Popologetics

POPULAR CULTURE IN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

To my children,
Roger, Claire, and Ruth,

who have brought so much love, laughter,
joy (and popular culture) into our home.

It has been an honor watching you grow up.
This book is for you.

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Introduction

"Why Would Anybody Want to Study That*?"*

A number of years ago, I spoke at a conference for Christian leaders in Europe. I did a few workshops, nothing major. But still, an exhausting half a week. Everyone was having a last breakfast at the hotel, and then we'd pack and go home. One of the keynote speakers came to our table and asked whether he could join us. This man (who shall remain nameless to protect the guilty) is an internationally known apologist, and a fairly brilliant man. As we chatted about this and that, he asked me what I do. I am a college lecturer. He asked me what I subjects I taught, and I told him about one of my favorite classes, Popular Culture and Media Theory, and I told him what it covered. He then leaned back in his chair, hand stroking his chin thoughtfully, and mused, "Why would anybody want to study *that*?"

I have been studying popular culture for about twenty years, so that question might have been a tad bit tactless. I wish his response were somehow atypical. But it isn't. It's a response that I've become used to. I can see it in the eyes of people when I tell them what I do and they say, "Oh, well, *that* sounds interesting," as if I dissected slugs for a living. But this apologist was the first one who was honest enough to put it so directly. It's an attitude that many Christians unfortunately share: Isn't studying popular culture simply a colossal waste of time? Who cares about Madonna or *Star Wars* or *World of Warcraft*? Isn't popular culture simply trivial, brain-melting, stupor-inducing, superficial tripe?[1]

1. Lately, I have been encouraged because this attitude has been changing. More Christians are becoming interested in engaging popular culture.

Allow me to respond with a few provocative quotations:

If "religion is the opiate of the people", then immersive multiplayer 3D virtual worlds are hard-core Afghani heroin.
—Science-fiction and technology writer Bruce Sterling[2]

Anyway, I stopped going to churches and got into a different kind of religion. Don't laugh. That's what being in a rock 'n' roll band is. Showbiz is shamanism, music is worship. Whether it's worship of women or their designer, the world or its destroyer, whether it comes from that ancient place we call soul or simply the spinal cortex, whether the prayers are on fire with a dumb rage or dove-like desire, the smoke goes upwards, to God or something you replace God with—usually yourself.
—Bono, lead singer of the band U2[3]

Popular culture is the new Babylon, into which so much art and intellect now flow. It is our imperial sex theater, supreme temple of the western eye. The pagan past, never dead, flames again in our mystic hierarchies of stardom.
—Postfeminist social critic and gadfly Camille Paglia[4]

What ties these three quotations together? It is the connection between religion and forms of popular culture: interactive multiplayer online gaming environments in the first, rock 'n' roll in the second, and popular culture as a whole (especially the cult of celebrity) in the third. Whether or not you agree with the details, all three quotations talk about popular culture in terms that used to be reserved for religion. In other words, these writers see popular culture as an influential player in the realm of the sacred, in the realm of ultimate meanings, in the realm of worldview. And such a perspective makes a good deal of sense. Popular culture has become not only a sign of the times, but also something of a rudder of the spirit, a touchstone for our deepest desires and aspirations.

2. Bruce Sterling, "I Saw the Best Minds of My Generation Destroyed by Google," *New Scientist Tech*, September 15, 2006, available online at http://technology.newscientist.com/article /mg19125691.800?DCMP=ILC-OpenHouse&nsref=mg19125691.800INT.
3. Bono, "Psalm Like It Hot," *Guardian*, October 31, 1999, available online at http://www.atu2 .com/news/article.src?ID=668&Key=psalms&Year=&Cat.
4. Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 139.

The problem is that popular culture is also a pervasive influence. It seems at once ephemeral and vital. Christians often either dismiss its influence as trivial or become flustered and assume a defensive posture. Popular culture is like something floating in the air around us, and it has the power to influence our beliefs. But we're not really sure what to do about it.

Allow me to illustrate with a parable called "The Flug in the Air":

Once upon a time (in a galaxy not so far away), there lived a community much like ours. One day, their scientists stumbled upon a discovery: there was something in the air they breathed. They called it *flug*, for lack of a better name. They didn't know where flug came from. Perhaps it was generated by the natural activities of the community's life together. Perhaps it was an alien substance that had invaded. No one knew for sure. But one thing they did know: Flug changed people. In some, the change was radical and disturbing. In others, the change was more subtle. But every person, every *breathing* person, underwent a change. Most people didn't even notice, or didn't care. They just kept on breathing and changing and living their lives.

Some people became alarmed and angry. They moved away to the high and lofty mountains, hoping they wouldn't have to breathe the flug-infested air. But since they were so high up, the sheer altitude and isolation changed them, but in a different way from people who breathed in the flug. And as it turned out, they couldn't *really* avoid it anyway, any more than you or I can avoid breathing.

Some people actually enjoyed the change and became flug-enthusiasts. They saw flug as a doorway into a deeper understanding of the mysteries of life, or something like that. They couldn't get enough. They even found a way to distill it and spike their cigarettes so as to increase their intake of flug. They called them *flugarettes*. Some people thought this group was being naive in their surrender to flug, but you couldn't really convince them otherwise. They just really, *really* enjoyed their flug.

And finally, there was a group of people who couldn't decide what to think of flug. So they started asking questions: "How and why are we being changed? Where did it come from? Is flug good or bad for us? What does it mean? What is the best way to live with it in our air?" They, too, distilled flug, and then tasted and tested it. One would dip his finger into the beaker, taste it, and say, "Hey, this stuff isn't half bad!" Another would spit out what he had just tasted and say, "Bleah! This stuff isn't half good!" And as it turned out, they were both right. They managed to build a microscope to study flug-distillate. They would lean over it for hours,

and they could actually see the goodness and the badness of flug, dark
and light filaments spreading out like the tendrils of a vine. The problem
was, the dark and light filaments were woven and tangled together, so you
can imagine how hard and laborious a process it was to disentangle the
good strands from the bad. It was all just so mixed together. But still they
persevered, for they knew that mixture *meant* something.

