

think
CHRISTIAN

POP CULTURE

— PRIMER —



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Introduction

by JOSH LARSEN

Let's say you're into popular culture. Maybe video games are your thing. Perhaps Netflix is a daily companion. Movies? You're there opening day. Now let's say you're interested in considering these things through the lens of your Christian faith. Where should you begin?

That's where this Pop Culture Primer comes in. Each essay is an extended list of five recommended titles. We picked these video games, television shows, albums, movies, and graphic novels not necessarily because they're "the best" or even our favorites. We've chosen them because we believe they resonate with Christianity in interesting ways. This isn't to say that they're explicitly "Christian" or have won some sort of seal of spiritual approval. Rather, in their sounds, images, gameplay, and narratives, they offer unique opportunities for people of faith to consider what it is we believe—and how we can share that Good News with a pop culture-obsessed world.

This is what we strive to do every day at *Think Christian*. It's why we use the phrase, "no such thing as secular"—our pithy variation on these far more erudite words from Dutch theologian [Abraham Kuyper](#): "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: 'Mine!'"

For Kuyper, this "domain of human existence" absolutely included art. Summarizing Kuyper's take on art in a June 2017 edition of [Pro Rege](#), Roger Henderson wrote, "Although capable of being misused or abused, human artistic creativity is recognized by Kuyper as part of the original good creation and subject to redemption in Christ."

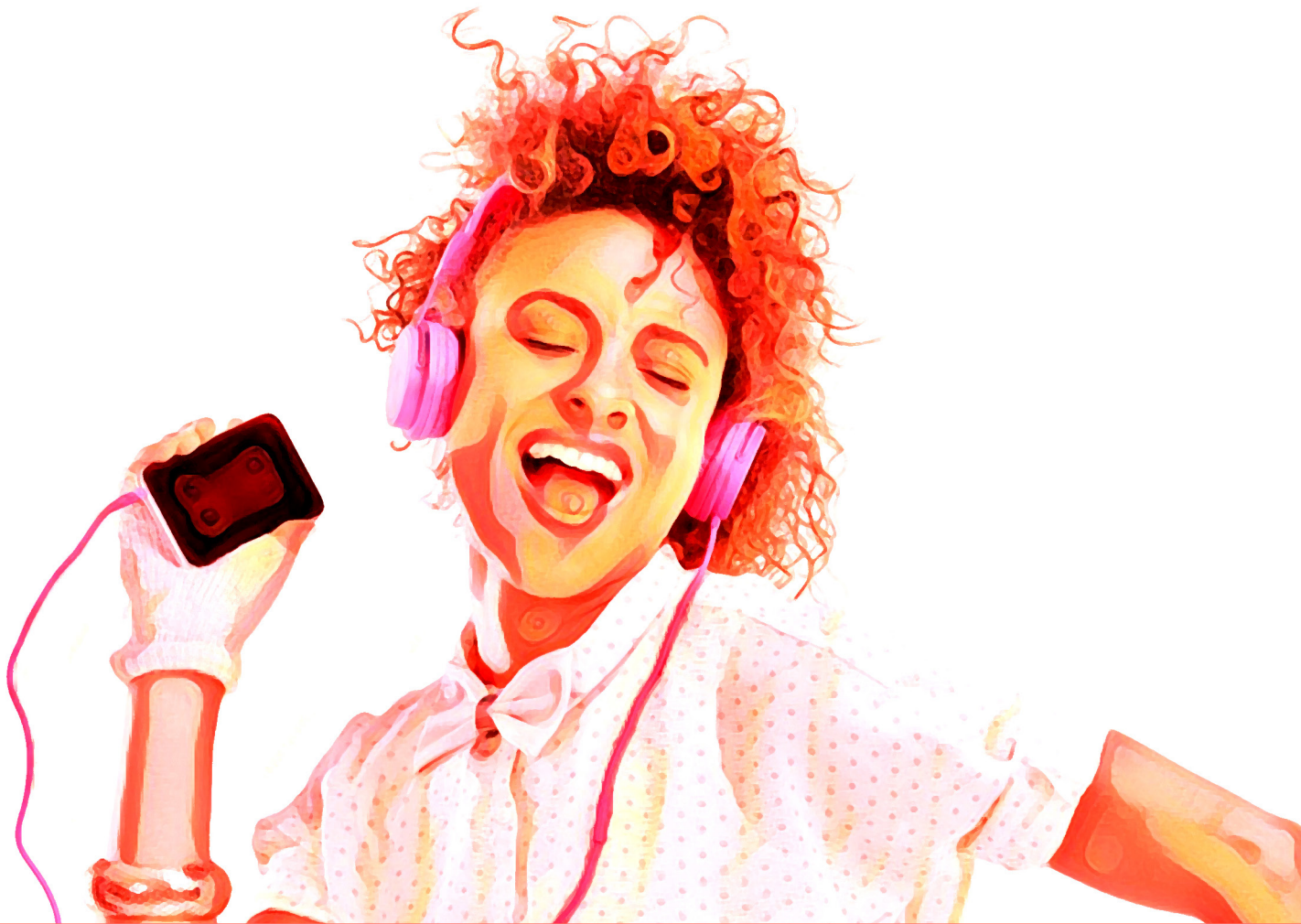
Although classical art—that of ancient Greece in particular—received most of Kuyper's praise, I'd like to suggest that his notion of God's sovereignty also applies to the popular art forms of today. That's the premise of this Pop Culture Primer. Following Kuyper's lead, Melissa Tamminga finds a yearning for the "green place" of the new creation in *Mad Max: Fury Road*. In his piece on music, Chad Ashby hears Augustinian reverberations in the restlessness of Taylor Swift. Whether it's Donna Bowman writing about the cult series *Battlestar Galactica* or Bill Boerman-Cornell considering the graphic novel *Mighty Jack* or Allison Barron reflecting on her time playing *Mass Effect*, we hope to explore these pop-culture creations in light of the human experience and the God who is sovereign over it all.

In his *Pro Rege* essay, Roger Henderson opens with this admonition: "A faith that leaves the wide field of the arts uncultivated, depriving the upcoming generation of contemporary cultural expressions of the glory of God, condemns itself to artistic marginalization and irrelevance." If you'd like to join us here at TC in some faithful cultivating, this Pop Culture Primer is a good place to start.

JOSH LARSEN is editor of *Think Christian* and author of *Movies Are Prayers: How Films Voice Our Deepest Longings*.



MUSIC



by CHAD ASHBY

In a modern society filled with 24-hour news, continuously competing pundits, and social media outrage, there are times when I just want to hit the off switch. More than ever, Christians are tempted to let their ears grow dull, wearied by the constant barrage of different perspectives. However, Dietrich Bonhoeffer astutely [notes](#), “He who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either... We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the word of God.” Through Bonhoeffer’s words I am reminded that listening is a spiritual act. Listening should be practiced and relished, not suffered and shunned.

My hope is that these five albums will help you rediscover the pleasure and duty of *listening*. Feel the stories. Follow the melodies. Seek to understand the artists’ perspectives. See if you don’t hear evidence of the *imago dei* and the human condition all over these five LPs.



5. Weezer (*The Blue Album*), Weezer 1994

From the opening guitar pings of “My Name is Jonas,” Weezer hooks us with its infectious geek rock. This album cut through the grunge scene of the early 1990s with its clean-as-a-whistle vocals, barbershop-style harmonies, and sunny California vibe.

Weezer’s approach to music is simple: it’s an escape from the letdowns of the real world. On “Holiday,” pain and rejection melt under the haze of guitar distortion as lead singer Rivers Cuomo invites us into his fantasyland: “Let’s go away for a while / you and I / to a strange and distant land / where they speak no word of truth.” When he’s in the garage with his bandmates (“In the Garage”), Cuomo finds freedom from judgment: “In the garage, I feel safe / No one cares about my ways / In the garage where I belong / No one hears me sing this song.” On other tracks, he flees painful breakups and breaks away from alcoholic father figures by way of the guitar strapped over his shoulder.

