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Spring Edition 2014

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Sovereignty and Education

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FROM THE EDITOR

Christians look at everything differently because we have been given different vision from the One who sets standards, the highest of all authorities. In this issue, you will see that play out. We have Christian looks at movies, philosophies, literature, liturgies, popular music, happiness, education and death. You may or may not agree with every observation but you will certainly agree that there is a difference in the lens.

The new movie, *Gravity*, as you can see from the cover, affected not one but two writers who saw it. In our lead article, *The Pull of Gravity*, I find some parallels between the story and dialogue of the movie, the philosophy of Blaise Pascal, and the sense of loss and alienation of post-modern society. Read it and see if you agree.

Bob Thornton saw the same movie and draws a very unique parallel between events and attitudes in the story and a Christian marriage. It is a fascinating take on the plot and demonstrates how he sees God in culture through his Christian worldview.

Dr. Carl Trueman is a theology professor and an important spokesman for the Reformed Faith. A recent article tells of a trip with his son to the Evensong service at Cambridge University on a rainy English night. It speaks eloquently of worship, liturgy, and cultural interaction. Don't miss this unique look at our faith on display.

In our last issue, our pastor, fascinated by the recent Sherlock Holmes revival, confessed that he had read the entire *oeuvre*. As Christians do, he examined Holmes in light of his faith and wrote on the nature of man according to Sherlock. Now the great detective looks at life in *Sherlock Holmes (Almost) Makes Sense of It All*. Join Tim as he follows Sherlock's clues and (almost) answers.

Americans are "guaranteed" the pursuit of happiness, and we certainly pursue it, but where is it found? Peggy Drinkard looks at happiness from her Christian viewpoint and shares some interesting points. Check them out in her fine article.

Jeff Miller is a music man and a Christian. Recently a piece of popular music both caught his attention and shocked him. Join Jeff as he explores two popular songs from a unique musical and philosophical basis in *Hooked on Ourselves*.

Riverwood has a Christian Classical School, a ministry that has shown amazing results. Clay Staggs, in *Sovereignty and Education*, looks at reasons Christians should educate their children in Christian Schools. It is an important article both for parents and church members.

In our Finale piece, the brilliant Christian poet, T. S. Eliot, delves into the meaning of life and death in a portion of his *Choruses from the Rock*.

The Pull of Gravity

Loss and Alienation in a Post-Christian World

By Jimmy Hopper

The eternal silence of these infinite spaces fills me with dread.

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)
from *Pensées*

"I hate space!"

Sandra Bullock as Dr. Ryan Stone
in the movie *Gravity*

Every time I attend a funeral, especially at my advanced age, I have a sense of wonder at how, and even *why*, those who are without God are able to make it without madness or suicide.

Considering anyone who might live life without God gives rise to a great emptiness in me, a feeling of loss and nothingness that is almost a physical ache.

Before I am accused of having a fear of death so deep that I am willing to subscribe to a myth, I can tell you that this is not the case. At a much younger age I looked at life as an endless opportunity for "meaningful achievements," heroism, "true love," really cool material goods, and, well, just plain FUN in an exciting, beautiful, complex world. I suspect most young people look at life in the same way. I was "normal", loved life, and looked forward to spending every minute of it, a lot of minutes when you are young. Despite that outlook that was far from being one of fear, there were still moments of desperation, of feeling lost and unmoored. These were times

when I would think of myself and my particular personality – a mind and body that seemed so significant and important – as only a tiny speck on a planet that to me was endless, but suddenly in those moments would be in itself a tiny speck in an unbelievably immense universe in which there was literally nothing, nothing at all. These times invariably occurred around 3:00 a.m, the darkest of the night, and I would lie awake feeling exactly as Blaise Pascal states in the quotation above, "*The eternal silence of these infinite spaces fills me with dread.*"

This dichotomy of person/personality and an infinite nothingness that renders said person/personality insignificant was astonishing, and, as Pascal says, "dreadful." There was something inherently wrong about the idea of a "speck" who was a person and a personality being insignificant. There was something inherently wrong in the fact that an insignificant "speck" could even *identify* the immensity and emptiness of the universe and could wonder about a place in it. There was something inherently wrong about a "speck" who understood those concepts and was still being designated as "insignificant." There was something inherently wrong with *any* person/personality having, and understanding, a feeling of "dread," or love, or *any* emotion and still remaining insignificant.

In my youth, those night musings did not occur

every night, and when they came, they disappeared with morning's arrival; achievement, love, materialism, and fun came to the forefront again. But the musings would return, and occasionally the dread seemed to fill my soul and I imagined a camera shot of myself during which the lens widened and zoomed out. I, the house, the city, the nation and the world disappeared and finally there was no sign of earth and there was nothing but infinite space filled with nothing, holding no life and no meaning.

The memory of these thoughts returned when my wife and I watched the new movie, *Gravity*,¹ while on vacation last October. This spectacular space story is about a college professor, Dr. Ryan Stone, played by Sandra Bullock, who is a specialist/scientist trained as an astronaut for this one mission. There is an accident, and some space debris destroys the space station that she and Matt Kowalski (George Clooney) are working on. They are suddenly isolated, cast off from humanity, and facing alone the eternal silence, the unbelievable cold and the unfeeling nothingness of space. The movie is about a lot of things² but it is also mainly about seeking something of consequence, something significant to which our humanity can relate to. It is about seeking a home.

Stone does her work because she is a high

achiever but she really doesn't want to be there. She states her dislike of the nothingness, Pascal's very human dread of nothingness, early in the movie before they were in danger. While working outside the space station, with the spectacular view of earth and the star scape above and around, she declared passionately, "*I hate space!*" I saw in this the same recognition and revolt against insignificance and dread that I had experienced in the Southern nights of my youth; the same insignificance and dread that the brilliant scientist and philosopher Blaise Pascal articulated back in the mid 17th century. That we suffer these feelings tells us that emptiness and nothingness are not what we are made and wired for. The feelings speak of something lost. They tell us of purpose, of foundations, of being something more than matter who will survive for a time, and will be no more. They tell us that humanity, since we are as we are, is the antitheses of nothingness.

Retrospection is a characteristic of growing older, and this has probably contributed to my recent reading and obsession with our culture, with the world I have lived in three quarters of a century (and counting). Thirty-six years into that length of time, I was claimed by God, and the rootless feelings and the dread and desperation no longer troubled my nights, therefore my thinking on the culture took a different turn.

¹ There are *spoilers* in the article. If you want to see the movie, read the article afterward.

² Read Robert Thornton's very interesting take on the relationship suspended in space between Kowalski and Stone in the movie.

Man is left in a quandary. His consciousness, his heart, his very humanness, his "soul" has no anchor because there is no transcendence.

Pascal said that the two ways we have of dealing with life without God and without purpose are diversions and indifference.

Then, for the first time, I saw things as they were, a created world denying its Creator and finding nothing available to replace it. The foundations were down, even then, and actually had been falling for centuries. In my reading and observations, I found that man had sought to replace them with philosophy, with psychiatry, and supremely, with scientism, the idea that science is able to explain everything and there is no transcendence. Man is left in a quandary. His consciousness, his heart, his very humanness, his “soul” has no anchor *because* there is no transcendence. “God Is Dead”, read the famous magazine cover. Man is the measure and everything is in his hands.

Blaise Pascal was a mid-17th Century mathematician, scientist, physicist, philosopher and Christian apologist. He did major work in applied science with his studies of fluids, pressure and vacuums. He built the first mechanical calculator and vacuum cleaner. In mathematics, he is best known for his work in probability theory and for the Pascal Triangle of binomial coefficients. He also wrote a book on Christian apologetics, *Pensées*, (“Thoughts”) that is still in print today. The sentence at the beginning of this article is one of those thoughts; one that like many of them is very profound. In the mid 1600’s, Pascal recognized man’s problem; he recognized the loss of transcendence back in the Age of Enlightenment, and saw what it was and foresaw where it was going. In his dismay, he wrote the following:

Man does not know the place he should occupy. He

has obviously gone astray; he has fallen from his true place and cannot find it again. He searches everywhere, anxiously but in vain, in the midst of impenetrable darkness.

