

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

AUGUST 2006

VOLUME 5, NUMBER 4

THE CHURCH AND CULTURAL DISCERNMENT: DISTINGUISHING ENGAGEMENT FROM CAPTIVITY, PART II

Ken Myers

Let me summarize what we covered in the first part of this essay and what its implications are. I argued that Creation has an order established by God, although that order is denied by the assumptions embedded in modern cultural institutions.

Second, humanity's vocation before God, our end, includes pursuing the ramifications of that order in cultural forms. We glorify God and enjoy him forever through our engagement as embodied souls with the material world in its diversity and specificity. We are not created to glorify God and enjoy him forever in a purely mental trance-like state but as we care for the world he has made, a world in which he delights.

Third, the Fall corrupted and twisted the whole of created order, but it did not destroy it. Sinful humanity expresses its disobedience and willfulness in the creation of cultural institutions that deny the order of Creation. But Christ's work includes the inauguration of the restoration of human engagement with Creation, which is to say the renewal of cultural life.

And finally, the Church, in its pursuit of its discipling vocation, must discern between cultural forms that do justice to created order and those that do not. It must encourage its members to go beyond belief in key doctrines, and to begin to order their lives, their ordering of time, their thinking about place, their habits in all sorts of embodied activity from food to sex,

to conversation, to buying and selling, and to voting; all of the ways that most fittingly honor the order of Creation.

Perhaps one of the most profound and subtle ways in which Western culture has been captivated by the surrounding culture is in its tacitly or explicitly accepting the assumptions that all religions do essentially the same things, and that they are essentially private matters. Philosopher Charles Taylor has observed that to be modern is to accept a kind

of dualism in which public life is devoid of religious content. "Modernity is secular," Taylor writes, "not in the frequent, rather loose sense of the word, where it designates the absence of religion, but rather in the fact that religion occupies a different place, compatible with the sense that all social action takes place in profane time."¹

There are many who have suggested that the postmodern moment would revise that dominant secularity, but it hasn't happened yet. To the extent that what we call postmodern is really more adequately designated "hypermodern," that is, an intensification of certain aspects of the modern, I don't think it's going to happen soon.

In 1983, theologian N. T. Wright began working on a commentary on Paul's letter to the Colossians. He finished it in 1985, and in the process of writing it (so he says), "I had undergone probably the most significant

To be modern is to accept
a kind of dualism
in which public life is
devoid of religious content.

change of my theological life. Until then I had been basically a dualist. The gospel belonged in one sphere, the world of creation and politics in another. Wrestling with Colossians 1:15-20 put paid to that. I am still working through the implications (and the resultant hostility in some quarters). . . .”²

Wright says that before studying Colossians for two years, he was a dualist. He’s a pretty smart guy, and he’d already done a lot of thinking about theology, so I think it’s probably safe to say that if he was a dualist, a lot of other Christians are as well. He believed, as they do, that the gospel could be neatly compartmentalized apart from, as he puts it, “the world of creation and politics.” That’s a pretty big slice of life that has nothing to do with the gospel. But studying that letter – in fact just studying six verses of it – produced the most significant change in his theological life. Ten years later he was still working through its implications, and I wouldn’t be surprised if he still is, because there are a lot of pressures to make us into that kind of dualist. The common understanding about the separation of church and state in America encourages that kind of dualism. As I’ve said, the entire momentum of modern culture favors that kind of dualism, whereby religious institutions and religious claims are privatized, and to a large extent, many contemporary churches are willing to accept (for whatever reasons) the world’s definition of what it means to be one of Christ’s disciples.

But is that dualistic view really compatible with the teaching of Scripture? Can our understanding of and, more importantly, *our experience* of redemption really be detached from our life in Creation, in all of its diversity and specificity? Should we assume that religious life is rightly understood as essentially separable from the order of Creation and of society? N. T. Wright came to the conclusion that such an assumption could not be sustained on a careful reading of the Bible’s account of the meaning of Creation and redemption. As he came to write in that commentary on Colossians, “[In the Scriptures] redemption is not thought of dualistically, as though the created world were totally evil and salvation meant being rescued

from it. Creation is God’s work—Christ’s work: though spoilt by sin, it still belongs to God and God still has plans for it. Redemption is not an invasion from a different or hostile realm. The Lord of the world has come to claim his rightful possession.”³

Wright came to believe that the New Testament and the Old Testament alike tell the story of God, the maker of all things, who made Man in his own image as the steward of all of Creation. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve are depicted as at home in the earth. The relationships they enjoyed with God, with each other, and with Creation were harmonious and fitting. Human flourishing, human blessedness, was the enjoyment of that harmony, not simply with God in some disembodied manner, but in human love and active engagement with the rest of Creation, which is what we mean by “culture.”