All the while though, reality continues “bubbling behind my back” (“Say It Ain’t So). On “Undone,” we

see a fragile ego unravel like a sweater and through “The World Has Turned and Left Me Here,” Cuomo admits his feelings of abandonment after a broken relationship. In these moments of honesty, we are reminded that people live deeply broken lives. As we listen to *The Blue Album*, we realize its songs function like escape hatches in Cuomo’s life. The closing track finishes with an euphoric guitar solo that transports us from the real world of rejection and sorrow to an ecstasy found “Only in Dreams.”

Weezer offers no final answer for the brokenness of this world, yet this album reminds us why God’s children have always been a music-making people. Through pain and suffering, we sing and play new gospel rhythms over our broken realities as we patiently await the return of a Savior. Moreover, Weezer’s desire for the “garage”—a comfortable, riff-laden space where they can be known in all their nerdy, quirky glory—reflects the desire of all people to be known and understood by the [one who loves us](#).



4. *1989, Taylor Swift 2014*

In the liner notes of her fifth studio album, Taylor Swift types: “In the world we live in, much is said about when we are born and when we die...But lately I’ve been wondering...what can be said of all the moments in between our birth and our death...the moments when we are reborn...” *1989* is about rebirth.

1989 took the world by storm. Filled with 1980s-inspired synthesizers and bouncy pop, Swift sheds any vestiges of her rootsy twang as she enters a new stage in her life, both musically and personally. “Welcome to New York / It’s been waiting for you,” chants the opening song’s chorus. Her hope is that this sonic renewal will prove to be her cleansing.

Although the sound is new, the themes on *1989* are quintessential Taylor Swift. The songs are arranged to follow a general narrative: girl meets boy, things go well, uncertainty creeps in, he leaves, she shakes it off then takes him back, learns about herself, and finally moves on.

The tracks on the album present different ways Swift has dealt with her relationships. On “Blank Space,” Swift lampoons her own reputation as a man-eater: “So it’s gonna be forever / or it’s gonna go down in flames.” On another song, her desperate pleading lays

over a contagious Madonna-era beat: “All you had to do was...stay!” Elsewhere she ponders if it’s too much to expect relationships to last. Perhaps she just needs to live passionately in the moment and be willing to let go, as she suggests on “Wildest Dreams”: “Say you’ll remember me...even if it’s just in your wildest dreams.”

The glam and pop of *1989* fade on her pensive final track, “Clean”: “Rain came pouring down / When I was drowning that’s when I could finally breathe.” Swift is not alone in her longing to be washed clean of the past. Folk rocker Ryan Adams felt such a connection to the album that in 2015 he released a complete cover album of *1989*; Swift’s lyrics told his story, too.

As we listen to the world around us, we realize that everyone is in search of rebirth. People look for it in a new city, a new sound, a new job, a new diet, a new relationship. St. Augustine puts his finger on the problem in his *Confessions*: “For you have formed us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in you.” Swift hopes for renewal, but *1989* is really about restlessness. Her album throbs with the question many in our world desperately ask: will replacing old habits and romances with new habits and romances really provide eternal rest?

3



3. *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Lauryn Hill 1998

Few women have reached the palatial heights of the vocal and lyrical talent of Lauryn Hill. This soulful debut received 10 Grammy nominations and managed five wins, including 1999's Album of the Year—the first hip-hop album ever to do so. *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* is a celebration of the American black experience, soaked in smooth R&B melodies, raspy rhymes, church gospel, and reggae guitar riffs.

The album borrows its concept from Carter G. Woodson's *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, first published in 1933. Woodson [wrote](#): “The portrait of the Negro has seldom been drawn but by the pencil of his oppressor.” Hill intends to offer one of those missing narratives, becoming what Woodson describes as “an enlightened artist portraying the life of [her] people.” Her tracks are a *re-education* for her brothers and sisters—and the world—about the black experience.

Lauryn Hill has a voice all her own. On “Lost Ones,” she calls us to *listen*—really listen—to her: “I was hopeless now I’m more hopeful / every man wanna act like he’s exempt / need to get down on his knees and repent / can’t slick talk on the day of judgment.” If we listen, we will grow. Hill desires for each of us to open our minds and be re-educated in our perspectives. While the world encourages us to hate our enemies, she highlights the true power found in showing forgiveness. On “Forgive Them Father,” she croons, “Forgive them,

Father, for they know not what they do.” While the world uses love to control others, freedom, we hear, is in showing unconditional love.

On “To Zion,” Hill calls us to reject the world’s perspective on motherhood, which sees it as an obstacle rather than a blessing: “Everybody told me to be smart / ‘Look at your career,’ they said / ‘Lauryn, baby, use your head’ / but instead I chose to use my heart.” In her smash hit “Doo Wop (That Thing)” she takes us to sex-ed class: “When you give it up so easy you ain’t even foolin’ him.” Hill shows us how using one another for sexual pleasure degrades our personal value: “You know I only say it cause I’m truly genuine / Don’t be a hard rock when you really are a gem.”

In the album’s title track, Hill explains how she let others miseducate her: “Every time I try to be / what someone else has thought of me / so caught up, I wasn’t able to achieve.” Ultimately, she had to realize her value did not come from what others said about her: “I hear so many cry for help / searching outside of themselves / now I know his strength is within me.” Hill is articulating the concept of *imago dei*—that men and women are created by God in his image; we don’t have to wait for society or a boyfriend to affirm us to believe we have eternal value. Our value, Hill reminds us, is [laced into our DNA](#).



2. *Helplessness Blues*, Fleet Foxes 2011

Out of the misty fog of the Puget Sound floats the haunting folk of *Helplessness Blues*. With layered harmonic vocals and intricate acoustic pieces, Fleet Foxes have formed a soundscape that echoes like the claustrophobia of an artist's mind. *Helplessness Blues* feels like a hand stretching for answers in the darkness.

Amid the gentle strums and flittering bows of “Montezuma” we hear lead singer Robin Pecknold wrestling with his personal identity: “So now I am older / than my mother and father / when they had their daughter / now what does that say about me?” On the title track, he vacillates between two ways of seeing life. His parents told him growing up he was a unique snowflake, but now he wonders, “...after some thinking, I’d say I’d rather be / A functioning cog in some great machinery serving something beyond me.” As we listen, we hear the pining of a soul longing for eternal purpose.

As Pecknold ponders his future, he realizes death—“the bitter dancer...bloody reaper”—is patiently biding his time. One day his life will come to an end. Pecknold determines not to let dark thoughts plague him: “At arm’s length / I will hold you there / there...” In that brief moment of personal triumph, he captures the world’s approach to death: *denial*. The sadness only returns later in “Blue Spotted Tail” as he wonders, “Why is life made only for to end?”

The album pulses to the title track’s mellow ideal: “What good is it to sing helplessness blues?” With a harmonic warmth worthy of The Beach Boys and a driving rhythm, the closing track “Grow Oceans” blooms: “You would come to me then without answers...in that dream there’s no darkness a-looming.” Life’s existential questions melt in the briny spray of bright guitars as loved ones and lovely surroundings help us forget harsh reality.

With honesty, Pecknold confesses, “I’m not one to ever pray for mercy or to wish on pennies in the fountain or the shrine.” Prayers are just pennies tossed into a vast universe with no cause—and no First Cause. Fleet Foxes voices the melancholy questions that people ask themselves when they lay their heads down: *Is there a God? Does anyone have a plan for me? Why does any of this matter if I’m going to die?*

Helplessness Blues is a night filled with sweet dreams and haunting nightmares. One moment, Fleet Foxes celebrates the vibrant reality of simple pleasures. The next, a chill creeps into their bones as they realize something metaphysical must give these beautiful fleeting experiences eternal meaning. *But what?* As we listen to Fleet Foxes, we learn to sympathize with a postmodern culture that wants to believe in an eternal narrative but doesn’t know who to trust.



1. *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Kendrick Lamar 2012

Rap artist Kendrick Lamar's first-person, biographical tale follows K.Dot, a teenager wading through Compton, with its temptations, peer pressure, gang violence, and poverty. Sure, I've included this album for its lyrical genius and understated West Coast beats. But most of all, because it is a story that needs to be heard. How does a good kid survive in the m.A.A.d city?

