



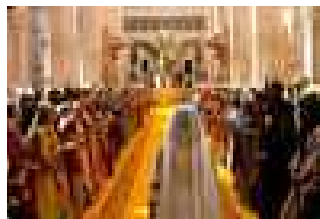
David's Web Wonder

Thoughts on Christianity and the Church

Dec 31 2006: Crossover bands and Christianity in the Arts

I am a big fan of Christians who are involved in the fine arts. Part of this comes from a (not-entirely-dead) youthful notion of being an author (inspired by the example of two heroes who were Christians involved in the arts: Tolkien and Lewis). Part derives from the concept of Earth-As-Story: The most important things in the world are not material objects or technology or persons in places of power - they are **ideas**. And expressions of art, being carriers of ideas, are incredibly important, to the degree in which the ideas they carry correspond to Reality and how well the vehicle carries them.

By that rule, books and films are the most powerful carriers of ideas, particularly films in our (supposedly) image-centered culture. Now, a movie doesn't have to be "Christian" to correspond to reality, and some films carry a message more compliant with Reality better than explicitly Christian films (e.g., produced by the Graham organization) that tend to be preachy and dull. Check out [WORLD Magazine](#) for reviews. Sometimes World's movie reviews get blasted by the readers because they can't believe a "Christian" news magazine would recommend films that contain elements that are "sinful" or otherwise contrary to biblical doctrines, but I think Christians should engage the culture, at least to some extent, and get out of the bubble, and point out the good when it appears. Merely bearing the label "Christian" is not necessarily a good thing.



For instance, One Night with the King

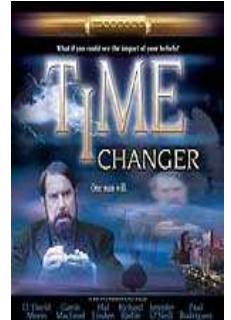


and The Nativity Story are pretty good, explicitly Christian (or at least religious) films,



but they're not as good as [Narnia](#) for communicating Reality in an effective fashion.

However, they are better than [Timechanger](#), an explicitly Christian film that is a bit heavy on the evangelism.



This applies to music, also, in a slightly different way. Music has more emotional and less intellectual content than story, and the art is much more closely associated with the artists as personalities, so it seems the potential for music to influence is a combination of what the music says and how the artist lives.

A friend of mine (involved with youth work in another church) was talking with me this morning about how his son is interested in a band called [Flatfoot56](#), and how he feels the message is pretty good. Pretty sincere. The conversation then turned to groups like Family Force 5, Ally and AJ, and Jump 5, all groups who purport to be crossover groups, but the messages in the music and the lifestyles of the artists span a spectrum from "mildly Christian" to "typical pop". Switchfoot is a band that probably falls at the more Reality-compliant end of the spectrum, but they are a very successful crossover group that has even played at the [Rialto](#) in downtown Tucson, quite the secular avant-garde venue. So just like movies, "Christian" music, particularly by crossover groups, have variations in both compliance with reality and effectiveness at getting the message across.

So what makes the difference?

Coincidentally (or is it?), I was browsing [SmartChristian.com](#), which passed me to [Nancy Pearcey's blog](#), which quoted from a larger interview (which is GREAT! [Read it!](#)) with Steve Turner, a British critic who expressed his opinion that many Christian artists, including some like Beyonce and Britney Spears who might identify themselves as Christian but whose art could not possibly be described as such, lack a **Biblical Worldview** that would integrate their lifestyles, their personal identities, and their art. The idea is, the more an artist (musician, author, director) understands that Christianity is the Reality that affects every part of life, and not just a Sunday School religious identity, the more likely that the artist will be able to produce works that are influential with a positive message (and reinforced by a sincere lifestyle).

Is this not true about any vocation? Be it engineer, lawyer, homemaker, and lay volunteer, the best - perhaps only - way to play your Earth-role effectively is to develop a *worldview* that corresponds to Reality. Being a good Baptist or learning your standard-fare

Sunday School lessons is not good enough.

This is *especially* true for Christians interested in the Arts. Do the entire job right!

Dec 26 2006: Earth as Story: Implications

Did you ever read a book, or watch a movie, and wish you could meet one of the characters?

When I was into my fantasy and role-play gaming phase, I was very taken with the Tolkien concept of elves (and now my daughter is, too). I would have liked to experience talking with elves the way the hobbits did. Wouldn't it be sweet if you could have Glorfindel or Galadriel, born in the Undying Land, sitting in your living room and talking with you?



