Inconspicuously Christian Film Criticism

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INTRODUCTION

Inconspicuously Christian, the title of this book, was one of two names I considered for my Internet depository of film reviews, interviews, and essays. I liked that it could be abbreviated "IC, which would create a homonym for "I see," but I eventually settled on the more cheeky (and more often misunderstood) *1More Film Blog*. Most readers get the obvious pun; I was offering yet another online collection of film musings. Fewer have reported to me that they understood the play on my surname. Since my work was spread across various outlets, I wanted one single place where I could collect it, where those interested in my writing would not have to do the Google searches and social media digging to remember where a review or essay had appeared. At times, I had a hard time remembering myself!

I identify as Christian, but years before the American presidential election of 2016 brought into sharp focus the blurred political as well as theological assumptions that proclaiming that tribe carries, I was aware that labeling oneself as such on the Internet was as likely to confound readers as it was to reassure them. How could I write a review allegedly for Christians and not cite the Bible even once? (I tried, for a short season, early in my career to attach a Bible verse about a film's topic to the beginning or end of a review, but those who knew me best complained that the practice was strained and heavy-handed, especially in comparison to my seemingly more nuanced analysis.) Why did I rate (and like!) "R" rated movies? Wasn't giving a critical or lukewarm review to a film by Christian artists a betrayal of the tribe? Why did I watch *gay* movies? Just what kind of Christian was I claiming to be?

Even at an early stage in my career, I knew that I must eventually address the relationship between my approach to film journalism and my Christian faith more explicitly. But I kept putting it off. Months became years, and other professional projects took priority. Yet even with a bifurcated professional focus, I managed to slowly carve out a niche for myself in the alternately hostile and indifferent blogosphere. For several years, and under a slew of different editorial overseers, I contributed regularly to the film and television coverage at *Christianity Today*. I fought with and made friends with others interested in the intersection of faith and film at the *Arts & Faith* online forum. For a season, that forum

was owned and run by *Image Journal*, and the work of the Arts & Faith Ecumenical Jury sometimes appeared at *Image*. Before, after, and in-between, I published work at *Christian Spotlight on Entertainment*, *WORLD*, *The Matthew's House Project*, and *The Gospel Coalition*. I published three anthologies of film criticism (one co-edited with Nicholas S. Olsen), and was thrilled to have a review reprinted by American Film Institute after contributing to one of their festival catalogs.

These are (or were) very different outlets, and anyone trying to deduce my politics or theology from them might conclude that they are…malleable. It is worth pointing out that "inconspicuously" is an adverb, not an adjective. In other words, it is meant to describe how I express my Christian faith, not as a comment on the nature of the faith itself. I wanted a phrase that would connote an attitude in opposition to what Barbara Ehrenreich dubbed "visible" Christians in her book*, Nickel and Dimed*. This is what she called Christians who would leave Bible tracts instead of tips for minimum-wage wait staff or Christians whose bumper stickers and t-shirts communicated aggressively and proactively that it was important for them to be identified publically, constantly, and unequivocally as Christian and, consequently, as supporting a range of specific causes and values.

What is wrong with that? In principle, nothing. In practice, perhaps some Christians have become so worried about not being "ashamed" of the gospel (Romans 1:16) that we have not always been scrupulous about distinguishing between timidity and gentleness, between being respectful of others and being cowed by a need for their approval, or between being bold and being obnoxious. I can't offer an unblemished testimony about being on the correct side of any of those divides, but I have tried to reflect on how being cognizant of them has informed my practice. What does being "inconspicuously" Christian mean to me?

First, it means that my Christian faith is the foundation for my perspective rather than a fence marking the boundaries of it. "How is this Christian?" is the most common question I have been asked when pitching stories to popular outlets, and it is (as at least one of the essays printed here attests) one of which I have grown increasingly weary. I accept the fact that there are some subjects that the majority of Christians will have little interest in, but I reject the underlying premise informing so much of this disinterest that any subject is inherently non-Christian. One's Christian theology need not be picayune in order for one's Christian perspective to be comprehensive. In my experience, the opposite is true. The broader one's interests are, the less one is likely to reduce the Christian position on any one subject to aphorism.

It should make sense then, that the second thing that being inconspicuously Christian means to me is that public expressions informed by faith rely more heavily on the articulation of values and principles than rules and prescriptions. Yes, Christianity has rules. Yes, Christians are given ten commandments, not ten suggestions. But even the most emphatic of these rules is not beyond misinterpretation or misunderstanding. Is there a prohibition against all killing, or only murder? Does "taking" the Lord's name in vain mean uttering it as an epithet or calling yourself a Christ follower while turning a deaf ear to his teaching? These and other questions have been sources of debate and dispute for centuries. Yet I believe that beneath the veneer of surface details that can affect the application of our convictions, there are principles that are clear (enough) and are extracted from the Bible consistently enough that they can serve as reliable guidelines for the attitude with which Christians practice most any profession. Speak the truth in love. The latter part of that principle has proven more challenging than I anticipated earlier in my career, since I firmly believe that the Internet has ushered in and helped promote a privileged style of caustic sarcasm more commonly referred to as "snark." In nearly two decades of writing publicly as a Christian, I've come to think the biggest danger for the Christian writer is not being censored or scoffed at by a secular audience but giving in to the temptation to allow witty or clever articulations to substitute for honest but potentially less popular analysis.

The third way I hope my writing has been inconspicuously Christian is by caring more about being empathetic than pious. I have said many times that I firmly believe Shelley's assertion in "Defense of Poetry" that imagination is the foundation of Christian morality. One cannot love one's neighbor without being able to imagine what he or she might be thinking or feeling. For me, piety is about telling the world how you wish to be perceived as a Christian. Empathy is about telling the world how you perceive it. For that reason, the audience for Christian film criticism is not, nor should it be, exclusively Christian. There are, I suppose, debates that are profitably agonistic, but I can't think of any that I have participated in where the promotion of a cause, belief, or idea outweighed the strain it caused on relationships–or that left me convinced I had achieved anything substantive by winning it.

