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salt&light

3rd Quarter 2012

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MAN

JIMMY HOPPER

PLUS:

SOMETIMES WE MUST INTERFERE

MAGNIFICENT MOTHER OR MAGNIFICENT LOVE

ENDLESS GRACE, ETERNAL GRATITUDE

WHY YOUR FAVORITE MOVIES MIGHT NOT
BE ABOUT JESUS AFTER ALL

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FROM THE EDITOR

It is Fall and school buses appear and school bells ring. The days are bright with color. On Fridays and Saturdays, football and its excitement returns. The church year has begun. Vacations are over and the pews are full. With a new season, there is a new issue of *Salt & Light*. Our issue this quarter is, we hope, informative, instructive, inspirational, and quite unique.

Our lead article, *The Significance of Man*, is by your editor and explores the dichotomy in the minds of modern man who can't decide if he is incredibly significant or pitifully insignificant. The idea for it came from the demotion of the now ex-planet Pluto to that of a dwarf planet. I hope you find it interesting and from it consider the wonder of God's creation in perhaps a different way.

Peggy Drinkard, our Director of Children's Ministries, gives us *Sometimes You Must Interfere*. While living in Europe many years ago, Peggy and her family visited the site of the German concentration camp, Dachau, and she speaks of that visit to speak to the call of Christians, and the persistence of America, to intervene and to protest massive corporate sin in the world. It is a thought-provoking piece with a lot to think about.

One of the most fascinating and unique pieces ever in *Salt & Light* is *Magnificent Mother or Magnificent Love: A Treatise on Worthiness and God's Love* by Hunter Sims. It begins as a look at one of Hunter's favorite writers, David Foster Wallace who, in his novel, *Infinite Jest*, speaks of whether mothers love their far-from-perfect children because of their great love for them or because they are great "mothers." This morphs into a look at the love of God for His people who are great sinners. Also, don't miss reading the footnotes. They are part of the article and many are hilarious.

Dr. Robert Thornton's contribution is a meditation of Christian generosity, gratitude, and grace in *Endless Grace, Eternal Gratitude*. He speaks of the way that God's matchless grace gives us the ability to deal with the vagaries, pain, and defeats of life but how it also fuels our generosity and gratitude in a fallen world. Read and be inspired.

In *Rethinking the Gospel and the Arts*, Eric Venable writes something of a rebuttal to our article last quarter by Brian Watkins, *Why the Gospel Isn't a Musical Comedy*. Watkins' article spoke to the counter-productivity on ministry of Christian censorship of the arts and particularly of movies. Eric speaks to the trivialization of words with profound meanings and ways in which movies can tempt Christians in their thoughts. The question is interesting as is the dilemma involved.

Our Finale addresses a quote by Robert Farrar Capon on the radical grace of God.

Happy Reading.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MAN

Contrarian Views and the Reality of God

by Jimmy Hopper

...what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet...

Psalms 8:4-6

It is too little to call man a little World; except God, man is diminutive to nothing.

John Donne

from ***Devotions Among Emergent Occasions*** (1624)

Recently, I read a fascinating book, one that I would never have read had I not been a member of the Riverwood Book Group. The (intriguing) title was ***How I Killed Pluto and Why It Had It Coming*** by Mike Brown. No, it's not about mayhem on the Disney lot but about the recent (2006) downgrading of Pluto from full planet status to dwarf planet.

Mike Brown is actually Dr. Michael Brown, formerly from Huntsville, Alabama and an astronomer at Cal Tech University. Dr. Brown is apparently very good

at his job and he had just discovered an object in space, Eris (which he nicknamed Xena for the warrior princess on television and thus irritated some staid scientists). Eris is 25% larger than Pluto and was in the same area of the sky as Pluto, which is the outer reaches of the solar system. As Dr. Brown searched for information regarding Eris and other objects in the vicinity, he found several more objects and became increasingly sure, for several reasons, that Eris was not a planet in the sense that we know planets.

If that was the case, then neither was Pluto. If Brown had made this case, he would go from being the only man alive who had discovered a planet to, the man responsible for killing a planet that school children had named in their memory work for generations. The search went from observatories from California to the big island of Hawaii and set off a fascinating piece of scientific detective work. Other scientists around the world caught on to what he was doing and tried to horn in on the action and acclaim. Finally, the paper was written and read, the vote was taken, he was vindicated and Pluto ended its reign as a planet.

(Pluto) is known
and has
significance
only because
it has been
noticed
by man, is
named
by man and is
part of the
knowledge
of man

One of many things in this book that fascinated me as a Christian was the naming of objects in outer space. Pluto is a frozen rock about 2/3 the size of our moon in a very long (247 years!) orbit around the sun at a distance of an incredible average 3.6 billion (!) miles from that sun. In all the universe, the vast reaches of not just our little solar system, but all the stars and their systems, it is known and has significance only because it has been noticed by man, is named by man, and has become part of the knowledge of man. This, to me, is something that speaks importantly to the idea of man's significance. This ability to think, to know, to differentiate, to communicate, has made man what he is and strongly speaks to his significance.

Whether man is significant is one of the self-proclaimed "Big Questions." The 21st Century continues down the path of the 20th Century regarding the place of man, a dichotomy as to whether he is significant or insignificant. On the one hand, man is significant. This significance of man, of the individual, is at a very high level. Man can build and land a space probe on Mars 48 million miles away using a parachute, of all things, to set it down a scant few feet from where it was planned to go. We praise man, his achievements, his technology, his intellect, his courage and persistence, his acumen in all fields of endeavor, everything about him is worthy of praise and we praise him as men once praised God.

We praise not only the race of man but the individual

man or woman. The individual man is inviolate. He has rights and his rights are inviolate. Our country fights foreign wars to assure political freedom for strangers to assure that their "rights" are inviolate.

To be politically correct to the nth degree is necessary for public figures and anyone of good breeding. Man as a race and individual man now seem to be as significant as they have ever been and have fulfilled the Greek philosopher Protagoras statement that "Man is the measure of all things."

And yet....The rise of Scientism and the subsequent devaluing of man brings to man themes of despair that echo throughout the land. Everywhere man is tortured, starved, devalued and killed. Women and children are

sold for sexual use. Babies are aborted by the millions at a level never imagined when legal abortion was approved. Euthanasia for the ill and aged is debated as is limiting healthcare for the aged. This is considered good by some because they are part of a philosophical system that says that only the strong shall live and the weak should die and get out of the way.