In Lewis' book The Last Battle, after the people of Narnia have passed through the Door, and the Pevensies suffer their train wreck, all the major characters find themselves in "heaven", and one of the greatest joys is to meet other characters in the history of the world: Reepicheep, King Frank and Queen Helen, and Tumnus.

Wouldn't it be incredible to meet and talk with your historical heroes? Chat with Gen. Washington and John Huss and Socrates (well, maybe). And Augustine and Francis Schaeffer? But that's exactly what we have to look forward to!

Earth is a story. Or more than *a* story, rather *THE* story! The meta-story, or foundational instance that all other stories - books, films, legends, myths - take as their model. Just as God is the Ultimate Reality, and the source of all concepts such as good (and evil, the absence of good), love, reason, purpose, nobility, virtue, etc., so is Earth the Ultimate Story. In fact, all other stories, be it The Lord of the Rings, The Chronicles of Narnia, even the Bible itself (although a special case), are all parts of the Ultimate Story, rather like a book read by a character in a book is itself part of the book.



Just like a book, the story of Earth has a beginning. Prior to the creation of Earth, there was nothing but the spiritual realm of God, the angels, and timeless eternity. Just like a book, the story of Earth has a climax, or a turning point, a watershed, a point where everything in the early part of the story was leading up to, and everything after reflects. And just like a



book, there is an end to the story,



where all the loose ends are tied up (hopefully) and all the mysteries are solved, and all the characters go off the stage. Only in the case of the Ultimate Story, the characters don't dissolve into memories when the back cover is turned...

We are the characters! It's very clear that we will exist forever, and (like Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration - Matt. 17) we will interact with one another. We will be learning about each other's earthly settings in time and place and culture with perfect memories, discussing what God might be doing next, visiting places all over a newly-created perfect Earth, playing, exploring, (flying?), or just sitting still and thinking, with the people we knew from our times on Earth, or those who went before, and those who came after, forever and ever.

Just the same way as a book has an author, the Ultimate Story has an Ultimate Author. Note that the characters in a book, or the actors in a play, do what the author or playwright intend for them to do. They play roles in support of the plot or a theme. And so do we. Some characters in the story of earth clearly have had roles: Judas' destiny was established from the prophecies. Pharaoh was hardened by God so He could display His glories. In fact, Romans 9:15-24 makes it clear that God sets up individuals for bad *and* good roles, and He does it for His purposes. God put Cyrus in power over Persia to do a good work (send the Jews back to Canaan), and God put Pilate in power over Judea to do an evil work (condemn Jesus to death). There is certainly the appearance of free will (constrained by character and circumstance), but in the large, at least, God has the players of Earth (at the very least, the more influential ones) playing the parts He intended for them.

There's all kinds of lessons we could take from this concept. The greatest one for me, at least right now, is that if God has a role for me to play in the Story of Earth, then I can trust Him to bring me into it, in the right time and the right place. I don't have to worry about career or achievement, or even survival (food, clothing, shelter, all that Sermon on the Mount stuff). All I need to do is work at getting plugged into God. Just like the closer an actor is to the playwright, consulting his thoughts and intentions, the closer I am to the Ultimate Author, the less chance of goofing up my part.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths. (Proverbs 3:5-6)

Christmas thought: There are some stories or films where the author shows up in the work. Alfred Hitchcock and Peter Jackson would make appearances or play bit roles, for instance. But in the Ultimate Story, the Ultimate Author makes an Appearance As Himself! He becomes the Main Character, in fact!

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Paintings: [The Crucifixion](#) by Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506), and [The Adoration of the Lamb](#) by Jan Van Eyck (1432)

Oct 17 2006: More Spiritual Growth

After last Sunday morning lesson, in which we chewed on the "Spiritual Growth Chart" concept, we made an observation:

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IF "you have faith" THEN "you will have works"
"You don't have works"
THEREFORE "you don't have faith"
VALID: Modus Tollens
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IF "you have faith" THEN "you will have works"
"You have works"
THEREFORE "you have faith"
INVALID: Fallacy of Affirming the Consequent

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The upshot is, don't gauge your Intimacy With God level by works or external phenomena. It's the motive behind the works that count!

Stories abound of missionaries and church pastors who became missionaries and church pastors for various reasons (religious piety, family expectations, vows, etc.) unrelated to a personal passion to serve the Lord Jesus. They often did more harm than good, and often came to the end of their lives as bitter cynics but occasionally as baby believers, amazed that they could go through their whole lives doing religious stuff without the power of Christ.