The album whirs to a start with several young voices reciting the sinner's prayer. Lamar's confessions continue amidst a washed-out Cali riff on the second song, "I am a sinner / Who's probably gonna sin again / Lord forgive me / Lord forgive me, things I don't understand." It's not his purpose to tell how things should be, but how they are—sins, transgressions, and all. All the while, cassette tape crackles and threads of late-nineties Compton beats throw us back to an earlier time in Kendrick's life.

On "Backseat Freestyle," we meet K.Dot, as an insecure teenager, lying through his teeth about sexual exploits, violence, and money all over fender-rattling subwoofers. Track by track, we listen as he learns the hard way that chasing youthful passions and sinful lusts will eventually destroy him. "Tired of running, tired of hunting," he says on "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst." "Too many sins, I'm running out / Somebody send me a well for the drought." As he expresses these words of spiritual exhaustion, they are followed by the voice of a grandmother figure (Maya Angelou) who asks, "Why are you so angry? / See you young men are

dying of thirst / Do you know what that means? / That means you need water, holy water / You need to be baptized, with the spirit of the Lord."

In the mad city filled with dangerous threats, Lamar's faith and his family prove to be his salvation. He doesn't make excuses for his past sins, even as his rhymes beg the question: *would you or I have fared differently?* In "Good Kid," a West Coast-makeover of Smif-N-Wessun's "Home Sweet Home," K.Dot finds himself equally in danger of gang violence and the heavy boot of crooked cops. In "m.A.A.d city," the hyped strings draw us into the panic of a city ruled by gun violence. When sexual temptation and peer pressure are on every block, how is a young man supposed to make it out alive?

Lamar's story is a very difficult one to hear. His language is jarring. The narrative is painful. However, this is the exact kind of listening that Christians owe to our neighbors. In so many cities, men and women are living desperate lives. They are tired of running. We have to be willing to sit down, listen to their story, and share together a cup of [living water](#). Out of Compton, Lamar emerges with faith in God and a family he loves. Compton royalty Dr. Dre anchors the final track with a signature beat, as Lamar emerges determined to use his success to help others follow his path. Lamar's *good kid, m.A.A.d city* reminds us that no person in this mad city we call earth is beyond the saving grace of our God.

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VIDEO GAMES



by ALLISON BARRON

Video games allow me to live through characters and stories in a way no other medium can. I connect with many of my favorite games on a spiritual, moral, and theological level because they apply to life in a unique way, whether it's through their plotlines or the mechanics of the game. Jesus was aware of just how powerful stories are; it's why he spoke in parables and referenced the popular culture (fishing, farming) of his time. Video games provide a way to glean wisdom from experiencing story: by wearing someone else's shoes, exploring issues of morality, and seeing the consequences your choices can have. Below is a list of five role-playing video games that hold deep meaning for those who have [ears to hear](#) and [eyes to see](#).

5



5. *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* 2013

In *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*, two boys search for a cure to heal their sick father. They embark upon a quest through a gorgeous landscape—mountains, rivers, troll-inhabited countryside, snow-dusted hills glowing with northern lights, crumbling castles, and a battlefield strewn with slain giants.

The player controls both brothers separately, one with each analog stick on the controller or set of keys on the keyboard. It's jarring at first to navigate these two different characters because my gamer brain has been wired to work solo. The game continually introduces new ways for the pair to work together, such as when they're tied to each other by a rope and swing from ledge to ledge, using each other as anchors.

Despite the fact that the two brothers don't speak a recognizable word throughout the entire game, I had no trouble following the plot and forming a connection to the characters. They interact with objects and the people around them, and do so differently. When they come across a woman sweeping outside her home, for instance, the little brother does a trick with the broom while the older brother uses it to help her with the chore.

The game is filled with opportunities to help other

people, from rescuing a lonely troll's mate to cutting the noose of a man attempting suicide. These individual acts are made even more significant because they're done in the face of the looming fate of the boys' father.

"All life-changing love toward people with serious needs is a substitutional sacrifice," writes Timothy Keller in *The Reason for God*. "If you become personally involved with them, in some way, their weaknesses flow toward you as your strengths flow toward them."

Lending others our strength and taking on their weaknesses is something Christians are called to do, because it's what Jesus did for us. "How can God be a God of love if he does not become personally involved in suffering the same violence, oppression, grief, weakness, and pain that we experience?" Keller asks.

Brothers demonstrates this sacrificial love as the boys face constant danger for the sake of others. A few scenes, especially the part where they navigate through a giants' battlefield and get lured into a spider's lair, face dark realities, and the ending is particularly bittersweet. This game is an obvious demonstration that sacrifice and love go hand in hand—a lesson that I'm not soon to forget.

4



4. *Final Fantasy IX* 2000

Final Fantasy IX is about a bandit named Zidane who gets caught up with a runaway princess in a plot to merge two worlds. The story deals a lot with identity; one of the main characters, Vivi, was created by humans as a magic-wielding servant. He is self-aware, unlike others of his kind. When he meets others like him, he is distressed at their soulless actions; they simply do the bidding of their creator without thought.

Vivi constantly questions the meaning of his existence and where he comes from. “I have to find out who I am...I’m scared...what if I’m not even human?” he asks at one point. “I don’t think I really understand what it means to live or to die. Where do we come from? Do we go back there when we die?”

Zidane also struggles with identity, becoming depressed when he discovers he, too, is a human-made creation. Though his defining characteristic is being there for his friends and helping those in need (one of his combat abilities even involves taking damage in the place of another character),

he pushes his companions away when they try to help him at a point of emotional crisis.

Both Vivi and Zidane eventually come to the understanding that they are not defined by their origin. Though Zidane was made for a destructive purpose, he becomes something new when he chooses to save the world instead of destroy it.

I’m reminded that our past is not important when we find our identity in Christ. “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ,” wrote Paul in his [letter](#) to the Galatians. “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Jesus accepts us no matter who we are or what we have done; in gratitude, we emulate mercy and love, doing our best to model him. Zidane even demonstrates those Christ-like traits at the end of the game by forgiving the very enemy who had been trying to kill him.

3



3. *Mass Effect* 2007

If there's another series that demonstrates how our choices affect who we are, it's *Mass Effect*. Players make decisions throughout the game that impact their morality, measured by "Paragon" and "Renegade" points. Generally, choices that are more merciful and loving grant Paragon points and decisions that are more cutthroat win you Renegade points. Unlike other role-playing games, this is not a sliding scale; doing something good doesn't negate the bad. People will still be afraid of you if you've been merciless in the past, even if you try to "make up for it" with a gentle gesture.

Sometimes the decisions you have to make are not clear-cut. Is it the "right" choice in *Mass Effect*, for example, to destroy the Rachni Queen—an insectoid creature that controls its brood through a telepathic link—or to let her go? On the one hand, the rachni are incredibly dangerous and her children have killed a lot of innocent people. On the other hand, the Rachni queen reveals that scientists entrapped her and were using the rachni creatures for an experiment. This means that she is not responsible for the deaths her children caused, and that destroying her would mean the genocide of an entire species.

You have to decide based on the information you have—much like in real life, where things aren't always black and white. The choices presented to you in *Mass Effect* are great sounding boards for discussing real-life morality. While the goal of the game remains the same—to save the galaxy from the artificial intelligence attempting to destroy it—the moral options bring up the question: does how you go about achieving a noble goal matter?

For Christians, the answer is a resounding yes—God cares about how we do things. Consider the story of Moses [striking the rock](#). God told him to speak to the rock, but Moses hit it instead (having earlier done so [to great success](#)). Because of his lack of trust and obedience, Moses was forbidden to enter the Promised Land alongside the Israelites. It wasn't only the water that was important, or even arriving at the new land. How he got there mattered. And we see this exemplified in the gameplay of *Mass Effect*, as relationships crumble or are strengthened depending on our choices.



2. *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* 2000

The Legend of Zelda is a series that I love mainly for its gameplay; I enjoy solving puzzles, exploring maps, and experiencing real-time action. But I also love *Majora's Mask*, the sixth installment in the series, for its story. The game explores some dark themes that speak to loneliness and the human desire for community.

Searching for a missing friend, Link is dropped into a place called Termina—a land parallel to the Hyrule of the previous game, *Ocarina of Time*. He meets many familiar faces (it's a parallel world, after all), but none of them know who he is, further emphasizing his loneliness after losing his horse and his friends.