With this dark background we rejoin our fictional everywoman, Dr. Ryan Stone, now alone without Kowalski, untethered in space, falling figuratively and literally as gravity inexorably pulls her down and she, though long dead, will burn up at the point in which she falls to the earth’s atmosphere below, another tiny speck of nothing in the unimaginable vastness of space. She wants desperately to live, to find solidity again, closed space, life, humanness. Her life before space had not been perfect. Her child had died and she had no methodology to deal with it. She lost herself in academics, in achievement. She had advanced to be the proverbial head of the class. Her abilities had given her what had been meant to be the ultimate achievement of a lifetime, a scientist on a space journey performing a task few were able to perform. Pascal said that the two ways we have of dealing with life without God and without purpose are diversions and indifference. She chose a high level diversion: knowledge and intellectual achievement. Again from Pascal:

We run heedlessly into the abyss after putting something in front of us to stop us from seeing it.

Dr. Stone has discovered, in space and circumstance, the physical reality of the abyss that she was already living in on earth in the life she had made.

Now, armed with this knowledge, she can worship and love the God who is the fountain of all knowledge, all goodness, and most of all, all grace.


Now, alone with very limited options, she draws on her humanness, her mind, her indomitable spirit, everything that had been given her as an image bearer of her Creator. She reaches the International Space Station and finds that everything, like her situation and her life, has been damaged. In her despair and desperation, she hallucinates, and the figure of Kowalski appears at the window and then inside the space station as if he had walked in off the street. She, in an imaginary conversation, works through what she has to do before the hallucination disappears. Things continue to go wrong and the situation continues to deteriorate. At one point she seeks God, and laments that she doesn't know how to seek Him in the proper way since "no one ever taught me to pray."

She boards and launches a Chinese space capsule, and in it, re-enters the earth's atmosphere and the ever-increasing pull of gravity toward home. In the final scene of the movie, she touches down in a bay within sight of land and is able to get out of the capsule and space suit and swim ashore to a very ordinary and muddy shore, which she kisses in gratitude.

The movie ends here, so we can write our own "what happens next" story. She can rejoin the academic community to great acclaim, obviously a world heroine who has achieved an

incredible feat. The book and movie about her experience will bring in millions (this is imaginary, remember). She will be rich and famous. Her speaking fee will be in the hundreds of thousands. She can find diversion after diversion to make her forget that moment in which she saw how things were, when she looked out and declared, "I hate space!"

Or can she? There is an alternate ending. She can realize that God had called her in the space station, called on her to call on Him and had then answered her prayer. She can understand, amid the adulation, who she really is while she was alone in the universe and only God could be reached by her voice. She can now know who God really is and that she requires His grace so that she can live. This knowledge has the power to resolve her inability to deal with the death of her child. Now she has a foundation, now she has a future and she knows her future and knows that she is safe. Now, armed with this knowledge, she can worship and love the God who is the fountain of all knowledge, all goodness, and most of all, all grace.

I like the second one. It's the same as my story, and if you are a Christian, it is also your story. 

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The “Gravity” of Marriage

An Analogy of Grace under Pressure

by Robert Thornton

Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

I Peter 3:7

Every good relationship, especially marriage, is based on respect. If it's not based on respect, nothing that appears to be good will last very long.

Amy Grant

I recently saw the movie *Gravity*, a depiction of a catastrophic accident aboard the Space Shuttle and the ensuing events. Sandra Bullock and George Clooney star in the movie and are literally the only characters. The movie was visually stunning (I saw it in IMAX 3-D) and it seemed factually accurate, which was a must in my book.

I was struck by the themes in the movie. *Gravity* is basically a tale of survival on the scale of another blockbuster, *Cast Away*. It also explored themes such as the meaninglessness of death and the will to survive as well as rebirth or re-evolving.

This article discusses one idea that I saw within the film that was most likely not intended by

the writers and director. To explore this I must discuss the plot, so, fair warning—**SPOILER ALERT!** See the movie and then read this article.

On screen for most of the 90 or so minutes we see only Bullock and Clooney. Bullock plays Dr. Ryan Stone, a college professor and a somewhat reluctant rookie payload specialist on the Space Shuttle while Clooney plays Matt Kowalski, a seasoned shuttle pilot. While on an EVA (extra vehicular activity) or a space walk to repair the Hubble telescope, the two principal characters are bombarded with space debris from a destroyed Russian satellite. There is catastrophic damage to the Space Shuttle and all the other astronauts are killed. One is killed in a particularly gruesome manner.

The debris casts Stone adrift when it severs her tether. She floats, helplessly destined to orbit indefinitely, eventually becoming just another piece of space junk. With oxygen running out and delirium and unconsciousness on her heels all seems lost until Clooney comes to her rescue using his “jet pack”. He tethers her to him and they both return to the Space Shuttle. Upon finding the Shuttle completely destroyed, they next jet to the International Space Station (ISS). It is damaged, but usable.

Gravity is basically a tale of survival (and) it also explored themes such as the meaninglessness of death, the will to survive and rebirth....

All through their tethered journey in space, the Kowalski character calmly and humorously instructs Stone on what must be done to return to earth, reminding her of her training and the similarities in the various international space vehicles in orbit. Upon arrival at the ISS, the tethered pair are nearly propelled beyond the vessel and out into space. Bullock saves both of them by catching her foot in the lines of the accidentally deployed parachutes of one of the Soyuz escape capsules.

It's at this critical point that Kowalski realizes that his jet pack is out of fuel and his momentum is pulling them both away from Bullock's tenuous grasp on the line. There's only one choice: he must release the tether in order for Stone to survive even though the act guarantees his death. He does so, and as he fades into the darkness of space, he is still assuring her that she can make it alone.

Stone gets into the ISS just before her oxygen completely runs out. From that point on it is a matter of her working the problem, overcoming one disaster after another to finally take a Chinese space capsule home. This segment actually occupies the lion's share of the movie.

As I said, several themes were explored. One idea, however, not likely conceived by the director or writer was that of a picture of Christian marriage. Specifically, the role of the Christian husband in marriage.

OK, Bob, you say, we're talking about a space movie here. I know. Just hear me out.

Throughout the time on screen, although relatively short, the Kowalski character exhibited four Biblical qualities of the Christian husband: communication, service, leadership, and love.

First, let's examine communication. It goes without saying that communication in a Christian marriage is important. Husbands must take the lead in this, assuring in a kind and loving manner that they listen and understand their wives' needs and desires. This involves showing their spouses that they are focused on their words giving them the space to express their concerns. Husbands' speech should always be Godly and loving even in stressful and contentious situations.

In the movie, Matt Kowalski had a wealth of live-saving information to pass on to Dr. Stone

in a short time. He didn't shout urgent instructions or castigate her for not understanding her astronaut training. He communicated everything with a calm, reassuring and, at times, humorous demeanor in the face of a cataclysmic situation. As Christians, Colossians 4:6 should guide us. It tells us: *"Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person."*

As to service, men, we must put aside our wants and desires to lift up our wives. Our hearts should be that of a servant's seeing to our wives' needs, constantly praying for them and for our ability to continually place them first, and not seeking recognition for ourselves.

In the movie there is a line by Kowalski that sums up his servant's heart. He says to the Dr. Stone at one point early in the film, "You're the genius, I'm just the bus driver."

To have a servant's heart is to have the mind of Christ. In Mark 10:45 Christ himself said it best: *"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

A quality related to service is leadership. Scripture mandates that the husband be the head of

the house (see Ephesians 5:23 and Colossians 3:18-19). In the movie Kowalski is the Mission Commander and thus in charge of all of the astronauts. In this secular world he would certainly be forgiven or even commended if he "lorded it over" the other astronauts, like a general or corporate CEO, shouting commands and demanding loyalty. Yet, he exerts his leadership in a low-key manner, choosing to instruct and encourage rather than dictate.

