

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE AND CULTURE

OCTOBER 2003

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

Richard V. Horner

As people gradually realize that a Christian Study Center exists in Gainesville, they raise the obvious questions: "Just what is a Christian Study Center?" they wonder, "And what does it do?" As we begin a new school year, therefore, I would like to answer a few basic questions about the work that we do here. I trust you will find these answers helpful and that you will take them as an invitation to express your own thoughts on how the Study Center can best serve in Gainesville and beyond.

In Brief ... Who are we?

We are a growing community of Christians centered in Gainesville, Florida who seek to love God with a whole heart and with a whole mind.

What do we do?

We explore a Christian understanding of life and offer that understanding to the university community and to the church.

How do we do this?

We do this through:

- our program of classes, lectures, reading groups, cinema, and discussions
- our Culture Seminar for scholars and future scholars
- our Summer Institute for college and university students
- our web site, www.christianstudycenter.org
- our quarterly newsletter, *Reconsiderations*
- our partnership with the Oxford Coffee Company that operates in the Study Center facility
- partnerships and cooperative efforts with others who serve the university community

Where do we serve?

We offer our programs primarily at the Christian Study Center, 112 NW 16th Street, just two blocks north of University Avenue in Gainesville, Florida. We also hold events on the campus of the University of Florida and, upon request, at other locations throughout the state and beyond.

Why are we doing this?

The short answer is that we are doing this because we are convinced that historic Christianity offers an understanding of life that is not only true, but also wise and essential to all of life.

The slightly longer answer is that we live in a time when there is a special need and opportunity for offering a Christian understanding of life.

It has been apparent for some time now that the modern cultural logic that drove Christian faith to the margins has little to offer in its place. Where Christianity once offered truth and meaning, there is now an empty space from which the very notions of essential truth or deep meaning have been removed. People are now free to believe whatever they choose to believe, they just aren't allowed to think of their beliefs as deep or enduring or as providing any truth that human beings need to know. The vague, pervasive sense in a university community is that people are absolutely free, but their freedom is absolutely empty.

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Thankfully, many people in the university community question this way of thinking and recognize its contradictions and inadequacies. Though the cultural logic of modernity keeps whispering in their ear that life has no depth, day-to-day experience keeps declaring that life does have depth to it. Day after day, life continues to feel as if something important is at stake in our relationships and our work, in our successes and our failures, in our joys and our sorrows, on the nightly news and in our personal lives. Many people, therefore, pause, reflect, and hold out hope for a meaningful life that is based in a true understanding of human experience.

We at the Study Center believe that people are right to maintain hope, and we are convinced that historic Christianity offers the true and meaningful understanding of life for which people long. We admit that in some cases we Christians have offered only a shallow, packaged version of the rich understanding that Christ offers, as if we were only hawking goods in the marketplace, while in other cases we have offered only a watered-down version of Christianity as if we were trying to make it palatable to a culture that is trying to learn to live without depth. The truth remains, however, that there is a deep and enduring understanding of life that centers in Jesus Christ and which cannot be exhausted. We want to explore this understanding of life and to offer it to anyone who cares to explore it with us.

Whom do we serve?

Our programs are open to **everyone**, but we focus on serving three audiences:

- **Students** (students at the University of Florida, Santa Fe Community College, and other institutions of higher learning in Florida and beyond)
- **Scholars and Future Scholars** (faculty at the University of Florida and Santa Fe Community College, together with graduate and undergraduate students who hope to serve in the academy)
- **Church Leaders and Future Church Leaders** (clergy, lay leaders, campus ministers, seminary students, and graduate and undergraduate students who hope to serve in the church)

Let me reflect on how we try to serve each of these audiences.

Everyone . . . We are not the least bit interested in being exclusive. While many of our programs are targeted toward particular audiences, our programs are generally open to anyone who wants to participate. Most importantly, all of our programs are open to those who profess Christianity and those who do not, and we never presume that those who attend our events are one or the other. Our ideal event is one that is equally engaging for those who attend out of conviction and for those who attend out of curiosity. Our hope is that by exploring a Christian understanding of human experience, those who are not Christians will find themselves drawn to Christ, while those who are Christians will be drawn into a deeper consideration and appreciation of the understanding of life that Christ provides.

Students . . . First, we want to offer the thoughtful Christian life to students. There are many students who do not think of themselves as Christians or even as religious, but they are wondering what to make of life. There are other students who do think of themselves as Christians and who are very serious about figuring out what that means. We want to offer the thoughtful consideration of a Christian understanding of life to these students and to all who are somewhere in between.