The essays, reviews, and interviews that I have published (or re-published) here are not necessarily those that I think are the best examples of my writing skill. Neither are they always and only those writing samples that take as subject the "best" films produced and distributed during my career, although excellent art does more often rouse the

anesthetized critic to more thoughtful expression. (I once had an editor who said my wheelhouse was the exasperated and resigned review of mundane and mediocre commercial fare. I'm still not sure if that pleases or horrifies me.) What these selections are meant to illustrate is how being Christian has informed my film analysis and influenced my evaluative criticism. It contains mostly work that I am proud of but also a few examples of ideas or expressions I now think of as wrong-headed or simply wrong. Revisiting them and sharing what I learned through writing and sharing them excites me as much if not more than would merely providing a "Greatest Hits" compendium of my most polished or well received work. To that end, I have edited (slightly) some of my earlier work and added postscripts to selected reviews with reflections on why they remain or have become significant to me.

Participating in film journalism (or in any crowded field) makes one acutely aware of and grateful for support and encouragement. The College of Arts & Sciences at Campbell University has supported me unwaveringly over the last fifteen years with a sabbatical, travel funds, and other professional development opportunities while never making me feel that the study of film was in any way less Christian an endeavor than the study of literature. I have had numerous colleagues and editors over the years, but I would feel ungrateful if I didn't single out Mark Moring, who was the first person who actually hired and paid me to write about film. Also too numerous to list exhaustively are the artists and technicians who have worked to create the films that have been the focus of my analysis and the source of much of my life's joy. The relationship between artist and critic too often becomes either adversarial or fawning. Whatever your own religious beliefs or affiliations, please know that I think myself blessed by and improved by the opportunities your work has afforded me to reflect on our shared humanity.

CHAPTER ONE

ARE CHRISTIAN FILMS JUDGED BY A DIFFERENT STANDARD?

I am going to go ahead and surprise a few people—myself included—and say "yes."

That is not to say that I think most Christian films should be rated higher than they are. How many Christian films could their supporters call truly excellent? But then again, having a higher percentage of mediocre films than truly good films is hardly a descriptor exclusively limited to Christian movies.

Neither am I claiming that Christian films are always the victims of conscious, individual bias. We don't often think about or articulate our criteria when we rate a film. So, sometimes, it may be hard to see that the criteria change depending on what we are looking at. When I scan film reviews, I generally see critics taking one of (or a mix of) four approaches: formal criticism, cultural criticism, reader-response criticism, or genre criticism. I contend that the way we navigate between and among those approaches is often detrimental to the rating of Christian films.

By **formal criticism**, I mean observations, descriptions, and judgment that focus on the technical aspects of a film and the artistic craftsmanship that go into making it. There has been some buzz in film journalism recently, particularly on the Internet, calling for critics to engage in more formal criticism. It is worth pointing out here that the Online Film Critics Society (of which I am a member) currently has 275 members. The Internet has flattened film criticism considerably, and it is not uncommon for film journalists to have little or no education or experience in the art of film making or the history of film.

The lack of formal training in the techniques of filmmaking does not exclude a critic from offering commentary. Just as there are perceptive and effective analysts of sports who never played tennis or hockey or golf, there are also effective analysts of film who have never been on a movie set. A critic may not know the term for "deep focus" nor how to achieve it using his own camera, but that does not mean he cannot grasp intuitively how it

is being used for effect in a particular film. That caveat aside, informed criticism is generally more interesting and engaging than mere aesthetic opinions. Criticism can be informed by viewing films or knowledge of film history. However a critic arrives at an understanding of the formal elements and how they are described, it would seem self-evident that a shared, common vocabulary is desirable when performing formal criticism.

I know a few critics who are rightfully proud of their technical knowledge and more than a few who seek to establish (or bolster) their bona fides by including formal analysis in their reviews. I don't think that's a bad thing. But I know very few casual film viewers who walk away from their latest trip to the multiplex saying, "That was a really clever use of negative space" or "I wish a reviewer would explain to me some of the low-key lighting choices in *Gone Girl*." Most importantly, for the context of this argument, I know very few critics who consistently make technical innovation or excellence the sole factor in rating or esteeming films. Formal elements are more often a factor in dismissing or downgrading some films.

Christian films are rarely inventive on a formal level. The Kendricks and the Erwins are by their own testimony largely self-taught, which means they may concentrate on following the basics of their craft rather than developing a particular style. Learning by doing is a valid approach to most professional endeavors. But doing so while making commercial movies (as opposed to shorts or while in film school) puts pressure on filmmakers to be conventional. Experimenting takes time, money, and resources.

Lack of innovation does not necessarily mean lack of competence. It can, however, lead those who value innovation to dismiss the conventional as less accomplished, favoring what is new or different over what is well executed but unexceptional. Sean Astin told a group of journalists that the dailies he saw for *Mom's Night Out* looked much better than many films he had been in, some of which had exponentially bigger budgets. Yet I was hard-pressed to find a single reviewer who praised that film for its cinematography, regardless of his or her overall judgment. I thought the color palette for *Dolphin Tale 2* was terrific and that director Charles Martin Smith and cinematographer Daryn Okada did a fantastic job of keeping what was essentially a very tight location shoot visually interesting. Randall Wallace's decision to eschew, as much as possible, special effects in filming *Heaven is for Real* kept that film from having the more cheesy appearance of *The Christmas Candle*. I'm still amazed that D. J. Caruso was able to figure out how to shoot certain scenes in his anti-bullying movie *Standing Up* and keep it PG.

If there is a critical double standard for Christian films, I think it is illustrated not in how we use formal criticism but when we use it. If critics

don't like a film, and we aren't sure why, it is easy enough to retreat to vague formal pronouncements that make it sound as though we are being more objective than we really are. This critical move is by no means limited to Christian films. Tom Hooper's *The King's Speech* was not particularly innovative or formally complex, and it won the Academy Award for Best Picture. His next film, *Les Misérables*, was more experimental, touting its attempts to record the actors singing on the set. Some critics complained this was a gimmick. My point? When we otherwise like a film, we tend to praise its technique, but it is often hard to really know how much of the technique is what is informing our judgment. In a famous story from film history, when *The Godfather* screened for test audiences, the film itself scored high, but the test audiences said the film, especially the opening wedding scene, was too long. A trimmer, recut version was shown to different test audiences who liked the film and characters much less. How many of us are able to tell how much the editing choices affected our overall experience?

Cultural criticism will look at the ways in which a work of art performs cultural work—how it promotes or reinforces certain ideas. Critics engaging in cultural criticism will often spend as much time trying to explain or understand why a film is popular (or not) as they do making an independent judgment. My point here is that it is quite easy to engage in cultural criticism and come up with judgments that are at odds with one's formal estimation of the film.