This book is for that last group of people, the ones who are interested
in taking a closer look at flug. Everything that follows flows from a certain
assumption, namely, that popular culture is very similar to the flug in the
air we breathe. Popular culture is all around us, and it does tend to get under
our skin. It does influence us. Of course, the influence isn't on our lungs,
but on our worldviews—on the way we understand God, the world, each
other, and ourselves. And like flug, popular culture is a mixed bag, a messy
mixture of good and bad. Comedian Oliver Hardy used to say to Stan Laurel,
"Another fine mess you've gotten us into!" Living in a world suffused by
popular culture has landed us, quite literally, into a fine, meaningful mess.

Popular Culture's Influence on Worldview

Popular culture has emerged in the last hundred years or so as one of the
most significant carriers (perhaps *the* most significant carrier) of worldview
and values in the West. Popular culture's influence travels far beyond the
West as well, now that the forces of globalization carry MTV, viral videos,
video games, and shows such as *Baywatch* and *24* to the farthest reaches
of the globe. For that reason alone, popular culture deserves attention and
serious reflection. It is anything but trivial. It wields considerable influence
in our societies, and has done so for a long time.

Even though we think of popular culture as a recent phenomenon
(and mass media certainly is relatively recent), popular culture has been a
shaping influence for a long, long time—ever since our ancestors sat around
campfires telling stories of love and heroism. And those songs and stories
have influenced the way people have understood their world. Classicist and
Shakespeare scholar Paul Cantor notes:

Socrates recounts in the Apology (22b–c) that among the most important
people in Athens he interrogated were the poets, because, as becomes
clear in several Platonic dialogues, the poets both reflect and help shape

popular opinion on wisdom, piety, and other virtues. Poetry in its various forms, including drama, was the popular culture of ancient Greece. As Plato makes clear in the Republic, Homer was the educator of the whole Greek world.[5]

Further, if you actually read the ancient Greek poets, you will find that sex and violence in popular culture are not exactly new phenomena, either. Popular culture has been around for as long as civilization has.

Take a more recent example: in 1744, the publication of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's popular novelette *The Sorrows of the Young Werther* caused a sensation in Europe. It started a continentwide fashion trend of young men wearing open-collared "poet shirts," yellow trousers, and blue vests, all copying the hero of Goethe's book. Later, Europe experienced a rash of suicides as young men and women followed the lead of the book's young lovelorn hero.[6] Popular culture has wielded a powerful influence in societies for a long, long time.

Consider even more recent examples of the effect of popular culture on how we view the world. Think of how men in the West have changed the way they think about women, sex, and beauty since *Playboy* began circulation in 1953. Think of how we understand material success under the influence of the many celebrity-lifestyle magazines and TV shows. Think of how Nike ads have changed how we think about our own bodies, about exercise, about pain ("Just Do It"). Think of how J. R. R. Tolkien's books, and the movies inspired by the books, have shaped our understanding of heroism, sacrifice, and evil. Think of how our sense of humor has changed since the first airing of *The Simpsons* in 1989.[7]

Sometimes the cultural changes caused by popular culture can be profound. In America, there is a generational divide between those who were too old to enjoy *Star Wars* when it was first released in 1977 (that's *Episode IV* for you youngsters) and those who have grown up with it and

5. Paul A. Cantor, "The Art in the Popular," *Wilson Quarterly* 25 (Summer 2001): 28.

6. This effect of copycat suicides inspired by popular culture has even been termed the *Werther Effect*. See Paul Marsden, "The 'Werther Effect': Fact or Fantasy" (Ph.D. diss., University of Sussex, 2000), 11, available online at http://www.viralculture.com/pubs/PhD.pdf. See also John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 9–10.

7. According to Mark I. Pinsky, the show is watched by 60 million people a week in seventy countries, and includes such people as Al Gore and Tony Blair among its substantial fan base. See *The Gospel according to the Simpsons: The Spiritual Life of the World's Most Animated Family* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 2–3.

have seen it ten times or more (that is, those born in the 1960s or later). For some Americans, *Star Wars* became a quasi-religion, and for many others, it crystallized a turn away from organized religion toward a more open sort of "spirituality," however defined.[8] Popular culture has an immense impact on us and on our worldviews that borders on the religious.[9]

Responding to the Worldview Challenge

Popular culture affects us and those around us on the level of *worldview*—the assumptions we make about reality every day—often without realizing it. This worldview effect is both obvious and elusive: we know it happens, but we don't often stop to think about what it means. How should we respond when our worldview is challenged? Though it might be tempting to move to a high and lofty mountain to avoid popular culture altogether, such a tactic usually doesn't work; you only end up creating another type of popular culture. Rather, I believe that a Christian's proper response to a worldview challenge from popular culture is to ask questions, to understand from a biblical perspective what popular culture is and how it works. In our parable, consider the Bible as the lens on the microscope that studies the flug. A biblical worldview helps us to sort out the good from the bad. Our task as Christians, then, is to respond to popular culture as a messy, deeply meaningful mixture. And I believe the only appropriate response to something that messy and that meaningful is apologetics.[10]

Consider the connection between popular culture and apologetics. Christians who engage unbelieving popular culture desperately need the tools that apologetics provides. But the reverse is also true: to remain relevant, apologetics desperately needs contact with the messages and world-

8. George Lucas, the creator of *Star Wars*, gave a fascinating interview to Bill Moyers, which was published as "Of Myth and Men," *Time*, April 26, 1999, 90–94. One of the sharpest and funniest analysts of popular culture writing today, Chuck Klosterman, claims that Lucas' *next* movie was the truly influential one. He argues persuasively that *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* shaped the ethos and style of the whole Gen X crowd (those born between 1965 and 1977—my generation, actually). See his "Sulking with Lisa Loeb on the Ice Planet Hoth," in *Sex, Drugs and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto* (New York: Scribner, 2004).

9. For more on popular culture as religion, see Michael Jindra, "It's about Faith in Our Future: *Star Trek* Fandom as Cultural Religion," in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000); and Theodore Turnau, "Popular Cultural 'Worlds' as Alternative Religions," *Christian Scholar's Review* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2008).