In one particularly telling scene the Bullock character sinks into the depths of despair when she realizes the Soyuz escape capsule she's entered has no fuel for the maneuvering rockets. On the verge of suicide she suddenly sees Kowalski, in a hallucination, at the capsule's window. He enters and calmly reminds her that the capsule's retro-rockets can be used to maneuver it to the Chinese space station. The scene is believable only because we have seen him, while alive, display leadership akin to that of a Christian husband. This is leadership that is defined by servanthood. This leadership is exemplified by putting our spouses first, not attempting to dominate or command, but to live a Christ-like life by example. We are to make those command decisions and take positive action, but in the context of a Biblical worldview.

...his character exhibited are four Biblical qualities of the Christian husband: communication, service, leadership, and love.

As Christian husbands our role in marriage likely won't be as dramatic, but should be guided by the same principles of sacrificial love.

The key to Christian leadership is Christ-likeness. In Matthew 20: 26-28, Christ states the following: *"It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*


Unlike the portrayal in countless romantic comedies and soap opera episodes in marriage the most important love is not physical attraction or romantic sentimentality. It is sacrificial love. It's the most important attribute we will examine and the glue that binds the other three together.

The movie illustrates sacrificial love vividly when, tethered together, Kowalski and Ryan reach the ISS. As she maintains a tenuous hold on a parachute line with her foot, he must make a quick and hard decision because his momentum is pulling them away from the station and out into space and certain death. He then releases his end and floats away allowing Ryan Stone with the opportunity to survive.

As Christian husbands our role in marriage likely won't be as dramatic, but should be guided

by the same principles of sacrificial love. In his book, *The Exemplary Husband*, Stuart Scott defines sacrificial love as: "A selfless and enduring commitment of the will to care about benefit another person by righteous, truthful, and compassionate thoughts, words and actions."

We have as an example the enduring commitment of sacrificial love of none other than Christ himself. Christ's model of service, humility, and self-sacrifice directs us in our marital duties. In Ephesians 5:25, Paul gives the succinct instruction: *"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."*

Obviously, marital life is no movie. We must live day-to-day in the peace and grace of our Lord Jesus. And our marriages should stand as a model of Christ and his Church. 

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What the Hijabi Witnessed

(and What She Didn't)

by Carl Trueman

I have had the pleasure on a couple of occasions of sitting next to a girl wearing a hijab. Typically, this has occurred in departure lounges of airports or on the platforms of railway stations. Never has it happened in a place of worship at the time of a service. Never, that is, until recently.

On the last Friday in June, I happened to be in Cambridge with my youngest son and decided to expose him to one of my alma mater's true delights: choral evensong at King's Chapel. We dutifully queued in the pouring rain (for me, those blue remembered hills are definitely English and cloud covered), and, when the chapel finally opened, we took our places at the far end of the aisle. It was then that I realized that the young girl sitting to my left was wearing a hijab. It was an interesting, if unlikely, juxtaposition: the middle aged Orthodox Presbyterian and the twenty-something Moslem waiting for the Anglican liturgy to begin. I assume that - rather like me - she was probably in the chapel for aesthetic reasons rather than religious ones. King's choir is famous; the preaching in the chapel was, at least in my student days, at best, infamous. Sermons then were the ultimate Schleiermacherian nightmare: rambling reflections on the religious self-consciousness by the irremediably irreverent. It may

have improved in recent decades but, not being remotely postmillennial, I have no confidence that that is the case.

Once the choir had entered and taken its place, the service began. For the next hour, the sardonic Presbyterian and the attractive hijabi sat, stood and on occasion knelt together as the congregation worked its way through the Book

of Common Prayer's liturgy for evensong, modified to take into account the appropriate Feast Day (as a good Presbyterian, I have erased the detail of whose day from my memory). The singing, both corporate and choral, was beautiful; and

the austere elegance of Cranmer's liturgy seemed to find its perfect acoustic context in the perpendicular poise of the late Gothic Chapel. Then, at the end, we filed out in silence, having, at the level of mere aesthetics, heard one of the great male choirs singing words of deep and passionate piety. Outside, the rain continued and my son and I left the young hijabi chatting on her phone as we headed off to Don Pasquale's, a favorite haunt of my student days. Indeed, it was the place where one took a girl on a date if one wished to appear sophisticated while still operating on a budget. (For any would-be sophisticated but impoverished Cambridge bachelors out there, I can confirm that it is still



there, and still a prudent balance of atmosphere and good value for money).

Sitting in Don Pasquale's, my son and I indulged in a little thought experiment. What, we wondered, had the girl in the hijab made of it all? Culturally, it may not have been a completely alien environment. She was a Spanish Moslem, and, with the exception of the hijab, dressed in the casual attire of any fashion conscious Western girl. So the look and sounds of a Christian church was possibly not as alien to her as, for example, I had found the Blue Mosque in Istanbul while touring Turkey in the 80s. Yet she was still a Moslem. The service itself would have been foreign territory.

So what exactly had she witnessed, I asked myself? Well, at a general level she had heard the English language at its most beautiful and set to an exalted purpose: the praise of Almighty God. She would also have seen a service with a clear biblical logic to it, moving from confession of sin to forgiveness to praise to prayer. She would also have heard this logic explained to her by the minister presiding, as he read the prescribed explanations that are built in to the very liturgy itself. The human tragedy and the way of salvation were both clearly explained and dramatized by the dynamic movement of the liturgy. And she would have witnessed all of this in an atmosphere of hushed and reverent quiet.

In terms of specific detail, she would also have heard two whole chapters of the Bible read out

loud: one from the Old Testament and one from the New. Not exactly the whole counsel of God but a pretty fair snapshot. She would have been led in a corporate confession of sin. She would have heard the minister pronounce forgiveness in words shaped by scripture. She would have been led in corporate prayer in accordance with the Lord's own prayer. She would have heard two whole psalms sung by the choir. She would have had the opportunity to sing a couple of hymns drawn from the rich vein of traditional hymnody and shot through with scripture. She would have been invited to recite the Apostles' Creed (and thus come pretty close to being exposed to the whole counsel of God). She would have heard collects rooted in the intercessory concerns of scripture brought to bear on the real world. And, as I noted earlier, all of this in the exalted, beautiful English prose of Thomas Cranmer.

Now, I confess to being something of an old Puritan when it comes to liturgy. Does it not lead to formalism and stifle the religion of the heart? Certainly I would have thought so fifteen or twenty years ago. Yet as I reflected on the service and what the girl in the hijab had witnessed, I could not help but ask myself if she could have experienced anything better had she walked into a church in the Protestant evangelical tradition. Two whole chapters of the Bible being read? To have one whole chapter from one Testament seems to test the patience of many today. Two whole psalms sung (and that as part of a calendar which proceeds through the whole Psal-


It was an interesting, if unlikely, juxtaposition: the middle aged Orthodox Presbyterian and the twenty-something Moslem waiting for the Anglican liturgy to begin.

So what exactly had she witnessed, I asked myself? Well, at a general level she had heard the English language at its most beautiful and set to an exalted purpose: the praise of Almighty God

ter)? That is surely a tad too old fashioned, irrelevant, and often depressing for those who want to go to church for a bit of an emotional boost. A structure for worship which is determined by the interface between theological truth and biblically-defined existential need? That sounds as if it might be vulnerable to becoming dangerously formulaic formalism. A language used to praise God which is emphatically not that employed of myself or of anybody else in their daily lives when addressing the children, the mailman, or the dog? I think the trendy adjective would be something like ‘inauthentic.’

