

## Thoughts on Christianity and the Church

December 29 2012: A *Real* Christian Movie - *Les Miserables*



Years ago, we had seen the musical based on Victor Hugo's novel at the Tucson Music Hall. Of course, we paid a fair bit for those tickets; had we not had two children involved in high school theatre class (and getting extra credit points for going to stage productions), it might have been another story. Suffice it to say, a musical draws a smaller crowd than a movie.

But now, *Les Miserables* is a [big screen movie](#) [1] with lots of major stars, and lots of people can see it at the mall cineplex at reasonable prices all over the country at the same time, and not just where the musical troupe is showing. As such, the messages communicated through the author's story can influence more people than ever before. As mass-production printing brought the written word to the common people, so the cinema has popularized the stage show. Or the morality play, as the case may be.

Which in this case, it is. The change in Jean Valjean's life when the bishop covers for him, and claims his life for God, is unmistakable. The frequent soliloquys uttered by Valjean are prayers to God, and his decisions are all driven, not to be a "good person" but in view of God's claim on his life. And of course the contrast between Javert ("The Law") and Valjean ("Grace") is the major theme of the work. Christian themes permeate *Les Miserables*, including both the musical theatre and the cinema versions.

Furthermore, fortunately, Hollywood doesn't corrupt the Christian themes too much. In fact, I'd say the director has done an admirable job... up until the very end, when Valjean has died, and his spirit is walking... well, not to God, or Heaven, but to a large square where the deceased Revolutionaries have set up an enormous barricade, and everyone - including Valjean and the deceased Fantine (the otherwise uninvolved young mother who dies while trying to provide for her daughter Cosette who is adopted by Valjean) - ends up singing the defiant hymn of revolt and overthrow. While the red flags are waving. I guess everyone is in "heaven", according to Hollywood. So the last scene is misguided. And clearly tacked on. Still, the rest of the story fares well.

The point is, this is a *Christian* story. Like the adaptation of C. S. Lewis' *Narnia* stories, or J. R. R. Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* stories. In those cases, the Christian themes weren't as overt as Hugo's, so it is less clear whether Hollywood has garbled the message either through ignorance or malice. The more important aspect of this point of these stories being Christian stories is that, because they are rousing good stories with obvious literary quality and craftsmanship, and **NOT PREACHY**, they get treated better and popularly received better than "Christian" films like those produced by the Graham organization or Sherwood Baptist Church.

That is because the original authors did not set out to write stories that were "Christian", but rather the authors were Christians who set out to write good stories. Because they were Christian, their work reflected their foundational truths. The works became *ART*, not moralistic or evangelistic propaganda.

This is Worldview in action, of Christians doing their best at what they do and allowing the Spirit to guide them, rather than consciously and objectively injecting a Christian message into their work. We need more Christians who are artists - and not so many artists trying to be Christian.

Now, imagine a Christian artist who finds himself or herself as a director. Imagine a Christian who was free to produce *Les Miserables* or *The Silver Chair* as accurate to the original intentions of Hugo or Lewis. Free to NOT tack on a silly Hollywood view of the afterlife.

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1. [www.lesmiserablesfilm.com](http://www.lesmiserablesfilm.com)

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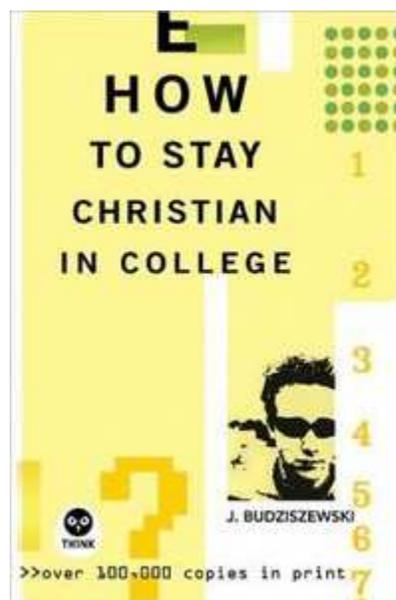
## December 16 2012: Preparing Kids for College