I more or less despised Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street*, a film that I thought reveled a bit too enthusiastically in the excesses of its protagonist. An excruciatingly long set piece in which Leonardo Di Caprio crawls back to his car because he can't control his body—and then gets into it and drives—is shot for laughs. I found the whole enterprise dreary and distasteful. Say that about the work of a respected director and you can expect a lot of pushback. You just don't get it...Martin Scorsese is a brilliant filmmaker (true)...it's actually a critique...blah, blah, blah.

God's Not Dead was a much easier target for cultural criticism. I tried to emphasize in my review that when I said I didn't care for the film, I was really saying that I didn't care for the cultural work the film was doing. The view of the world it represented was not one that I found accurate. But you know what? I could say much the same thing about *Gone Girl* (and its views of marriage and mental illness), *Boyhood*, *The Lego Movie*, or *The Equalizer*. Reviews of—and discussion surrounding—movies that invite cultural criticism often become less about the movies themselves and more about the views of the world they represent. This is one area in which—scoff all you like—I think Christian reviewers are sometimes fairer than

some of their secular counterparts. They will more often acknowledge or perhaps even praise elements of films that are engaging in overall cultural work they find distasteful than will some of their secular counterparts. Or so it seems to me, anyway.

Reader-response criticism is often parodied and more often misunderstood. In literature, reader-response is an umbrella term that covers a lot of approaches, each of which focuses on how the reader builds meaning by interacting with text. Too often, it is caricaturized as suggesting that the reader (or viewer) can interpret a text however she likes.

One strain of reader-response criticism that I appreciate is that which seeks to examine the reader's interpretive communities and how they inform his or her approach to any text. While a formalist might call on the critic (especially the Christian critic) to put aside his or her presuppositions when approaching a work of art, a reader-response critic is more apt to buy into the notion that doing so is impossible. In teaching, as in reviewing, I tend to privilege transparency over (dubious claims of) neutrality. It is probably important when deciding how much weight to give to my reviews of *Mom's Night Out* or *When the Game Stands Tall* to know how I feel about comedies (meh) or sports films (yeah!) in general.

Because I think Christian reviewers are more sensitive to (or feel more vulnerable about) charges of bias, I actually think they tend to be more up-front about their biases, which in turn makes their judgments paradoxically easier rather than harder to dismiss. I tend to think, for example, that critics go out of their way to formally criticize a film like, say, *Gimme Shelter*, so that they can avoid grappling with how much of their own antipathy has to do with its ideology rather than its execution. There are issues with the film, to be sure, but when was the last time you remember reading a review in which the critic said, essentially, "this was okay, but I didn't like it because it challenges my own ideology or beliefs"? Do we really think that critics of faith are the only ones who ever feel that way? I read more comments explaining why *Juno* wasn't really pro-life than I did admissions from critics that being pro-life was something that they might hold against a film.

I tend to equate genre criticism in film with the late Roger Ebert. Here I am not talking about the literary tendency to break down and examine the conventions of the genre so much as an attempt to evaluate films relative to other films in the same genre. It seemed to me that Ebert figured out, as does any critic who rates films long enough, that it is hard to rate films with any sort of consistency. How can we rank *A Clockwork Orange* relative to *Babe*? Is it necessary—or helpful—to determine whether or not *Spring Breakers* is quantifiably better or worse than *Andrei Rublev*? Ebert popularized the practice of comparing films to others within its genre, which implies (if it

doesn't state outright), that five stars for a film noir or western mean something different than five stars for a kiddie movie or romantic comedy.

Here, I think the Christian movie has two problems. Critics and artists sometimes deny that Christian movies are a genre unto themselves—thus making it difficult, if not impossible, for a critic to say, "I don't like Christian movies" and have it mean the same thing as my saying, "I don't like horror movies." Heck, for that matter, it does not provide the Christian critic the space for saying that he/she does not particularly like Christian movies without it coming across as an example of cultural or reader-response criticism. Recently one of my colleagues at *Christianity Today* admitted that his distaste for a film and desire to review it was informed by his wanting to make clear that the source material did not represent his "positions" or "the positions of most other Christians." This assessment may be true, but I'm not sure what qualifies a film critic—absent some reference to actual survey data—to make it. Full disclosure, I haven't seen *Left Behind*, and I do not think the books represent my own theological position. But I certainly would take pause at using that fact as the basis for saying something was categorically "not a Christian movie," particularly if I went on to claim that I did not know what that label meant.

While I certainly understand an artist wanting to eschew any label—Graham Greene once denied he was a "Catholic writer" instead claiming that he was a writer "who explored the Catholic regions of the mind"—denying that the category of "Christian" film exists (and means something) is ultimately an incomprehensible position to me. A cursory definition—either by Christians, for Christians, about Christians, or some combination of all three—doesn't have to mean that every author of faith is participating in or exemplifying the current conventions of the genre. Is it possible for a "Christian" movie to represent social or theological positions that I disagree with and still have me accept them as "Christian" movies? Of course. *Mom's Night Out* participates in and is informed by a complementarian interpretation of Biblical pronouncements about gender roles that I do not share. That doesn't mean that the Erwins are not Christian or that I can't accept it as a Christian movie. I wrote in my review of *Heaven is For Real* that I was (and am) highly skeptical of Todd Burpo's book, but that does not mean I could not accept the film as a representative offering by (some) Christians for (some) Christians—and find themes or ideas to admire in it even where I rejected its premise. *Son of God* appeared to, in my reading, present Mary Magdalene as not just a disciple but as an apostle. Not buying it. But if there are any doubts that this was meant to be—and was—a Christian movie, just ask Mark Burnett and Roma Downey.

I'll be the first to concede that the lines between Christian production and mainstream production are pretty blurry, particularly in a studio system that challenges our continued commitment to auteur theory. There are and will remain reasonable distinctions to be made between Flannery O'Connor and Tim La Haye, between D. J. Caruso and Carl Theodor Dreyer. *Heaven is for Real* was directed by Randall Wallace whose body of work speaks for itself. Prior to that movie, the titles he directed, and the director himself, might have been looked at as faith-friendly, but *Pearl Harbor*, *Secretariat*, *When We Were Soldiers*, or even *Braveheart* were never thought of as "Christian" films, were they? But that *Heaven is for Real* was a movie by (some) Christians for (some) Christians was emphasized by the fact that Todd Burpo only agreed to sell the story to Sony if T.D. Jakes produced it and did so primarily because he thought that the minister/producer would preserve and protect the religious aspects of the story even while trying to entice others who might not care about such themes to watch also.