Man, because of this philosophical system, has gone to great lengths to try to find other inhabited worlds, other creatures who would make us less unique. Great listening systems have been developed and are constantly manned, seeking to hear intelligible sounds from the endless soundlessness of space. Without evidence, we have invented these distant planets and creatures, making them, as in the *Star Wars* franchise, remarkably like man, even to the

The rise of Scientism and the subsequent devaluing of man brings to man themes of despair that echo throughout the land

point of fighting wars. We speculate about events whereby they might have once walked on our planet, even to the point of jump-starting our creation, our supposed evolution. We want badly to know, not that we are not alone, but that we are not unique.

Without this, we have tweaked the philosophy, even the anthropology of man. In saying that he is insignificant, we have disposed of the things that make man who he is, the mannishness, the humanness of man, all these have been eliminated in the equation of that system. We have focused on Scientism and Rationalism and dismissed Transcendence. Man seemingly wishes to be described as an insignificant speck on an insignificant planet in a small solar system in endless space, warmed by a dying star and waiting for oblivion. Man, by these measures, can only be proclaimed insignificant.

The photograph on the cover of this issue is from the NASA files and is a picture of the eclipse of the sun by Saturn taken from the Cassini space probe. It is a stunningly beautiful portrait of the rings of Saturn. Surely, to the Christian it brings to mind that "the heavens declare the glory of God." However, one of the most interesting things about it is that it is a portrait of earth. At the 10:00 o'clock position above the outer ring, you can find an infinitesimal light blue dot. This is earth, the home of man. It couldn't possibly be more insignificant, and man's smallness in the universe is often cited as proclaiming our insignificance.

This is the alternate view, a view that says that, even though man "is the measure of all things," even though man is the only known intellectual being in the universe, even though man is a marvel of complexity, even though man gives and takes away the names of celestial bodies, man is a totally insignificant creature who, as William Shakespeare, surely one of the more significant of insignificant men said:

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

That stage we strut and fret on is our earth, the blue dot barely visible from the photograph behind Saturn.

To consider even further the insignificance of man and of his planet, we consider again the faculty for language, for communication. We know that there are, and have been, many millions of men over the generations of the earth. Almost all of them have been named by men. In our terms this is a vast multitude of men. Marilynne Robinson, the Christian novelist and thinker, puts this number into perspective as she considers the known universe when she wrote in the essay, "Austerity as

Ideology," the following:

Scatter the names of all those who have ever lived over the surface of the knowable cosmos and it would remain, for all purposes, as unnamed as it was before the small, anomalous flicker of human

**This is the
God who
left the
seat of all
power, all
creativity,
all beauty,
all holiness,
to come to the
blue dot
and interact
with His
people**

life appeared on this small, wildly atypical planet.

This is perspective. The huge gaseous planet Jupiter, so large it dwarfs even Saturn, and its seventeen named moons would certainly absorb the names of everyone who ever lived on earth. And with this, Jupiter itself is only a speck in our galaxy. By this measure, the planet Earth is insignificant, and man, veritable lords on earth, is literally nothing.

Or maybe he is significant. Maybe man is very significant. Ms. Robinson goes on to write the following: *Say that we are a puff of warm breath in a very cold universe. By this type of reckoning we are either immeasurably insignificant or we are incalculably precious and interesting. I tend toward the second view. Scarcity is said to create value after all.* As a Christian, she would certainly tend toward the significance of man. As a Christian, we have been given the information that we are incredibly significant and we have been given the knowledge as to why this is the case.

Galileo was right physically but wrong metaphysically. Despite the fact that the earth revolves around the sun instead of vice versa, it is truly the center of the universe. The universe and its ordered beauty as exemplified in this photograph exists because the earth exists. The reason the universe exists is because of the earth; the earth that God created as a platform for our existence. As a Christian, the smallness of the earth is a matter of joy and delight because it speaks of man's importance, his significance, in the very eyes of God.

Why did God make it this way? For the same reason he made everything. He made it for His own glory. He made the huge planet Saturn and its beautiful rings so that man would some day photograph it

and by doing so, proclaim the glory of God. The heavens do "declare the glory of God," don't they?

Why was it small? Because that is the way God does things. This is the God who "Chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; the weak to shame the strong; the lowly, the despised, the things that are not to shame the things that are." This is the God who left the seat of all power, all creativity, all beauty, all holiness, to come to the blue dot and interact with the people He had created so that they could join Him as trophies of His grace and glory. What could possibly make man more significant than that?

To return to Mike Brown and Pluto, toward the end of the book, he and his wife are anticipating the coming of their daughter in the world. He leaves his job for a time, a job he absolutely loves, makes charts and graphs of birth dates, anticipates, prepares to be a father. When the child comes, this man, a man who charts the heavens, sees billions of miles, and thousands on thousands of light years, who sees the rings of Saturn and the heavens wheeling through space, who sees incredible, unbelievable galaxies in deep space; **this** man holds his daughter in his arms and says, "This is the most amazing and beautiful thing I have ever seen."

It is an incredible statement about the significance of man. ¶

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SOMETIMES WE MUST INTERFERE

Christian Duty in a Dark World

by Peggy Drinkard

One summer when we were stationed in Germany with the U.S. Air Force we toured Bavaria with our little boys. Somehow, in the middle of a holiday intended to give refreshment and pleasure, we decided to visit Dachau, the site of the first German concentration camp opened by Hitler and the SS. The familiar slogan of *Arbeit Macht Frei*—work will make you free—adorns the entrance beside a modern bronze sculpture depicting emaciated bodies crisscrossed in helter-skelter juxtaposition. Entering, I found it every bit as sobering and horrific as one would imagine. Our other destinations had been characterized by music, beer, good food, cleanliness, rich green sylvan beauty, and mirth. Here, visitors toured soberly and silently. We spoke in hushed tones. One wanted to tip-toe, or better, to hide. Even our little ones seemed to intuit the gravity of the place. At moments I felt completely overcome, wanting at once to scream and then, to sit down on that haunted dirt under our feet and just cry.

Outside the walls encircling the camp, life went on, of course. Dachau is a pretty town, with restaurants and shops and all the pristine charm of any other

Bavarian locale. Tidy homes more than a hundred years old, some passed from generation to generation within families, back right up to the very walls of the prison yard. I couldn't help thinking, "Someone lived right there when this was all operational...not a stone's throw from the horrors being perpetrated within these walls.