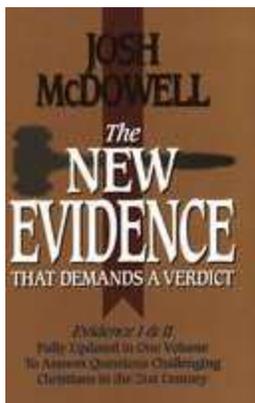
The fall semestre at Northern Arizona University finished this week, and my younger daughter Faith took her final exam in history. She is a freshman, and after the first week of school, she posted on her Facebook page how the history professor was telling them that Moses didn't really write the Pentateuch, and Luke didn't really write the Gospel of Luke. At first, I was a bit shocked. I of all people knew of the danger for college students to encounter anti-Christian indoctrination in their classes, but my older daughter Charity has gotten through three years at NAU without any such experience (that she ever mentioned), so I was hoping that NAU would be "clean". Now I know that even at a small off-the-road school like NAU, anti-Christian professors can be found. The lesson is that the risk is ever-present, and you must anticipate the bias and prepare to deal with it.

I was also a bit surprised that the *history* teacher would be advocating

the [Documentary Hypothesis](#) [1] and [Form Criticism](#) [2] (in the broader field of [Biblical Criticism](#) [3]). Both of these are theories developed by scholars who write things like "based on my *expert* opinion, in view of the sentence structure and the choice of adjectives and theme, *this* passage must have had a different author than *that* passage". In other words, entirely subjective, the sort of thing you get in English or Literature courses. I would have expected a *historian* to be inclined to dismiss such erudite opinionating - there are better ways to assess ancient scripts, like paleography or the archaeological setting in which the artifact was recovered; disciplines "harder" and somewhat more objective than literary criticism. But I also already knew that someone who *wants* to believe something (or to believe NOT someONE) will often not be terribly objective about sources supporting their position.

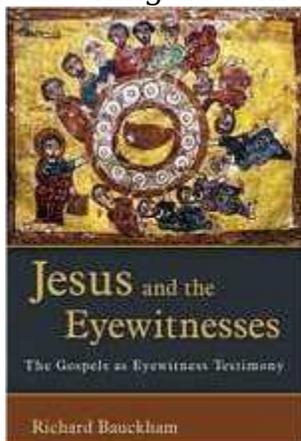
Now, as a former youth worker, I had already introduced the young people in my group, which included my own children, to some logic and some intellectual challenges to Christianity and reasons why they could trust in the reliability of Scripture. I had also given my own children the Budziszewski book [How To Stay Christian In College](#) [4]. I also had my own copy, so when I found what Faith had encountered, I reviewed it - no, nothing specifically about the Documentary Hypothesis or Form Criticism or any other particular challenge, but useful information about dealing with challenges, like how to respectfully engage teachers and fellow students (and how NOT to engage them - contrary to a response to Faith's Facebook post from a fellow student - obviously brought up in the usual unthinking evangelicalism - that she "bring her Bible to class"). The book has other useful advice, including the importance of being in community with other believers. These kids' parents had been encouraging them already; mommy was wanting them to go to church, but I was more than pleased that they would connect with the [Chi Alpha](#) [5] chapter at NAU... particularly when the leaders reinforce ideas that their dad/youth pastor had been teaching, like "dating is not for recreation, it is for choosing a spouse". It seems that the Chi Alpha chapter at NAU has a good record of dating couples that get married.





In order to help Faith right away, I bundled my favorite book on the subject of addressing challenges to Christian belief, Josh McDowell's [Evidence that Demands a Verdict](#) [6] into the mail. There are two volumes in the set; the first deals with challenges to the reliability of the Old and New Testaments and the existence and deity of Christ, and the second deals explicitly with, yes, the Documentary Hypothesis and Form Criticism. Unfortunately, the McDowell books are a bit... dense, with a unique outline format, and are not very readable. I suspect that Faith inherited a bit of the

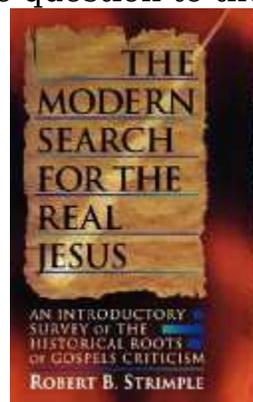
"analytical" from her dad, so she might actually get into it. I wanted something a bit more focused and manageable for a student already



busy with her class load, so I put the question to the

pastor of [Tucson Reformed Baptist Church](#) [7], the little start-up where I have been attending the excellent class on the London Baptist Confession of 1689. He

recommended two books; one by Richard Bauckham, [Jesus and the Eyewitnesses](#) [8], and the other [The Modern Search for the Real Jesus](#) [9] by Robert Strimple. Now,



at this point I decided to not get

the book for her, but rather send her the link so she could get it herself, and the suggestion that she look for the book in the Cline Library or arrange for an Inter-Library Loan, so she can put out the effort to answer her own question.