One of the reasons that we as modern people are tempted to understand redemption apart from Creation is that we have assumed that we could understand *human nature* apart from Creation. Modern philosophy, beginning with Francis Bacon and René Descartes, assumes that there is a chasm separating the human mind from the world of matter. The cosmos are a machine: purposeless, meaningless stuff. We can impose meaning on the stuff of Creation; we can extract useful materials from Creation for the pursuit of our own

projects, but nature is not, in the modern view, declaring the glory of God or available for the imparting of wisdom. In such a world, if human nature is to be understood, it must be defined *apart* from the material world, even apart from the human body itself. Like the ancient Greeks, the essential human attribute for modern thought is mind, or more accurately, will. Mind suggests a contemplative attitude, and modern man is committed to doing things, to making history, to being in control.

The modern dream of absolute and unbounded control requires the assumption that nature is meaningless, but even in a world after the Fall, under the Curse, Creation is not without form and void. The sinful disobedience of Adam and Eve disrupted the harmony they enjoyed before their Fall. Not only

Our cultural lives, the way we
institutionalize our engagement
with the meaningful Creation in
which God has placed us,
are also implicated in
the work of redemption.

were they thus alienated from God, they were alienated from one another and from the rest of Creation. The alienation was decisive, but not complete. The curse in Genesis 3 shows a world of pain, struggle, and disorder. But it is not a complete chaos: babies are still born; the earth still yields fruit. God's good gifts are not entirely destroyed, even though Creation is in bondage to decay as Man is in bondage to sin.

Our sinfulness continues to cause us to rebel against God, and also to rebel against the order he has established in nature and human nature. As Oliver O'Donovan writes, "In speaking of man's fallenness we point not only to his persistent rejection of the created order, but also to an inescapable confusion in his perceptions of it."⁴ So our rebellion against God results in confusion about the rest of Creation, and the pursuit of a position of dominion that is a shameful parody of the dominion enjoyed by Adam.

The Biblical narrative in four acts is Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. The law of the Spirit of life sets us free, and the Creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. How could we possibly posit a dualism between gospel and culture, between redemption and Creation, when redemption is the liberation of Creation?

In his book, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, Oliver O'Donovan argues, "In proclaiming the resurrection of Christ, the apostles proclaimed also the resurrection of mankind in Christ; and in proclaiming the resurrection of mankind, they proclaimed the renewal of all creation with him. The resurrection of Christ in isolation from mankind would not be a gospel message. The resurrection of mankind apart from creation would be a gospel of a sort, but of a purely Gnostic and world-denying sort which is far from the gospel that the apostles actually preached. So the resurrection of Christ directs our attention back to the creation which it vindicates. But we must understand 'creation' not merely as the raw material out of which the world as we know it was composed, but as the

order and coherence in which it is composed."⁵

Earlier in his book, O'Donovan observed that in the resurrection of Christ, the God/Man, the last Adam in whom the fullness of the godhead assumed bodily form, we have a vantage point to understand God's creative and redemptive work together: "From the resurrection we look not only back to the created order which is vindicated but forwards to our eschatological participation in that order."⁶ As to the King of Kings, the loving, resurrected Lord of Creation: "so far from overpowering the given order of things, he rescued it from the 'emptiness' into which it had fallen (Rom. 8:20-21). His redemptive love thus fulfilled the creative task of Adam, to call things by their proper names." That is, Adam was given a naming task, a cultural vocation of perceiving the nature of creatures and thus sealing that divinely appointed reality with a name. Christ commences the completion of that task. As O'Donovan says, "His authority over nature and his salvific concern for the true being of nature go together inseparably."⁷

Let me summarize. I'm arguing that the vantage point we need to have to keep cultural engagement from becoming cultural captivity is first to remember that the Church is called not just to evangelism, but to the discipleship of believers. The redemptive work of Christ which believers enjoy is the beginning of their restoration as full human beings. We are

not, as Paul Marshall says, apprentice angels. We are saved into our full humanity, not away from it. That means that our cultural lives (that is, the way we institutionalize our engagement with the meaningful Creation in which God has placed us) are also implicated in the work of redemption. Our salvation is toward our fulfilled humanity, and thus our discipleship must be a training in the contours of a fulfilled humanity. "Man's life on earth is important to God," argues Oliver O'Donovan. "[H]e has given it its order; it matters that it should conform to the order he has given it."⁸ The discipleship practiced by the Church must therefore take into account the order of Creation. The Church cannot present Jesus simply as the savior of private life, when he himself prefaces the Great Commission with the assertion of his

Evangelicals often talk about accepting Christ as their personal Savior; I don't think I've ever heard anyone talk about honoring him as a personal Creator.

authority over all of heaven and earth.