Too often, in the lives of students, the words "spiritual" and "intellectual" are used in opposition to each other. A Christian understanding of life, however, refuses to give in to such usage. Moses' great commandment calls us to love God not only with a whole heart but with a whole mind. In a similar manner, the Prophet Isaiah invites us to come and reason with God, and the Apostle Paul urges us to bring every thought captive to Jesus Christ. He also reminds us that Christ has come not only to be our righteousness and our sanctification but our wisdom as well.

As Christ becomes our wisdom, he offers an understanding of life that can help us think about history and sociology, engineering and architecture, and botany and astrophysics. He helps us ponder everything from our relationships with our parents to our favorite cartoon, from the moral philosophy of Howard Stern to the quandaries of minority identities, from cinematic techniques to post-structuralist hermeneutics, and from sex to food and drink. Christ cares not only about moral integrity and personal relationships, or about spiritual disciplines and community service, but also about the work we do – including the work that students do, the work of inquiry, learning, writing, and creativity. We want to do whatever we can to help students face the intellectual challenges of a spiritual life and explore what it means for Christ to be our wisdom.

Scholars and Future Scholars . . . In keeping with this view of the work of inquiry and learning, we affirm scholars and future scholars in their work, and we seek to serve them. We believe that the work of the scholar/teacher flows from the very character of God. Whether a person calls herself a Christian or not, therefore, we affirm her in her work, and we seek to encourage all who give themselves to service through inquiry and creativity, research and writing, and teaching and mentoring. A Christian understanding of life affirms the work of the academy, and thus, as a Study Center we want genuinely to serve our neighbors in the local academic community.

Toward this end, we want to encourage our neighbors in the exploration of the intellectual and cultural resources of the Christian tradition. We are convinced that there is a richness in that tradition that is well worth exploring, and we want to explore that richness in service to the community of which we are a part. In our Culture Seminar, therefore, we are glad to work with anyone who is willing to work with us in the sympathetic and scholarly exploration of the resources of the Christian tradition for understanding and responding to shared human questions and the challenges created by contemporary cultural change. It is our privilege to be a part of this conversation, and our hope is that we will genuinely be able to serve our neighbors in it.

Church Leaders and Future Church Leaders . . . We also want to serve the church leaders of today and tomorrow by encouraging them and equipping them for facing the challenges of the twenty-first century. We believe in the Church and refuse to give in to the all-too-prevalent habit of church-bashing. To the contrary, we consider it a privilege to serve those who serve the Church—both clergy and lay people. Our hope is that many of the classes, lectures, and other events we offer will serve this goal, but we also offer something specifically for church leaders each semester. Sometimes this takes the form of a single lecture, other times it takes the form of a reading group, and still other times it takes the form of a class or conference, but each semester we try to serve the Church by serving its leaders.

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NEWS FROM THE STUDY CENTER

SUMMER & RECENT HIGHLIGHTS

FIRST ANNUAL SUMMER INSTITUTE ON FAITH AND THE UNIVERSITY

On June 1-3, the first annual Summer Institute on Faith and the University was held at the Study Center. The Institute was a gathering for university students where the discussions revolved around the tensions and possibilities of pursuing university studies from a Christian framework of thought. Keynote speaker Andy Crouch, a writer and editor of *Re:generation Quarterly*, spoke on "Things I Wish I Had Known Before My Freshman Year." Other topics included Blaise Pascal as a model of Christian thought, the history of the university, considering a calling to academia, and several sessions relating to specific academic disciplines. Presenters for these included Richard Horner, John Sommerville, Tim Sansbury, Stan Wallace, Todd Best, and Ashley Rogers, who also served as the director of the Institute. Students attending were from schools as far away as Harvard and Davidson (NC) and of course from Florida State University, University of Florida, and University of Central Florida.

NEW CLASSROOM

With less traffic in our building this summer, the timing was right to move forward in our plans to create a new classroom on the first floor of the Study Center. What used to be a large kitchen space has undergone major transformation over the past couple of months. Starting simply with a large empty space, the area was framed, electrical and audio/visual wiring was installed, walls were put up and equipment was installed. While there are still finishing touches to come, we are glad to report that the room is usable and has already been put to use for some Center events. Special thanks to our hard-working, creative, and patient project coordinator Gary Lewis and those who helped along the way, including Jason Rogers and Aaron Zinck who designed the audio/visual system that will enhance the room all the more.

CLASS: "COULD WE IMPROVE THE BIBLE?"

This four-part series was a class taught in September by UF History professor John Sommerville. Dr. Sommerville looked into the following issues: "Why the Bible Works: Narrative Theory," "Why are Some Books In and Others Out," "What Makes it One Book and Not Many," and "How Historical Is It, Really?"

