

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is a politically correct attempt to over-correct cultural bias by elevating all subcultures to equal status.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

What is Multiculturalism?

A few years ago the campus newspaper of a major university published an essay written by two professors titled *The Statement of the Black Faculty Caucus*.^{1} The purpose of the essay was to define how the University might become a truly multicultural institution. It spoke of empowerment, authority, Western culture, and transformation. The objective of the Black Faculty Caucus was to create a critical mass of empowered “minority people” at all levels of the university system. The essay argued that “Euro-Americans teaching the materials of people of color cannot make the University multicultural because multiculturalism demands empowered people of color as well as empowered areas of knowledge.”^{2} At the end of their essay the authors wrote, “What we are talking about here is no less than transforming the University into a center of multicultural learning: anything less continues a system of education that ultimately reproduces racism and racists.”^{3}

Racial reconciliation should be a top priority for every Christian, of any race or cultural background. But will this demand for a “multicultural center of learning” produce a less prejudiced society? Multiculturalists insist on greater sensitivity towards, and increased inclusion of, racial minorities and women in society. Christians should endorse both of these goals. But many advocating multiculturalism go beyond these demands for sensitivity and inclusion; here is where Christians must be careful.

One of the difficulties of accommodating multiculturalists is that defining a multicultural society, curriculum, or institution seems to be determined by one's perspective. A commonly held view suggests that being multicultural involves tolerance towards racial and ethnic minorities, mainly in the areas of dress, language, food, religious beliefs, and other cultural manifestations. However, an influential group calling itself NAME, or the National Association for Multicultural Education, includes in its philosophy statement the following: "Xenophobia, discrimination, racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia are societal phenomena that are inconsistent with the principles of a democracy and lead to the counterproductive reasoning that differences are deficiencies."⁴ NAME is a powerful organization composed of educators from around the country, and it has considerable influence on how schools approach the issue of diversity on campus. The fundamental question that the folks at NAME need to answer is, "Is it always counterproductive to reason that some differences might be deficiencies?" In other words, isn't it possible that some of the characteristics of specific culture groups are dangerous or morally flawed (for example, the culture of pedophilia)?

It is not uncommon for advocates of multiculturalism like NAME to begin with the assumption that truth is culturally based. It is argued that a group's language dictates what ideas about God, human nature, and morality are permissible. While Americans may define reality using ideas from its Greek, Roman, and Judeo-Christian heritage, Asian or African cultures see the world differently based on their traditions. Multiculturalists conclude that since multiple descriptions of reality exist, no one view can be true in any ultimate sense. Furthermore, since truth is a function of language, and all language is created by humans, all truth is created by humans. This view of truth and language has a spokesperson in Dr. Richard Rorty, humanities professor at the University of Virginia, who argues that truth that transcends culture is not

available because “where there are no sentences there is no truth, and sentences and their respective languages are human creations.”[\[5\]](#)

Finally, if all truth is created by humans, it is all equally true. Cultural ideas or institutions, like human sacrifice or welfare systems, are equally valid if they are useful for a given group of people. In other words, we live in a universe that is blind to moral choices. We are the final judges of how we shall live.

As Christians, we believe that ideas do have consequences. While being careful not to promote one set of cultural rules over others simply because we are comfortable with them, we acknowledge that Scripture reveals to us the character and nature of God, humankind, and our need for a savior. These truths can be communicated cross-culturally in a sensitive way, regardless of the people-group involved. If we didn't believe this to be true in a universal sense, then Christianity can't be true in any real way. In other words, in order to be what it claims to be, Christianity must transcend culture in a way that many multiculturalists argue cannot occur.

Language and Sensitivity

In recent years, America has been attracting over one million immigrants annually. This has resulted in a country that is religiously, racially, and linguistically more diverse. Conflict arises, however, over the question of how our nation's institutions should respond to this diversity. Until recently, it was argued that America was a melting pot society, that regardless of an immigrant's origin, given a generation or two, his family would be assimilated into American culture. Multiculturalists have challenged both the reality and advisability of this view.

Multiculturalists brand our culture as white, Western, male,

Christian, middle-class and heterosexual. They declare that our schools have forced on students a curriculum that promotes only that perspective. The books they read, the ideas they consider, the moral and ethical standards they are taught, explicitly or implicitly, tend to be those of dead white European males. The problem, they argue, is that this leaves out the contributions of many people. People of color, women, homosexuals, and various religious traditions are ignored and thus silenced. As a result, they contend, what passes for knowledge on campus is biased. Their goal is to correct this bias.

This charge of bias is not a groundless one. Even though many feel that Western culture has been very open to outside ideas, all majorities—in any society—will tend to seek cultural dominance.