Yet here is the irony: in this liberal Anglican chapel, the hijabi experienced an hour long service in which most of the time was spent occupied with words drawn directly from scripture. She heard more of the Bible read, said, sung and prayed than in any Protestant evangelical church of which I am aware - than any church, in other words, which actually claims to take the word of God seriously and place it at the centre of its life. Yes, it was probably a good thing that there was no sermon that day: I am confident that, as Carlyle once commented, what we might have witnessed then would have been a priest boring holes in the bottom of the Church of England. But that aside, Cranmer’s liturgy meant that this girl was exposed to biblical Christianity in a remarkably beautiful, scriptural and reverent fashion. I was utterly convicted as a Protestant minister that evangelical Protestant-

ism must do better on this score: for all of my instinctive sneering at Anglicanism and formalism, I had just been shown in a powerful way how far short of taking God’s word seriously in worship I fall.

Of course, there were things other than a sermon which the hijabi did not witness: she did not witness any adults behaving childishly; she did not witness anybody saying anything stupid; she did not witness any stand-up comedy routine or any casual cocksureness in the presence of God; she did not see any forty-something pretending to be cool; in short, she did not witness anything that made me, as a Christian, cringe with embarrassment for my faith, or for what my faith has too often become at the hands of the modern evangelical gossellers. 

*Carl R. Trueman is Paul Woolley Professor of Church History at Westminster Theological Seminary. His latest book is *The Creedal Imperative* (Crossway, 2012).*

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Sherlock Holmes (Almost) Makes Sense of it All

The Great Detective and Existential Questions

by Tim Lien

Introduction

In a recent op-ed piece¹ in the New York Times, Pamela Druckerman gave a brief review of her 44 year-old life. She briefly mentioned her regrets and missteps and then offered a collection of wisdom for those wishing to navigate Life through calmer and deeper channels. A sampling from Ms. Druckerman:

- *There are no grown-ups. We suspect this when we are younger, but can confirm it only once we are the ones writing books and attending parent-teacher conferences. Everyone is winging it, some just do it more confidently.*
- *Forgive your exes, even the awful ones. They were just winging it, too.*
- *You don't have to decide whether God exists.*
- *It's O.K. if you don't like jazz.*
- *More about you is universal than not universal. My unscientific assessment is that we are 95 percent cohort, 5 percent unique. Knowing this is a bit of a disappointment, and a bit of a relief.*

As Victor Hugo said, “40 is the old age of youth,” and Ms. Druckerman attempted to form all those youthful experiences into a cohesive (helpful, even) chart for future living. Perhaps, according to Druckerman, the second half of her life would be better if she just followed her battle-shaped Code.

It may seem self-evident, but people are always trying to make sense of things. It happens on a small scale at first: in

a classroom, at a job, in a family. Although the questions may not be audible or even overtly conscious, people begin to ask: “What’s important, here? What should I do to avoid failure or embarrassment? Who is an ally? Who is dangerous? What hurts me? What helps me? What problems are common to just me and common to everyone else?” Most people would call that “living in reality,” while the philosophers call that “looking for truth.”

It may take a while, but most people begin the bigger task of trying to figure out Life—just like Pamela Druckerman. They naturally compile what they have absorbed from living—educational background, family histories, professional successes and failures, observations and experiences, relational tears and thrills, loyalties and betrayals, and windfalls and tragedies. Knowingly or not, everyone has an opinion on Life. Everyone is a philosopher; everyone has come to some conclusions about how Life works. The philosophers call them *existential questions*, but most people call it surviving.

But whether you call them Existential Questions

or Survival Guides, everyone comes to conclusions about Life. And then we live by them. What we do is a reflection of what we *really* believe. Sometimes that is tough to accept; sometimes, that makes us feel better. But the basic point is this: we all

have navigation charts, coping techniques, crafted strategies, or antidotes for Life. We decide to



¹ Druckerman, Pamela. “What You Learn in Your 40’s,” New York Times, February 28, 2014.

.....everyone comes to conclusions about Life. And then we live by them. What we do is a reflection of what we really believe.

live by a Code—a code that has been calculated from countless conversations, pursuits, travels, study, and work.

In my recent (and somewhat unhealthy²) fascination with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's (SACD, hereafter) Sherlock Holmes stories, two reoccurring themes mirrored Ms. Druckerman's philosophical musings: 1) observation of reality and 2) helpful paths drawn from those conclusions. If philosophers always strain to find what is really true, then Holmes always strains to uncover the tiniest detail through the senses and a magnifying glass. Solving the mystery and the certain arrest are merely logical afterthoughts—because they flow directly from establishing what is truly real.

Even more remarkable was that through many of Holmes & Watson's escapades, SACD began to present certain conclusions about Life—not just criminal behavior. He answers the *existential questions*, and then offers a Code.

Sherlock (Doyle) Observes Life

As I wrote before³, SACD is consistent in presenting Man as rampant rogue while exhibiting marks of the marvelous. Man has great capacity and tendency towards evil while at the same time manifesting exhilarating displays of the image of God. In the same way, SACD's observations about Life seem equally consumed with these two understandings.

For example, SACD waxes philosophical when he has Holmes comment on the larger com-

plexion of Life: “Was ever such a dreary, dismal, unprofitable world? See how the yellow fog swirls down the street and drifts across the dun-colored houses. What could be more hopelessly prosaic and material? What is the use of having powers, doctor, when one has no field upon which to exert them? Crime is commonplace, existence is commonplace, and no qualities save those which are commonplace have any function upon earth.”⁴ What are his conclusions? The material world is all there is. The material is common and earth has no place for the supernatural. Imagine Doyle's worldview if he could conceive of the Incarnation: the immaterial becoming material—the supernatural becoming common.

But SACD is not underwhelmed by everything. He does give great reverence to things beyond his daily scope or control. He offers this observation on the grandness of Creation: “How sweet the morning air is! See how that one little cloud floats like a pink feather from some gigantic flamingo. Now the red rim of the sun pushes itself over the London cloud-bank. It shines on a good many folk, but on none, I dare bet, who are on a stranger errand than you and I. How small we feel with our petty ambitions and strivings in the presence of the great elemental forces of nature! Are you well up in your Jean Paul?”⁵ Life is not fully comprehensible when you gaze upon elemental forces that you did not make or control. Repeatedly, SACD appeals to Nature/Creation as something markedly beyond Man's explanation and strivings.

² It took me almost a year to read the complete Sherlockian corpus.

³ “However Improbable: The Nature of Man in Sherlock Holmes,” Salt and Light, Fall 2013. Discounting my own mother, this essay enjoyed a very wide readership of three persons.

⁴ From “The Sign of the Four.”

⁵ Jean Paul Sartre, French philosopher, playwright, novelist, (1905-1980).

⁶ From “The Sign of the Four.”

it becomes increasingly difficult to see (man's) greatness without a God-imbued value. The end result is circular reasoning or a vague sense that Life hardly matters at all.

To no surprise, SACD makes deductions about Man and Life that are even greater than observing Creation's grandness. In comparing the two, Holmes draws a conclusion from this initial observation: "That was like following the brook to the parent lake. He makes one curious but profound remark. It is that the chief proof of man's real greatness lies in his perception of his own smallness. It argues, you see, a power of comparison and of appreciation which is in itself a proof of nobility. There is much food for thought in Richter."⁷

Base conclusions matter—that's why philosophy isn't just some dusty exercise. SACD derives nobility from comparing Man to Nature. He realizes that Man is small, but it becomes increasingly difficult to see his greatness without a God-imbued value. The end result is circular reasoning or a vague sense that Life hardly matters at all. It's difficult to reconcile Man's greatness and depravity without God. And by "difficult," I mean, impossible.

Predictably, SACD struggles to maintain a cheery outlook with Holmes spouting such conclusions: "It saved me from ennui," he answered, yawning. 'Alas! I already feel it closing in upon me. My life is spent in one long effort to escape from the commonplaces of existence. These little problems help me to do so.'"⁸ According to Holmes, if Life is merely material and commonplace, then it seems that Life should be spent trying to rise above the drab. Holmes's involved forays into criminal investigation are just another escape—like alcohol, drugs,

work, sex, and leisure. Sure, it looks nobler on the surface, but can we say it is any different from a junkie seeking another high? Can we say that it is a better navigation of Life, if Life is *just* material and commonplace?