Maybe even some of those elderly people there...strolling along the street out front....maybe they lived here then." Did they not hear the tormented cries in the stark nights as Nazi surgeons performed their gruesome experiments and "surgeries"? The "infirmary" was at the front of the camp, adjacent to those homes. Did they not daily catch glimpses of those poor wasted bodies being relentlessly shuffled in and out those gates? How could you live next door to that and sit down to a civilized meal...a birthday or holiday celebration...laughing, loving, living, carrying on with the knowledge of the hideousness that lay just beyond the bedroom walls? Could you lie there at night taking pleasure with your spouse or gently slumbering when, just feet away, some of the most terrible atrocities ever visited upon man were daily occurring?

**Human suffering anywhere
concerns men and women everywhere**

Somewhere, across the globe or down the street, people are dying because of evil and injustice

After the war German civilians were sometimes forced to tour the camps. Many, perhaps most, said they just didn't know...they never realized...they never imagined. Could that be? At the very least some of the local civilians employed by the Nazis to work in the camps had to have known. And surely they spoke with their families and neighbors. Did they feel so helpless and scared for their own fate they became numb and silent? Were they desensitized, as were members of the SS, by psychological manipulation and propaganda? Or did they just not care? And when it was over, and all became apparent, were they able to just move on without guilt and shame?

Corrie Ten Boom once told of speaking at a church in Germany years after the war. At the end of the service a booming, jovial German man came up to her. He just wanted to shake her hand, he said. Wasn't it wonderful that here they met after the horrible war, together now in the house of God, and everyone forgiven? She immediately recognized him as one of her captors during her own internment, and as a flood of memory washed over her, she was unable to extend her hand, albeit it grieved and convicted her that this was so.

In his terrifying book, *Night*, Elie Wiesel describes more than one occasion in the concentration camps where even sons turned on their weaker fathers or siblings, sometimes for the sake of a crust of bread.

Now, I am a Calvinist. I like to think I have a firm grasp of the meaning of total depravity. But the

recoil I feel at such tales gives me away. Worse, I somehow imagine, like Peter when he said to Jesus, "though others fall away, I will not," (Mark 14:29) that were I situated like those people living next door to Dachau, I would not cave in to my cowardice. I would say something...do something. But who am I kidding? There are a lot of atrocious things happening in Tuscaloosa today, and I am planning to plant flowers.

Don't misunderstand. I don't think there's anything wrong with planting flowers. In its own way, the planting, the cultivation of beauty in this sin-weary world, is in itself a little grenade lobbed at Satan and his determination to rob the world of beauty and truth. But if I am planting in happy oblivion to the suffering going on around me and the injustice being perpetrated by the stronger against the weak then I fail. And I know I do fail.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was martyred for his efforts to combat evil... hanged as he stood naked and shivering in a Nazi prison courtyard on a Sunday morning. He said, "Silence in the face of evil is evil itself. God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act." And Elie Wiesel, in his acceptance speech of the Nobel Peace Prize, said, "We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. Human suffering anywhere concerns men and women everywhere."

It is increasingly fashionable to decry America's role

in the wars around the world. If our involvement were simply an attempt to extend our “empire” we might justly be accused. But I believe, individually, but also collectively, sometimes we have to act to save the innocent and the oppressed, and that America has often been at the forefront of that endeavor. I am not naive enough to think that has always been true, or that self-serving motives have never been intermingled with altruism, but I am not an isolationist because of just what Wiesel said. Suffering concerns us all.

Proverbs 24:11-12 says, *Rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter. If you say, “Behold, we did not know this,” does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it, and will he not repay man according to his work?* The first time I read these verses early in my Christian life I was pierced with conviction. I asked God to make me faithful in declaring His gospel as a means of helping those who are staggering toward the death of hell. This was a spiritual application. But there is the tangible and obvious physical application as well. Somewhere in our world today, across the globe or down the street, many somewheres in fact, people are dying because of evil and injustice inflicted on the powerless by the powerful. Can we help? Will we help? *Miserere, Domine.* Lord, have mercy on us. ¶

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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 21st 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*

*Sunset
Limited*

MAGNIFICENT MOTHER OR MAGNIFICENT LOVE

A Treatise On Worthiness and God's Love

by Hunter Sims

Suppose your mother¹ is consistently, unfailingly supportive in the face of your many shortcomings. Suppose that, in fact, she is unwilling to admit that such shortcomings exist. Would you feel valued? Worthwhile? Loved? Would it seem as though the source of this love is not your own loveliness but her desire to be a Good Mother? And would that bother you? This question, whether it is a good or desirable thing to be loved unconditionally and irrespective of one's worthiness, recurs throughout the fiction and nonfiction of David Foster Wallace.² Though he is perhaps best known as a champion of post-ironic sincerity³ and footnotes, Wallace's writing exhibits a deep concern with what it means to live morally in society.⁴ And, while he wrote just about nothing about any faith he may or may not have had,⁵ it is not overly revisionist to claim that he considered how one responds to the claims of religion (including how one addresses the issues I lead off with) as among the "Big Questions."⁶

And but so⁷ clearly the question of whether we

should be happy to be the recipients of unconditional love and whether we should show this sort of love to others is a biggie. And even if DFW sometimes wrote as though he was a little leery of it, I don't think that he necessarily advocated taking the Randian⁸ opposite route—that is, to only love or value others insofar as they are useful. Before you get too concerned, the purpose of this article is not to say that unconditional love is anything other than excellent. But like most excellent things, it can be mangled and perverted. And, truly, perhaps the idea of being loved in spite of oneself is in some ways unpleasant. It wounds my pride not to be able to attribute God's goodness to me to what I sometimes like to think of as my virtue. If I forget that grace means "unmerited favor," then it follows that I must be something pretty special to have received so much of it.

A somewhat contentious reader might be inclined to ask why one should care what Dave Wallace thought about unconditional love or anything else. It's a fair

1 Or other appropriate figure

2 (1962 – 2008) He wrote the novels *The Broom of the System* (1987), *Infinite Jest* (1996), and *The Pale King* (2011, posthumously published and unfinished) as well as a number of short stories and essays, one of which I'll be coming back to. Readers of his will correctly assume that the prevalence of footnotes in the following is a nod to his writing style (although it's also just kind of a useful way to break out of the main flow of the text).

3 Also known as "sincerity."

4 As referenced by The New Yorker's D. T. Max in "The Unfinished: David Foster Wallace's Struggle to Surpass *Infinite Jest*," he once wrote that "fiction's about what it means to be a [****]ing human being."