While some critics are bending over backwards to eschew explicitly acknowledging or adopting the "Christian" label, the biggest indicator I see that it informs their (our) judgment is the odd unwillingness to examine these films in the context of any other genre. *When the Game Stands Tall* is not a perfect sports film, but, hey, Rotten Tomatoes critics, is it seriously forty points worse than *Vision Quest* and fifty worse than John Huston's shockingly overvalued *Victory*? *Mom's Night Out* was not a comedy masterpiece, but I laughed during it more frequently than I did at *The Heat*, *Tammy*, and both *Grown Ups* movies combined. While I am on the subject of Adam Sandler's unfunny franchise, I'll point out that it is actually ranked lower at Rotten Tomatoes than the Erwin brothers' comedy, yet it had no trouble getting a sequel made. There are plenty of non-Christian movies that have an audience that cares little about what the critics say. Yet when a publicist or reader points out the discrepancies between critical consensus and target audience enthusiasm in regards to Christian films, much eye-rolling ensues. I didn't think *Grace Unplugged* was all that good, but neither did I imagine anyone but the target audience caring for *Jersey Boys*, *Rock of Ages*, or *The Doors*. The difference? I didn't see defenders or fans of the latter films preemptively dismissed, their pleasure in flawed works cited as evidence that they should be disqualified from all further discussion.

The perfect Christian film was once described to me by a studio executive as one that faith audiences saw as explicitly directed towards them but that non-faith audiences would be comfortable viewing and not feel excluded from. Whether such a film even theoretically existed was—and is—an open question. The executive's use of the metaphor for a "sweet

spot" on a baseball bat indicated that if it did, its balance between announcing and hiding its faith focus would be a delicate one.

Christian films have a long way to go before they have earned the right to complain about being slighted. I don't think it is a coincidence that the most popular films that could be included in that genre — *The Blind Side*, *The Good Lie*, *Calvary* — are often excluded from the conversation since some artists often don't want to be associated with that label and segments of the audience always want the faith content to be more central and more explicit than it is. But conceding that faith-based films are often not very good doesn't mean we can't notice or comment on a tendency to be overly critical of them. Is there never a distinction to be made between average and terrible? Between "I didn't care for it" and "worst movie ever"? Is it really that far out of line to ask whether, if (some? most? many?) critics hate every entry into a genre equally, they simply hate that genre?

—October, 2014

Postscript: I was surprised when I wrote this piece that I received mostly positive feedback from friends and peers. I didn't think I was saying anything particularly insightful or helpful, just documenting some obvious trends that I encountered in the film blogosphere.

Ironically, I revisited this essay just after Tom Hooper's adaptation of *Cats* was resoundingly panned, leading me to question how, in ten years, critical consensus about him went from someone who was deserving of an Academy Award for Best Director to someone who was allegedly incompetent about basic filmmaking techniques. I don't know anything about Hooper's faith or lack of it. The comments about Hooper are meant to illustrate the telling inconsistencies with which formal criticism is used to champion or denigrate films. Film criticism seems inexorably wedded to auteur theory and the categorical divisions of form that lend themselves to award categories.

Ultimately, I think this essay argues not that there is some sort of bias against Christian films but that the diversity of acceptable critical approaches can mask the unconscious biases of any critic. There is nothing inherently wrong or unprofessional about a critic saying, "I don't like Christian movies." It is when the critic tries to convince himself that such antipathy (or favoring) is based on objective, unchanging criteria that the differences between critical approaches (and their underlying assumptions) become important.

—July, 2021

CHAPTER TWO

LEFT BEHIND AS EVANGELICAL PORNOGRAPHY

For most readers who are not evangelical Christians (and for many of us who are), the representation of reality in the *Left Behind* series can come across as oddly distorted. I have adopted the term "Evangelical Pornography" to describe the *Left Behind* franchise because its methods of representing its characters, particularly those who differ from its target audience, fit the description of what psychoanalyst Louise Kaplan calls a "perverse strategy" (123).

A perversion, according to Kaplan, is a psychological strategy that simultaneously attempts to gratify and hide a desire by acting it out while hiding its true meaning. Kaplan uses this definition to explore her thesis that perversions are "as much pathologies of […] role identity as they are pathologies of sexuality" (14). She focuses, of course, on gender as a primary factor in creating role identity, and hence concludes that the perversions (and pornographies) of women are substantially different from those of men. "A perversion," Kaplan writes, "is a central preoccupation of a person's existence" (11). Male perversions use some "manifest form of 'kinky sex' to prevail over . . . otherwise devastating emotional states" (10). Because females have different emotional states born of different emotional fears growing out of different sociological roles and expectations, their strategies for appeasing inner demons will be attached to different content.

I would like to extend Kaplan's analysis and categories to sociological and psychological roles grounded primarily in people's conception of their own religious identity. While authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins have argued that the *Left Behind* books are evangelistic (and hence have non-Christians as their intended audience), they have acknowledged in interviews what the books' publication and marketing history bear out: the series is most widely read and championed by evangelical and fundamentalist Christians (*Larry King Live*). I would argue that the success of these books is largely because they serve a Kaplanesque pornographic function—they allow readers to simultaneously gratify and hide a desire.

Furthermore, I contend that the consumption of these books becomes a perverse strategy. The protagonists become fetish objects used to create the illusion of a superior-inferior (dominant-submissive) relationship between the reader and the fetish object—in this case, people in the readers' own lives who are symbolically represented by characters in the text. Kaplan says of fetishism that it "exemplifies the perverse strategy [because] the fetish is designed to divert attention from a whole story by focusing attention on a detail" (123).

In deciding how effectively Kaplan's terminology can be applied to *Left Behind*, the reader must ask certain questions not just about what work the books do, but also about what emotional or spiritual states require that sort of work. To be more precise in using Kaplan's terminology, what shameful or painful emotional states are being simultaneously indulged in and hidden by the *Left Behind* series? Key passages and scenes show that unraptured characters engage in ritualistic self-humiliation, constantly thinking and proclaiming that their raptured friends and family members were "right" and that they, the left behind, were unworthy of their Christian friends and loved ones.