So what becomes important in Life? In The worldview of SACD, work and projects—the things that will outlast your lifespan. Holmes quotes Flaubert: "Well, perhaps, after all, it is of some little use," he remarked. "L'homme c'est rien—l'oeuvre c'est tout,"⁹ as Gustave Flaubert wrote to George Sand."¹⁰ This is the common answer to Life: contribute something to humanity. And then die. Humanity will go on and be better for it.

In the case of SACD, you can never pin him down very long. He seems equally perplexed by Life's material meaninglessness and yet, seems awed by the complexity that Life presents: "My dear fellow," said Sherlock Holmes as we sat on either side of the fire in his lodgings at Baker Street, 'life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent. We would not dare to conceive the things which are really mere commonplaces of existence. If we could fly out of that window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer things which are going on, the strange coincidences, the plannings, the cross-purposes, the wonderful chains of events, working through generations, and leading to the most outré results, it would make all fiction with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions most stale and unprofitable.'"¹¹

7 From "The Sign of the Four."

8 From "The Red-Headed League."

9 Holmes acts like the know-it-all and ends up misquoting Flaubert's French in an obscure letter. The correct translation: "The man is nothing, the work is everything."

10 From "The Red-Headed League."

11 From "A Case of Identity."

Admittedly, it's dark outside the house and darker still in the heart of man, but let's sing, play, and do a little jig, for no reason other than escaping it for a while.

Unable to mark the commonplace as quite *all* commonplace, SACD must ascribe some of the fantastic to the Life of man. While dismissing God's providence and movement among men, he must give the natural a supernatural aura. There *has* to be something more to that frog than ribbits and slime, SACD proposes. When the material is given more value than itself, it doesn't *have* to be meaningless. And meaninglessness is depressing, as Nietzsche discovered.

SACD makes this point a little stronger: "Depend upon it, there is nothing so *unnatural* as the commonplace."¹² Did you catch that? The Creation must assume some supernatural significance, if you deny the Creator. Why? Because no one likes being told that their daily routine for 80 years is forgettable, useless, and ultimately filled with no more meaning than an underground ant war you'll never hear about. We have to have meaning, even if it is focused on the wrong meaning.

Charts, Survival Guides, and Antidotes

After Ms. Druckerman had lived 44 observant years and wrote her conclusions for *New York Times*, she landed on some pieces of Life Application. She found a Code of Living based squarely on her conclusions about Life. It's not hard to live by what we *really* think is true. We just do it.

In the same way, SACD (through Holmes) offers a Code of Living for the person who discovers that the material world is commonplace, un-supernatural, and possibly without meaning beyond what we can give to it.

One antidote is to find an escape through art. You may have heard that one before. Holmes offers some respite from bad circumstances and bad people: "There is nothing more to be said or to be done to-night, so hand me over my violin and let us try to forget for half an hour the miserable weather and the still more miserable ways of our fellow-men."¹³ Admittedly, it's dark outside the house and darker still in the heart of man, but let's sing, play, and do a little jig, for no reason other than escaping it for a while. That sounds like "let's eat, drink, and be merry," if you ask me.

This hardly an isolated instance. SACD returns again to the notion that art (music) has a capacity to elevate Man above his common, notorious existence. Holmes quotes Charles Darwin in one particular episode: "It was magnificent. Do you know what Darwin says about music? He claims that the power of producing and appreciating it existed among the human race long before the power of speech was arrived at. Perhaps that is why we are so subtly influenced by it. There are vague memories in our souls of those misty centuries when the world was in its childhoods."¹⁴ In place of the soul, there is music.

Ultimately, according to SACD, transcendence in art is found most often among the material world: "To the man who loves art for its own sake," remarked Sherlock Holmes, tossing aside the advertisement sheet of the Daily Telegraph, "it is frequently in its least important and lowliest manifestations that the keenest pleasure is to be derived."¹⁵ SACD runs into some difficulty here. If art is man's reflections upon the material

¹² From "A Case of Identity."

¹³ From "The Five Orange Pips."

¹⁴ From "The Study of Scarlet."

¹⁵ From "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches."


Our highest assurance of the goodness of Providence seems to me to rest in the flowers. All other things are all really necessary for our existence.... But this rose is an extra. Its smell and its color are an embellishment of life. It is only goodness which gives extras, and so I say again that we have much to hope from the flowers.”

world, then art cannot hope to be any better. And, yet, art stands as man’s hope to lift himself from the commonplace. It is interesting to note how close SACD gets to the real thing. The creative capacity *is* a screaming billboard to the image of God in man, but when divorced from the Creator, it hardly seems like Life Code for meaningful existence.

SACD extends another potion to steer you through the complexity of Life—the pursuit of knowledge: “To carry the art [of deduction in crime solving], however, to its highest pitch, it is necessary that the reasoner should be able to utilise all the facts which have come to his knowledge; and this in itself implies, as you will readily see, a possession of all knowledge, which, even in these days of free education and encyclopaedias, is a somewhat rare accomplishment. It is not so impossible, however, that a man should possess all knowledge which is likely to be useful to him in his work, and this I have endeavoured in my case to do.”¹⁶ Holmes suggests that the acquisition and use of knowledge is a meaningful and noble task, while putting forth an astonishing claim: given human progress, we can know all there is to know about what we do. This is the trap of an inquisitive mind that worships inquisitiveness—it makes you quite arrogant and ultimately wrong. In acquiring knowledge for its intrinsic value, you lose the ability to see

that you don’t know it all.

Although the bulk of SACD’s writings skew heavily towards an agnostic naturalism, there is one instance where he comes the closest to an admission of the supernatural. This is one of the more stunning quotes in all of *The Complete Works of Sherlock Holmes*: “There is nothing in which deduction is so necessary as in religion,’ said he, leaning with his back against the shutters. ‘It can be built up as an exact science by the reasoner. Our highest assurance of the goodness of Providence seems to me to rest in the flowers. All other things, our powers our desires, our food, are all really necessary for our existence in the first instance. But this rose is an extra. Its smell and its color are an embellishment of life, not a condition of it. It is only goodness which gives extras, and so I say again that we have much to hope from the flowers.”¹⁷

“Only goodness gives extras.” Hope deducted from a rose towards a rose-Creator. That sounds like grace to me—the only real Code or antidote for Life. 

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¹⁶ From “The Five Orange Pips.”

¹⁷ From “The Naval Treaty.”

"If You're Happy and You Know It..."

Thoughts on the Nature of Happiness

by Peggy Drinkard

Ah, happiness! It's something most of us long for...something for which we expend considerable sacrifices of time, strength, thought, and resources to secure. Its acquisition lies at the heart of cherished dreams. "If X, Y, and Z come together I shall be SO happy!" we think. Our yearning for happiness can drive us to scheme and even compromise our conscience for its attainment. My experience suggests, too, that happiness is a tricky thing, fickle and illusive. There is seldom any permanency to its nature. The gratification of that longed-for Christmas toy begins to fade at about the same time it comes out of the box. In the Riverwood children's catechism classes we have a box of inexpensive trinkets given to award good work. Years ago our pastor insightfully dubbed it "the prize box of temporary happiness."

We are not unaware, of course, of a camp in the Christian community that is suspicious of happiness. Styling itself above the fray, this group inclines toward holy misery. They've turned the realm of happiness over to the devil and imagine him the prime suspect wherever it pops up. These are the stoic few who, with long face and stooping shoulders, resign themselves to silent suffering as the badge of spirituality. But even here, are they not striving for some sort of satisfaction? Some convoluted sense of a restful soul? And isn't that at the heart of what we mean by happiness?

There is an equally oppressive Christian camp that identifies a superficial sort of never-ending

cheerfulness as the healthy norm for believers. To be "happy, happy, happy, all the time, time, time" is the goal. ("I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart...") Most of us have suffered at one time or the other from some worship leader's instruction to put on a positive front. One wonders if they have not read their Bibles. I'm thinking of David's lamentations. John Calvin observed that the Psalms represent the full gamut of human emotion experienced in a fallen world and teach us that lamentation is as legitimate and appropriate as exhilaration.