10. For those of you who don't even know what apologetics is, be patient. We'll get there in chapter 3. For right now, let's just say that apologetics is the art of defending and commending the Christian faith in a context of unbelief.

views communicated by popular culture. Popular-cultural engagement and apologetics need each other. Consider what happens when they are isolated from each other. On the one hand, a lot of Christian literature out there deals with popular culture (how to protect your children, media literacy, and so on); but precious little actually deals with popular culture as this messy, meaningful, and ultimately religious phenomenon. For that, you need a worldview approach, namely, apologetics. On the other hand, plenty of apologetics books out there treat apologetics as if it were a hard science (evidence for the resurrection, evidence for an intelligent designer, philosophical arguments for theism, and so on). But precious little apologetical literature actually engages popular culture. I fear that Christian apologists unwittingly contribute to their own perceived irrelevance by presenting arguments that simply do not deal with people where they actually live. And people do indeed live in an atmosphere suffused with popular culture. Christians who want to reach out to their non-Christian friends and neighbors need a worldview-oriented approach, an approach that deals with popular culture in all its complicated, messed-up glory.

The Plan of This Book

The main question that drives this book, then, is: How should we as Christians engage non-Christian popular culture? We won't even touch upon Christian popular culture. That is another question for another time and another book. Also, this book is not primarily intended for scholars of apologetics or cultural studies, though much here might interest them. Rather, I wrote it for thoughtful, everyday Christians who believe that these issues are worthy of serious reflection. This resource is intended for Christians who want to reach people where they live, who want to be able to talk about popular culture with their friends, spouses, and children in a way that has spiritual depth, but that won't scare folks off, either. In short, this book is for those who want to be able to give an intelligent, warmhearted, biblical answer back to the worldviews presented in popular culture. This book is for all who are interested in considering non-Christian popular culture from a Christian perspective.

Here is the territory that we are going to explore together: The first part of the book is called "Grounding." As the title suggests, it concerns getting our feet settled firmly on the ground. That really is the best place for them, especially when dealing with something in the air, like flug. In chapter 1,

we will try to define the two terms that are crucial for understanding the rest of the book: *popular culture* and *worldview*. In chapter 2, we will look at how these two interact. How does popular culture influence worldview, especially in postmodern times? Chapter 3 asks the questions: How do we meet the worldview challenges that we face? What sort of apologetics is most fit for the task? In chapter 4, we will deal with a subject that I think is too often ignored when Christians discuss popular culture: What is the significance of popular culture when viewed from a biblical, Christian-worldview perspective? Answering that question will give us clues about how best to engage popular culture in a biblically faithful way.

Part 2 of the book, "Some Not-So-Helpful Approaches to Popular Culture," surveys some of the ways that Christians have responded to popular culture. While there are lessons to be learned from these Christian approaches, they all go astray in one way or another. Typically, they minimize the messy complexity that lies at the heart of popular culture, a complexity that a sound biblical theology of popular culture should prepare us for (see chapter 4). Part 2 comprises chapters 5–9, each of which deals with a different Christian approach and how each goes astray in different ways.

In part 3, "Engaging Popular Culture," I will present what I believe is a more balanced approach to popular culture. In chapter 10, I will lay out a method of how to watch (or play or listen to or read) popular culture, and how to respond apologetically. I call this approach *popologetics*. In other words, we will explore how we ought to relate our faith to popular culture as cultural consumers, and how to respond thoughtfully to the worldview challenges presented in popular culture. In chapter 11, I unpack the ideas presented in chapter 10 by giving several concrete examples of popologetics in practice.

Then I will close the book with some thoughts on how to use this approach practically. The conclusion should give the whole book a sense of closure, as any good Hollywood movie would.

Feel free to browse and dip in and out of this book as you need to, but one small cautionary note: the whole thing will make a lot more sense if you proceed straight through from the first chapter to the last. I know that linear thinking is somewhat out of fashion in these postmodern times, what with the MTV-ization of our cerebral cortexes and all. But I still prefer it when a book builds up its perspective gradually, brick by brick. I think you will get the most out of the book if you plow straight through, and then come back

and dip in as needed. Also, keep thinking about how the book's content measures up against what the Bible says, for that's our flug-microscope lens. It is the standard against which anything I say in this book ought to be judged. Finally, think about how you can *use* what you read—or, better, how God would have you use it. It doesn't do anyone any good if it simply lies on a page, flat and inert. This book was written to be useful to Christians interested in popular culture. If you are one of those, enjoy! And if you're not (Christian or interested in popular culture), it may turn out that this book has something for you as well. At the very least, you may go away with a better understanding of the flug in the air.

Before we embark on this journey together, however, it is important to understand what engaging popular culture can and cannot do. Engaging popular culture will not save the world. It will not feed the starving in Africa or bring peace to the Middle East. It won't heal broken marriages or turn the hearts of fathers to their children and vice versa (Mal. 4:6). It won't bring spiritual revival that will sweep across the land, bringing thousands to Christ. It may strike some of you practically minded people as a waste of time. Let me assure you that it is not. What engaging popular culture *will* do is to allow you to enter into the broader cultural conversation that involves you, your family, your friends, the folks you work with, and the folks you relax with. It will allow you to enter into dialogue with them and speak truth into their lives with sensitivity, insight, and grace. And maybe, just maybe, it will help you love these people and be salt and light in the lives of those around you. And then, who knows how far the ripples of such conversations can go?

11

Popologetics Workshop

Practicing a Christian Reading of Popular Culture

I realize that the previous chapter might seem abstract and confusing for some of you. So in this chapter we will flesh out the method I presented with some practice sessions using examples from popular culture. First, we'll look at a fairly simple classic-rock song by the Eagles, "Heartache Tonight." After that, we'll tackle a more complicated example: the fascinating documentary *Grizzly Man* (2005), by Werner Herzog. Our third case study will be the Japanese anime series *One Piece*, about the man who would be Pirate King. Our fourth example will examine the blockbuster family movie *Kung Fu Panda*. And finally, a nonnarrative example, the online social network Twitter. Using these five case studies, I hope to suggest the amazing variety of imaginative worlds circulating in popular culture. Such variety needs a perspective that is flexible and responsive.[1]

Here are the five questions that constitute the perspective that I presented in the previous chapter:

1. "What's the story?" This question helps us to put together a solid interpretation of the narrative or mood of the text.
2. "Where in the world am I?" We are led to sketch out and get a feeling for the imaginative landscape of the world of the text.

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1. Books take time to write and publish, and that fact becomes nowhere more obvious than when writing about popular culture. Therefore, I must ask your pardon if the examples seem somewhat dated. Twitter has grown, *One Piece* has many more episodes, *Kung Fu Panda* has a sequel, and so on. Please remember that the point of this chapter is to illustrate the principles of how to read and respond to popular culture. It is up to you to apply these principles to the popular culture that you find around you at any given time.