5 It's reported that he belonged to a church wherever he lived, and he does mention fellow church members in his essay following Sept. 11, "The View from Mrs. Thompson's," but that's about it. In any event, nothing in the following should be construed as speculation as to DFW's eternal state.

6 For more on that, see Wallace's "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky."

7 For those not in the know, this is me tipping my hand that it is taking a non-negligible force of will not to write this as an extended pastiche of DFW's style. I will endeavor to keep the direct references to a minimum.

8 As in Ayn Rand

question. If I were willing to come off as something of a fanboy,⁹ I might be inclined to claim that it is always reasonable to wonder what great minds have thought about difficult questions. Approaching the subject more rationally, let's say that he had a talent for exploring ideas that are often left unexamined and that by taking advantage of his ground-work we can better evaluate and elucidate our own beliefs. Then again, maybe it's unnecessary to sell the readers of *Salt & Light* on the validity of mining literature for spiritual insight. Still with me? Good; let's see what we can see.

The eponymous essay from Wallace's 1997 collection *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* originally appeared in *Harper's* magazine in 1996 under the slightly less snappy title "Shipping Out." It's probably his most well-known non-fiction piece.¹⁰ Apart from making a compelling case that no one should ever ever ever take a cruise,¹¹ "A Supposedly Fun Thing" also contains perhaps a germ of what I'm I guess contending is a recurring theme in his work, i.e. that it's unsettling and ultimately undesirable to be served—and much more so to be loved—in a way that does not convey that the object of service or love is intrinsically worthy of same. I'll open off with a semi-extended quote,¹² if for no other reason than to increase your access to his far-superior prose. In this passage, Wallace has just finished (rather humorously if paranoically) speculating on how it was possible that the cleaning staff on the cruise ship seemed somehow to know when he was going to be gone long enough for them to clean his cabin:

I mean, if pampering and radical kindness don't seem motivated by strong affection

and thus don't somehow affirm one or help assure one that one is not, finally, a dork, of what final and significant value is all this indulgence and cleaning? The feeling's not all that dissimilar to the experience of being a guest in the home of somebody who does things like sneak in in the A.M. and make your guest bed up for you while you're in the shower and fold your dirty clothes and even launder them without being asked to.... For a while, with a host like this, it seems great, and you feel cared about and prized and worthwhile and affirmed, etc. But then after a while you being to intuit that the host isn't acting out of regard or affection for you so much as simply going around obeying the imperatives of some personal neurosis having to do with domestic cleaning and order... which means that, since the ultimate point and object of the cleaning isn't you but rather cleanliness and order, it's going to be a relief for her when you leave. Meaning her hygienic pampering of you is actually evidence that she doesn't want you around.

Okay. So, first, maybe I should amend the above to say that one should never take a cruise if one is prone to (some might say) overthinking everything. But second, what is he criticizing here? In an earlier passage, he expresses the same sort of concern about Professional Smiles, suggesting that the impersonal, mouth-but-not-eyes smiles that one is buffeted with in the course of an average day are an intense source of despair. The central question here is who is benefiting from the seemingly good

9 In certain circles, one who is (often irrationally) devoted to a certain topic, genre, item of popular culture, etc. is referred to (almost exclusively pejoratively) as a fanboy.

10 If you don't believe me, a) you're not really meeting me halfway here, and also b) see the *Simpson's* episode ("A Totally Fun Thing that Bart Will Never Do Again"), the chapter in Tina Fey's memoir *Bossypants* ("My Honeymoon, or A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again Either"), or this article.

11 Which, agreed.

12 So, I guess now you get to see just how badly I'm cribbing his style.

It wounds my pride not to be able to attribute God's goodness to me to what I sometimes like to think of as my virtue

service? Few would contend that having one's cruise ship cabin cleaned after any absence of (it turns out exactly) thirty minutes is an intrinsically malicious act, nor is it necessarily unkind to smile at someone at whom you don't especially feel like smiling. However, in both cases, the service is being rendered not in deference to what is assumed to be the patron's wishes but to project an image of being the sort of cruise line that never lets you return to a dirty room or a bank or shop or whatever where you're guaranteed a smile from every employee. Where else in daily life would a smile that says "I am trying (only partially successfully) to like you, but really I don't have much to go on, here," be considered welcome? And what about the cleaning? If someone employs a team of professionals to constantly remove the filth and untidiness your presence creates, what sort of feelings is that likely to engender in the guest? Does one get the feeling that one is fortunate to be the undeserving recipient of such fine service?

Okay, so maybe this sort of corporate friendliness can mess with one's mind, but one has to be fairly neurotic (or at least American) to let questionable customer service policies shake one's self-worth. So what would it take? Let's turn now to Wallace's *magnum opus*, the 1079-page (including just shy of 100 pages of footnotes) *Infinite Jest*.¹³ The plot,

though not quite as convoluted as those typical of the authors with whom Wallace tends to share sentences,¹⁴ is a relatively complex one (not least of which because it doesn't get quite resolved until¹⁵ the first chapter). It takes place in an alternate future, which is probably the present by now—the years are somewhat difficult to gauge as they have shifted from numerical to corporate-sponsored designations (the majority of the action takes place in the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment), in which a portion of the northeastern United States has been ceded to Canada on the condition that the former retain the right to dump all of its waste there. The United States, Canada, and Mexico have combined into the Organization of North American Nations (acronymic pun emphatically intended by the author).

The main action of the plot centers around the attempts of a terrorist organization seeking Quebecois independence (Les Assassins de Fauteuils Rollents (AFR), or The Wheelchair Assassins) to obtain a master copy¹⁶ of a film so entertaining that those who watch it can never stop watching, ultimately resulting in the viewer's death. At the center of all of this is the Incandenza family. James O. Incandenza: father (at least to Hal and Orin), après-garde¹⁷ filmmaker (including the aforementioned video), inventor, tennis-

13 Telling facts: a) In Dave Eggers's forward to my edition (Back Bay 10th anniversary paperback), he speculates that the average age of those first reading the book is about twenty-five. b) Dave Eggers wrote the forward to my edition.

14 *cough* Thomas Pynchon *cough*

15 So to speak

16 Note to those under a certain age: It was once possible to prevent something called a "video cassette" from being copied by adding electronic noise that would ruin subsequent copies without preventing playback of the original. This master copy would not have been copy-protected, allowing for mass-dissemination. Although the book is ridiculously accurate in predicting much of the form that modern televisual entertainment takes, it was somewhat more short-sighted in the physical media department.