THE CULTURE SEMINAR: "THOSE BATTLIN' BAPTISTS"

On September 18th, the Christian Study Center sponsored the first Culture Seminar event of the fall. Brent Walker, M.Div., J.D., addressed the subject of "Those Battlin' Baptists: A Fight for Religious Liberty." Walker is also Executive Director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs as well as adjunct professor of law at the Georgetown University Law Center. Responding to Mr. Walker was Prof. Ken Wald, University of Florida Professor of Political Science and Director of the Center for Jewish Studies at UF. The Culture Seminar is a scholarly initiative of the Christian Study Center that works in cooperation with the university community in exploring the resources of the Christian tradition for understanding and responding to the challenges of contemporary cultural change.

THE CULTURE SEMINAR: "CHRISTIAN THEMES IN CONTEMPORARY ART"

In a second Culture Seminar event held on October 16th, UF Professors John Scott (Pre-Columbian American Art), David Stanley (Medieval Architecture), and Robert Westin (Renaissance Painting) each offered their observations regarding "Christian Themes in Contemporary Art."

NEWS FROM THE STUDY CENTER

CURRENT AND COMING EVENTS

READING GROUP ON G. K. CHESTERTON

During October, November, and December monthly reading discussions will be held at the Center on three selected works by G. K. Chesterton. Readings groups will meet as follows: faculty: Oct. 3, Oct. 31, and Dec. 5; students/others: Oct. 8, Nov. 5, Dec. 3. Selections include *The Man Who Was Thursday*, *Orthodoxy*, and *The Innocence of Father Brown*.

CLASS:

“AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CHURCH FATHERS”

This class, now underway, is being taught by Ron Kuykendall, Rector at St. Andrews Episcopal Church. It will look at the main themes found in the leaders of the early church. In addition, consideration will be given to how these themes have been understood over the centuries. The class meets on Oct. 6, 13, 20, and 27 (Mondays) at 7:30 p.m. at the Study Center.

CULTURE SEMINAR:

“CHRISTIAN THEMES IN CONTEMPORARY MUSIC”

The Culture Seminar continues on November 13th at 7:30 p.m. with a discussion of “Christian Themes in Contemporary Music.” Kandace Brooks, James Sain, and Budd Udell, all professors of music at UF, will offer insight into the topic and help us appreciate the ways a biblical understanding emerges in this art form.

FINANCIAL UPDATE FROM THE DIRECTOR: BAD NEW, GOOD NEWS, GOOD NEWS, GOOD NEWS

The bad news is that during spring and summer, giving generally fell short of expenses, and at the end of August we came very close to being unable to make ends meet. The good news is that as general income was slipping, you contributed nearly fifty thousand dollars to our classroom fund, and the classroom is now nearly complete. The other good news is that in the past few weeks you have continued to contribute generously, and we now not only have our bank balance back, but our dreams for the future as well. I've been telling people lately that I have the best job in the world – and I do mean that. I am surrounded by wonderful people, and I am excited about what is going on here. Thank you for being a part of the Study Center community.

--Richard Horner, Director

— RECOMMENDED —
RESOURCES

Mars Hill Audio Journal:

Helping Us to Think About the Neighborhood

Todd A. Best

We live in a culture that demands little from us intellectually. In fact, our society often pushes us in the opposite direction. Our way of life is defined not by reflection but by whatever media and fashion trends happen to dictate. Sadly, our educational system does little to battle the aversion to a reflective life. The end goal of education has more to do with the acquisition of skills for a good job than with the pursuit of knowledge for human flourishing. Even in the mainstream of American religious life, where longstanding traditions can be found, there is little exploration into those traditions for the purpose of understanding ourselves and our culture.

Mars Hill Audio Journal is a refreshing change that offers hope for those who sense the inadequacy of these cultural norms. The innovative project of Ken Myers, a former producer for National Public Radio, Mars Hill Audio Journal is a bi-monthly, ninety-minute, audio magazine that offers insightful discussion, generally from a Christian vantage point, on a wide array of cultural issues. There is a core Christian motivation for the journal, which recognizes that “fulfilling the commands to love God and neighbor requires that we pay careful attention to the neighborhood: that is, every sphere of human life where God is either glorified or despised, where neighbors are either edified or undermined.” This paying attention to the neighborhood is what drives Myers to interview contemporary thinkers as a way to consider not only the devotional component to Christian commitment (Bible study, prayer, etc.) but also “our enjoyment of literature and music, our use of tools and machines, our eating and drinking, our views on government and economics, and so on.”