The assumption that human beings are free to shape any kind of culture they want, that all cultural conventions are simply social constructions, arises from the assumption that the natural world is meaningless, something alien to *who we are most essentially*. Let me reiterate that this assumption is not simply an accidental or careless social trend, but it is at the heart of modernity, and it becomes more radicalized in the postmodern moment. Colin Gunton, among others, has made the case that “the distinctive shape of modernity’s disengagement from the world is derived from its rebellion against Christian theology.”⁹ So not only is modernity’s account of the nature of nature wrong, but it is deliberately wrong, and hence, its advocates will not be easily corrected.

There is a logic, a momentum about modern culture, a dynamic that finds its way into many specific institutions. Remember that the denial of Creation’s meaning is a way of forgetting about the Creator and of exalting human enterprises. God disappears from the center of the cosmos, and autonomous modern man emerges, with all of his institutions designed to advance his power, and discredit those who would set limits on human ambition.

Robert Jenson is right: the message we have for the world does contradict everything the world could possibly suppose—about itself, about God, and about Creation. Where modern culture assumes that human well-being can be achieved only if we are free to define reality any way our desires direct us, the Biblical account insists that we are free only in obedience to the order that God has established. Where the modern account assumes that we are fulfilled when we liberate ourselves from nature and its limitations, the Christian message of salvation calls us to deny ourselves and take up a cross.

The radical work of God in conversion and discipleship is nothing less than the beginning of the renewal of all Creation, and to the extent that our cultural lives are extensions of our engagement with Creation, the patterns of our cultural conventions require transformation as well. Jesus did not die, rise, and ascend to change something in our hearts and to leave it at that, but thereby to change everything. We as his disciples participate in the commencement of those changes.

In striving to keep Creation linked with redemption in our minds, it may help to be reminded of the way in which the Creator is described in the Bible as personally engaged with the entire cosmos. Evangelicals often talk

about accepting Christ as their personal Savior; I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone talk about honoring him as a personal Creator. The order God has placed in Creation, which we are obliged to discern and honor, is the order of a personal God who cares for what he has made. In the Scriptures, the identity of God as Creator is very much tied up with the idea of loving Providence, of his actively working with-in Creation to fulfill his purposes.

For example, Psalm 147 intermingles descriptions of God’s caring for his people with God’s ordering of cosmic forces. The Psalm begins, “Praise the Lord! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is seemly. The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds.” Here we see God’s tender care for his people, especially those most in need of healing. And from this intimate, close-up picture of specific provision for specific people, the Psalmist zooms out for a pan-galactic wide shot: “He determines the numbers of the stars.” The contrast between these two verses is breathtaking, showing us in one moment God attending to something as fragile as a broken heart and then whisking us thousands of light-years out to call our attention to the stellar inventory God is keeping. But in the next phrase, the personal is combined with the cosmic in a way that makes the God of the Bible unique among all gods: “He gives to all of them [that is all of the stars] their names.” The power that the Almighty God has over all He has made is never an abstract, detached power. It is the power of a person. The stars are personally attended to by God. “Great is our Lord,” the Psalmist continues, “and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.”

I think that Paul had this Psalm in mind when he was writing his letter to the Romans. At the end of chapter 11 – right before that great pivoting “Therefore” in chapter 12, verse 1, and right after assuring us that all things work together for the good of the people of God – Paul breaks into praise to God precisely for the obscurity of his purposes. This is a little bit odd. It might be natural for someone to praise God because his purposes are clear, because the reason for every little event is utterly evident. But Paul realizes that God deserves praise precisely because his purposes are fulfilled with unfathomable complexity. “Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How

Continue On Page 7

SUMMER AT THE STUDY CENTER

As a Study Center we do not want to end conversations about important issues but further them, and we are especially eager to enter into the conversations that go on in places like the University of Florida and Santa Fe Community College. As these conversations are opened to us, we are glad to bring them into our own classroom. When faculty, from across the street or across the country, are willing to share their views on questions of shared interest, we are glad to have them as our guests and to enter into dialogue with them.

This summer we had the opportunity to enjoy such a conversation in the context of a reading group that focused on Bart Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*. Professor Ehrman, who teaches at the University of North Carolina, argues that what we know as Christian orthodoxy was created by scribes who imposed their views on the biblical text and corrupted early biblical manuscripts. We think this is a thesis worth taking issue with, and so we spent several weeks discussing the book and looking at issues regarding textual criticism and the biblical manuscripts.