Kaplan says that a person creates a perverse scenario because "it protects him from becoming conscious of some wishes and fantasies that would otherwise frighten or humiliate him" (124). The frightening wishes and fantasies that would humiliate the readers of *Left Behind* if openly acknowledged seem fairly easy to extract: a fear of sexuality born out of an ascetic legalism, a latent anger at loved ones for not converting and thus forcing the Christian family member to deal with the fear of eternal separation, and a feeling of resentment at the world for making the evangelical or fundamentalist reader feel ignored and marginalized.

To understand this latter feeling, a brief overview of evangelicalism and fundamentalism is in order. While no synopsis can do justice to the diversity of developments within American Protestantism, it is possible to paint a broad picture that will help contextualize and explain the *Left Behind* phenomenon. Today the term "fundamentalist" is often used to denote any politically conservative Christian, while its counterpart, "evangelical," is the fashionable preface to denote a self-proclaimed Christian rather than a social or ethnic one. While these generalizations have some basis in fact, they tend to obscure the fact that evangelical was itself originally a pejorative term—a curtailment of the phrase "neo-evangelicals" that fundamentalists used (and evangelicals appropriated) to describe the more moderate coalition that inherited and emerged from the attempts at fundamental coalitions of the 1920s (Marsden 62).

George Marsden describes the roots of fundamentalism growing out of a schism in Protestantism about how to respond to the challenges to its cultural dominance provided by Darwinian science, urbanization, and secularization. Marsden writes:

> Protestants' apparent cultural dominance rested on a strong base of the wealthiest and the oldest American families and institutions. Protestants had been the first to settle almost everywhere in the American colonies and so naturally their heirs held most of the positions of power and influence…. It is hardly surprising… that the prevailing moral values of the civilization reflected this heritage. (11)

Marsden also clearly outlines that the rise of fundamentalism was first and foremost a reaction against and an attempt to separate from liberal theology that it saw as accommodating secularization (56). For example, he cites Curtis Lee Laws as one of the first to coin the term" fundamentalist," when he wrote in *The Watchman-Examiner* to describe those who were ready "to do battle royal for the Fundamentals" (qtd in Marsden 57).

This context is designed to explain the sense of disenfranchisement felt by many conservative Christians. As the Laws quote shows, political and social activism is nothing new for conservative Christians. I would argue, however, prior to the ascent of Ralph Reed's Christian Coalition in the 1980s and 1990s, the dominant mood of the Christian community was one of dismay at the loss of perceived privileged status as the (perceived) majority worldview of the country. For that reason, I think it is easy to see the portrayal of Christian persecution in the post-apocalyptic world as being allegorical rather than prophetic. That Bibles are banned from public school in *Left Behind: The Kids* is not meant to be a prediction of post-apocalyptic secularization for the benefit of secular readers but a lament of current secularization to be recognized by Christian readers. That Buck Williams loses his job almost immediately after converting to Christianity can be viewed as a fictional parallel to the sort of anti-Christian prejudice that Rams quarterback Kurt Warner related as accepted fact to a Christian audience but shied away from when picked up by the large media networks.

The historical context also reveals that much of the anger in fundamentalism is directed at moderate or socially liberal Christians. The Laws quote, for example, presupposes a class of Christians who are not ready to do "battle royal" for the fundamentals, and its attitude towards them is mirrored in *Left Behind*'s attitude towards the nominal Christians whose refusal to share their raptured brethren's separation from the world results in their failure to share in their pre-tribulation escape from it. It is in this attitude towards

others that are less separatist than those who are raptured that *Left Behind* is most deserving of the label "fundamentalist."

How does this historical rift between fundamentalism and evangelicalism manifest (or hide) itself in a Kaplanesque "perverse strategy"? To answer that question, we must begin to summarize and look closely at some of the scenes in *Left Behind*. Works in the *Left Behind* series are composed of loose episodes built around central characters. The climax of individual volumes usually focuses around a sermon, dialogue, or experience that prompts one of the central characters to acknowledge a previous failure and commit himself or herself to a "true" theological understanding. Epiphanies are combined with a denunciation of one's previous willful ignorance. Within both the adult and youth series are a number of what I call "touchstone" scenes: scenarios or incidents that are mentioned prominently in more than one volume. While in much postmodern literature or film this style of revisiting the same events from different perspectives is done to underline the subjectivity of individual perception, there is a uniformity in the reiteration (and retelling) of these scenes in *Left Behind* that underscores rather than extending their most overt themes.

Two of the most often referenced scenes are that of Rayford Steele, the protagonist of the adult series, coming home after the rapture and confronting the empty bedroom containing the relics left behind by his raptured wife and the story of an adolescent soccer player at an Indonesian missionary school who commits suicide after every other player on the field is raptured before his eyes. The former scene is described in detail in the adult *Left Behind* series and witnessed (secretly) by one of the protagonists of the children's series. It is worth quoting at some length:

> At the end of the hall he paused before the French doors that led to the master suite. What a beautiful, frilly place Irene had made it, decorated with needlepoint and country knickknacks. Had he ever told her he appreciated it? Had he ever appreciated it?
>
> There was no alarm to turn off here. The smell of coffee had always roused Irene. Another picture of the two of them, him looking confidently at the camera, her gazing at him. He did not deserve her. He deserved this, he knew, to be mocked by his own self-centeredness and to be stripped of the most important person in his life.
>
> He approached the bed, knowing what he would find. The indented pillow, the wrinkled covers. He could smell her, though he knew the bed would be cold. He carefully peeled back the blankets and sheet to reveal her locket, which carried a picture of him. Her flannel nightgown, the one he always kidded her about and which she wore only when he was not home, evidenced her now departed form.

> His throat tight, his eyes full, he noticed her wedding ring near the pillow, where she always supported her cheek with her hand. It was too much to bear, and he broke down. He gathered the ring into his palm and sat on the edge of the bed, his body racked with fatigue and grief. He put the ring in his jacket pocket and noticed the package she had mailed. Tearing it open, he found two of his favorite homemade cookies with hearts drawn on the top in chocolate.
>
> What a sweet, sweet woman! he thought. I never deserved her, never loved her enough! He set the cookies on the bedside table, their essence filling the air. With wooden fingers he removed his clothes and let them fall to the floor. He climbed into the bed and lay facedown, gathering Irene's nightgown in his arms so he could smell her and imagine her close to him.
>
> And Rayford cried himself to sleep. (53-54)

It is not a coincidence that this scene lies at the center of the *Left Behind* franchise. It contains the ritualistic elements of self-abuse that evidence an antipathy or even outright hostility towards the characters that feed the readers' desire to see their hurt, shame, and rejection at the hands of their own loved ones who reject Christianity acknowledged and punished. The high degree of remorse is inextricably linked to an acknowledgment of the moral purity and superiority of the departed family member who is analogous to the reader. In two of the paragraphs, the main character says he did not "deserve" his Christian wife, in two he expresses a lack of appreciation for the domestic qualities (needlepoint, home decoration, cooking) which not-so-subtly links her moral superiority to a middle-class, social conservatism.