This motivation to explore the complex ways that the Christian faith can speak to our human situation serves as the impetus to each edition of the journal in which Myers conducts about a half-dozen, ten to fifteen minute interviews with scholars, artists, philosophers, poets, and others. Topics range across a broad spectrum from the arts to architecture, from social philosophy to the sciences, from ethics to ecology, and from theology to technology. Guests are generally published and are known experts in their fields. Memorable topics have included: religion and democracy, moral law as a component of cultur-

al thought, Islamic resentment of the West, living well amidst intrusive communications technologies, artificial intelligence, the work of J. S. Bach, and the recent resurgence of J. R. R. Tolkien. It is interesting to note also that Mars Hill interviews over the years have included such local scholars as UF Professor of History John Sommerville, who also teaches at the Christian Study Center, and UF English professor James Twitchell, who has been a critic of certain cultural trends.

While the stated purpose of the journal is “to assist Christians who desire to move from thoughtless consumption of modern culture to a vantage point of thoughtful engagement,” the journal clearly has appeal for anyone who wants to be more thoughtful about culture and who wants to look into the resources of the Christian tradition for interpreting and improving cultural life. One Mars Hill interview I recall was played in a religious studies course I took during my graduate work at the University of Florida. The class was titled “Religion and the Modern Mind,” and in it the instructor played a Mars Hill interview with renowned Princeton sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow. Wuthnow was being interviewed about a recent book of his in which he was looking into the drift in our culture from organized religion to individual spirituality.

Because the Mars Hill Audio Journal is available only by subscription, not many people know about it, but we would like to help change that. We think it is one of the finest resources available for developing a well-informed understanding of contemporary culture, so we have made arrangements with the folks at Mars Hill to offer our readers a special opportunity. First, if you contact Mars Hill by email, phone, or online request, you can receive a complimentary sample issue of the Journal. Second, Mars Hill has agreed to offer a discounted subscription rate to new subscribers who mention *Reconsiderations* (six issues on CD for \$39 instead of \$48 or on cassette for \$29 instead of \$36). We hope you will take advantage of one or both of these offers. You can reach Mars Hill Audio by phone at 1-800-331-6407, by email at tapes@marshillaudio.org, or through their website at www.marshillaudio.org. When you subscribe, be sure to mention *Reconsiderations* and give the following code: REC1003. You must subscribe before December 15, 2003, in order to qualify for this special offer.

Todd A. Best, Editor of *Reconsiderations*, received his M.A. in religious studies from the University of Florida and currently is in transition to doctoral studies.

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HOW ARE WE DOING?

I do have my moments when I think too much about the part of the glass that is empty rather than the part that is full, but for the most part, I am very encouraged. I think of being jammed in our little conference room for classes, of moving across the street to find more space, and of all the opportunities that our new classroom will open up. I think of students who have already come and gone and of students who are with us now. I think of the students at last night's class on the Church Fathers, the familiar faces, the new faces, and the retired couples sitting right in the middle of the room. I think of the small groups that were using the conference room upstairs while fifty students packed the new classroom downstairs, and another seventy-five studied for exams at the tables of the Ox. I think of faculty at the University of Florida who have been cordial and gracious in working with us on the Culture Seminar, and I think of clergy who believe in the Study Center and encourage us in our work.

I think of the community that is the Christian Study Center. I think of individuals, families, and churches who have prayed for us and given generously month after month, of others who have given just the right gift at just the right time. I think of all the baristas who work hard in the coffee shop - and I know it's not for the money. I think of Nora, Gary, Betty Jo, Laura, Jason, Wade, and John, without whom I cannot imagine the Study Center, and I think of numerous volunteers through whom so much gets done. I think of praying for the Center with Terry, our custodian, with Alex, the manager of the Ox, with Jay, the President of our Board, and with April, my wife, and I realize how blessed I am. I think of all that God is doing in this community and of the part we are privileged to play, and I think, by God's grace and blessing, we're doing pretty well. And we're still just getting started...

Richard V. Horner is Director of the Christian Study Center.

CHRISTIAN STUDY CENTER OF GAINESVILLE

THANK YOU FOR YOUR INTEREST AND SUPPORT

The Christian Study Center is funded solely through the generous contributions of those who share our commitment to serve the university community with a biblical understanding of life. We invite you to join us as a financial partner.

- I would like to contribute to the work of the Christian Study Center. Enclosed is my tax-deductible contribution of: \$25 \$50 \$100 Other \$ This is a Monthly or One Time contribution.
I would like to help you build a classroom for the Study Center. Enclosed is my tax-deductible gift of: \$

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"*Reconsiderations*" is a quarterly publication of the Christian Study Center of Gainesville. Its purpose is to explore a biblical understanding of life and culture and to offer resources to those who seek to serve God with a whole mind. If you do not wish to receive "Reconsiderations," please let us know by e-mailing us at info@christianstudycenter.org or calling us at 352-379-7375.

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