This theme of isolation is repeated through various characters he meets, but is most powerfully demonstrated by the Skull Kid who, frustrated and angry because of loneliness, acts out by stealing Majora's Mask and initiating disaster.

God is [always with us](#), and we can find comfort in that, but he also made us to be in community with each other. We can forgive each other's faults and be the answer to loneliness. The Skull Kid takes Majora's Mask to hide behind because he's been hurt by friends who abandoned him; he felt outcast by society and his attempt to spread his misery was a cry for help. He's a reminder that loneliness is sometimes self-inflicted, a mask we put on because we can't forgive ourselves.

As Paul says in his [letter to the Ephesians](#): "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." The key message of the Skull Kid's story is that loneliness doesn't have to overcome us, and that true friends forgive each other. Reaching out to someone else with acceptance can seem like a small thing, but sometimes doing so can make a huge difference in that person's life and prevent disaster. (Perhaps not on the level of a moon falling on the world and destroying it, but you never know.)



1. *Undertale* 2015

Undertale has some of the most interesting mechanics of any game I've ever played. You find yourself, a human child, dropped into the Underground—a place where monsters live since being banished from the world above. After a talking flower tries to murder you, you meet a goat-like creature named Toriel who kindly offers to teach you about the world you've fallen into. She wants to adopt you and take care of you in mother-like fashion, but you eventually leave her house because you want to get back to the surface.

Toriel tries to stop you when you leave, for your own protection. You are confronted with a combat sequence and have two options: "Fight" or "Mercy." The first time I played *Undertale*, I didn't know what I was doing and I accidentally killed her. Whoops. Reload, try again. The second time I managed to get past her without killing her.

Immediately after, I crossed paths with the flower again. "I know what you did," it says. "You murdered her. And then you went back, because you regretted it."

WHAAATTT?

Undertale is programmed to remember your actions despite save and reload functions. It plays with your preconceptions of how a video game works, of choices and their consequences. You can play through the entire game as a pacifist, not harming a single monster

but befriending them instead. You can also play the game by killing *everything*. The scenes drastically change if you choose this route; villages empty of all life as word of a rampaging, murderous human spreads. Creatures who had, on a pacifist playthrough, offered you friendship and love now look at you with fear and hate. If you kill them all, there is no going back. The game remembers.

We can't go back to a save point in real life; our choices have meaning. If we do something evil, even if we regret it later, we can't undo the consequences of that decision. That is why forgiveness is such a powerful thing; without it, we're lost. *Undertale* defines that loss very clearly; the game never lets you go back to your original innocence.

This stands in stark contrast to what Christ offers: a way to be cleared of all we've done wrong. He is "[faithful and just and will forgive us our sins](#)." This is such a relief when we know we deserve punishment. At the end of the pacifist run in *Undertale*, you have the opportunity to forgive the character who has caused you and everyone else so much pain. He even admits there's no excuse for what he's done, and he shows genuine regret for his actions. At the end of a genocide run, you simply destroy him. While that type of destruction is what we deserve, Christ offers us grace instead. And for that we are glad to show him eternal gratitude.

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GRAPHIC NOVELS



by **BILL BOERMAN-CORNELL**

Each art form offers us a new way to see the world. Painting, photography, dance, music, poetry, novels—all reveal different parts of God’s universe and how humans fit into it. Graphic novels combine both illustration and writing to tell a story that is at once both image and word-driven. From facial expressions to maps and narration to speech bubbles, image and word combine to uniquely capture not only the brokenness of the world, but also the ways that grace shines through that brokenness. The titles I’ve chosen to highlight offer new ways to see, think critically, and live into God’s forgiveness, justice, and love. Some raise more questions than they answer. Some serve as a jumping-off point for discussion. Others will simply touch you deeply, as the best art should.



5. *A Wrinkle in Time: The Graphic Novel*, Hope Larson 2012

One of my favorite childhood books was Madeleine L'Engle's science-fiction fantasy *A Wrinkle in Time*. However, even as a grade-school boy, I remember wishing L'Engle had more clearly developed the world of her story, in which Meg, a 13-year-old girl, leads her younger brother and a friend on a search for her missing scientist father. With her 2012 graphic-novel adaptation, Hope Larson not only brings L'Engle's story to visual life, she also honors its original spirit.

At one point in the novel, Meg is wavering over how she can rescue her brother, who has been trapped on a dangerous shadow planet. Terrified and in tears, she says, "I can't go. I can't. You know I can't." One of the guardian angel-like beings who accompanies her asks, "Did anybody ask you to?" The following panels chart

her indecision, depicting her fear, anger, and anguish, until she catches her breath and says, "All right. I'll go. I know you want me to." The angelic being responds, "We want nothing from you that you do without grace or that you do without understanding."

Grace and understanding. Both qualities of God's love are depicted in Meg's love for her family, as well as the sacrifices she is willing to make on their behalf. *A Wrinkle in Time: The Graphic Novel* reminds me of the God who [so loves us](#). I don't think that L'Engle intended *A Wrinkle in Time* to be an allegory the way C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* books are, yet I see anew in the illustrious detail of Larson's graphic novel adaption the unmistakable image of God in Meg's stubborn love.

4



4. *The Eternal Smile*, Gene Yang and Derek Kirk 2009

This graphic novel is a collection of three short stories, all dealing with questions of how virtual and actual reality interact. Collectively the stories of *The Eternal Smile* ask whether our responsibility toward others in the real world should take precedence over our desire to enjoy ourselves in a virtual one.

The graphic novel's title comes from the second story, "Gran'pa Greenbax and the Eternal Smile," which is rendered in a cartoonish style for reasons that are quickly revealed. We're introduced to Gran'pa Greenbax, a stingy millionaire frog who founds the Church of the Eternal Smile as a way of bilking innocent people out of their money. One day he kills someone in a fit of anger, after which the sky opens up and a hand reaches in and grabs him. Gran'pa Greenbax learns he exists as part of a 24-hour cartoon

television network. When the owner of the company makes him an offer he cannot refuse, Gran'pa Greenbax must choose between living in a fake world, where he can indulge his greed, or in a real world that offers only the cool water of a pond.

With virtual-reality technology, the temptation to create our own personal Edens is perhaps stronger than ever. Yet that would mean living in denial of both the good (if marred by sin) world God has created and the new creation he has promised. Through their evocative images and clever words, Yang and Kirk expose such instant gratification as a self-indulgent trap. Much like [James 5:1-6](#), which condemns the hoarding of wealth for our own pleasure, *The Eternal Smile* is a prophetic word of warning against the temptation of designer lives.

3



3. *Mighty Jack*, Ben Hatke 2016

Mighty Jack, a play on the Jack and the Beanstalk legend, is a book for kids, but Ben Hatke's masterful use of panels, his colorful and action-packed drawing style, and his excellent ability to tell a story with dialogue will appeal to adult readers as well. What's even more engaging is the way Hatke's story comes back to the theme of forgiveness again and again.

Young Jack's life is not easy. His single mom has to work two jobs to keep up with the bills; it falls to Jack to look after his sister Maddy, who has autism. While at the flea market one day, Jack impulsively trades his mom's car keys for a case of strange seeds. When Jack's mom finds out, she is angry. Jack tries to explain but then stops and simply says, with tears in his eyes, "I am so sorry." Jack's mom embraces him, an image that is repeated for two panels. On the last panel on the page, she tells Jack, "We'll be alright."

There are other instances and images of forgiveness throughout *Mighty Jack*. They resonate because we recognize them—not so much as a variation on the forgiveness God extends to us, but as the imperfect sort we grant to each other. This sort of forgiveness is messy and incomplete and doesn't always make sense or make us feel better. It is the down-and-dirty work of being a broken human trying to engage in a divine task.

To be clear, *Mighty Jack* is not contrived to highlight moments of forgiveness. Rather, they happen in the midst of a story that also features giant monster snails, plants that throw mud, plants that explode, and plants whose fruits and vegetables enable kids to jump a mile in the air. One of the visual highlights is the two-page spread of kids flying against a blue sky, an exuberant smile on their faces. The combination of moving words and electrifying images brings you so completely into Jack's world that you feel as if you've left your own.