Three people made important contributions to our inquiry: **Dr. Leo Sandgren**, a professor of religion at UF who completed his PhD under Bart Ehrman's direction; **Dr. Charles Hill**, Professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida, who has written often on the biblical manuscripts and text criticism; and **Dr. John Sommerville**, our resident expert on the *Da Vinci Code*, who explored with us what the *Da Vinci Code* phenomenon tells us about American culture.

All three of these lectures are now available as audio files on our web site, so you are welcome to listen in no matter where you live. Listen carefully and with discernment to these thought-provoking lectures, and don't hesitate to enter into the conversation.

PROFESSOR IN THE NEWS

On June 29, Oxford University Press released *The Decline of the Secular University: Why the Academy Needs Religion* by **Dr. John Sommerville**, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Florida and one of the Study Center's board members. Critics have praised his work for its careful research and insightful, important message. Reviewers have employed such words as "valuable," "brilliant," and "controversial" to describe Dr. Sommerville's groundbreaking book, which he cultivated from his culture seminar on the same topic. We congratulate Dr. Sommerville for the success of his work with hopeful anticipation that his argument will inspire the academic world to take a fresh look at Christianity's vital intellectual weight.

EXORCISING DAN BROWN

DR. JOHN SOMMERVILLE

In historical fiction, we normally expect the author to set the fictional lives of his characters against a fairly accurate historical background. Thus, we expect to learn some actual history as we follow the entertaining, fictional story. *The Da Vinci Code* is different: Dan Brown could not resist altering any part of the historical background of his book; it is as fictional as his foreground story!

For that reason, some professional and many amateur historians are having a field day pointing out the many historical errors. The book is so replete with inaccuracies that no one can leave it alone. Of course, all their books together won't reach even a tiny fraction of the audience that Brown is reaching, but maybe the more thoughtful part of that audience will profit from their efforts. We can only hope that the many who will blindly concede that Brown's tale *might* be true will not influence future generations. So it is probably worth while to put out these books so that they can be arranged across the bookseller's window display to get the attention of serious book readers.

There is something else going on here that is more encouraging. Unlike *The Da Vinci Code*, these books will actually teach you a lot about Church history. Readers will find that the history of the early centuries of the Church was often inspiring: people wrestled centuries ago with some of the same questions we face today. The Western Roman Empire bore some striking resemblances to our own times, but it also differed in interesting ways. Through some of these works, we can learn the ways that Christians have been faithful and persevered in various adverse circumstances. Dan Brown really has awakened Christians - and some others - to some of this history, not that we need to thank him for that.

When I first learned of the many refutations of the *Code*, I didn't think it would be worth my while to acquire any or read them. I felt sorry for anyone who felt he must track down and refute every one of the innumerable errors in the book. But when one of my students gave me one of these critiques, I was surprised at how well it was conceived and how much I could learn from it. You may react the same way I did to Sharan Newman's *The Real History behind the Da*

Vinci Code (Berkley Books, 2005). Mercifully, Newman has organized her book topically so that one can dip in here and there for the potted histories of things like Freemasonry, The Gospel of Philip, or the Priory of Sion. You don't have to drag yourself through a whole history of the Middle Ages to get to the parts that interest you.

It seems that every Christian publisher wanted to get into the fray, perhaps not knowing how crowded the field would soon become (most of the books were rushed out in 2004). Ben Witherington III wrote *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims About Jesus, Mary Magdalene and da Vinci* for InterVarsity Press. Amy Welborn produced *De-Coding Da Vinci: The Facts Behind the Fiction of the Da Vinci Code* for the Catholic press, Our Sunday Visitor. Hank Hanegraaff and Paul L. Maier authored *The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction* for Tyndale House, and Greg Jones put together *Beyond Da Vinci* for Seabury. That still left Darrell Bock's *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* for Nelson and Richard Abanes' *The Truth Behind the Da Vinci Code* for Harvest House.

These authors were not leading professional historians. That was not their fault; the professional historians cast a deafening silence during this whole phenomenon. There was, however, one exception: Bart Ehrman of University of North Carolina's Department of Religious Studies came out with a substantial work called *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code*, published by Oxford University Press. He is a skilled popularizer who hitherto had found that the money was in attacking the orthodox histories of Christian origins. Not that he would falsify anything, but you may find the truth rather deeply buried in his books. There is a tendentiousness in his writing that one may find annoying. Nevertheless, one can learn much about early Christian history and be confident that it is up-to-date. Whether he deserves credit for breaking ranks with the rest of the academy, or he simply saw that opposing the opposers was the new money-maker, is not for me to say.