Of course, Jesus Himself was familiar with the religion-without-reality as practiced by Pharisees and Sadducees, and had harsh, non-feel-good words for this. I doubt it is less prevalent in even our evangelical setting today than in His.

So go ahead and examine yourself with the Spiritual Growth Chart tool, but instead of actual works of increasing involvement, apply the measure of **PASSION**. Am I increasingly in love with Jesus? Do I more and more desire to know Him and surrender my life for His glory and favour? Yes, that passion will be revealed by works of faith, but the person of faith doing them will be aware of their own faith motivating the works. *That's* how to tell you are moving up the Intimacy with God scale!

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On another note, ([WORLD Magazine](#)) ran an interview with [Mike Bechtel](#), who is doubtless an influential person, warranting an interview from WORLD Magazine, but he shares something with me: He is an introvert who doesn't buy into the current programmatical model of Evangelism. At one point, the reporter asks his thoughts about "spam evangelism". Mike told an interesting story about his friend in Phoenix (teaser!) and ended by saying "I think a lot of unbelievers have been hardened by aggressive witnessing techniques."

A common observation made in evangelical circles is how it seems people in other countries are so much more open to the Gospel than people in the States. I know there is no simple answer to the question of why this should be, but I would agree: Modern evangelicals have very likely contributed to the problem with our pushy programs. These programs (don't we Enlightenment moderns love *programs*!) are very religious ("Rescue the Perishing") but not at all relational ("This is My commandment, that you love one another").

It's time to change this. Before any more damage is done.

Oct 03 2006: The Spiritual Growth Chart

Engineers like plots and graphs. My world is filled with root-locus plots and frequency response charts and state transition diagrams and dataflow diagrams and such things. "A picture is worth a thousand words," they say, and engineers (and scientists, and doctors, and economists, etc.) appreciate the concept capacity of

these graphical tools. Sports coaches use them, also, and to the extent that pastors are spiritual coaches, perhaps pastors ought to consider one of my favorites - the Spiritual Growth chart (fig. 1).

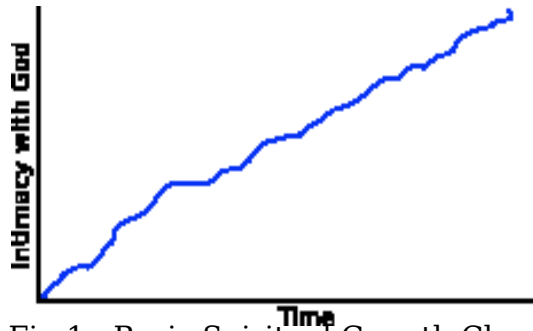


Fig 1 - Basic Spiritual Growth Chart

To even have a spiritual growth chart, one must have been spiritually born. People who do not know God cannot grow in knowledge of God. So the chart starts (Time=0) with the New Birth. As time passes, hopefully the new believer grows in their relationship with the Living God, so that toward the end of their life they know God (personally) better than they did at the point when they first met Him.

"Time" is pretty easy to measure, but "Intimacy" is tougher. We have a not-totally-subjective guide in the Gospels and the Epistles. If someone is "bearing more fruit" (John 15:5, Gal. 5:22-23), loving other people (as in service, not emotion; John 15:12), constant in prayer and full of joy in spite of life-circumstances (I Thess. 5:16-17) and so forth, these are marks of a maturing relationship with God. Also, I've drawn these plots as pretty much monotonically increasing, but the real Christian experience has ups and downs ("roller coaster"); however, the overall trend should be upward.

Different people will mature at different rates. It's quite possible that a young person will be "on fire for God", and be rapidly growing, perhaps up to the point where they get killed by a car. Everyone may feel, "oh, what a pity they died so young", but this person may have achieved a greater eternal maturity in their short life than a person who lives to an old age but who is lackadaisical about their relationship with God and is more interested in the things of this life than the things of God (see Fig. 2).

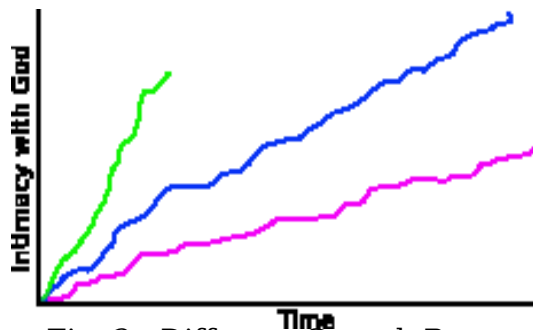


Fig. 2 - Different Growth Rates

But worse off than this lukewarm grandma is someone who starts out okay, but at some point becomes comfortable and satisfied with where they are spiritually. They "plateau". They stop growing. They stop wanting to grow. They may be heaven-bound Christians by virtue of their trust in Jesus' blood, but they are not much use to Him,

and they don't have much prospect of an eternal reward. See Fig. 3. Now, there is a phenomenon observed in our denominational churches where a church stop growing and the membership becomes more elderly. They say the church has "plateaued". But churches are not buildings or organizations, they are *people*, so if a church has plateaued, it is because a critical mass of the members have individually plateaued per Fig. 3.