There is also a strong undercurrent of sexual tension in the above passage. Granted, the "flannel nightgown" acts as a reminder of domesticated sexuality which is unappreciated and juxtaposed with the more dangerous (spiritually and emotionally) temptation of sex for pleasure offered by non-spouses. Later, in the children's series, part of Vickie's transformation from teenage slut to born-again Christian will be symbolized by her acquiring the wardrobe of Judd's mother–another chaste dresser. The fact that the coffee is what "rouse"s Irene also suggests an underlying insecurity about Rayford's own ability to satisfy his spouse.

More suggestive than the parody of copulation that fills the end of the scene (Rayford hugging the nightgown on the bed) are the connotations of "mocked" and "stripped" in the second paragraph. Both have strong sexual undertones, and both imply an element which at first seems missing from the scene but that is nevertheless central to its emotional power: an audience.

There is an element of performance in Rayford's emotional flagellation that is prompted by the symbolic reminder in the previous sentence that his wife has been (and indeed still is) "gazing" at him. The concept of a male

gaze is nothing new to feminist criticism. It is the axiom that the point of view or perspective of the audience is an inferred masculine view and that its object is the female body. The female body is objectified because the viewer is invited not to identify with the subject but rather with a surrogate viewer (or maybe even a surrogate participant who is acting upon the subject.) Rayford has the fe-male gaze turned upon him; he becomes the object in a fantasy construction in which the reader is invited to identify with the surrogate viewer, his wife, both symbolically in the picture and presumably from heaven.

These elements become ritualized throughout the series as the central post-rapture experiences are told and retold in post-conversion "testimonies." The scenes that are told in greatest detail are not those where the characters convert but where they acknowledge their own sins prior to conversion. The central elements are an acknowledgment of the characters' unworthiness of their raptured Christian friends and family (the reader surrogates) and a testimony to the raptured Christians' (unheeded) efforts (always made in love) to convert or serve the unappreciative sinner. There is very little evangelical mention of the gospel; God's saving work is not accomplished through Christ on the cross but through contemporary Christians showing His love to unbelievers.

Extending this thematic formula to *Left Behind*: *The Kids* is fairly simple. While in much of the best literature readers are invited to identify with the protagonists (and thus face realities they might not otherwise consider), here, as in the adult series, the readers are invited to identify with the raptured siblings or parents of the kids "left behind." Thus the attitude invited is one of superiority and vindication: those who symbolize people in the lives of Christian adolescents and parents who teased, ridiculed, or disobeyed them are symbolically and ritually chastened and humiliated for the entertainment of the Christian audience.

When I call *Left Behind: The Kids* "kiddie porn," I mean it in a dual sense. First, it is evangelical porn intended for children's consumption, encouraging the child reader to retreat to a fantasy world rather than face complex realities. Second, it is evangelical porn with children as the subject matter, inviting adult readers to participate in a fantasy world where rebellious, arrogant, and mocking adolescents come to acknowledge the moral superiority and sincerity of their parents. After the parents become raptured, the infantile fantasy of "they'll be sorry when I'm gone" is reversed. The children have to admit as part of their repentance process that their parents and pastors were both ideologically correct and morally uncompromised. There is, in short, a secondary audience: Christian parents, and the message the series sends to them is that their children's lack of faith

is not their fault. Thus the series is "kiddie porn" in the second sense, and LaHaye's and Jenkins's dedication, "To our own kids," could be read as somewhat ironic.

Both target audiences are catered to in the first volume of the children's series, where the character Judd, a sixteen-year-old white male with one sibling, is portrayed as being unilaterally at fault for all of his family's conflicts. After having forged his father's signature to obtain an illegal credit card, Judd buys a plane ticket to London. While on the plane, he recalls steps his parents have tried to take to deal with his rebellion, including a father-son trip which Judd sabotaged: "[His trip] was also supposed to be a time for him and his dad to bond—whatever that meant. Dad had tried, Judd had to give him that, but there had been no bonding" (11). In another example, Judd recalls how his younger brother, Marc (another reader surrogate) was mocked and ridiculed by Judd for his attempts at sibling love:

> One day, after school, his little brother came into his room.
> "What do you want?" Judd asked Marc.
> "I just wanted to ask you a question. Are you still a Christian?"
> Judd lied. "Of course," he said. "What's it to you?"
> "I was just wonderin' because it doesn't seem like you're happy or acting like one."
> "Why don't you get out of here and mind your own business!"
> "Will you be mad at me if I pray for you?"
> "Don't waste your breath."
> "You're makin' Mom cry, you know that?"
> "She shouldn't waste her tears either."
> "Judd, what's the matter? You used to care—"
> "Out! Get out!"
> Marc looked pale and tearful as he left. Judd shook his head, disgusted, and told himself Marc would be a lot better off when he outgrew his stupidity. I used to be just like that, Judd thought. What a wuss!" (13)

Like Rayford Steele, the protagonist of the adult series, Judd's post-rapture conversion comes with a repentance not so much of his sins against God but against his family, a confession not so much of his own faith but of his family's irreproachable conduct towards him. He finds his family's abandoned clothes, and his response is a miniature version of Rayford Steele's: "They loved him so much, cared for him, worried about him. And look how he had treated them. He held their clothes close to his chest and closed his eyes, realizing he had gotten just what he deserved" (138).