2



2. *The Tale of One Bad Rat*, Bryan Talbot 1995

At the start of *The Tale of One Bad Rat*, runaway Helen Potter is sitting on the floor of a train station. She stands up and leaps into the path of an oncoming train. On the next page, she is sitting on the floor of the station again, talking to her pet rat. She imagined her suicide but did not act on it. This dramatic dream sequence works well for a story that begins in abuse, but moves toward healing.

After drifting through London and escaping various dangerous situations, Helen eventually hitchhikes to England's Lake District, where she gets a job working for Mr. and Mrs. McGregor, who own a bed and breakfast. After the three of them survive a particularly busy weekend, the grandfatherly owner gives his wife a hug and beckons for Helen to join them. When she finds herself unable to open herself to their love, she realizes she must come to terms with her past and confront her abusive father.

As you may have already guessed from the characters' names, *The Tale of One Bad Rat* is styled after a Beatrix Potter book; the soft colors and occasionally flowery script nicely contrast with the desperation of Helen's situation. Another nod to Potter is the drawing of the face of a predatory man on the London streets, which changes suddenly to that of a hungry-looking fox.

As Helen moves toward restoration near the novel's end, the beautiful hills and valleys of the Lake District, with their rolling lines and soft colors, suggest healing and peace. *The Tale of One Bad Rat* starkly acknowledges the brokenness of the world, while also offering the hope of redemption within it, as a girl who once considered herself lost and worthless comes to know real love.



1. March: Book I, Book II, Book III, John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, Nate Powell 2013-2016

This graphic memoir of Civil Rights activist and current U.S. Representative John Lewis is both unrelenting in the ways it forces us to see the sin of racism, yet also persistent in its use of the Bible as a moral anchor. And while the theme of grace is not always in the forefront, it is a thread woven through the work, especially visible when major victories, like the Voting Rights Act, are marked.

March: Book I shows a 5-year-old John Lewis sitting on a porch, reading the Bible. The words of the verse—“Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world.”—are cast upon Lewis’ form as he sits in the early morning light.

In *March: Book II*, Lewis is a college student participating in a sit-in when the owner of the lunch counter closes up shop, turns off the lights, and throws a fumigation bomb into the restaurant, locking the door behind him. In the two-page spread that follows, Lewis, his face barely visible in the dark clouds of poison, says, “...and whoever falleth not down and worshipping shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.” At the same time, a text panel to the side reveals Lewis’ thoughts: “At first I couldn’t believe that

man could have left us to die.” Then lower on the page, as the darkness closes in: “Were we not human to him?”

In *March: Book III*, after three pages of horizontal panels leading up to the Birmingham church bombing of 1963, the explosion itself covers three quarters of a page with black smoke. In the pages that follow we see a dying, burning woman; a parent searching the rubble for a child; and, finally, two parents’ anguish and anger at finding a dead child. “I’d like to blow the whole town up,” says the father as a single shaft of light through a window illuminates broken support beams. The dark smoke, meanwhile, obscures the mother’s words: “No, no, no.”

The *March* books raise important questions for believers to consider. What responsibilities do Christians (or any citizen) have to fight against injustice? How do we support order and stability (in the form of the government) and at the same time engage in civil disobedience? What is a Christian’s responsibility toward a law that is unjust? Can a person love God and hate his or her brother or sister? The *March* books demand honest answers to these questions, even as they honor a lifetime of service in the face of injustice.

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MOVIES



by MELISSA TAMMINGA

What place do “secular” movies have in the life of the Christian? I believe one answer can be found in Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “[God’s Grandeur](#),” which begins: “The world is charged with the grandeur of God. / It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.” It’s a startling, triumphant opening for a poem that also goes on to describe the world as “bleared, smeared with toil” and begrimed with “man’s smudge” and “man’s smell.” The poem points to the constant tension between fallenness and glory, the two things living side by side in the natural world and in all human beings, beings who bear both the smudge of the fall and the grandeur of the *imago dei*.

Movies flow from both of those human identities: in them we can see the glory of God flaming out as much as we can see the fall and the need for redemption. As such, movies—those flickers of light on screens in the dark—stand as rich objects of spiritual contemplation.

5



5. *Serenity* 2010

Joss Whedon's space Western, *Serenity*, opens on a children's history class. The teacher describes how, after humans fled the overpopulated Earth and found new home planets, a powerful group—the Alliance—became a “beacon of civilization,” subduing rebel planets and uniting everyone under gracious rule. It's a nice story, but it handily conceals a brutal reality.

The Alliance's goals initially seem good. They aim, according to one fanatical believer, to make “a world without sin.” But as we follow the adventures of a ragtag crew aboard the spaceship *Firefly*, who find themselves at odds with the Alliance, we learn how dangerous an admirable ideal can be in the hands of fallible human beings, particularly those with the power to erase history. By the end of the film, the crew has fled to the very edges of the universe, discovered how far the Alliance has gone in pursuit of its goals, and how desperately it's tried to cover the hideous side-effects.

Science fiction often explores the darkest parts of humanity by placing characters in a technologically advanced setting and then interrogating the notion that we could be sinless if only we had more sophisticated props—better medicine, communication systems, and infrastructure. *Serenity* exposes the cracks in such

thinking, revealing that utopia, as Thomas More's Latin wordplay suggests, is “[no place](#)”—at least, no place humans are capable of creating. *Serenity* speaks to an admirable desire for a perfect earth but reminds us of the Fall, the problem of evil, its human causes and complicities, and the ultimate mess humans make of our own attempts at heaven.

Mal (Nathan Fillion), the captain of the *Firefly*, holds no illusions about humanity's supposed incorruptibility. “I don't hold to that,” he says. “I aim to misbehave.” By this, Mal does not mean he intends evil. He is simply acknowledging his own failings and recognizes that people are incapable of perfection. He and his crew have flashes of heroism and share a little love, but they are still scavengers, making their way through the universe, just trying to survive.

Mal and his friends offer no solution to the problem of evil; they suffer irreparable loss and grief, even as they aim to do the right thing. All they can do in the end is point their beloved, rickety, imperfect ship toward a literal storm, taking comfort in each other. In rejecting sci-fi utopianism, *Serenity* reminds us that salvation will never come from our imperfect hands. Instead, our hope for the world lies with the one who created and redeemed it.



4. *Rashomon* 1950

Just after World War II, during a period of destruction and horror in Japan, director Akira Kurosawa made *Rashomon*—a film that would stun the Western world with its unique form and startling themes. While Kurosawa made other, more optimistic films during the post-war period, in *Rashomon* he gives free rein to pessimism, turning the light of cinema on the dark human soul.

The film opens on the ruined Rashomon city gates. Two figures sit, hunched in the rain, one of them repeatedly saying, “I don’t understand.” The statement is a portent of things to come, of the ways in which viewers, too, will be immersed in a story about a mysterious death that confounds understanding.

The murder mystery genre to which *Rashomon* belongs often underscores a longing for justice and satisfies a human need to discover the truth. In most mysteries, the murderer is discovered and brought to justice. *Rashomon* initially seems to promise something similar, considering it features a dead man, a trial, and a series of eyewitnesses. But as each witness tells a story that convincingly contradicts the others, the path towards truth becomes as tangled and shadowed as the forest in which the film’s dead man met his demise.

It’s not simply our longing for truth that the film thwarts; it’s our desire to believe human beings are good. The witnesses’ stories contradict each other so radically that the only remaining truth is that of the human capacity to lie. We might be certain, at first, that one witness must be right, but as we examine each story, it becomes clear that the witnesses are casting themselves in the most sympathetic light possible. How can we believe any of them?

Kurosawa, in his [*Something Like an Autobiography*](#), writes that his assistant directors initially found the script baffling and begged for an explanation. Kurosawa explained, “Human beings are unable to be honest with themselves about themselves. ...Egoism is a sin the human being carries with him from birth.”

Rashomon confronts us with the Fall and asks us to consider whether we truly believe we are included in it. For those who accept complicity, it leaves an urgent need that the film suggests cannot be filled by human means. It leaves a longing for transcendence, and we searchingly gaze upwards, as the movie’s characters themselves often do, towards the sun.