17 Using the novel's terminology. That is to say, he created works that were counter-cultural not for being ahead of their time but in a sense behind the times. Perhaps, Wallace considered himself irony après-garde in a sense, although he was hardly a reactionary.

An important distinction between God and The Mom lies in their respective responses to disobedience

aficionado, and alcoholic, typically referred to either as “Himself” or “The Mad Stork,” committed suicide before the events of the novel by sticking his head in a microwave oven. Avril: often referred to as “The Moms,” strict prescriptive grammarian, avid gardener and mother, engager in a variety of extra-marital affairs, and possible accomplice to the AFR. Hal: a partial stand-in for teenage DFW and the co-protagonist, a highly-ranked junior tennis player attending an elite tennis academy¹⁸ founded by his late father, and marijuana enthusiast. Orin: a former tennis player and current NFL punter and womanizer. And Mario: a deformed-to-the-point-of-being-sub-human (and probably not biologically J.O.I.'s) yet sunny-dispositioned aspiring filmmaker in his own right. Like most literary families, the Incandenzas are deeply and idiosyncratically flawed in such a way as to illustrate the various ideas the author wishes to express. For our purposes, we will focus on Avril Incandenza. Avril is an unfailingly loving mother; her interactions with her children are almost comically suffused with praise, positive affirmations, and general good cheer. On the surface this sounds basically okay. But, even before a secondary character has the opportunity to sort of explicitly spell out Wallace's issue, the reader can get an uneasy feeling about her. Let's start with her gardening. According to Orin, The Moms “gardened like a fiend” and referred to her crops as her Green

Babies.¹⁹ Yet, she never picked them.²⁰ They grew large and healthy and were then left to rot on the vine. One might suspect that she enjoyed being a successful gardener who could grow impressive crops but had no interest in the crops themselves.²¹

Any need for literary sleuthing goes out the window, however, in a later footnoted correspondence between Orin's childhood friend Marlon Bain and putative reporter Helen Steeply (actually covert agent Hugh Steeply, seeking to prevent the mass-release of the film). I hope you will allow me one more fairly long quote to illustrate, again in lieu of potentially ungainly paraphrasing and summarizing:²²

I am not sure whether you could call this abuse, but when I was (long ago) abroad in the world of dry men, I saw parents, usually upscale and educated and talented and functional and white, patient and loving and supportive and concerned and involved in their children's lives, profligate with compliments and diplomatic with constructive criticism, loquacious in their pronouncements of unconditional love for and approval of their children, conforming to every last jot/tittle in any conceivable definition of a good parent, I saw parent after unimpeachable parent who raised kids who

18 Certain readers may find it interesting that said academy utilizes the trivium/quadrivium system.

19 Subtext subtext subtext

20 (or at least not the zucchini; it's not clear if she only grew zucchini or if she did, in fact, harvest whatever else she was growing)

21 See footnote 19.

22 Also, so I am here reproducing a kind of long diatribe against a certain kind of parenting. I don't have kids and do not pretend to know how to raise them. I am simply quoting a passage from a work of fiction that very clearly shows what I'm trying to claim

Wallace is saying. No one should infer that I am advocating or inveighing against anything that he or she is doing because a) clearly I don't know anything about parenting and b) even more clearly I don't know how you are raising your kids and isn't it a little silly to think that this is aimed at you?

were (a) emotionally retarded or (b) lethally self-indulgent or (c) chronically depressed or (d) borderline psychotic or (e) consumed with narcissistic self-loathing or (f) neurotically driven/addicted or (g) variously psychosomatically Disabled or (h) some conjunctive permutation of (a)...(g).

Why is this[?] Why do many parents who seem relentlessly bent on producing children who feel they are good persons deserving of love produce children who grow to feel they are hideous persons not deserving of love who just happen to have lucked into having parents so marvelous that the parents love them even though they are hideous?

Is it a sign of abuse if a mother produces a child who believes not that he is innately beautiful and loveable and deserving of magnificent maternal treatment but that he is a hideous unlovable child who has somehow lucked into having a really magnificent mother? Probably not. But could such a mother then *really* be all that magnificent, if that's the child's view of himself?...

Was the almost pathological generosity with which Mrs. Inc responded to her son taking her car in an intoxicated condition and dragging her beloved dog to its grotesque death and then trying to lie his way out of it, was this generosity for Orin's sake, or for Avril's own? Was it Orin's "self-esteem" she was safe-guarding, or her own vision of herself as a more stellar Moms than any human son could ever hope to feel he merits. ...

For some reason now I am thinking of the sort of philanthropist who seems humanly repellant not in spite of his charity but *because* of it: on some level you can tell that he views the recipients of his charity not as persons so much as pieces of exercise equipment on which he can develop and demonstrate his own virtue. What's creepy and repellent is that this sort of philanthropist clearly *needs* privation and suffering to continue, since it is his own virtue he prizes, instead of the ends to which the virtue is ostensibly directed.²³

So, although one should remember that this comes from an also-damaged character, we have here what I think can be argued is a (relatively) succinct statement of the problem. Is there a point at which unconditional love transitions into something else? Again, I don't think that Wallace is going the hard-line Objectivist route and suggesting that love should be a strictly *quid pro quo* endeavor. I think that the passage affirms that there is a sort of love that resembles what Avril shows but that does not leave the beloved feeling hollow or worthless. Avril's failing is not in wanting to support and love her children but in her determination to do so basically with or without their help or even approval. Bain reports that Orin had an impression²⁴ of The Moms that he would sometimes use to entertain dinner guests. It involved slowly approaching another person until their faces were literally touching, smiling warmly and lovingly the entire time. Just one last aside before moving on: the point here isn't to mom- or parent-bash; what we're ultimately after is to see how this depiction may or may not relate to how we think about God. If there's anything useful for human-to-human interaction in it, all the better.

²³ So, I know I'm sort of walking the line between "inspiring you to read the book" and "tricking you into reading the whole thing right here," and probably the editor will cut a bunch of that quote, but it just almost too perfectly sums it all up.

²⁴ Or, you know, not something she actually ever did but sort of a "hey guys isn't this how she is?" impression.