In volume two of *Left Behind: The Kids*, this conditioned response will resolve itself into rote characterizations of his pre-rapture life that acknowledge the sincerity of both parents and sibling:

> Though he knew he had had every chance and could have been in heaven with his parents and brother right then, everything in him still fought to blame somebody else. But whom could he blame?
>
> His parents had been wonderful examples to him. Even his little brother had recently asked Judd if he still loved Jesus. (3)

Nor is this attitude towards one's former life unique to Judd. Vickie, the fifteen-year-old daughter of a trailer-park couple admits both before and after the rapture that her parents' behavior has been above reproach since their conversion and that her rejection of Christianity is based solely upon her own need to feel morally superior:

> Vickie didn't understand herself. Often she asked herself why she had to be so mean, so angry. It was obvious that this . . . this thing, whatever it was, was working. Her dad was a new man. He never missed work, was always on time, got promoted, had more friends. He was always sober. He looked happier. The only sore point in his life, besides his smoking, was Vicki. She could see him getting more and more frustrated with her, and she had to admit her goal was to make him explode in anger. Why? So she wouldn't feel so bad about herself. (67)

After the rapture of her parents, Vickie, like Judd, takes full responsibility for all of the problems in her pre-rapture family: "I saw big changes in their lives […] but actually I hated it," (8-9) she says. Later she admits, "Her mother was right […] she simply didn't want to change" (17), and again: "She saw what a fool she had been, what an ungrateful rebel. […] She had not wanted to admit that her parents had really changed, but it was obvious to everyone, herself included" (71).

Thirteen-year-old Lionel Washington finds himself unraptured despite his immediate family's devout Christianity. Lionel tells his drug-addicted and alcoholic uncle that God "uses the people who love them to show them His forgiveness," to which his uncle replies, "Well, I can't deny my family has done that" (40). He also reminds his twelve-year-old friend, Ryan Daley, that Ryan had heard the truth from Raymie Steele (Rayford's son) and is, hence, without excuse for his own unraptured state.

The previous quotes are designed to demonstrate the prevalence of a spiritually masochistic theme that runs through the *Left Behind* series. To understand that masochism as pornographic, however, requires that we accept it as representing the consumers' anger at another rather than at

himself. Self-flagellation, emotional and physical, is, after all, not a recent innovation in Christian narration. Might Rayford's castigation of himself be seen as a latter-day example of puritanical self-abasement? Jonathan Edwards writes in his "Personal Narrative":

> I have often since I lived in this town, had very affecting views of my own sinfulness and vileness; very frequently so as to hold me in a kind of loud weeping, sometimes for considerable time together [….] My wickedness, as I am in myself, has long appeared to me perfectly ineffable, and infinitely swallowing up all thought and imagination; like an infinite deluge, or infinite mountains over my head. I know not how to express better, what my sins appear to me to be, than by heaping infinite upon infinite, and multiplying infinite by infinite [….] When I look into my heart, and take a view of my wickedness, it looks like an abyss deeper than hell. (475)

Is Rayford's self-excoriation different from Edwards's or, for that matter, from Paul's who says he counts all things but dung (Phil 3:8)? One could point out that both Paul's and Edwards's laments are products of post-conversion reflection, while Rayford's precedes his own acceptance of the gospel. In fact, the film version of the bedroom scene culminates not with Rayford stripping but with his smashing a bedroom mirror with his wife's Bible. More telling for me, however, is the extent to which the self-derision of the characters in *Left Behind* is focused on their treatment of departed Christians rather than their rejection of God. It is not God, but Rayford's wife, Irene, who appears to him in a confirming vision in the *Tribulation Force* film.

This theme of self-chastisement is especially prevalent early in the respective series, when the reader is more apt to identify with the raptured family members than the left behind protagonists. As the children's series progresses, a bit of a transfer takes place. The kids continue to maintain a subordinate relationship with the departed that is ritually reinforced through the periodic repetition of their "testimony." This process is repeated when they hear the testimonies of new Christians. Each reinforces the same basic themes—how they were intolerant of (and inferior to) the respective Christians in their lives. For example, a woman with a Jewish-Christian husband tells the kids in Volume 4:

> I believed I was the most open-minded and tolerant person in the world until Isaiah converted to Christianity […]. I was mortified. I was angry. I refused to discuss it. I would not attend with him. Our marriage was nearly on the rocks, and yet I could not deny the change in him. No matter how I treated him, he loved me and forgave me and treated me kindly. (135)

The kids' subordinate relationship to previous Christians remains, but it is increasingly supplemented with a stance of superiority towards their living, post-rapture acquaintances that remain unconverted. This is especially true as the kids return to school and face systematic political and social opposition that attempts to marginalize them. They find themselves, in short, in a position oddly similar to that of contemporary Christian readers suffering from (perceived or real) persecution. The clear superiority of the Christian kids to their non-Christian contemporaries in the areas of courage, compassion, love, and above all, integrity, allows the readers to identify with their situation when they are interacting with non-Christians. This compartmentalized identification allows the series to simultaneously gratify the reader's desire to be flattered while alternately permitting her or him to feel that Christians are unfairly persecuted.

Take, for example, the following quotes from Volumes 4-5, when the kids return to school and form a junior "Tribulation Force" (a secret cadre of Christians designed to spread the gospel):

- Did Judd need an education, or would he be wasting his time in class while the world hurtled out of control? (4:13).
- I'm being straight with you because you talk that way to people. I wish someone had talked to me this way before it was too late (4:77).
- Bruce swore them to secrecy and said the only others who knew how he felt were four adults who formed a sort of inner circle within the church (4:107).
- Anyway, if Bruce is right […] we'll have only seven years to live. Why would I want to spend half that time in school? To learn what? The world is going to hell, and we'd be sitting in class, trying to prepare for a future that doesn't exist (5:2).
- Judd and Marc and Marcie used to play games on it and surf the Net. Judd enjoyed all the chat rooms, though his parents warned him about the worst ones. Those didn't even tempt him now (5:28).
- "I never want to stop telling what Christ has done for me," Bruce said. "I will never again be ashamed of the gospel of Christ. The Bible says that the Cross offends. If you are offended, I am doing my job" (5:51).
- Judd shrugged. He was no match for an intellect, a presence like Mr. Shellenberger. Judd had considered hiding his belief, but he wouldn't have been able to live with his cowardice (86).