Now, I don't know if she took the advice to find the book (I rather doubt it), or look through the *Evidence* book. As it turned out, the history professor wasn't an agenda-driven hostile actively and persistently working to overthrow the faith of the Christians in her class, and there was apparently no further mention of the subjects after the first week of class. All the same, here are the lessons from this mild adventure:

**First**, the institutional church did not help. The fact that college professors are often hostile to Christian students is known to me from my personal studies in the para-church counter-culture. Other youth leaders may be aware of the problem, but they don't appear to do anything about it. As near as I can tell, my effort to teach apologetics, logic, church history, etc., was unique; most youth ministries are focused on Bible lessons, evangelism, and fun activities. This is true of the larger church as well; the pastor of the church is more concerned with preparing his Bible sermon than dealing with faith challenges affecting the church members, or evangelism and programs and "bridge events" intended to bring more outsiders into the church. This may not be universally true - there may be churches whose pastors are concerned with cultural trends and preach sermons with more than

merely Biblical content, or who structure the church programs to equip and motivate believers, but those churches are very much the exception. My daughters were *NOT* going to be prepared to deal with the Documentary Hypothesis or Form Criticism or any other, more common challenge to their beliefs by their involvement with the youth ministry or attendance at the "worship" service in any Baptist, Assemblies, or non-denominational church that I've ever been in. This is true even of the Assemblies church that is the "host" of the Chi Alpha chapter at NAU - not that the chapter itself did much to help, either, which I've noted is true of pretty much all the denominational-based (i.e., institutional church-oriented) student ministries.

**Second**, seminary education is important for pastors. Yes, it's also dangerous; from what I can tell, it is typical for pastors of mainline denomination churches (especially Presbyterian and Episcopalian) to have attended seminary, but they also imbibe the institutional liberalism of those seminaries. It seems to be less typical for Baptist pastors to have attended seminary; at any rate, the two most recent pastors of First Southern Baptist in Tucson have not been seminary trained. This is not to say that those men *could not* have helped with a recommendation of a book had I asked, but the seminary-trained Reformed pastor definitely *was* equipped to suggest several books that he had personally been introduced to by his professors.

**Third**, it is more important to equip parents to equip their students than to equip the students directly. Yes, the youth ministry could have exposed teens to the Documentary Hypothesis and Form Criticism, but more than likely the same thing would have happened as in my group - the young people get bored, it's too dry, they expect a Bible lesson and a quarterly and fun activities. I suppose I could have livened it up a bit, had I been a better teacher, but this does not change the fact that teen minds are immature, that modern culture does not expect teens to take things seriously. This is counter to what I observe in the Homeschool culture, where teens are quite up to apologetics training, but this merely serves my point - homeschool parents *are* prepared and committed to equip their children. Churches and youth ministries ought to train parents to help their own children and hold them accountable for doing so, and not persist in the clearly-inadequate method of attempting to teach children apart from - and frequently *in spite of* - their parents.

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1. [www.gotquestions.org/documentary-hypothesis.html](http://www.gotquestions.org/documentary-hypothesis.html)
2. [www.gotquestions.org/form-criticism.html](http://www.gotquestions.org/form-criticism.html)
3. [www.theopedia.com/Biblical\\_criticism](http://www.theopedia.com/Biblical_criticism)
4. [www.christianbook.com/how-to-stay-christian-in-college/j-budziszewski/9781576835104/pd/835103](http://www.christianbook.com/how-to-stay-christian-in-college/j-budziszewski/9781576835104/pd/835103)

5. [www.chialphanau.com](http://www.chialphanau.com)
6. [www.christianbook.com/Christian/Books/product?item\\_no=42199&netp\\_id=157655&event=ESRCN&item\\_code=WW](http://www.christianbook.com/Christian/Books/product?item_no=42199&netp_id=157655&event=ESRCN&item_code=WW)
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8. [search.barnesandnoble.com/Jesus-and-the-Eyewitnesses/Richard-Bauckham/e/9780802863904?ean=9780802863904](http://search.barnesandnoble.com/Jesus-and-the-Eyewitnesses/Richard-Bauckham/e/9780802863904?ean=9780802863904)
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