That we are without any merit that could warrant God's love is not to say that we are worthless

Now it's time to ask the real question: which better describes how God relates to us (i.e. the Church)? On the one hand, we know that “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us,” (Romans 5:8 ESV) and “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins,” (1 John 4:10 ESV). We believe that “by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast,” (Ephesians 2:8-9 ESV). And furthermore, we believe that God has done these things not because we are, despite our occasional flaws, worthy of love or mercy but because He has determined to show Himself in this way.²⁵ Moreover, God doesn't simply forgive our unrighteousness; He imputes Christ's perfection to us, despite our continued failures.²⁶ So, does this fit Wallace's criteria for undesirable love, or is Avril merely performing imperfectly what God does perfectly? An important distinction between God and The Moms²⁷ lies in their respective responses to disobedience. The incident Bain references regarding Avril's car went as follows: 15-ish-year-old Orin and Bain, under multiple influences, absconded with The Moms's Volvo and went joyriding. It was not until they finally stopped that they realized that the frantic waving and gesturing they had observed in various pedestrians along the way had been in response to the presence of The Moms's beloved dog Samuel Johnson²⁸ tied to its

bumper, leaving nothing but a leash and what Bain tactfully refers to as a “nubbin” by the time the two realized what had happened. In response, “[Avril] became even more cheerful and loquacious and witty and intimate and benign, even suggesting in oblique ways that life was now somehow suddenly *better* without the dog.” The “Assurance of Salvation” in our service often contains a phrase to the effect of “only through the blood of Christ, all your sins are forgiven,” but does that mean that God simply sweeps it all under the rug with a smile? Maybe those with a Universalist bent would say that this is the case, but we believe that God takes sin seriously and that He disciplines those He loves, whether through church discipline or by other means. Avril's response implies that her continued love for Orin required her to essentially break with reality and deny his guilt. Her behavior showcases not mercy but simply largesse, a testament to just how great she is, and while it is fitting for God, as the Supreme Being, to display His majesty as He sees fit, in humans this is, to say the least, off-putting.²⁹

The other half of the issue returns to what we encountered in “A Supposedly Fun Thing.” At the core of Marlon Bain's indictment of The Moms is the claim that she values her children without seeing them as valuable. Or rather, that she wishes them to feel valued without caring if they feel valuable. And it's always “valued customer,”³⁰ right? Never “valuable customer.” It's always “your call is

²⁵ I don't think one has to be John Piper to agree with this, although maybe it helps.

²⁶ Praise God!

²⁷ Well, I mean, for the purposes of our inquiry. There are many, obviously.

²⁸ Yes, that Samuel Johnson. Avril is seemingly at least partly based on Wallace's own personal mother, who was quite the bundle of grammar-hijinks herself.

²⁹ And, given that we are all flawed, ultimately inaccurate.

³⁰ Which, granted, that would sound somewhat creepy, but I do think the word choice is probably accurate.

important to us” and never “your call is important.” In our relationships with others, this is probably an important distinction, one whose implications are beyond the scope of this piece. With God, it is perhaps more complicated. That we are without any merit that could warrant God's love is not to say that we are worthless. It seems unlikely that God would have created the universe if it and we did not have intrinsic value (though He does not “need” us in the sense that we might provide for something he lacks). However, to demand that one be dealt with as not only valued but valuable may also betray a desire to have one's pride stroked. We want to feel as though we bring something to the table, but we can make no such claim as to our calling. But the good bit is he doesn't leave us that way. Paul treats it as already accomplished that “those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified,” (Romans 8:30 ESV). We will be sanctified and made blameless, partially in this life and fully in the next. *✠*

Hunter Sims is a member of Riverwood Presbyterian Church. He's from New Orleans, LA and is a doctoral student in physics at the University of Alabama. He plans to complete his Ph.D. in May and wants to eventually pursue an academic career as a university professor. He can be reached at hunter.r.sims@gmail.com.

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 *When I Was a Child, I Read Books* by Marilyn Robinson and *Twelfth Night* by Shakespeare.

ENDLESS GRACE, ETERNAL GRATITUDE

Christian Generosity, Grace and Gratitude in the 21st Century

by Robert Thornton

We can say that true gratitude does not give rise to the debtor's ethic because it gives rise to faith in future grace. With true gratitude there is such a delight in the worth of God's past grace, that we are driven on to experience more and more of it in the future...it is done by transforming gratitude into faith as it turns from contemplating the pleasures of past grace and starts contemplating the promises of the future.

John Piper

Recently, I came across an e-mail from the chief of staff at the VA hospital where I work. It was a reprint of a blog by a urologist discussing an "attitude of gratitude." The author, Dr. Neil Baum, writes of his daughter's business school commencement speaker who talked about the "...three G's of life: generosity, grace, and gratitude." He went on to say that he asked his daughters each night to tell him three things that they were grateful for that day. He noted that it was gratitude, the third and most difficult to think of that seemed to be the most meaningful.

Dr. Baum goes on to say that physicians should emulate the speaker's daughters and think of three things each day for which they can express gratitude. He concludes his blog by quoting the speaker's closing remarks: "a daily focus on being

grateful makes you more generous and makes you lead a life of grace."

I certainly agree that having an attitude of generosity and gratitude is helpful for any profession let alone a person's day-to-day dealings with his or her fellow human being. And, naming three things we are grateful for at the end of the day is laudable.

But, what happens when things are not so great? You've just lost your job. A beloved family member passes away. You go through a bitter divorce. Life can be cruel and uncertain. Can we manufacture that same personal view of gratitude during those difficult times? Can we think of three things we're grateful for on those very bad days?

Gratitude is not something that exists for long in a vacuum. By this I mean that while we can be grateful for an individual's kindness on providing a meal, a compliment on a job well done, or the beauty of a spring morning, these are temporary like a flower that blooms one day and then later fades. In such circumstances that type of attitude of gratitude must wait for the next small act of grace, which also blooms and fades in time. In the interval we exist in a desert of ingratitude, bereft of thirst-quenching thankfulness. This can lead to a life of bitterness and

**The commencement speaker
talked about the "...three G's of life:
generosity, grace and gratitude"**

Whatever life brings— great joy or insurmountable difficulties— we can rest in God's love in Christ

resentment.

So, is there anything that can completely fill that gratitude vacuum which would lead to, as the graduation speaker said, a life of grace?

We know the answer. Apart from Christ we are helpless to live such a life.

Paul put it this way in Ephesians 2:1-10: *And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.*

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

We see three things in these verses. First, we once walked in sin, tossed by the world and Satan.

Whatever grace we experienced and gratitude we showed was as ephemeral as the air we breathe. Here today and gone tomorrow.

But, God is rich in mercy and love. In unthinkable generosity, He extends an unassailable Grace in the form of his Son's death, burial, and resurrection. Christ's work on the Cross on our behalf extends a Grace that endures forever and doesn't depend on circumstances. Whatever life brings—great joy or seeming insurmountable difficulties—we can continually rest in God's love in Christ.