Because the world of *Left Behind* is one in which legitimate human authority has been taken away, it offers to new or marginal Christians a path

to instant leadership without the hard work of discipleship or transformation. There is a condescension in the attitude of the above quotes towards both the world and, if one looks closely, towards politically or socially moderate Christians. The Christian who does not evangelize to the point of offense is "ashamed" or "a coward." School is pointless. Governments and organizations are never used by God and are increasingly hostile towards Him. Transformation in and of the world is increasingly eschewed in favor of a separatist impulse. Transformation is relatively pain-free and backsliding is limited to rebellious acts that are the product of easily identifiable (and repentable) sinful attitudes, and seldom does the habitual nature of sin present a problem. Judd is "not even tempted" by things that had enthralled him before. Any sexual temptation between the two teenagers who live together with no parental supervision is swept aside with an assurance that Vickie thinks of Judd as "a brother" and feels it is "way too soon" to even contemplate such a thing as a romantic or sexual relationship.

With the smugness, however, there is also an undercurrent of guilt. In fact, guilt trips seem to be the primary mode of persuasion throughout the series. Are you offending people with the gospel? Do they ridicule you and ostracize you? Is the emotional temptation to stay silent strong? Just imagine how guilty you will feel if you don't do this. Guilt, more than even fear, is the driving motivation in the kids' life, and the vast majority of their actions seem to be a self-inflicted penance for their former treatment of their parents and siblings.

If there is a problem with the *Left Behind* as evangelical pornography metaphor, it is that any theory or metaphor that conceptualizes contradictory impulses—in this case the desires to cater to and hide shameful impulses—is impervious to contradictory evidence and hence unfalsifiable. For that reason, a pornographic reading of *Left Behind* could be seen as an example of what Eve Sedgwick calls a "paranoid" reading in her essay, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About You."

In this essay, Sedgwick argues that a hegemonic "hermeneutics of suspicion" (5) characteristic of much criticism (including her own) has stifled contemporary critical practice by privileging "paranoid inquiry" (6) and dismissing "reparative" (8) reading strategies as "naïve, pious, or complaisant" (5). Sedgwick describes paranoid theory as "anticipatory" in its "imperative" to avoid "bad surprises" (9) and its insistence that "bad news be always already known" (10). She sees reparative positions as focused on positive effects—as pleasure-seeking, "ameliorative" (22), and open to "surprises" (24). She concludes that paranoid reading has its place but that it should be balanced with reparative reading.

Can a reparative reading of *Left Behind* be productively paired with a more critical, pornographic one? Certainly there are surprises in *Left Behind* and acknowledging them, rather than undermining the claim that *Left Behind* is performing specific cultural work, may help explain the franchise's popularity by explaining its broad appeal. Two possible surprises deal with the somewhat unexpected treatment of groups that would not be expected to be portrayed favorably in eschatological fiction: Catholics and Blacks.

Given the history of political activism and patriotism that are intertwined with both American fundamentalism and evangelicalism, it is understandable that the Antichrist's rule in *Left Behind* is acted out primarily in a political context. Nicolae Carpathia begins his rule as secretary-general of the United Nations. Traditionally, attempts to find contemporary antecedents for the Antichrist have often exacerbated tensions between Catholics and Protestants by conjecturing, as Jonathan Edwards does in his Notebooks on the Apocalypse, that Rome is the New Babylon and the Catholic Church is the Beast. Edwards called Revelation 17:18, "the plainest of any one passage in the whole book...a key to the whole prophecy" (120). After describing a woman with the beast, the author of Revelation gives the explanation, "The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth." Edwards clearly felt that "great city" was Rome, and that the Protestant Reformation signaled the end of that city's "rule." Later Edwards writes of Revelation 16:3, "all the men in this sea died as to popery."

It is somewhat surprising, given the historical proclivity of anti-Catholic bias in eschatological thought, that the sitting Pope is among the elect who are raptured in the *Left Behind* series. Granted, Catholic readers may not be especially comforted by the fact that the raptured Pope is replaced by a figurehead puppet of the anti-Christ and that the raptured Pope is said to have bewildered some traditional Catholics with teachings that seem close to Protestantism. Even so, if my central presupposition is correct and *Left Behind* is addressed primarily to an evangelical audience, then part of the message being addressed to this audience is that the modern conception of those who will be saved is more ecumenical than many pre-twentieth-century strains of fundamentalist or evangelical thought. Wells and Woodbridge, point out, for instance, that the threats of modernism and secularism tended to obscure the differences between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews (14). A reparative reading of *Left Behind* might situate it as part of an evangelical trend that obscures denominational differences in favor of allegiance to a monotheistic God.

American evangelicalism has had a particularly difficult time categorizing and incorporating African-American Christianity. George M. Marsden writes, "Because of racial segregation that isolated them from their white

counterparts, they seldom used the term 'evangelical,' and their experience is usually regarded as a distinct type in itself" (46). The casting of Clarence Gilyard and T.D. Jakes as the pastors of the church where Rayford's wife and child attended, suggest that the vision of evangelicalism presented by the series is multicultural. A skeptic might point out that neither character is ethnically identified in the text of *Left Behind* and wonder whether this casting was an attempt to expand the market for the film. One might also wonder whether a racially mixed church, pre-rapture, in the upper-middle-class Chicago suburbs is a credible representation of reality. Even so, if an underlying point of *Left Behind* is that it projects how Evangelicals and Fundamentalists wish to see themselves, it is worth noting that they wish to see themselves (and to actually be) racially diverse. The final scene of the Tribulation Force movie underscores this point; the new church being formed by post-rapture conversions contains a mix of races.

Of course, the need to represent the pre-raptured church and not just the post-rapture church as racially diverse can also be seen as the product of just the sort of shameful desire that Kaplan says must be both acted out and hidden. What makes this particular desire shameful is the fact that evangelicals may recognize on some level that we are currently failing to break down racial boundaries and that we often find it easier to imagine a racially harmonious church than to create one.

Given Sedgwick's warning that paranoid readings have stifled critical inquiry, perhaps the most important question left to ask is, what is the purpose of choosing such an incendiary label like "evangelical pornography" to describe *Left Behind*? Like much that serves a pornographic function, *Left Behind* caters to multiple, often contradictory, desires and self-conceptions. My point here is not that the negative desires and self-conceptions are the real ones that describe and define evangelicalism. What I would argue is that seeing and owning our baser instincts is the first step towards confronting and conquering them.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "Whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things" (Phil 4:8). The clause that introduces this list, however, is often dropped or forgotten when the verse is cited. It is: "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true." Paul calls on Christians to balance their contemplation of the lovely with their contemplation of the true, even if that truth can be painful.

In *Left Behind*, as in much Christian fiction, the objects that are portrayed seem to be represented in such a way as to gratify the consumers rather than challenge them. The role of the constructed reader flip-flops