The resulting multiculturalist agenda includes three demands on American society. The first is that the white Americans become more sensitive to minorities. This demand has resulted in what is referred to as “politically correct language.” Speech codes enforcing sensitivity on college campuses have attempted to protect oppressed groups from having to endure words and ideas that might ostracize them. At the center of this issue is the individual’s feelings or self-esteem. The multiculturalists argue that if a person’s self-esteem is damaged, he or she cannot learn in school.

Christians ought to be the most sensitive people in society. If calling people handicapped, Black, or Indian makes them feel diminished in importance or somehow less human, we as Christians need to be empathetic and make changes in our use of language. This sensitivity should grow out of a sense of biblical humility, not for political or economic reasons.

But another question still must be answered. Will the enforced use of certain words really benefit the self-esteem and thus the learning of minority students in schools, as some have

suggested? Dr. Paul Vitz, professor of psychology at New York University, argues that this is a far too simplistic view of human nature.^[6] Self-esteem itself cannot be tied directly to any behavior, positive or negative.

Some contend that enforcing “politically correct speech” is an attempt to redescribe our society in a manner that changes the way we think about issues. If the concepts of personal and family responsibility become labeled as hate speech towards those on welfare, an entire way of looking at the issue is forced out of the dialogue.

Unfortunately, language can also be used to legitimize behavior that Christians believe to be morally wrong. Homosexuality has progressively been referred to as a sin, then a disease, a lifestyle, and now a preference or sexual orientation. Just by re-describing this activity in new terms, an entirely different connotation is given to what homosexuality is. This has not occurred by accident.

Hebrews 12:14 tells us to make every effort to be at peace with all men. As we articulate truth, our language should lean towards gentleness and respect, for the sake of the Gospel. When we believe that every person deserves to be shown respect because we are all created in the image of God, our attitude will result in language and tone that is sensitive and gentle—not because political correctness demands it, but because out of a heart of love flow words of love.

Inclusion and Truth

A second demand being made on our schools and society is in the area of inclusiveness. Multiculturalists contend that marginalized people need to be brought into the curriculum and the marketplace of ideas on campus. No group should ever have to feel left out. One example is the recent set of standards offered by UCLA’s National Center for History in the Schools. As originally offered, the standards greatly increased the

voice of both minorities and women in the telling of our nation's history. However, many charge that they denigrated or ignored the contributions of white Americans in order to be inclusive. In fact, some complained that the overall picture of America produced by the standards was of an oppressive, WASPish empire. Even the U.S. Senate denounced the proposed standards by a vote of 99 to 1. One Senator voted against the resolution because it wasn't strong enough.

The standards declared that the U.S. is not a Western-based nation, but the result of three cultures. These cultures—Native American, African-American and European—are not seen as moral equals. In fact, the European contribution was one of oppression, injustice, gender bias and rape of the natural world. Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, responded to the standards by saying that “No other nation in the world teaches a national history that leaves its children feeling negative about their own country—this would be the first.”[\[7\]](#)

In fact, U.S. history textbooks have been moving toward inclusion for some time. In order to make up for the neglect of women and people of color in past texts, some historians and publishers have gone a bit overboard in their attempts at finding the right balance. In one text, *The American Nation*, of the 13 religious leaders mentioned in short biographies, only two are non-Hispanic white males—Brigham Young and Ralph Waldo Emerson.[\[8\]](#) Often women and minorities are injected into the text in odd ways. In this book, Senator Margaret Chase Smith is cited for challenging Senator Joseph McCarthy. While she was an early critic of McCarthy, she had little to do with his eventual political demise. Another example is Native American chief George Crum, noted for making the first potato chips in 1853.

The writing of history is a delicate task, and is probably impossible to accomplish without bias. But as Christians, we would prefer that truth—what really happened—at least be the

goal, rather than political or racial propaganda, even if this goal will never be perfectly accomplished. This notion of truth demands that students be taught as much U.S. history as feasible. To leave out the experience of Native Americans, African-Americans or women would be a tremendous failure. But writing our entire history from their perspective is unfair as well. One answer to this problem is to have students read more primary historical documents and depend less on history textbooks. Unfortunately, multiculturalists see all texts as primarily political. They argue that only one view prevails: either the empowered majority's or the oppressed minority's. This belief that all knowledge is political results in turning schools into battlegrounds where representatives from every group, from Hispanics to gay rights activists, go over the curriculum with a magnifying glass, looking for the proper amount of inclusion or any derogatory remarks made about their group.

Tolerance as a Worldview

Many multiculturalists insist that we embrace multiculturalism in our schools not just in the way we teach, but in the way we think. Multiculturalists have specific ideas about the notion of truth; paramount is the belief that no truth transcends culture, that no idea or moral concept might be true for every cultural group or every human being. As a result, multiculturalists demand that we give up our beliefs in moral absolutes and become moral relativists.