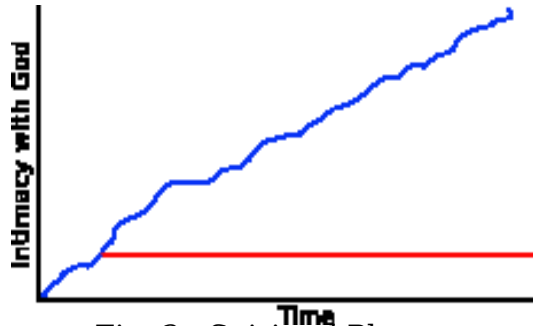


Fig. 3 - Spiritual Plateau

Now, for pastors who are responsible for the spiritual state of their "sheep", they don't want people to plateau. They don't want people to take a lukewarm approach to their Christianity. Pastors will want their members to have healthy spiritual growth, maybe with a few "rising stars". I'll bet most pastors will have some idea how their members are doing individually, even though, unlike the sports coach, they don't carry a clipboard with the performance charts of the team members.

More importantly for all of us, we ought to gauge our own spiritual growth, asking ourselves, "have I plateaued?" "Am I lukewarm?" We ought to want to be growing closer to God, dissatisfied with where we are right now, knowing there's another point of commitment and service and Spirit-filled joy higher up from where we are now, and straining to reach it. We ought to be encouraging each other (Hebrews 10:24) to be growing, because growth is contagious.

Is this not what an ideal church would look like? Not the absence of problems or even friction, but a God-focused passion to grow to know Him better, working at this together as a team, with the pastor/coach tending us and guiding us upward.

Sept 21 2006: Fear of Giving Offense

Courtesy of [Hugh Hewitt](#), I found this Wall Street Journal [article](#) by Reuel Marc Gerecht about the Pope's speech. This is a good article about the need of the West to be honest about a dialog with Islam. However, what struck me the most was a thought near the end of the article:

No one wants to offend, so we assume a public position of liberal tolerance, hoping that good-willed, nonconfrontational dialogue, which criticizes "our" possibly offensive behavior while downplaying "theirs," will somehow lead to a more peaceful, ecumenical world.

The problem is, this is not just a problem of how the "Christian" West deals with Islam. It is how the Christian Church tends to deal with everyone. We don't want to offend unbelievers, who might form an

unfortunate opinion of Christianity. We don't want to offend members, who might leave our church and cease attending or contributing money or volunteering. As a result, we Christians don't say (or more importantly, do) anything that we suspect might offend anybody.

One might think this is just a problem with the liberal, mainstream, Bible-rejecting churches, but it isn't. Certainly the main reason those denominations have watered down the Bible is to avoid offense (policies toward homosexuality are a prime example), but the evangelicals, with our fixation on evangelism and "soul-winning", are just as apt to soft-pedal the hard teachings even as we affirm the authority of Scripture. This is much of the grounds for the controversy over "seeker-sensitive" approaches.

Is it possible that this position is self-defeating? Just the same way as the West's diplomatic, self-effacing, offer-no-offense methods do not impress the muslims, neither do our non-condemning, entertaining, life application methods seem to impress American unbelievers. The Western church is shrinking, in spite of two decades of "seeker-sensitive".

In fact, is the problem even our stance toward outsiders? The West's lack of a guiding truth in her dealings with Islam is merely a symptom of her rejection of ANY transcendent guiding truth. Is it possible that the Church's inability to impress unbelievers with the Truth is merely a symptom of our inability to impress our own members with the Truth?

It has been said by various people that unbelievers are turned off by hypocritical Christians. Perhaps if we spent more effort working on our own house (and I don't mean pretty buildings) and the *believers* were living truth, we would see more of a response by unbelievers. Perhaps the greatest fear of giving offense we need to get over is the fear of offending church people who call themselves Christians.

That would me much more in keeping with the church of Acts, after all.