Lastly, because of His Grace, our attitude of generosity and gratitude now springs from Christ's work on our behalf and fills the vacuum in our hearts. For we know that God's gift surpasses anything that temporarily happens to us on this earth.

Dr. Baum has a good idea. The three G's of life—generosity, grace and gratitude—should bloom within us all. And, as Christians these attributes are eternal for our generosity and gratitude and life of grace all flow from God's mercy and love expressed in the Grace of the Cross.

We are truly blessed. 

Dr. Robert Thornton is an elder at Riverwood Presbyterian Church. You may contact him at rthorn3423@comcast.net.

WHY YOUR FAVORITE MOVIES MIGHT NOT BE ABOUT JESUS AFTER ALL

A Friendly Response to “Why the Gospel Isn't a Musical Comedy”

by Eric Venable

I got fired up several weeks ago reading the *Salt & Light* article, “Why the Gospel Isn't a Musical Comedy” by Brian Watkins. You can access this article at www.Riverwoodchurch.com. Those who know me well (just ask my wife) know that getting fired up when reading something isn't particularly uncommon for me. I can be an opinionated Presbyterian that loves to argue even when I'm the only one doing the talking. And I hope the following doesn't just sound like another angry, Reformed rant. God knows just how desperately Reformed people (present writer included) need to heed the words of James when he writes, “...let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger...” With that being said, I'll briefly share some of my thoughts about the article.

Watkins is clearly a gifted writer. He writes in an engaging way, a way that grabs your attention and makes you want to listen. Watkins says some interesting things and quotes several authors I appreciate, writers like Cormac McCarthy and

Flannery O'Connor. Watkins' thesis is straightforward enough. He believes that the many reasons Christians have for refusing to watch certain films actually are a bad thing. He believes much of Christian “censorship” cheapens the truths of the gospel and artistic integrity and passes up crucial opportunities for Christians to interact with their surrounding culture. But the pluses of Watkins' writing skill and thought-provoking thesis were overshadowed for me by some troubling statements.

First, when writers sometimes use biblical words like “the gospel,” they seem to take on a new meaning that has little to nothing to do with the meaning that God himself has given in Scripture. Good words like “the gospel,” get lots of mileage these days, especially in Christian circles where people are seeking to faithfully follow Jesus. Much of the resurgence of the use of this word is good, healthy, and a sign the Spirit is at work in God's church by making people love more of the things

When writers sometimes use biblical words like “the gospel,” they seem to take on new meaning

Redefining the meaning of the gospel should be as big of an anathema to Christians as the Galatians church turning to “another gospel”

that God himself loves. However, the more this word is used, the more I begin to wonder if it has just become another trite religious word people use to serve their own purposes and if they really understand what it means.

It's all the rage these days to be “gospel-centered” to make sure we are eating, sleeping, breathing, practicing, living, believing, resting in and preaching “the gospel.” But what do we mean by this exactly? In the biblical language of God's dictionary, the gospel means the historical news of God becoming flesh in the person of Jesus and what he has accomplished in his life, death and resurrection. The first time this word shows up in Scripture, it centers around a person, Jesus of Nazareth, and something that he himself accomplishes. But increasingly, this word (that has for centuries been used to describe a historical person and historical events) has evolved into some abstract concept that refers to philosophical ideas about evil and good in a way that is completely severed from Jesus himself. For example, when Watkins writes, “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,” one is left scratching their head as to what exactly “the gospel” means in this instance.

Watkins attempts to explain that the movie is

“gospel-centered” because it portrays the world as broken, violent, and so full of evil that it's painfully obvious that it is in need of redemption. And what exactly is the redemption that *No Country for Old Men* offers a broken, sinful world? A closing scene where the main character tells about a dream where he sees his dead father riding a horse while carrying a horn filled with fire. This scene is meant to give the impression of warmth and light piercing the cold, darkness of a shattered world. This seems very inadequate to explain the true meaning of “gospel.”

I love Cormac McCarthy's novels and the Coen brothers' films. I think they are creative, visually and intellectually stimulating, and contain characters who are gripping, frightening and hilarious. McCarthy's character Judge Holden in his novel *Blood Meridian* is the most fascinating and terrifying Satan figure I have ever witnessed in any work of art. But neither McCarthy's books nor the Coen brothers' films are “gospel-centered” because neither of these proclaim what Jesus Christ accomplished through his life, death and resurrection. To say that the world is evil and in need of redemption is not the gospel. It's a half-gospel (at best) and a half-gospel is no gospel at all.

I hope this is not theological nitpicking or Calvinist snobbery. This is about responsibly using the language of the Bible to mean what the Bible itself says. Redefining the meaning of the gospel should

be as big of an anathema to Christians as the Galatian church turning to “another gospel,” one other than the one they received from the Apostle Paul. If we want to draw similarities between artistic themes pagans create and what the Bible says, fine. But there is a world of difference between analogy/similarity and a truthful definition. The gospel means one thing and one thing only. Trying to see the gospel everywhere just might be a sign that you are failing to see accurately the gospel anywhere.

Secondly, Watkins misses the most important question that Christians should be asking when they go the movies. What should be on a Christian's mind when he or she sits down in front of the glowing big screen or watches something on TV? What should be the governing principle that determines what one should and shouldn't watch as a follower of Jesus? According to a wise, well-worn catechism, “man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” This means that Christians are called to glorify God and enjoy him in whatever we do, whether that's movie-watching, making Excel spreadsheets or playing with my kids in the backyard.

A big part of the Christian's call to glorify God in whatever we do involves us pursuing the kind of life that God has called us to. And what is the life that God has called me to live because of the vast grace of

Jesus? A life where I think about from Philippians 4:8, “...whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable,” and things that are excellent and “...worthy of praise.” As a Christian I'm called by Romans 8:5 to live a life ruled by the Holy Spirit that involves me actively setting my mind on the things of the Spirit. I'm called to glorify God by putting to death the deeds of my sinful flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:13). Do all of these verses mean that I can never watch anything sinful being portrayed in a work of art? Well, that depends. Let's talk about just one of many examples of sin we see regularly portrayed on our screens--sex and sleaze.

