two people together making sure that it doesn't fall. This working together is "something wonderful" happening, and the work that assures that the house remains standing is extraordinarily valuable and wonderful. We know, after all, that it is all of God.

## *A Marriage*

*for Maggie Smigel and Jon Dopkeen*

*You are holding up a ceiling  
with both arms. It is very heavy,  
but you must hold it up, or else  
it will fall down on you. Your arms  
are tired, terribly tired,  
and, as the day goes on, it feels  
as if either your arms or the ceiling  
will soon collapse.  
But then,  
unexpectedly,  
something wonderful happens:  
Someone,  
a man or a woman,  
walks into the room  
and holds their arms up  
to the ceiling beside you.  
So you finally get  
to take down your arms.  
You feel the relief of respite,  
the blood flowing back  
to your fingers and arms.  
And when your partner's arms tire,  
you hold up your own  
to relieve him again.  
And it can go on like this  
for many years  
without the house falling.*

~Michael Blumenthal



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