Sept 15 2006: Why Prayer Isn't Answered

If you've been watching, you might have picked up the idea that **prayer** is an important part of our group. Sunday night and Wednesday night and Thursday night, we spend varying amounts of time in more/less serious and heartfelt prayer. Part of this is certainly wanting to **teach to obey** about prayer, but a big (bigger?) part is wanting to see God do something with us.

But why do we not see God doing anything with us or among us? There's a hint He did at some points in the past. Why not usually? Why not *NOW*! After all, we have these promises, like I John 5:14-15. There are probably many reasons - after all, God is a *person*, not a vending machine, and He is *sovereign*, the King, and *we* are the servants. But let's focus on three reasons that probably poke at us at Central Baptist the most.

1. Wilfull sin in your life. In Joshua 7:6-9, Joshua and the Israelite leaders were crying out to God over their defeat at Ai, right on the heels of the victory at Jericho. God came right back in vs. 10-12: "Knock that stuff off! Israel has sinned, and I will not be with you

until you take care of this problem." Isaiah 59:1-2 make it clear that our sins come between us and God, and He will not hear our cries. So maybe it is ourselves individually that are not committed to Personal Holiness, or maybe it is someone in the group that is holding us back (and it may not be who you think it is... it might be *you!*), but we must take care of this problem before God can hear us.

2. Selfish prayers. James 4:3 says we don't get what we ask for, because we are asking for our own selfish interests. Are you praying for good grades in school? Why? So your parents don't come down on you? Or because you have committed your school experience to God's glory? Are you praying for a sick relative or friend? Why? Because you want them around? Or to see God get the glory for their healing? Are we praying for God to bless our church, or Jeremiah's startup? Why? For "success" (more people), or for God to do what He wants with us? Examine your motives!

3. Not being serious. When only three CBC members show up at the "official" prayer time, I'd say that CBC is not serious about prayer. Remember the Brooklyn Tabernacle story about Calvin Hunt - that church was praying for him for *hours*. When Jesus said in Matthew 7:7 (quick, what is Matthew 5-7? SOTM) "Ask", "Seek", "Knock", He is saying "continue to ask", "continue to seek", "continue to knock", not just do it once and give up. Persistence pays. You learned this asking for stuff from your parents - God is saying "bug me about it". When the Holy Spirit spoke to the early church in Antioch in Acts 13:1-3, they were **fasting** and praying. Fasting is a practise of showing God you're serious about this. But fasting is not really a Baptist thing. Maybe it should be...

So if we really want to see God at work with us, both in our church and our individual lives, we need to put wilfull, unrepentant sin out from us, examine the motives of our requests, and get serious with God about it.

Sept 13 2006: My Hero: Francis Schaeffer

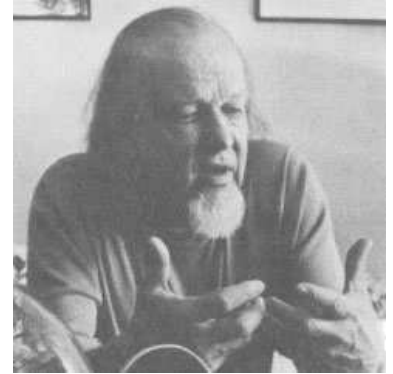
With some [help](#), I found an [exerpt from a book about Francis Schaeffer](#), who is one of my heroes, along with C.S. Lewis and Josh McDowell and a few others. The article makes the statement that Schaeffer wasn't original, but he did and said some things that evangelicals at the time were not doing or saying.

Really, originality is overrated. We were not called by God to be *original*, but *authentic*. Schaeffer was authentic. He led his family to Switzerland to start the L'Abri phenomenon, trusting totally on God and not fundraising or the support of a larger organization. That's authentic. He adjusted his lifestyle (particularly his trousers) for the cultural setting he adopted. He reached out to especially young people, travelling about Europe in search of authenticity and reality. And (most importantly to me) he possessed an authentic Christian intellect that came across clearly in his lectures and his writings, a theory-and-practical-consequence intellect far too rare in Evangelicalism in his day, and (sadly) in ours. One of the early contemporary Worldview thinkers.

God grant me the courage to be so authentic!



(I couldn't find any pics
of him in his knickers...)



Sept 04 2006: Kingdom Cooperation

I guess it's my perspective as a layman with a "real" job that pays, and maybe I don't quite grok the situation of the professional clergyman who depends upon his church for a salary, but it bugs me when (it seems to me) pastors don't want for their churches to cooperate lest the other churches "steal their sheep". Are we One Kingdom or not? Do we not have One Purpose - The Great Commandment / Commission? I guess it's easy for me to say, not having to live by faith for God to provide a paycheck (to the same extent a church pastor does).