3. *I Am Not Your Negro* 2016

Raoul Peck's 2016 documentary is, on the surface level, a film about the black American writer James Baldwin. However, because Baldwin's novels, plays, poems, essays, speeches, and interviews consider the complex personal and communal intersections relative to race, class, and sexuality in mid-20th century America, the film invites contemplation for all Americans. By way of Baldwin's own words (narrated by Samuel L. Jackson) and of television clips of Baldwin, Peck holds the man's work before us, like a mirror, reflecting who we are.

As Baldwin considers America—the country he fled for a time to escape the torments of racism—his words reverberate: “Part of my responsibility as a writer was... to write the story and get it out.” That story is the clear-eyed, blunt account of an America clinging as tightly to its institutional racism as it clings to its notion that it is the land of the free.

“White people,” Baldwin wrote, during the heat of the Civil Rights Movement, “want to believe Birmingham is on Mars; they don’t want to believe there is one step actually or morally between Birmingham and Los Angeles.” One of the strengths of the film is the way it shows us that “Birmingham” is, indeed, only one step from anywhere in America. Peck layers the film with images that connect Baldwin’s words to the country’s past and present: we see the dead bodies of Malcolm

X and Martin Luther King, Jr., then see the faces of Trayvon Martin and Tamir Rice. We see images of a white mob attacking those at a lunch counter sit-in during the Civil Rights Movement; we then see images of white policemen beating Rodney King, as well as Eric Garner pinned down on the sidewalk. The past and the present mingle, and Peck makes us witnesses; we see and cannot deny the connections.

As Christians we know that the Fall is not just something that happened long ago; it also manifests itself in the present. *I Am Not Your Negro* challenges us to take our profession of the Fall seriously and to turn, lest, in a denial of guilt, the guilt compounds. “We are our history,” Baldwin says, in a kind of call to confession. “If we pretend otherwise, we literally are criminals.”

In an [interview with Marc Maron on the WTF podcast](#), Peck suggests the film is “not about punishment; it’s about knowing—because knowing is the beginning of change.” The film makes us witnesses to knowledge that white America has long denied. If we, as Christians, agree that we are called by God to partner with him in his work of restoration, *I Am Not Your Negro* leaves us with one question: what will we do with this knowledge that we have?



2. *The House is Black* 1962

In her lyrical essay-film *The House is Black*, Iranian poet and filmmaker Forugh Farrokhzad invites us into the lives of those living in a leper colony. In a powerful 22 minutes, Farrokhzad layers verses—from the Bible, the Qur'an, and Farrokhzad's own poetry—with potent images of the men, women, and children whose bodies have been ravaged by disease.

The very first image is of a woman who is studying her scarred, pitted face in a mirror. Her unflinching gaze seems to say, "I see me. Now, you see me." At first, it is painful to look at her, as well as the others, who present equally eroded faces and diseased body parts: a toeless foot, an eyeless face, a disintegrated nose, a crumpled hand. In an early schoolroom scene, students read, "I thank you for giving me hands to work with" and "I thank you for giving me eyes to see the marvels of this world." Here Farrokhzad seems to be pointing out the dreadful, ironic joke of it all. Thank God for creating this? Those hands and eyes?

But as we continue to look, the horror dissolves into sympathy, and then into something more complex. Beings who look so far from whole and human become, not only human, but human like me. Eating, laughing, playing, making music, nursing a baby.

One of the most arresting scenes also takes place in a schoolroom. "You. Name a few beautiful things," says the teacher. The addressed student pauses. "The moon, sun, flowers, playtime," he says. To another student, the teacher says, "And you, name a few ugly things." There is another pause, until the answer: "Hand. Foot. Head."

We watch and listen in a shock of horrified sympathy, for in this boy's life, the body is grotesque. His world is full of ugly humans, an unbearable tragedy. But quickly, as if in a gentle contradiction to our shocked response, the other students erupt in laughter. And the boy who answered ducks his head, a delighted modesty in having made a joke.

Is there nothing more human than laughing in the face of misery? Animals whimper in fear and pain, but what other creature on earth looks at another creature of its kind and, in sweet communion with another, laughs in the midst of trauma? Laughter does not dismiss the pain, but it looks at it, like the woman looking in her mirror. It says, "No, I will hope. I will live." Laughter is a grace in the darkness, a hope for redemption. It offers the knowledge that in the body, however marred, is the soul. And that the body, in whatever form, has dignity.

Perhaps the best art is that which reminds us of the transcendent, a transcendence that does not dismiss the material world but connects us to it and to one another, making us more alive to our physical world, to the communal implications of living. *The House is Black* asks us to see the disfigured and recognize the *imago dei*, the stamp of the image of God. Farrokhzad unveils the transcendence of a leper's body, for in it, as in all our bodies and lives, is embodied the joy of creation, the horror of the Fall, and the promise of redemption. Like Jesus [touching the leper](#), Farrokhzad's camera touches these lepers, embraces them, and says, "See."

1



1. *Mad Max: Fury Road* 2015

As in his earlier *Mad Max* films (1979's *Mad Max*; 1981's *The Road Warrior*; 1985's *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*), George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road* is set in a post-apocalyptic desert world, where a nuclear holocaust has decimated populations and poisoned the earth. Presiding over part of this world is Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne), a ruthless ruler turned cult leader, whose machinery controls the only known supply of water, which he gives to and withholds from the masses. His kingdom depends on brutal exploitation: of those who run the machinery, those who fight as warrior slaves, those who give blood to the warriors, those who give him milk, and those who give him children. All—men, women, children—are branded with the mark of Joe's ownership.

The story follows a group of women, and a few men who join them, who dares to rebel against Immortan Joe's control, who dare to hope for some other life, a "green place" of freshwater and freedom. Joe, of course, who will not tolerate such rebellion, leads an enraged pursuit after his "property," and the film becomes a madly treacherous ride over the desert, through sand and sand storms, over poisonous sucking mud, through canyons, over rocks, in vehicles ingeniously patched together with bits of a previous civilization. All is fire, blood, and careening madness, crashings, explosions, and speed.

It is an exhilarating rush, the best of action filmmaking. Its characters are vibrantly memorable, expertly sketched in spare dialogue, and adorned with evocative costuming. The movie's visual inventiveness is so rich, with surprising, delightful detail, it will tempt you to

hit pause to study each bit of texture. Such richness of detail, so thoroughly, organically embedded in the film's world, recalls one of the most basic joys cinema can offer for the Christian, that is, its reflection of the Creator in the human creative act, for the film is as lushly gratuitous as a sunset, viscerally pleasurable as a snowy mountain peak, delightfully ridiculous as a [pink fairy armadillo](#).

The sheer creativity of the film, however, is not its only happiness, for the movie is rich in theme as well. As a film about power and exploitation, *Mad Max: Fury Road* leads us to consider the human propensity for such things. What fallen darkness are we capable of and how much of it can we tolerate? Though in a seemingly unserious pop-culture form, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, like *Rashomon* and *I Am Not Your Negro*, confronts us with what humans will do, given the power, to other humans in service of their own corrupted egos.

Joes' religious demagoguery—exploiting a need for worship and producing fanatical worshippers—leads us to consider the abuses of religion, as well as the self-destructive acts of some worshippers. It causes us to consider, perhaps, the fraught place of religion in contemporary society and the ways in which a cause, dressed in religious garb, can so easily breed evil.

The film's invocation of Valhalla and the pursuit of its earthly parallel, the "green place," cause us to question where heaven may be found, in this life or the next, very near or very far. We are invited to consider, perhaps, as Augustine did in [The City of God](#), what it means to

live with one's feet planted in the "City of Man" and yet live with hope in the unseen realm of the "City of God."

Mad Max: Fury Road, in short, exhilarates with its

craft and joyous creativity, even as it leaves us with much to consider: the very nature of what it means to be a human soul, living with the hope of heaven in this ugly, beautiful place called Earth.