3. "What is good and true and beautiful in this world?" Pondering this question helps us to locate the common-grace elements woven into the world of the text.

4. "What is false and evil and perverse in this world (and how can I subvert it)?" We ask this question to search for the idolatry that serves as the foundation for the text's worldview, and to show the idol's impotence and self-contradictory nature.

5. "How does the gospel apply here?" We are prompted to think through the ways that the worldview opened by the gospel provides life-giving answers when the text's idols fall short.

Let us run through these five steps, using actual examples. Feel free to refer back here if you need to.

A Heart-Aching Example

In 1979, the Eagles released a pop/rock song entitled "Heartache Tonight."[2] The single soared to number 1 on the Billboard "Hot 100" for a week on November 10 of that year.[3] *The Long Run*, the album that it was included on, went platinum over seven times.[4] "Heartache Tonight" also won that year's Grammy Award for "Best Rock Vocal Performance by a Duo or Group."[5] It has gone on to become a staple of classic-rock stations throughout the United States and worldwide. So we can assume that this has been an influential song among the rock-listening public, especially for those of us who grew up in the 1970s. What can we say about this song from a Christian perspective?

First Question: What's the Story?

The song, while not presenting a full-blown narrative, has many narrative elements in it. There is an implied story, and it is told in an interesting way. The lyrics paint a picture of a typical high-school summer party.

2. Don Henley, Glenn Frey, Bob Seger, and J. D. Souther, "Heartache Tonight," from *The Long Run*, Asylum Records (1979).

3. See "Hot 100 #1 Hits of 1979 (USA)," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hot_100_number-one_hits_of_1979_(USA).

4. That is, it sold over seven million units. See http://www.riaa.com/goldandplatinumdata.php?resultpage=3&table=tblTop100&action=.

5. See "Grammy Winners Search," http://www.grammy.com/GRAMMY_Awards/Winners/Results.aspx?title=&winner=&year=1979&genreID=0&hp=1.

The gospel also provides other answers where the worldviews of this film's imaginative world fall short. It makes no sense to treat humans with love and dignity in a universe where only nature matters. That was the path of Treadwell. Nor does it make sense to value humans when there is no meaning to human existence—or anything else, for that matter. That was Herzog's path. And yet we instinctively rebel against both those assertions of human meaninglessness. We recognize that human life *is* worth valuing. That is why we feel Treadwell's death as a terrible loss, an emptiness that haunts the end of the film. The gospel opens up a way of seeing human life as being made in God's image, and therefore inherently worthy of care and respect. God, this Being of ultimate worth, placed his mark on humans, rendering them inescapably valuable. And God created us as creatures who mirror him by relating to others. We are hardwired to love others. We would find loving others as natural as walking, were it not for the distorting power of sin in our lives—which goes some way in explaining Treadwell's egocentric and vituperative tantrums against other humans.

Finally, the gospel opens up a way of salvation that can put lives together again. Treadwell's life had fallen apart, and he gave himself heart and soul to a path of salvation—the grizzly gospel—that ultimately destroyed him. The real gospel, the gospel of Jesus Christ, could have put him back together again without placing him on this dangerous and quixotic path. That's not to say that risks aren't involved in following Jesus. There are risks. Some of the followers of Jesus meet insult, injury, and even death along the way. What is the difference between the followers of Jesus and Treadwell's path of the grizzly? The gospel offers a love and security that transcends even death. The followers of Jesus need never fear death, for they live on, beloved sons and daughters of the living God. As one pastor I know put it: "For the Christian, nothing is ultimately fatal." The salvation opened by the cross runs as deep as death, and runs as long as forever.

In this way, by starting within the world of the film, we are led out into wonder, into the vista of the completeness of our salvation. As I've said before, if you engage popular culture apologetically, you ultimately arrive at worship.

Getting Through in *One Piece*

Let's try a third example from yet a different medium, and a very different cultural source: Japanese manga (comic books) and anime (animated

television shows). Already wildly popular in Japan, these popular art forms have gradually become part of the popular-cultural mainstream in the West during the last twenty years. Together, manga and anime form a multibillion-dollar market worldwide.[22] Just look at the shelf space dedicated to manga and anime at your local bookstore or video rental shop. Their texts and worldviews have become increasingly influential in Western popular culture, especially among the youth and college-age audiences.

Fig. 10
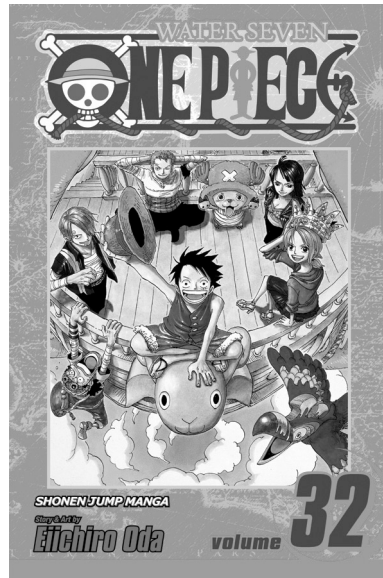
Luffy and the Straw Hat crew from an early manga cover (clockwise from bottom): the captain, Luffy; Usopp, the marksman; Sanji, the cook; Zoro, the swordsman; Chopper, the medic; Robin, the scholar; and Nami, the navigator. ONE PIECE © 1997 by Eiichiro Oda/SHUEISHA Inc.

One Piece, along with *Naruto* and *Bleach*, is considered one of the "Holy Trinity" of shōnen anime.[23] Shōnen manga and anime typically have adventure stories aimed at boys aged ten through eighteen. That means that violence, while still present, is not particularly gory; there are sexual references but nothing explicit; and the humor tends to be sillier than manga and

22. Coco Masters, "America Is Drawn to Manga," *Time*, August 10, 2006, available online at http://www.time.com/time/insidebiz/article/0,9171,1223355,00.html.
23. OnePiecehq.com, "About *One Piece*," http://www.onepiecehq.com/one-piece/about-one-piece. August 2010 saw the 460th episode of the anime series that has run for more than a decade.