I'll provide a quick personal example that I hope makes my point clear. I used to watch lots of the HBO series *The Wire*. This is a show that aired several years ago but can still be watched through Netflix or DVD. It is a remarkable show written by David Simon who was a police reporter for several years in Baltimore. *The Wire* is primarily about all the ugly aspects of the drug trade in the United States and how the trade touches a large swath of society—from impoverished young men living in government housing projects, to judges, politicians, law enforcement and professional criminals. Its characters are complex and full of ambiguity. Almost every detail of the show seems highly realistic and something that could be happening in


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We have much bigger questions than those that should be determining our behavior as Christians

any major city. There are no “good” guys vs. “bad” guys on this show. Everybody is a bad guy in some way and some bad guys do more and less good than others. I was quickly hooked on this show after just a few episodes.

But I had to say goodbye to *The Wire* the more I watched it because of its graphic nature. To be frank, the sex scenes in the show are soft-core porn and that's putting it in its best light. Can I as a Christian man pursue the life of holiness God has called me to in 1st Thessalonians 4:7 and make war on my sinful flesh by watching *The Wire*? The more I watched this show, the more I was convinced that the answer for me was a definitive “no.” I found it virtually impossible to watch *The Wire* without being tempted to the sin of lust. I cannot follow Jesus' call to kill my sin and yet feed it at the same time.

Obviously, there is no verse that tells us “Thou shall not watch the critically acclaimed series *The Wire*.” The Bible doesn't give us a list of TV shows and movies that we can and cannot watch. However, through Spirit-led, biblically informed discernment, I came to this decision about *The Wire* and we as Christians must see that there will be times and instances where we see that the life God has called me to excludes me from watching certain TV shows and movies.

For Christians, our controlling question should not be the Brian Watkins approach of asking “Does this film accurately display a broken world?” We have much bigger questions than these that should be determining our behavior as Christians. When we sit down in front of a movie, whether or not the maker has artistic integrity really is *not* at the top of my list of things that determine whether or not I will watch and approve. It's nowhere on the list if the Bible is what governs our lives as opposed to some subjective definition of what “true” art should be. Instead, everything a Christian does should be determined by what God himself says life should be about: “giving thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” So the next time before watching, ask yourself: Can I give thanks to God for this? 

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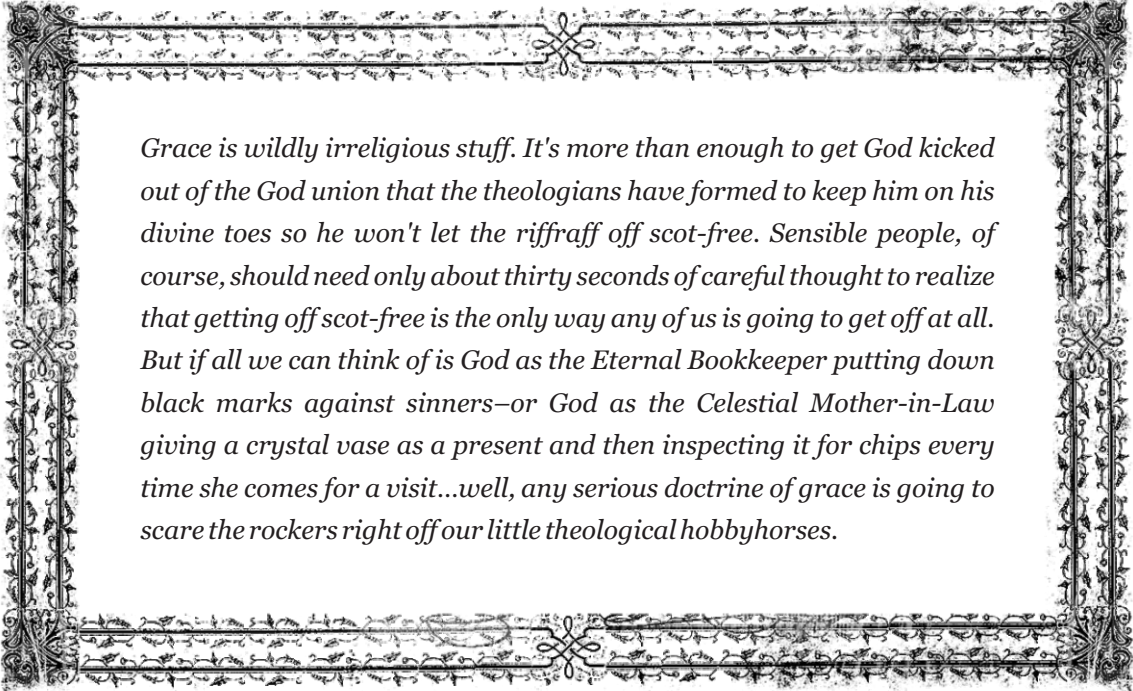
Robert Farrar Capon on Grace

Robert Farrar Capon is a fascinating guy. He was an Episcopal parish priest who retired from the ministry to devote more time to his writing career. He writes mainly on two subjects, theology and gourmet cooking. His writing is easy, informal, informational and very accessible.

There is much in his writing and perhaps in his life that we (I speak of believers in the reformed faith) would not agree with. He has a tendency to quote parts of a sentence in Scripture followed by ellipses indicating that he left something out, that something sometimes being a phrase that makes his conclusion incorrect and/or irrelevant. In the same way he can ignore context in his quotes. He veers dangerously close to a Universalism that is strictly un-Biblical. He tends to associate the church (and religion in general) in his writing with an all-

encompassing Pharisaism of which I am sure there is far too much but it also is not universal and it is also un-Biblical. He has a divorce in his life that is probably (I say probably because I only have the information he chose to give regarding it) not Biblical and of which he is unrepentant in his discussion of it.

I have read him, however, apart from these things because of his writing on Grace. The quote below comes from his trilogy, ***The Romance of the Word: One Man's Love Affair with Theology***. Capon's view of the Grace we have in God is wildly radical, even as Grace itself is wildly radical. He speaks of our version of God as a "celestial Mother-in-Law" with an emphasis on "Law," this is characteristic of his ideas of the radical grace we have in Christ.



Grace is wildly irreligious stuff. It's more than enough to get God kicked out of the God union that the theologians have formed to keep him on his divine toes so he won't let the riffraff off scot-free. Sensible people, of course, should need only about thirty seconds of careful thought to realize that getting off scot-free is the only way any of us is going to get off at all. But if all we can think of is God as the Eternal Bookkeeper putting down black marks against sinners—or God as the Celestial Mother-in-Law giving a crystal vase as a present and then inspecting it for chips every time she comes for a visit...well, any serious doctrine of grace is going to scare the rockers right off our little theological hobbyhorses.

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