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TELEVISION



by **DONNA BOWMAN**

A great television show—like a series of novels—takes its characters through changes, doubles back to pick up old threads for new stories, ventures beyond its initial premise, and picks at every assumption of that starting point, unraveling and knitting each of them up again. The longitudinal arc of television gives us not tidy packages, but messy, open-ended, episodic journeys. When it comes to faith, we can be tempted to dwell too much on the doctrinal aspects of theology, where abstractions dominate over lived experience. Meanwhile, we forget that the Gospel often emerged from Jesus' daily encounters with people and was driven by the narrative of his life and parables. The following five TV series, I posit, use the power of narrative to explore themes that recur in Scripture, that Jesus made the heart of his message, and that we struggle to reconcile with the human condition.

5



5. *Breaking Bad* 2008-2013

According to the [Belgic Confession](#), “humans are nothing but the slaves of sin.” *Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan portrays this enslaving, evil force in the tragedy of Walter White (Bryan Cranston), which plays out against the backdrop of the barren American Southwest. Facing death in light of a recent terminal cancer diagnosis, ignored by the high-school chemistry students he teaches, and belittled by his boss and customers at the menial second job he’s taken to make ends meet, Walt makes a snap decision. He’ll throw off the bonds of the law and suburban respectability, and with the help of a drug-dealing former student, cash in on his scientific knowledge by selling high-grade methamphetamine to Albuquerque’s burnouts.

Over and over again, Walt justifies this move as a selfless sacrifice for his family—making sure that if he has to leave them fatherless, he at least won’t leave them broke. But from the very start it’s clear that he’s motivated by wanting to take control of his own fate. Backed up against the horizon of death like a prisoner facing the firing squad, he feeds his lust for power

with the memories of the injustices he feels have been done to him. In one of the show’s most iconic scenes, Walt’s wife (Anna Gunn) takes him to a storage locker where she’s piled up all the cash they can never spend. “I gave up counting it,” she says, as the camera circles the waist-high block. Money becomes an end in itself, a tangible symbol of power, worthless in terms of what it can buy but perfect for keeping score against a world that has failed to give Walt his due. *He’ll show them. He’ll show them all!*

Gilligan famously [described](#) *Breaking Bad* as “Mr. Chips turns into Scarface.” But what could possibly cause such a downwardly spiraling transformation? We see it in Walt’s hesitation to turn a passed-out, choking woman onto her side and save her life, when letting her die would solve one of his problems. That’s what Christians call sin—not just a list of personal transgressions, but the kind of self-indulgence that warps the soul and sends us through the looking glass. Violence is love. Theft is justice. Poison is nourishment. Betrayal is loyalty.



4. *Battlestar Galactica* 2004-2009

[Exodus](#), the book and the concept, lies at the heart of the Bible. The familiar narrative of escape, wandering, and eventual homecoming provides a framework for Christ as well. Jesus is the “[stranger from heaven](#),” the pillar of cloud and fire that shows us the way from the present wilderness to our milk-and-honey destiny.

In the late 1970s and early '80s, the sense of American malaise that followed the turbulent counterculture years led to a number of pensive TV series about perpetually wandering heroes, from [Kung Fu](#) to [The Incredible Hulk](#). One of the most ambitious was the original 1978 [Battlestar Galactica](#), created by [devout Mormon](#) Glen A. Larson. Here an entire people, the last survivors of a 1,000-year war with robotic Cylons, set off on a quest for the mythical planet Earth, which according to faith and legend was the home of the “thirteenth tribe” of humans. Its 2004 [reboot](#), created by *Star Trek: The Next Generation* veteran Ronald D. Moore, examines in minute detail the possibilities and risks involved with being such a sojourning people.

In the survivors’ fleet, faith is constantly tested, as individuals and families grapple with the immaterial nature of the promises they’ve inherited. Does Earth even exist? Are their leaders sincere or manipulative? Do the ancient texts and periodic oracles from the gods of their former home lead them somewhere, or nowhere? The Cylons, too, have a divine mandate—theirs from a single God, the lord of all. Their religious quest to exterminate or assimilate the human survivors echoes an all-too-familiar apocalyptic enthusiasm.

Over the course of its four seasons, *Battlestar Galactica* takes its characters through many dark nights of the soul, and its leaders deal with grumbling, restless masses, as did Aaron and Moses. They argue about whether to exterminate all foreigners or join forces with some of them. Skepticism, mysticism, scientism, and new religions exercise powerful compulsions over them, each in their turn. Take the flawed, venal Gaius Baltar (James Callis), whose visions from a beautiful Cylon inspire a breakaway sect. Paralyzed by his ecstasies in a hidden part of the ship, he reclines like a saint struck with rays from heaven, surrounded by fanatic devotees. As when Moses disappeared into the clouds atop Mount Sinai or Jesus left the disciples on watch at Gethsemane, these unruly exiles seem to have infinite resources for creative heresy. They struggle to shore up a modicum of faith with old stories, rapidly fading memories of mountaintop experiences, and increasingly empty disciplines demanded by their leaders.

Like *Battlestar Galactica*’s wanderers, we live in the in-between days, as the [letters of Paul](#) make clear. The kingdom of heaven is both here and now, and not yet. Christ is risen, but has not yet returned. We try to figure out how to spend our entire lives on the way, with no idea of when (or whether) we will arrive. That makes us vulnerable to people who seem more certain—who claim to have already seen or attained—and to people who aim to debunk the whole endeavor and substitute a different picture of reality.

3



3. *Homicide: Life on the Street* 1993-1999

When Donald Trump was asked during the 2016 presidential campaign about his favorite Bible verse, he came up with “[an eye for an eye](#).” That notion of justice—the righting of wrongs, with clear villains and innocent victims—certainly has its place in TV history. The satisfaction of many a cop show or courtroom drama (or both at once, as in the [Law and Order](#) franchise) is in seeing people get what they deserve.

But Christianity insists that our just deserts are not nearly so simple. Jesus constantly questioned the idea that lawbreakers should be punished harshly (as when he saved the [woman caught in adultery](#)) and challenged the concept that those who suffered were merely reaping their just reward (as when he said that congenital blindness is [not the result](#) of anyone’s sin).

Based on journalist David Simon’s nonfiction book about Baltimore homicide detectives, *Homicide: Life on the Street* sought to portray the humanity on both sides of the thin blue line. There’s not much idealism to be found. Munch, Pembleton, Lewis, Howard, Bayliss—all of these law-enforcement officers

approach their job differently, with varying levels of cynicism and commitment. But what they have in common is the knowledge that justice on the streets of Baltimore is nothing simple. Perps, victims, and suspects alike live in conditions that often make a mockery of the notions of guilt and innocence. Poverty, victimization, drugs, gangs, and violence surround them. At times their city seems submerged, and their attempt to ride the waves for the purposes of a system that demands closed cases feels willfully obtuse.

Efforts to turn Christianity into a similar system of laws fly in the face of Jesus’ words and actions. Jesus [ragged against the injustice](#) that such legalistic systems always produce. *Homicide* follows the humans who form the gears of such a machine, grappling with the work they have to do. It’s no coincidence that the characters often go up to the roof of the precinct building, closer to heaven, when they have some truth to tell to each other. Down in the rolling swells of day-to-day existence, clear answers are almost impossible to find.