anime meant for an older audience. *One Piece* is the brainchild of award-winning Japanese manga artist Eiichiro Oda. The manga was originally released as a serial in the Japanese weekly *Shōnen Jump* on August 4, 1997. It was later released as separate volumes (called *tankōbon*), and has since gone on to become the third-highest-selling manga in Japanese history. Oda had planned for it to run for five years, but says he has had so much fun producing it, he is continuing it indefinitely (at the time of writing, the anime has accumulated more than 460 weekly half-hour episodes).[24] It is now one of the longest-running current manga series in Japan. It premiered as a weekly animated television series in Japan on October 20, 1999. Americans know the anime mostly from a badly dubbed and heavily edited version released by 4Kids Entertainment and broadcast on Cartoon Network's anime show *Toonami*. More recently, FUNimation has taken over U.S. distribution and begun releasing unedited versions on DVD. Both the manga and anime have a massive Internet presence, with fan sites and download sites galore.[25]

Not only has *One Piece* had a massive impact in Japan and on manga and anime lovers worldwide, it has had a massive influence in my home. My two eldest children have each logged hundreds of hours watching the anime version. My son also reads the manga online. It motivated my then fourteen-year-old daughter to begin to teach herself Japanese. My son even planned to take courses in Japanese language and culture when he went to college, even though it had nothing to do with his first love, meteorology. When my children are this entranced by something, I need to find out what all the fuss is about. Eventually, my wife and I were drawn in as well. But like all other forms of popular culture, *One Piece* is something that should not be enjoyed uncritically. It deserves some careful thought. So let us spend some time reading this text, using the five questions.

First Question: What's the Story?

The story concerns a pirate named Monkey D. Luffy (rhymes with *goofy*). He is the leader of the "Straw Hat Pirates Crew," so called because Luffy constantly wears a straw hat, a memento from a father figure who was also a pirate. Within this fictional world, some characters have magical abilities given to them by "devil's fruits." Once eaten, a fruit empowers the

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24. See "Oda Eiichiro," in *One Piece*, vol. 42 (July 9, 2006), in Japanese (Tokyo: Shueisha, 2006), 126, cited in "One Piece," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_Piece.

25. If you would like to watch some episodes of *One Piece* before reading further, every episode is online for legal watching at www.watchop.com.

eater with its characteristic ability, yet renders the eater helpless in water. As a child, Luffy accidentally ate the "Gomu Gomu" (Gum Gum) fruit, giving him the abilities of a rubberman: elasticity, and virtual indestructibility. This is also the key to Luffy's character: tenacity—he just keeps bouncing back.

During his adventures, Luffy finds friends that he inducts one by one into his crew. Each member is brilliant in some way, but flawed in another: a master swordsman who has no sense of direction; a master cook with a killer kung fu (or rather *kenpō*) kick, but who is love-starved and lustful; a master thief, navigator, and cartographer who is deeply avaricious; a technician who is a crack shot with a slingshot, but also a compulsive liar; and so on. Luffy himself shares this "brilliant but flawed" type. He has a tenacious sense of loyalty to his crew and to his quest. He has no fear. He is determined and single-minded. He has an unerring moral compass, knowing instinctively what course of action to pursue. On the other hand, he is an unlearned, childlike idiot, constantly saying impolite or inappropriate (and often humorous) things. He is wise, but not very bright. Without his crew, he would be lost. Together, they sail from place to place, helping people out of predicaments, defeating bad guys, but always searching for a treasure called "One Piece." Finding that treasure will make Luffy the reigning Pirate King.

The story's "chapters" (called *arcs*) tend to follow a typical pattern.[26] Luffy and crew land on some unfamiliar shore and discover some dire situation of injustice. For several episodes, they scramble around, trying to grasp the situation. At some point, understanding penetrates Luffy's thick skull, and his resolve hardens, as does his crew's. This leads inevitably to a series of confrontations, culminating in a final battle between Luffy and the chief villain, usually someone who also has the ability of a devil's fruit.[27] Much time is spent on fight scenes, complete with special fighting techniques, as is typical in shōnen anime. Oda's skill as a storyteller is revealed in how he builds tension and doubt. Even though you know that Luffy can't possibly lose (since you can't kill off the main character), Luffy and company find themselves in enough trouble for the viewer to be concerned. And Oda

26. The anime series often outpaces the manga. When that happens, the anime introduces a "filler series" to allow the main, manga-inspired story line to catch up. The filler episodes are often inferior and less inventive than the main arc because they are not written by Oda, but by writers at the animation studio. Fillers also often don't follow the typical story patterns, or mimic them lamely.

27. Since I wrote this section of the book, Oda has departed several times from this typical pattern as Luffy's character has become more complex and we have learned more about him.

creates villains who are unbearably smug and callous. Watching them go down in defeat is absolutely cathartic.

Over time, the Straw Hat Pirates face more challenging opponents and more difficult moral dilemmas. The characters learn and grow in strength, prowess, and wisdom—even Luffy. More importantly, they grow to trust and depend on each other, even as they squabble. They are like family, and family loyalty is a major theme in the show, as we will see.

Second Question: What Sort of Imaginative World Is Projected by This Animated Series?

What sort of world are we, the viewers and readers, drawn into?

Aesthetically, the series is well drawn. The animators are certainly not Studio Ghibli (the studio that gave us such classics as Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*). But they do a competent job of reflecting Oda's signature manga style: bright, clean lines, exaggerated facial expressions, and sweeping action sequences. The show does have some truly beautiful artistic moments, however, especially when the animation directly reflects the artwork of the black-and-white manga. The anime also adds something missing from the manga: color. The animators favor boldness rather than subtlety in coloration, making the show leap off the screen. The bold visual style goes rather well with the hyperkinetic action sequences. The effect is very pleasing on the eye.

Further, the performances by the voice actors are wonderfully engaging. In the West, voice actors tend to dwell in relative obscurity next to their more famous live-action colleagues.[28] Not so in Japan, where voice actors themselves become celebrities. *One Piece* boasts a veteran cast of comic voice actors, and the experience shows. Each animated character is brought to life by a wonderfully expressive voice. Even though I do not speak or understand Japanese, I would have a hard time watching the show in a dubbed version. I would miss hearing the rhythms and rise and fall of each voice actor.