Pondering, then, the meaning of true happiness, I've settled on a definition which, while not comprehensive, seems to get at the heart of it: true happiness is a buoyant, large freedom to recognize, accept, and enjoy God's good gifts. And since the good things are indeed gifts, it always goes in tandem with gratitude. It is the open-armed "yes" that derives from the eternal Yes and Amen. I look into the dancing eyes of my grandson as a huge smile lights his face. Translated, he seems to be simply saying a big "yes!" "Yes, we are here together! Yes, I hear the birds singing! Yes, that breeze feels pleasant on our faces! Yes, you and me, here and now, in this moment..." It is all "yes," and it is good.

Sadly, sin is the antipathy of yes and amen. As sinners, we are experts at twisting the good things and losing and destroying what we might have gained from them. God provides us with millions of gifts on a daily basis and we reject them, fail to recognize them, or take them for

True happiness is a buoyant, large freedom to recognize, accept and enjoy God's good gifts. And since the good things are indeed gifts, it always goes in tandem with gratitude

granted. Our own warped notions of what we need to bring us happiness cloud our vision and set us up for the inevitable let-down of placing our hopes in the wrong things.

At a conference once the speaker suggested we should want our children to be holy instead of happy. There is a kernel of truth behind the admonition. Parents are prone to give children their way in hopes of maintaining their felicity. In I Kings 1:6 it is said of Adonijah, King David's son, "And his father had not displeased him at any time." We fail to discipline our children as we should because the discipline, we reason, will make them unhappy, and in the short run it's true. The writer of Hebrews points out "no discipline seems pleasant at the moment." (Hebrews 12:11) Nonetheless, a false dichotomy arises when we juxtapose holiness and happiness. They are scarcely on the opposite ends of the spiritual spectrum.

We have all heard advice to the effect that a key element for discerning God's will is that it is sure to be something we don't want to do. We know great character enhancement can result from plowing through things contrary to our will, but this "truism" reflects an unjustly

harsh view of God. It assumes He aims at our misery as he accomplishes His purposes in our lives. This is the "hard taskmaster" view of God that Jesus so adamantly scorned and it cannot be further from the truth. Our God is a good and loving Father who knows what lies at the root of our every longing. He also knows what will really and ultimately satisfy. He wants our happiness. The rub comes from our resistance when He overrides the temporary fixes we prescribe for ourselves in order to guide us toward a greater good, a greater joy. He, the pearl of great price, will not settle for superficial remedies alone. Unlike we, the less wise human parents, He has limitless patience and can resist our most intense whining when it's needed. Anthony Thorold said, "Knowing us better than we know ourselves, fully understanding how greatly we are affected by the outward events and conditions of life, He has ordered them with a view to our entire and final, not only our immediate, happiness; and whenever we can be safely trusted with pastures that are green, and waters that are still, in the way of earthly blessing, the Good Shepherd leads us there."


There was a time when I longed, maybe even grieved, for a home and a husband and chil-

I was tearfully confiding to this wise woman some of the problems I was facing as a wife and mother and this dear, gracious saint looked at me..... and said, in a gently pleading voice, "Peggy, be happy!"

In urging a choice for happiness, I am not encouraging a false naïveté or a superficial, “happy-clappy” response to life

dren. I asked God for them, but I didn't trust He would give them to me. A much older, dear friend often prayed for these things for me, and in the course of time, at the right time, God answered our prayers. Sometime later I was tearfully confiding to this wise woman some of the problems I was facing as a wife and mother and this dear, gracious saint looked at me with sad, loving eyes and said, in a gently pleading voice, “Peggy, be happy!” I have never forgotten the look or the words. They said more to me than a book on the subject of happiness ever could. I saw at once that happiness is fundamentally a disposition, an attitude of thanksgiving and appreciation and recognition of God's good gifts, and that it is ultimately a choice, not a response to life's ever-changing circumstances. The choice before me was to be grateful and happy, or grumbling and complaining, and both would reflect my attitude toward God. Over time He has reinforced this epiphany in dozens of ways, knowing I can be hard-headed and forgetful. But I owe a great debt and a great deal of subsequent happiness to this good woman who, by choice, was one of the happiest people I have ever known. If anyone had a right to complain or be bitter at life my friend did. Externally viewed, her life from cradle to grave was full of hard knocks, trials, and misfortunes. But she was hands-down the sunniest, funniest, most joyful, exuberant and contented Christian I've been blessed to know. There was a child-like, playful quality about her that exhibited what I

think Jesus meant when he said we must become like little children to inherit the kingdom of heaven. She was not naïve, but she possessed a deep, simple trust in the goodness of God and made a habit of counting her blessings. Having been born into and grown up in the poorest of circumstances, her favorite hymn was “I'm a Child of the King.”

Douglas Wilson frequently and helpfully points out that every road has two ditches and our goal is to stay out of both of them. In urging a choice for happiness, I am not encouraging a false naïveté or a superficial, “happy-clappy” response to life. We live in a sin-filled world. The result of our first parents' disobedience has ramified into every molecule of life. Bad things happen to good people and Christian happiness is not the product of a life in which “everything's going my way.” Like most Christian virtues, its existence is often at odds with the evidence. It exists in spite of Satan and sin, not from their absence. Happiness is the choice to trust in the goodness of God and to recognize his providences as part of His loving design for our highest good, whether we understand them or not. It is the habit of counting our blessings and thanking Him for them continuously. It is becoming one with the eternal Yes and Amen. 

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Hooked on Ourselves

A Postmodern Merry Go Round

by Jeff Miller

We see God's truth in the things around us. Joy, peace, goodness and beauty are some of the things easily seen in nature. We talk about that a lot and call it common grace – it's available for everyone to see, if they will. Sometimes, though, we see God's truth in the negative. We talk about depravity in general, but are often surprised when we see it specifically. Either way, it also reminds us of the truth of God's Word.

I was sitting at my desk about a year ago, listening to radio over the internet when a song caught my ear and then my mind. I heard something about marriage, kids, etc. Then came the chorus:

Mama's hooked on Mary Kay, Brother's hooked on Mary Jane, Daddy's hooked on Mary two doors down...

I knew at that point I needed to pay attention so I found the lyrics and read them more carefully. Rarely had I read lines so utterly depressing. The only mentions of God or His people were results of misunderstanding and unbelief which leave the narrator only with themselves and their limited and weak choices; in other words- total despair.

This song is called *Merry Go Round* and is performed by Kacey Musgraves, who wrote it with Josh Osborne and Shane MacAnally. Here are the lyrics:

Merry Go Round

*If you ain't got two kids by 21, You're probably gonna die alone
At least that's what tradition told you.
And it don't matter if you don't believe, Come Sunday morning you best be there
In the front row, like you're s'posed to.
Same hurt in every heart. Same trailer, different park.*

Chorus:

*Mama's hooked on Mary Kay, Brother's hooked on Mary Jane
And Daddy's hooked on Mary two doors down.
Mary Mary quite contrary, We get bored so we get married
And just like dust we settle in this town. On this broken merry go 'round
and 'round and 'round we go, Where it stops nobody knows...
And it ain't slowin' down, this merry go 'round...*

*We think the first time's good enough, So we hold on to high school love,
Say we won't end up like our parents.
Tiny little boxes in a row, Ain't what you want it's what you know,
Just happy in the shoes you're wearin'.
Same checks we're always cashin', To buy a little more distraction.*

Repeat Chorus

*Mary Mary quite contrary, We're so bored until we're buried.
And just like dust we settle in this town. On this broken merry go 'round...
Jack and Jill went up the hill, Jack burned out on booze and pills,
And Mary had a little lamb, Mary just don't give a damn no more.*

Merry Go Round is a snapshot of disenfranchised lives. The musical palette and style is traditional country but the attitude is thoroughly post-modern rock and roll. Tradition, family and religion, in the song, is hollow for the parents' generation and irrelevant for the singers. The future is incapable of being better and life holds nothing beyond what can be had right in front of us. Since we are only what we are right now and nothing will come of our existence other than futility and despair, we must find ways to cope. Materialism, drugs, sensual pleasure, any distraction is fair game to try and survive this

I knew at that point I needed to pay attention so I found the lyrics and read them more carefully. Rarely had I read lines so utterly depressing

endless cycle. Mary's answer is the ultimate end of all in that situation, eventually giving in to despair.