2. *Mom* 2013-present

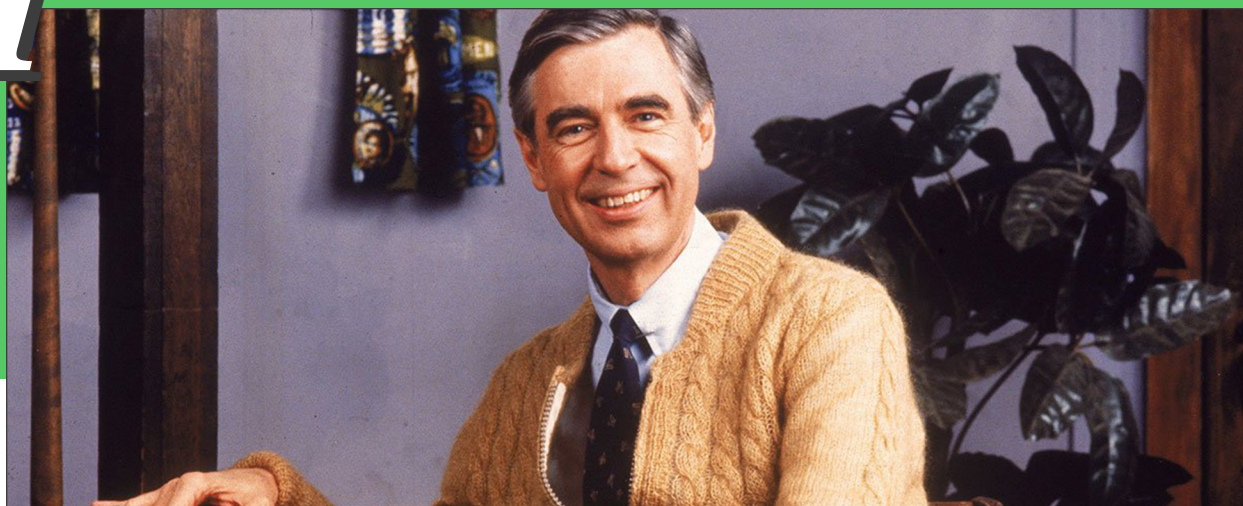
The Baptist church of my childhood taught me “once saved, always saved.” That’s a neat solution to the problem of continuing to exist in the world after being sanctified by grace. Backsliding? Don’t worry too much about it. When God chooses you, you stay chosen. From our human perspective, though, the disconnect remains—and it never stops being troubling. After all, we’re the ones who have to get up and live a redeemed life, day after day. The best analog for this experience is the recovering alcoholic. And the stunning comedy *Mom*, still going strong on CBS after four seasons, may be the best show about recovering alcoholics television has ever produced.

Addiction is no joke, but it seems that those in recovery have to laugh at themselves to stay sane at the absurdity of their condition. On this show, single mom Christy (Anna Faris) and her mother Bonnie (Allison Janney) fight their way through the detritus left behind by the drugs-and-booze-fueled difficulties of their past—including their relationship with each other. At the same time they’re battling money troubles, hanging

onto low-security jobs, and resisting the ever-present temptation to have a drink to take the edge off. It’s often funny, and also tragic. Take the episode this past season where a new guy attends Christy’s Alcoholics Anonymous meeting and she remembers waking up beside him after he raped her while she was passed out drunk. Many viewers regard the three-camera, live-audience sitcom as an antiquated form, but these small, crowded sets trap these characters in unbearable proximity to their pasts, while the open “fourth wall” of the format invites us to witness and empathize.

Being in recovery means being simultaneously an alcoholic and sober, which to alert Protestants should sound familiar. That’s easy to say, but damned hard to live out. The women of *Mom* are no saints, and they look back on their days of gleeful indulgence with nostalgia. What keeps them going—well, most of the time, when they can—is that they choose the part of that two-fold identity that they have a choice about: the sober part. And not just once for all, but every day thereafter.

1



1. *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* 1968-2001

Anyone who grew up watching Mr. Rogers knows what the [kingdom of heaven](#) is like. It's welcoming. Personal. Profoundly interested. Intimate. Curious. A place and time set apart from the workaday world, made special and holy by the ritual of putting on sneakers and a cardigan that was hand-knit by your mom. It's a realm of answers that honor the questions, of delight in the very simplest things. There we discover that we matter, that we are seen. There we find love that puts to rest our dread that we are unlovable.

It's no coincidence that *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was created by an [ordained minister](#). In the vast wasteland he saw on television, Fred Rogers built a house next door, where a friendly face looked directly at you and took you seriously, where the gulf between children and adults collapsed in an instant, and all that was left was love.

The word "neighbor" may be the most homely word that is also a profound theological concept. Jesus [defined](#) it as someone who acts with compassion toward a fellow human being. Neighborliness, in the Gospel, isn't a status; it's an action. The question in the parable of the Good Samaritan gets turned inside out. "Who is my neighbor?" requests a test we can use to figure out whom we should love. But Jesus answers: look for

the ones loving. They are the ones who are making themselves neighbors to all of humanity.

During the frightening hours after the May 2017 bombing at an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester, England, Anthony Breznican posted a [series of tweets](#) about the time in college when he met Fred Rogers. Breznican, reeling from the death of his grandfather at the time, had found solace when he came across *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* playing on a TV in his dorm's common room. A few days later, he had a chance encounter with Rogers in an elevator and mentioned the experience to him. Instead of hurrying on, Rogers sat down with him and asked what was upsetting him. Breznican poured out his heart to that listening ear, and then apologized for delaying the great man. "Sometimes you're right where you need to be," Rogers replied.

It's a story that strikes me as truly heaven on earth. *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* portrayed the power of kindness, a power we tend to forget as we grow older. Adulthood, we think, requires us to harden ourselves against the disappointments of reality. And then someone greets us with kindness, and the miracle that can happen every day—the neighborly ushering in of God's kingdom—happens again.

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About Us

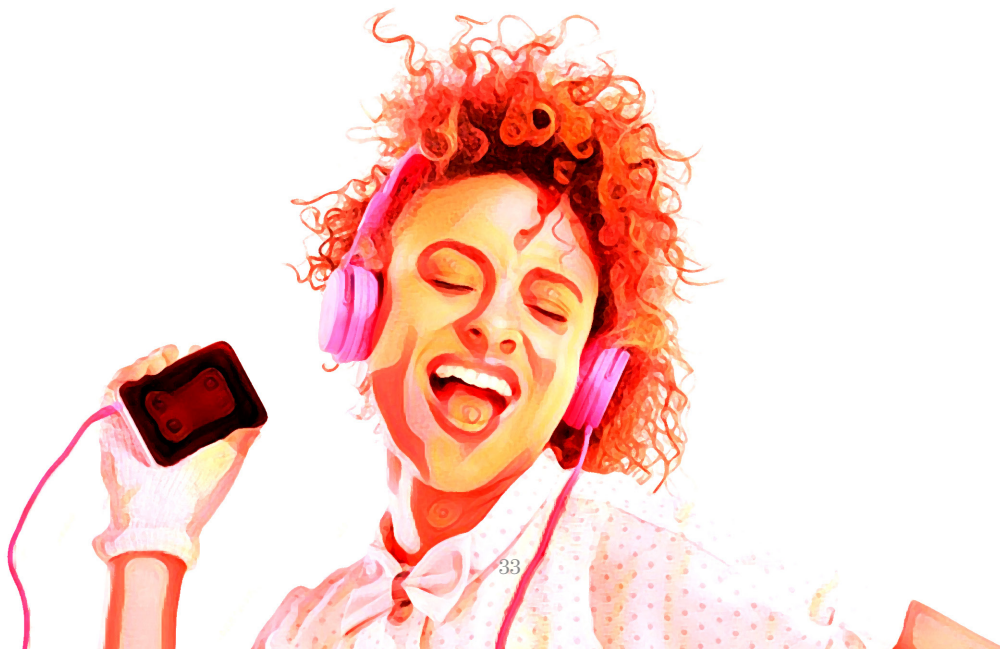
Think Christian is for the devout faithful who are also fans of popular culture. In music and movies, television and video games, we seek to find—in the [words](#) of the Apostle Paul—“whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable.” Our task as a digital magazine is to consider how popular culture and its cultivators interact with God’s story, and we do this with grace, appreciation, and discernment.

Many Christians are swimming in popular culture every day, whether passively or as active consumers. We hope to meet you in that place, connecting what you consider in worship on Sunday with what you experience as art and entertainment during the rest of the week.

Rooted in the [Reformed](#) tradition, we recognize that all of culture falls beneath God’s sovereignty, and that by his common grace believers and unbelievers alike are capable of creating beautiful things. We do not attempt to “baptize” popular culture, but rather recognize that God’s truth can sometimes be glimpsed in unlikely places. Our aim is the same for each piece of pop culture we consider: to meet it first on its own terms, and then ask how it might sit alongside the Christian faith. Does it echo the gospel in some fashion? Evidence our need for the good news? Contradict our understanding of the world in a way that deserves a loving response? To ask such questions is to think Christianly about popular culture, the common language of our time.

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Think Christian is one of a family of programs from



PUBLISHED BY
ReFrame Ministries

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DESIGN & LAYOUT
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1700 28th Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49509-1407 UNITED STATES
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