Dramatically, *One Piece* is a combination of humor and moral seriousness that is particularly strange for a Western audience. Silliness and playfulness abound. Luffy is, at times, absolutely childlike in his wide-eyed joy at new discoveries. The younger members of the crew, including Luffy,

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28. This is so much the case that in the past decade in Hollywood, animated films have been using live-action stars to draw audiences, edging out the voice actors who have traditionally worked in animation.

run around and play silly games between adventures. The characters often do exaggerated double-takes at each other's verbal gaffes. There is plenty of physical humor, too, even in the midst of combat sequences. You must have a high threshold for goofball humor to enjoy *One Piece*. On the other hand, there is *also* a moral gravity to many of the show's story lines and dialogue. The show's mood may turn on a dime, embracing silliness and gravitas in almost the same moment. The effect is truly bizarre. A character may be weeping bitter tears one moment and bellowing in mock outrage at some joke the next. But such is the strange admixture of *One Piece*'s fictional world.

One clue about the reason for this tone of moral seriousness is the themes embraced by the show. They are big themes that touch on deep human realities. Before I started watching *One Piece*, I talked with my daughter about the show and how it related to God. She responded, "It doesn't, really. I mean, there are godlike figures, but they aren't really gods."

I pressed further. "Okay, but what *functions* as God in the series?"

Without hesitation, she replied, "Oh, that's easy. *Nakama*."

Nakama is a Japanese word that appears frequently in *One Piece*.[29] It can be translated as "colleagues," "friends," or even one's "true family," as opposed to birth family. One of the chief virtues within the moral universe of *One Piece* is absolute loyalty to your *nakama*. Conversely, the worst crime you can commit is to betray or abandon your *nakama*. Despite their squabbles and insults, the members of Luffy's crew love one another as family and would willingly risk their lives for each other, and often do.

Along with *nakama*, fulfilling your lifelong dream forms another major theme of the series. The glory of a human being within *One Piece* is to dream big. Even small people can dream big dreams. Oda often includes children or flashbacks to the childhood of a character to show the origin of his or her dreams and life goals. Having a dream is also a burden, a quest that must be fulfilled. Those who give up on their dreams are considered weak and to be pitied. One plot device that the series regularly employs is having the crew stumble upon an incidental character who has given up on his dream. After the Straw Hat Pirates help the character out, he finds inspiration and strength in their example to pick himself up and renew his glorious quest to fulfill his dream. The dream can be anything: to be a great writer, to be the Pirate King, to draw a map of every ocean in the world, to

29. My son, Roger, informed me that *nakama* is a favorite theme of many manga and anime series, such as *Bleach* and *Naruto*.

become a brave warrior of the sea, and so on. But having a dream is only half the battle. One must also be willing to persevere, become strong, and brook no opposition in pursuit of one's personal goal.

Oda does weave other themes into the series—for example, racism, war and pacifism, and the horror of nuclear weapons (a theme that resonates deeply with the Japanese). But these are subordinate to the main themes: *nakama*, dreams, and the willpower to pursue your dreams. In fact, within *One Piece*'s world, personal integrity is a combination of these three traits: loyalty to *nakama*, having big dreams, and having the determination to realize them. Plus, it doesn't hurt to be strong and quick enough to crush any opponent who challenges you. It all feels very Old West, so it did not come as a big surprise to me to learn that one of Oda's favorite films was Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*.[30] Part of Kurosawa's genius lay in how he brought Western values and narrative styles into a Japanese context, often by taking plots and motifs from actual Westerns (he was a great admirer of the director of classic Westerns, John Ford). In the world of *One Piece*, pirates are the samurai/cowboys of the sea with big dreams and fierce passions, and the will to get it done for their personal dreams and for their *nakama*. The series does have its Eastern, Zen-inspired moments, but the story gains its primary motivation from this combination of loyalty to friends and relentlessly pursuing your dreams. This is the center of the moral/spiritual world of *One Piece*. These things make life worth living. At least for pirates.

Third Question: What Is Good and True and Beautiful in This World?

How does the imaginative world of *One Piece* reflect the grace of God? How is it a source for truth, beauty, and light?

The world of *One Piece* is a strange mixture of silliness and moral seriousness. Does silliness reflect God's grace? Or is it just a childish distraction? Earlier, in chapter 8, I argued that play and fun are very much part of God's plan, very much a reflection of his joy and grace. The playful, silly humor of this show seems to reflect that joy and wonder. Humor and silliness *can* be a sinful distraction when they continually turn our attention away from people and issues that matter. Man cannot live on silliness alone. It can be a lopsided diet that leaves us insulated and oblivious to the hurts and problems around us. In this way, entertainment *can* lead to a harmful

30. See http://onepiece.wikia.com/wiki/Eiichiro_Oda.

escapism. But I do not think that such is the case with *One Piece*. As silly as the show can be—and it can be very silly—serious issues are never far from view. In fact, without its characteristic humor, the show would feel very oppressive and bleak. Humor and silliness leaven the mix. They make it possible for the audience to consider the heavier matters that Oda wants to convey: loyalty to your *nakama* and the duty to pursue your dreams despite oppression and resistance.

Silliness and humor can also be sinful when used to attack others. Humor, even silly humor, can degrade people or undermine their dignity. *Monty Python's Flying Circus* was expert at this type of silly humor. The show used silliness to highlight the absurdity of someone else's position, usually someone in the "establishment," such as the government, the church, or business. But again, *One Piece* is very different. Most of the humor is self-effacing, directed nowhere else than at the characters themselves. The heroes enjoy laughing at one another and at themselves. This kind of humor is miles away from mean-spirited. Instead, it is humanizing, a sign of the grace of humility. Indeed, one of the ways you can differentiate between the heroes and villains is by paying attention to what they laugh at. The villains' laughter is cruel. They find the suffering of their victims amusing. The heroes laugh at the foibles and quirks of members of their own group, or the odd situations they find themselves in. They never take themselves so seriously that they cannot laugh. That is a reflection of a humble heart, of grace.

If the show's silliness reflects God's grace, so does its serious side. When I began watching, I was taken by surprise by the show's emotional intensity. Again, the characters can shift from a moment of goofball humor to pathos in seconds. Tears are plentiful in the world of *One Piece*, and they are nothing to be ashamed about. Though it may seem strange coming from a culture with a reputation for emotional repression, almost every other episode features at least one character breaking down in tears. And they cry for all the right reasons. They weep in pity when they see great suffering. They weep in anger when they see injustice. They weep tears of rage and resolve when they have been knocked down by a stronger opponent and need to stand up and fight. And they weep in gratitude for the loyalty and sacrifices of their *nakama*.

