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Gary B. Swanson

In *Firefly*, a television show now in syndication, an odd assortment of characters (TV people call this an “ensemble cast”), have been thrown together because of their various but mutual “misunderstandings” with an oppressive interstellar state. In one respect or another, they are all outlaws.

Among this group are an elderly man called “the shepherd,” because he is a religious person who frequently expresses uncommon spiritual wisdom, and a teenage girl named River, who has been freed by her brother from a facility where she has undergone unknown but sinister experiments by the state to develop her unusually high intelligence into weapons. Everyone aboard the spacecraft is unsettled by River’s mercurial behavior. At one moment she may be serene; at the next she may erupt into astonishing violence and power.

Yet River and the shepherd have developed a kind of close, father-daughter relationship. In one scene, the shepherd enters a room with

## “CAN ANY GOOD THING...”

some food for River. He lays the tray on a table, without looking up, unaware of what she is doing.

River is browsing through a Bible, tearing out pages here and there, and the following exchange ensues:

“What are we up to, Sweetheart?” the shepherd asks kindly.

“Fixing your Bible,” River announces, as she continues to rip pages out of the book.

“I, uh—What?” the shepherd responds in alarm.

“Bible’s broken,” River continues. “Contradictions. Doesn’t make sense.”

“No,” the shepherd protests, “no, you can’t . . .”

“So we’ll integrate non-progressive evolution theory with God’s creation,” River says, unfazed. “Eleven inherent metaphoric parallels are already there. Eleven. Important number. Prime number. . . . Noah’s ark is a problem.”

“Really!”

“We’ll have it early quantum state phenomenon,” River goes on. “Only

way to fit 5,000 species of mammals in the same boat.”

The shepherd reaches for the book. “Give me that. River, you don’t *fix* the Bible.”

“It’s broken,” River says. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“It’s not about making sense,” the shepherd sighs. “It’s about believing in something. And letting that belief be real enough to change your life. It’s about faith. You don’t fix faith, River. It fixes you.”

Like River, the character in *Firefly*, our culture is trying to “fix” the Bible, to bring it into conformity with what it considers to be a higher authority: science. A few individuals and groups are, like River, literally going through the Scriptures and methodically removing content that they consider to be unsupported by human research.

This kind of project has been attempted before. Thomas Jefferson, for example, the author of America’s Declaration of Independence, meticulously edited out any mention of the miraculous in the four Gospels, producing what we know of today as the Jefferson Bible. It includes no reference to prophecies, the Trinity, angels, genealogy, or the resurrection. In Jefferson’s view, Jesus Christ was undeniably one of the great teachers of humankind, but this divinity thing just wouldn’t do. And there have been many other such attempts to envelop Christ among

the other major contributors to the great human curriculum: Moses, Confucius, Buddha, Socrates, Mohammed.

But today scientists, educators, the media—even many Christian theologians—are also making every effort to change the way they have previously *interpreted* the Bible. In this way there’s no apparent need to delete anything in Scripture; all you have to do is change the way you *read* it. Very neat—very convenient!

Because of this change of view toward the authority of Scripture, until very recently the media have presented a very unsympathetic portrayal of religion—especially of Christianity. More than a decade ago, media critic Michael Medved, a voice crying in the wilderness, complained that “every time you see a member of the clergy or a religious figure [in the entertainment media], he’ll be portrayed as crazy or crooked or both. Hollywood, “said Medved, “sees traditionally religious people as some kind of an enemy.”\*

And, for some time, this is a depiction that people of faith have had to endure. Being the butt of so much ridicule is no fun, but Jesus did say that we would be reviled and persecuted. This, presumably, could include attacks on the spirit as well

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\* “My Gripe With Hollywood,” *Adventist Review* (July 7, 1994), p. 14.

as the more extreme attacks on the physical. Persecution can come in more subtle ways than pogroms or physical torture.

And this is why the exchange between River and the shepherd is so refreshing. Throughout popular culture—in TV shows and motion pictures, in the lyrics of popular music, in the thought of writers of books and magazine articles—we are unexpectedly beginning to encounter an ever-growing rejection of the divine status that the Enlightenment has ascribed to human reason and a much more sympathetic depiction of spiritual issues and people of faith. The creative community, at least, has become increasingly willing to return to the frequent depiction and discussion of the transcendent.

U2, four Irish musicians considered to be probably the most popular rock group in the world, sends up a prayer in "Yahweh," the penultimate song on its live album recorded in Chicago:

Take this city

A city should be shining on a hill

Take this city

If it be your will

What no man can own, no man  
can take

Take this heart

Take this heart

Take this heart

And make it break

What is happening here? Is it possible that God can reveal truth even through otherwise uninspired voices? Scripture suggests that this kind of thing has been known to happen.

Nebuchadnezzar, a heathen king, testified to the power of God (Dan. 3:25). Pagan sailors expressed the truth to God's prophet—who was literally running away from God and was dead wrong (Jonah 1:7-16). Truth came from the mouth of Balaam's donkey—again, to counter the direction of one of God's wayward prophets (Num. 22). As the result of a dream, the wife of Roman legate Pilate warned her husband, "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man" (Matt. 27:19, NIV). And even the demons testify to the divinity of Jesus (Matt. 8:29; Mark 1:23, 24; 3:11; 5:7; Luke 8:28; Acts 19:15).

So when many of the pulpits of our time may be losing touch with the spiritual basis of our lives (or maybe *because* they are doing so), it's heartening to hear more than merely occasional rhythms and refrains in popular culture to which we can resonate so that, if we are open to them, faith can "fix" us. If the stones can be made to cry out, is it conceivable that maybe even a rock group can?