In case that wasn't happy enough, Musgraves' follow up song offers a more prescriptive approach to life; not that it's any better, just more direct. *Follow Your Arrow* takes the Apostle Paul seriously and suggests to eat, drink, etc. because tomorrow we die. Here are the lyrics:

Follow Your Arrow

*If you save yourself for marriage, You're a bore
You don't save yourself for marriage, You're a horrible person
If you won't have a drink then you're a prude, But
they'll call you a drunk as soon as you down the first one,
If you can't lose the weight then you're just fat,
But if you lose too much, Then you're on crack
You're damned if you do And you're damned if you don't
So, you might as well just do whatever you want*

Chorus:

*So, make lots of noise, Kiss lots of boys
Or kiss lots of girls, If that's something you're into
When the straight and narrow gets a little too straight
Roll up a joint-I would- just follow your arrow
Wherever it points, yeah
Follow your arrow wherever it points*

*If you don't go to church, you'll go to hell
If you're the first one on the front row, you're a self-righteous son of a ...
Can't win for losing You'll just disappoint 'em
Just 'cause you can't beat 'em Don't mean you should join 'em*

Repeat chorus

*Say what you think Love who you love
'Cause you just get so many trips around the sun
Yeah, you only, only live once, so...
Repeat chorus*

Where *Merry Go Round* was a snapshot of trailer park life, *Follow Your Arrow* plays out as advice to those dealing with critics or with anyone in their life saying something they don't want to hear. The baseline advice is to ignore them. Somebody's going to be down on you anyway. Do whatever you want – this is the major idea of hedonism in today's context. Notice that the singer advocates no position. If you're chaste or sober, you're going to be called names. If you're promiscuous or drink at all, you'll be rebuked. Indeed, in today's world, this makes sense because truth is regarded as relative and an individual is the only valid judge of their own actions. So, since one stands to be chastised for anything or nothing, the answer is to feel good in your own decisions, cast off all self-judgment and do what satisfies you for the moment. Though wrapped in fresh, gentle, rural sounding rhythms, the ideas are old, worn and just as seductive as they were in the Garden at the Fall.

Just so we understand, this is not a flash in the pan thing that can be glanced at as an aberration. The CD that these two songs came from, *Same Trailer, Different Park*, has sold over 350,000 copies (as of Feb 2014) and it won the Grammy for Best Country Album this year. The music of Musgraves and her writing team is seen by some within the industry as the torchbearer of country music going forward due to its "gritty, realistic" view of ordinary life. In

... have they become so compartmentalized in their thinking to the point that belief is divorced from creativity?

Our culture constantly screams at us that we are our own gods, but those who buy into it become desperate little deities, sovereign over nothing.

truth, there are several artists who say the same thing in varying ways, but Musgraves' eloquence makes her writing more worthy of attention than the latest "beer on the tailgate, girl in my truck" party anthem.

The difficulties come when artists sing songs with this same ideology while claiming allegiance to Christ. Are they simply singing a snapshot about someone and playing a part or are have they become compartmentalized in their thinking to the point that belief is divorced from creativity? It requires more conversation than is usually available between the artist and listener. Understand that I'm not aware at this point if Musgraves makes any such statement about being a believer, nor am I trying to judge her heart. I am just making the statement that many artists do make such statements and that belief should affect things produced, at least over the body of their work. Musgraves is not some evil pied piper leading everyone down a Hellish path. She is simply a talented singer and writer that has done a good job amplifying the mood of at least part of the current culture. What the culture does about following or reflecting her lyrics remains to be seen.

For those of you not curled up in a fetal position at this point (or maybe more for any who are), the upside of this whole thing is that truth and reality are not found in Musgraves' lyrics, nor in our own circumstances. Truth and reality, "true truth," as Francis Schaeffer called it, is found in, and only in, the person of Jesus Christ. The pictures of depravity and selfishness shown in these songs and purported to be real are indeed real to those who have never tasted the Grace and Love

of Jesus. To His people, who have been blessed by His call and His presence in our lives, there is so much more to life that we become isolated from and ignorant of those who don't know Him. As we see from Musgraves' music, their only connection to God is from television, occasional church services, and what they are able

to interpret from the lives of believers. If Musgraves has read them correctly, all of this is unflattering and something they see as unreal. .

We can learn from this music also. It's also a temptation for those of us who know Jesus to take our eyes off Him, focus on ourselves or our circumstances and fall into the same mentality which is both natural and

surrounds us: satisfy the flesh and be your own standard of right and wrong, or simply ignore right and wrong altogether.

Sound familiar? It flows from Kacey Musgraves and her listeners all the way to the garden when the serpent asked Eve, "Did God really say...", and promises her that she can be like God. Our culture constantly screams at us that we *are* our own gods, but those who buy into it, according to Ms. Musgraves, become desperate little deities, sovereign over nothing.

Indeed, some things never change. 

Soli Deo Gloria,

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The Sovereignty of God and American Education

An Argument for Christian Schools

by Clay Staggs

In modern American society, few topics stir up more controversy than education, and probably rightly so. I believe that there are many factors contributing to this. For those with children or grandchildren going through the process, they have an obviously vested stake, which makes the matter personal to them. For those whose formal education is complete, they carry their own perspectives on the subject, shaped by their personal experiences.

Those who labor in the field, who are “in the trenches” so to speak, certainly have views shaped by that work. And, as taxpayers, we all have something of a stake

in our publicly funded educational system. In fiscal year 2011, the state of Alabama spent just over \$6.5 billion on K-12 education, which works out to a little more than \$8,700 per student. That’s a lot of money, and so, this being America, everyone has an opinion about it.

Never being the type to shy away from controversy, but to wade into it hip deep, I’m going to take the evergreen controversy of education and mix it up with the perhaps even more controversial subject of Christianity and see what I get. The answer to this is probably going to be trouble. So rather than do the sensible thing

and turn off my word processor, I’m going to ask for my readers’ indulgence, and start off by making a few specific disclaimers.

First and foremost, I am not hinting, implying, or saying that those who disagree with my positions in this piece are bad Christians, or that they are sinful people. I am also not suggesting that they are hurting their children or are

bad parents if they do differently than what I advocate here. One of the beauties of Christianity is the liberty the Christian enjoys in living out his faith, and obeying the Lord’s commands

as he is moved by the Holy Spirit. It is not given to us to judge, and that is certainly not what I’m doing here.

That all said, I am going to set forth an argument for why an explicitly Christian education is proper, good, and desirable for the children of Christian parents. Because my argument is in favor of Christian education, it will be necessary for me, in some measure, to say why a non-Christian, or secular education in the public schools is not as good. This brings me to another disclaimer. Though I will be pointing out why I find a Christian education superior, I



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do not intend to beat up on the public schools. I am myself a product of public education, as is my wife and our parents. My mother and my wife's mother are both retired public school teachers, and I have numerous other friends and relatives in that system.

In reality, being as close as I have been to the public schools, and having some grasp of the legal framework within which they are forced to operate, I have a great deal of sympathy for the task the public schools are assigned. In point of fact, what they are currently being asked to do is, in my view, humanly impossible. In many ways, our laws force the public schools to take on many of the tasks of the parent, but without the tools of the parent for discipline. The modern schoolteacher's requirements strike me as ridiculously bureaucratized. It seems to me sometimes that the powers that be are more concerned with the teacher keeping the system from being sued than with the effectiveness of her teaching. Teachers today appear to be mandated to use one-size-fits-all approaches, rather than using their skill and gifts to respond to individual students' strengths and weaknesses. If I am correct about even half of this, then the public schools are indeed faced with a task ordinary mortals should not face.