Not that tears are a sure sign of grace in cultural works. Sometimes they are simply an indicator of sentimentality or emotional manipulation, and

One Piece can be guilty of both. But the grace in these emotional outbursts lies in the fact that what moves the characters to tears are the same kinds of things that also break *God's* heart: suffering, injustice, and evil. Tears of gratitude and feelings of indebtedness to friends also shine with grace. If *One Piece* had a signature Bible verse, it might be John 15:13: "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his *nakama*."

Let me give you a brief example of *One Piece*'s grace in action. About a fifth of the way through the series, the Straw Hat Pirates crew runs across an odd character named "Chopper" on an island where it is always winter. Chopper is a blue-nosed reindeer who ate a devil's fruit that allows him to transform into a half-man, half-reindeer creature. Already hated by the herd for his blue nose (they never let poor Chopper join in any reindeer games), his new form causes his herd to reject him entirely. When he goes to the humans for companionship, they fear him as a monster and chase him away with guns. He finds refuge with an outcast doctor, but bears the scars of those earlier rejections. He has, shall we say, trust and acceptance issues. Luffy and company arrive on the island, and after some adventures, they are hungry. They see Chopper and think he is simply an animal, a source of meat. They chase him, and Chopper turns to defend himself, transforming into his more fearsome reindeer-man form during the fight. Luffy is impressed, and immediately offers to become his *nakama*. Chopper fiercely rejects the offer. He knows how humans see him—as a monster, not a potential *nakama*. But once Luffy is determined to make someone his friend, there is no stopping him. It is not until Chopper sees Luffy in action, stretching in weird inhuman ways, that he realizes that Luffy, too, is a monster of sorts. And to his surprise, Luffy fights ferociously against Chopper's sworn enemy. After the battle, Luffy again invites Chopper to come to sea with him. Chopper, in tears, faces Luffy and says, "Thank you. But I am a reindeer. I have hooves and horns. I also have a blue nose! Actually, I want to be a pirate, too. But I'm not human! I'm a monster! I can't be friends with humans! That's why I just came here to thank you!" To which Luffy (with his trademark insight and sensitivity) responds: "JUST SHUT UP AND COME WITH US!!"[31]

31. Eiichiro Oda and Beth Kawasaki, "Full Moon," chap. 152 of *One Piece Volume 16: Carrying Out His Will* (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2007). I have given a very rough summary of this part of the story. For the full arc concerning the introduction of Chopper, see chapters 139–152 of the manga, and episodes 84–91 of the anime.

In other words, Luffy doesn't want to hear about Chopper's feelings of inadequacy and reasons why he feels he can't join. Luffy has decided to befriend him, and that is that. Chopper tearfully accepts. From that moment on, Chopper is a trusted member of the crew, pursuing his dream along with others who he knows care for him and would give their lives for him.

That whole story arc resonates deeply with the gospel, the way Jesus has befriended us unconditionally, and how we are to befriend each other unconditionally. In a way, Luffy's crew is a picture of what the church should be: a bunch of misfits who sometimes bicker, but accept one another as family; who journey together toward that One Piece of treasure (known in Christian circles as "the pearl of great price"). There is something ennobling about that kind of friendship and loyalty, about dreaming big, about digging deep to find the will to reach your goal. Despite the series' violence and sometimes earthy humor, it also has these moments of grace that resonate with the gospel.

God created us for companionship, for *nakama*. We were not meant to be alone. God also created us with imaginations and aspirations, to dream big dreams. When human aspirations are thwarted (by social oppression or war, for example), something of a person's humanity is lost: it dehumanizes that person. We admire those who, despite the obstacles, persevere to realize their vision. That is what we admire in our Lord, who endured the opposition of his society to realize his dream: the salvation of his people. In pursuing his dream, Jesus fulfilled what humans were supposed to do and to be: creators in the image of God.

In all these ways—its playful humor, its tears, its values of *nakama* and tenaciously pursuing dreams—*One Piece* resonates with grace.

Fourth Question: What Is False, Evil, and Perverse in This World, and How Can I Subvert It?

Where does the world of *One Piece* lie about reality and lead us into idolatry? Just because grace shines in this world does not mean that there is no spiritual danger or deception here (intended or not). We need to be aware of the delicate interweaving of grace and idolatry that is characteristic of popular culture. How does *One Piece* use its fragments of grace to make the gospel seem irrelevant?

First, consider how this imaginative world has so carefully tailored its message to both its Japanese and Western audiences. Japan is a largely

collectivist culture: the individual is subordinated to the group. Youths in Japan often go to great lengths to express their individuality—dyeing their hair wild colors, or wearing bizarre clothes—to try to break free from traditions they consider stifling. For this group, Luffy's irreverence toward elders must seem both outrageous and refreshing. And his insistence that you must follow your dreams no matter the cost carries great appeal. It makes him seem healthy and centered—an individualist antidote to the bondage of duties to the group. And yet he still affirms the importance of one's *nakama*. He breaks with the oppressive parts of collectivist culture while affirming the need for continuing group support.

On the other hand, we individualistic Westerners are already convinced of the sacredness of our own life goals. For us, Luffy's fierce commitment to his *nakama* is extremely attractive. People in the West don't suffer as much from social pressure to subordinate self to the group. Our individualism causes a different kind of suffering: feelings of alienation, isolation, and loneliness. We crave community. And *One Piece* is, among other things, a prolonged celebration of community bonds.

Finally, both Western and Japanese cultures believe that the path to a better life lies essentially with the self, or with your group. If you cannot do it yourself, either it cannot be done or it is not worth doing. Both the East and the West are committed to forms of do-it-yourself salvation whereby the ultimate answers to life's quandaries are found within. Media scholar William Romanowski calls this the "*Wizard of Oz* Syndrome" so typical of Hollywood.[32] Characters aren't complicated, weak, sinful creatures who need a Savior. They just need to dig deep within and believe in themselves—and in their *nakama*, in the case of *One Piece*. In this sort of imaginative world, what room is there for a Savior who embraces the weak, the faltering, the sinful? Which would you rather be: a samurai or a prodigal? *One Piece* offers adventure and meaning, while essentially leaving our pride in place. *One Piece* seems guided at times by *bushido*, the code of the proud samurai. In *bushido*, there is no room for failure. By contrast, the gospel is predicated on the fact that everyone *is* a failure who needs to be put back together.