For those who would rather watch the critique than read it, there is now a DVD complete with discussion leader's guide and workbooks, Zondervan's *Discussing the Da Vinci Code* (2006). The DVD tracks with the same publisher's *Exploring the Da Vinci Code* by Garry Poole and the estimable Lee Strobel, who wrote the very useful *The Case for Christ*. Unfortunately, I cannot recom-

Continue On Page 7

Continued From Page 6

mend the other DVD's on the subject. ABC News markets a disk of their 2003 *Primetime* broadcast on *Jesus, Mary and Da Vinci* hosted by Elizabeth Vargas, who allows Brown to maintain the plausibility of his "interpretations" and balances all "scholarly" opinions as if there were no consensus on any of the history. The same can be said of the longer 2005 History Channel broadcast of *Beyond the Da Vinci Code*, marketed by A&E Home Video, which seems to avoid providing any clear and satisfying answers to the questions it addresses, so as not to spoil the book sales.

Dr. Sommerville contributed to the Study Center's summer series on Bart Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* with a discussion about America's surprising response to *The Da Vinci Code*. Entitled "*The Da Vinci Code Phenomenon: What It Says About American Society*," an audio version of the lecture can be accessed on the Study Center's website. Dr. Sommerville encourages us to move beyond Dan Brown's work itself and to examine American society critically: what about our culture causes people to embrace the patent falsehoods of the story? This is the code we would do well to crack.

Continued From Page 4

unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him, and through him, and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen."

Here is a posture entirely out of keeping with modern culture, and yet it is precisely the inner bearing that discipleship ought to encourage: honoring the one who set the foundations of the earth, who leads his people through paths of righteousness, who promises the restoration of all things, and who calls each faithful disciple to walk with him in the continuing mission of this glorious new Creation.

Ken Myers

Executive Producer, Mars Hill Audio

- 1 Taylor interviewed by Bruce Ellis Benson in "What It Means to be Secular." *Books and Culture*. Jul./Aug. 2002: 37.
- 2 N. T. Wright. "My Pilgrimage in Theology." *Themelios*. 18:2. Jan. 1993: 35.
- 3 N. T. Wright. *Colossians and Philemon*. Eerdmans, William B. Publishing Company, 1994: 67-68.
- 4 Oliver O'Donovan. *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988: 19.
- 5 *Ibid.* 31.
- 6 *Ibid.* 22.
- 7 *Ibid.* 25.
- 8 *Ibid.* 15.
- 9 *Op. cit.* 16.

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 by offering the thoughtful consideration of a Christian 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 be added to your mailing list to learn more about the Study Center.

Please make your tax-deductible contribution payable to: Christian Study Center of Gainesville and return this form with your check to the Center at: 112 NW 16th St., Gainesville, FL, 32603

Please add me to your mailing list:

NAME _____
 ADDRESS _____

 E-MAIL _____

Please add the following to your mailing list:

NAME _____
 ADDRESS _____

 E-MAIL _____

CHRISTIAN STUDY CENTER OF GAINESVILLE, INC.
112 NW 16TH STREET
GAINESVILLE, FLORIDA 32603-1827

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
GAINESVILLE, FL
PERMIT NO. 1

INSIDE THIS EDITION

"The Church and Cultural Discernment: Distinguishing Engagement from Captivity, Part II" by Ken Myers, p. 1-4.

"The radical work of God in conversion and discipleship is nothing less than the beginning of the renewal of all Creation, and to the extent that our cultural lives are extensions of our engagement with Creation, the patterns of our cultural conventions require transformation as well."

Review: "Exorcising Dan Brown" by John Sommerville, p. 6-7.

"Unlike The Da Vinci Code, these books will actually teach you a lot about Church history that you weren't interested in before. Dan Brown really has awakened Christians - and some others - to some of this history, not that we need to thank him for that."

Please check our website at www.christianstudycenter.org for the latest information and previous issues of *Reconsiderations*. If you do not wish to receive *Reconsiderations*, email us at info@christianstudycenter.org or call us at 352-379-7375

Reconsiderations is a quarterly publication of the Christian Study Center of Gainesville, whose purpose is to offer the thoughtful consideration of a Christian understanding of life.

**Christian Study Center
of Gainesville**

**112 NW 16th Street
Gainesville, Florida 32603**

352-379-7375

www.christianstudycenter.org

Dr. Richard V. Horner
Director

Zachary G. Beck
Editor