These are all very practical critiques, and I suspect that I could find a lot of common ground with many Christians if I just stopped there. But I don't think that Christians should

start with the practical. The Christian should, instead, start with scripture, and what we learn there. The basis must be solid, or all of the well intentioned practicalities in the world will be useless.

Writing in Colossians 1:16-18, Paul says of Jesus:

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

Or, stated another way, the Earth is the Lord's and everything in it. There is no sphere over which He does not reign. No human endeavor is beyond His claims to rule. He is "preeminent" in all things. And that really does mean ALL things.

This is not some point that one needs to take from the esoteric realms of philosophy and apply to the daily life of raising children and educating them. In the Old Testament, we find this command to the people of God in Deuteronomy 6:4-7:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD

...the Earth is the Lord's and everything in it. There is no sphere over which He does not reign. No human endeavor is beyond His claims to rule.

your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

Jesus himself repeats this in the New Testament at Mark 12:30:

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

Notice especially that Jesus adds the words “with all your mind,” which tells us that loving the Lord is not simply some emotional exercise, but an *intellectual* one as well. We are to devote our entire being—emotion and intelligence—to God. This is the way we are commanded in scripture to educate and train our children: constantly, entirely fixed on Him, and leaving out nothing.

This brings me to the conundrum of the public schools. These schools are organs of the government. As the law currently stands, the interpretation of the First Amendment forbids an endorsement of any religion by any agency of the government, which surely prohibits the Mark

12:30 approach to education. Some might argue that this is a flawed interpretation of the First Amendment, which is a fascinating subject, but unfortunately beyond the scope of this article. Regardless of what should be, the law of this land is that a school run by the government is forbidden from endorsing any particular view of any particular religion.

This should put the Christian on the horns of a dilemma: they are commanded to teach their children the statutes of our God and the claims of Jesus to lordship over all, yet the school to which the government assigns their children forbids precisely that type of teaching. Some try to avoid the dilemma by arguing that public schools are merely teaching neutral facts—that their instruction is free of any viewpoint toward religion at all. But that position is untenable for several reasons.

Consider the following attitude toward the Almighty: I'm not really opposed to Him, I'm just neutral; sort of a spiritual Switzerland. Do we Bible believing Christians really believe that such an attitude will stand before our God? There is no neutrality where God is concerned. He is a jealous God and demands that we recognize who He is.

Additionally, the facts really aren't neutral at all. Everyone knows that $2+2=4$, and a public school can surely pass that along to a child. What that

school cannot do, that a Christian school can, is to teach the child that $2+2=4$ *because* God made it that way. The Christian school can also teach the child that the fact that $2+2$ *always* equals 4 reflects the fact that our God is a God of rationality and order, not of chaos, chance, and confusion.

Lastly, though, a school which is forbidden by law to admit the existence of our God, much less what his attributes and laws are, will necessarily teach material in a different way from the believing Christian. To be clear, this is not because Christians who teach in the public schools are unfaithful, but because they are legally restricted from being faithful, should they wish to keep their jobs.

Consider the ways that a hypothetical Christian school and a hypothetical public school would teach Macbeth. In the story, Lady Macbeth relentlessly hounds her husband to murder King Duncan and to usurp the throne. She even questions his manhood if he fails to do so. Ultimately, Macbeth does the deed and conspires with his wife, who frames innocent men for the crime. Ultimately Lady Macbeth is driven to madness and takes her own life, and Macbeth himself is killed so that the rightful king may reign.

The public school (as mine did) may treat this as a morality play, of the evil of ambition: Macbeth's undoing was his ambition, so don't be ambitious! A more modern twist might be to deconstruct the play and subject it to feminist critique, where Lady Macbeth is seen as trying to assert her power in a male dominated world which rejects that, and the contradictions ultimately drive her to madness and suicide. She thus turns into yet another victim of the heterosexual patriarchy.

The Christian school, not restricted from holding any text up to scriptural analysis, will immediately note Lady Macbeth's failure to be a biblically correct helper for her husband, challenging his manhood instead for refusal to murder. The Christian school should also point out Macbeth's failure to be a proper leader to his wife, caving in to her advocacy of sin, instead of leading her away from it. The school should then point out how this exactly mimics the fall in the garden. The similarities between the Macbeths and Adam and Eve should be striking to the student. Finally, there is a good dose of failing to submit to the sovereign will of God, who, Paul tells us, establishes all kings and rulers on the earth.

So the school suffering under the mandates of a government which forbids acknowledge of God,


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must ultimately at some level become adverse to God. There simply is no neutrality. Put simply, if you're not for God, you're against Him. If you don't acknowledge and submit to the rule of Jesus Christ over everything, then you must at some point be claiming that there is some sphere over which Christ does not have Lordship. I do not believe that Christians want to take that position.

Yet there is an appeal that the public schools have that draws men and women to them. People naturally wish for some universalizing influence in their lives—a point where all men respond to the call and experience something together in community. A school where all of your neighbors attend has a great appeal in that direction. Christians know, though, that the thing that must bind all peoples together is Christ. Unity outside of Christ is ultimately false. In a choice between community grounded in ignoring or rejecting God and an education that communicates the lordship of Christ over all things, let God be true and every man a liar. Christian schools should learn from this appeal of the public schools and strive mightily to reflect the community in which God has placed them.

For a more complete (and better) presentation of my views here, I recommend the book *Why Christian Kids Need a Christian Education*, by Douglas Wilson. Rev. Wilson sets forth these arguments in much greater detail than I, and more entertainingly as well.

I do not expect the controversies over how Christians should educate their children to go away but to intensify over the coming years. The subject is important and is one of those critical areas where our actions as parents will affect not only our own families, but the future of the church and the nation. In whatever ways they ultimately choose to do so, I hope that Christians educate their children to be faithful to God, able defenders of the faith, and salt and light to the unbelieving world. 

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FINALE

Comes the Stranger.....

As mentioned earlier, Blaise Pascal wrote that man deals with life without God in only two ways: diversions and indifference. In this portion of his long poem, *Choruses from the Rock*, T. S. Eliot, one of the greatest of Christian poets, speaks of the “weariness of men who turn from God.” He writes of their diversions and accomplishments, of adventure, of achievement, of art, of nationalism. It all ends when the Stranger comes to their door, and they suddenly understand that they have evaded the only reality of life – the only Truth.

O weariness of men who turn from God
To the grandeur of your mind and the glory of your action,
To arts and inventions and daring enterprises.
To schemes of human greatness thoroughly discredited.
Binding the earth and the water to your service,
Exploiting the seas and developing the mountains,
Dividing the stars into common and preferred.
Engaged in devising the perfect refrigerator,
Engaged in working out a rational morality,
Engaged in printing as many books as possible,
Plotting of happiness and flinging empty bottles,
Turning from your vacancy to fevered enthusiasm
For nation or race or what you call humanity;
Though you forget the way to the Temple,
There is one who remembers the way to your door:
Life you may evade, but Death you shall not.
You shall not deny the Stranger...

T. S. Eliot

from *Choruses from the Rock*

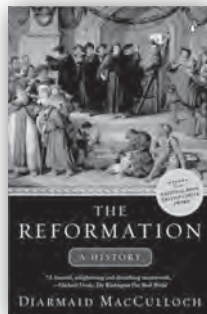


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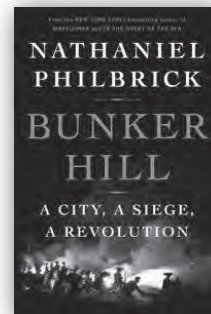
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The Riverwood Book Group meets each Monday evening at 7:30 PM in the home of Kay Kirkley, at 1745 Ridgemont Drive. We select the books we will read together, an eclectic combination of fiction, history, theology, biography, commentary and drama, then we meet to look at them through the lens of the Gospel, “sharpening each other” through discussion. If you enjoy books, ideas, fellowship, and coffee, join us. Everyone is welcome.

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