In this way, one of the main virtues within *One Piece*'s world—determined perseverance—can actually be an idol that leads to destruction. The path of unlimited determination in real life often leads to a hardness and an

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32. William D. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture*, rev. and expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 168–71.

unquenchable drive that has little patience with those who aren't as deter-mined as you are. Mercy evaporates under its heat. Weak people are seen as just so many obstacles and burdens. The path of unlimited determination that *One Piece* valorizes in real life often ends up consuming those who fol-low it. Such people end up judgmental and bitter. The gospel, on the other hand, does not see determination as an unmitigated good. Rather, the gospel creates space for mercy and patience for those who struggle. The weak are the people whom Jesus came to save, and I must not brush them aside in my pursuit of some grand cause. The kingdom is made up of weak people. Determination is a blessing, but when turned into a functional god, it can just as easily become a curse.

The same is true with the dreams and aspirations that we believe we must pursue. It is dangerous and unwise to deify one's own dreams. Think about it: Are human dreams and aspirations sacred per se? Will just any dream do? This is part of the idolatry of the series, and it plays into the larger idolatry of our culture. Our culture assumes that we create our own holy quests. The holiness in dreams lies precisely in our commitment to them. Our dreams are sacred because they are *ours*. Humans are seen as having a sort of sanctifying touch—part King Midas, part Don Quixote. We are the makers of our dreams. We become de facto wellsprings of holiness.

But in fact, the actual content of a dream matters a great deal. Pol Pot had a dream. So did Joseph Stalin. Their dreams cost millions of lives. Is it enough to want something for it to be worth pursuing? What about addictions? Can we say that the addict's next fix is his "dream," even if it leads to his own destruction? What about a father who dreams of abandon-ing his family and getting a trophy wife? We were created to be dreaming beings, but not all dreams are created equal. That is not to say that dreams are automatically idol-driven. Rather, it is a question of *context*. *One Piece* gives us no context for our dreams. They just are. A dream simply exists, and the dreamer's glory lies in pursuing it, whatever *it* is. If the context for our dreams does not include God's reality, even dreams and aspirations can destroy us and those around us.

Even the cherished value of *nakama* should not be seen as an unquali-fied blessing. Unquestioning loyalty to one's friends or community can lead to bad places. Obviously, a bad choice of *nakama* can corrupt character (1 Cor. 15:33). This isn't really a problem in *One Piece*, since every member of the crew deep down has a heart of gold. But it isn't always that way in real

life, in which people deep down don't have hearts of gold. The Bible tells us that the best of us deep down have hearts of twisted lead, with perhaps specks of gold here and there. Are we really wise to commit unquestioning loyalty to *that*?

Another danger of unquestioning loyalty to the group is that communal identities tend to be built in opposition to rival groups. Historically, even recently, we have seen that loyalty to the group carries with it a corollary: insensitivity to those who are not in the group, or even an inability to see them as fully human. Rape, torture, genocide, ethnic cleansing—all have been justified in terms of loyalty to one's *nakama*. *Nakama*, when idolized, can turn very nasty very quickly. Don't believe me? Try Googling "football violence" to explore the ugly underbelly of violence associated with European football fan clubs. This is *nakama*-inspired violence and nothing more. *Nakama* is an important value, a fragment of grace, but it doesn't make a very good god.

In all these ways, then, *nakama*, the persevering code of the samurai, even our dreams—all of them both provide blessings *and* can lead to spiritual self-destruction if they are removed from their true context and treated as de facto gods. As I said before, "Here there be monsters." Grace out of context can become oppressive idolatry, a monster. So what is the *true* context of the grace offered in *One Piece*? That leads us to the last question.

Fifth Question: How Does the Gospel Apply to This Imaginative World?

In what ways does the gospel, in its broadest application, answer the call of the desires of the human heart within this particular worldview? How does the context of God's creation and redemption story change our understanding of *nakama*, determination, or even dreams worth pursuing?

First, consider *nakama* from within the Christian worldview. The Christian approach, while seeing the value of loyalty to friends, does not allow for an uncritical investment into one's friends to the exclusion of others. People are *all* made in God's image. They are all worthy of love and respect, even if they are not part of my group. When the group begins to act in ways that run counter to Christian love or integrity, I need to take a stand against the group, even when it undermines my *nakama*. How could it be otherwise? My first loyalty is to the One who created and saved me.

For the astounding truth of the gospel is that God, at great cost to himself, came into our group and became one of us. He became our *nakama*, even to the point of death. He is now our greatest *nakama*, and our *sencho-san*, the Captain who leads us. But he did not sacrifice himself for us so that we could escape into tribalism, even Christian tribalism. Rather, he saved us so that we who were once outcasts could likewise befriend outcasts, those outside our group. It has often been said that the Christian church is the only institution that exists for the benefit of its nonmembers. Christianity offers a radical reimagining of *nakama*.

What about dreams, aspirations, and determination? Again, dreams are not sacred just because we have them. Desires can be twisted, and the determination to fulfill my aspiration no matter what can be dangerous—unless those dreams and desires are put within the right context. Our dreams and aspirations must be placed within the larger story of God's creation, our fall into sin, and redemption to new life. The Christian is first God's creature, and second a rebel whom God has rescued through Christ and made alive by his Spirit. Christ is now my truest *nakama*, and my loyalty to him must now color all my dreams and aspirations.

Further, the Christian church is unique. We are a collection of misfits who not only are loyal to each other, but have the same dream: to draw closer to our Lord and to see him glorified in the world he has made. Or, better, we misfits have a myriad of goals and aspirations that all flow into the same dream, like different parts of a single body (see Rom. 12:4–8; 1 Cor. 12:12–31; Eph. 4:11–13). We have been invited by our Captain to take part in his grand adventure, no matter how unfit we may feel for the voyage. For it is *his* power, and not our own determination, that will finally cause this dream to be realized (see John 15:5; Eph. 2:8–10; Phil. 1:6; 1 Thess. 5:23–24). The gospel, when taken seriously, radically recasts even our dreams. Our dream is now to love others as Jesus has loved us, and to spread that love along the many paths of life to which he has called us, using the gifts he has given us.

In this way, the fragments of grace within *One Piece* find their truest context within God's story of creation and redemption. Finding that truest context is the apological challenge of reading *One Piece* and other popular-cultural texts. But if you can find it, instead of being an enticement to idolatry, the show becomes an occasion for talking about the deep truths of the gospel. It can even be an occasion for worship.