This worldview model has been the litmus test for college professors on many campuses for quite some time, particularly in the humanities. Evidently, in some programs it is now being applied to college students as well. In 1992, St. Cloud (Minn.) State University made it known that if students were to be accepted, those who desired to enter the social work program must relinquish specific notions of moral truth. While acknowledging that many students come from religious

backgrounds that do not accept homosexuality as a legitimate lifestyle, these very students were required to go beyond "hating the sin and loving the sinner." Students who had predetermined negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians were told to look elsewhere for a major. In other words, one must, at the level of faith commitment, find no moral aversion to homosexuality in order to be admitted to this program. This removes a majority of our population from consideration right off the bat.

Part of the problem with multiculturalism is that it allows for a broad definition of cultural groups. There is both a gay culture and a feminist culture in America. In fact, any group can identify itself as a marginalized culture group. The homeless become a cultural group, as do single mothers on welfare. Should their perspectives get equal treatment in our schools? Are their moral values as valid as all others? The problem is that to be considered multiculturally sensitive, one must be able to place oneself into the perspective of the oppressed group completely, at the metaphysical level, not just to sympathize or even empathize with them. This means that one must be willing to compromise faith-based beliefs about God, human nature, and reality itself. For instance, if the gay community, being an oppressed minority group, believes that being homosexual is natural and every bit as normal as heterosexual relationships, Christians should ignore what they believe to be revealed truth about homosexuality's sinfulness.

Christians are called to have mercy and compassion on the poor and less fortunate, but not at the expense of recognizing that some lifestyles result in the impoverishment of people regardless of their race or cultural heritage. What is being asked of Christians is that we give up our view of a universe governed by a moral God who has established a moral universe, and replace it with a morally relativistic one. Tolerance becomes the only absolute. To be exclusive about truth, or to argue that some action might be morally wrong for all people

all the time, violates this new absolute of tolerance.

Ultimately, this current enforcement of tolerance is really a thinly veiled pursuit of power. The only way certain groups, such as homosexual activists or the more radical feminists, can get recognition and the ability to spread their views, is by establishing tolerance as an absolute. Eventually, they win affirmative action concessions from universities and public schools, which enforces their viewpoint. Recently, the state of Massachusetts passed legislation recognizing the difficulties of gay elementary and secondary students, forcing all public school teachers to be educated and sensitized to their plight. This recognition and re-education of teachers further legitimizes and enhances the power of the gay rights movement.

Without losing sight of our calling to reach out and minister to people caught in lifestyles and cultures that vaunt themselves against the knowledge and standards of God, we cannot become moral relativists in the process.

Justice and Truth

While multiculturalists occasionally refer to justice, it cannot be the foundation of their movement. This is for the simple reason that justice is not possible without truth. In order to claim that someone's actions or words are unjust, one must assume that a moral order really does exist, a moral order that would be true for all cultures and at all times. Injustice implies that justice exists, justice implies that moral laws exist, and moral laws imply that a lawgiver exists.

One college professor, explaining his plan for a liberal ironist utopia, says that a liberal is someone who thinks that being cruel is the worst thing that one can do. He argues that this moral standard can be used to create a utopia on earth. But he admits, being a good moral relativist, that he cannot give any non-circular arguments for why being cruel is the

worst thing one can do. He is inventing a moral law, but admitting that its foundation lies only in his preference for that law.

Even if we accept his moral standard as useful, it leaves us with many questions. The first is, what does it mean to be cruel? Is it cruel to encourage people in their gay lifestyle given the short life span of male homosexuals, even without AIDS?[\[9\]](#) If pain is part of our definition of cruelty, should all operations be banned because even if successful, pain might result? How can he know that being cruel is the worst thing one can do in a morally neutral universe? Without truth, without knowledge of right and wrong, justice is impossible, as is any notion of a good life. The word "cruel" becomes an empty word.

By declaring tolerance an absolute, multiculturalists are consistent with their view of reality. They see all human cultures as morally equal because of their faith in a naturalistic world view. This view argues for a godless universe, and recognizes chance as the only possible cause for what exists. If this is true, absolute tolerance is the best we can hope for. Christians seek sensitivity and inclusion for a much better reason.

We believe that every human being was created in God's image and reflects God's glory and majesty. We were created to have dominion over God's creation as His stewards. Thus, we are to care for others because they are ultimately worthy of our care and concern. We are not to be cruel to others because the Creator of the universe made individuals to have fellowship with Him and He cares for them. This does not discount that people are fallen and in rebellion against God. In fact, if we really care about people we will take 2 Corinthians 5:19-20 seriously. First, that God has made reconciliation with Himself possible through His Son Jesus Christ, and as verse 20 says, "...he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were

making his appeal through us.”

True sensitivity and inclusion will not be achieved by making tolerance an absolute. They occur when we take what people believe, and the consequences of those beliefs, seriously. When you think about it, what could be crueler than failing to inform people of the Gospel of redemption through Christ, leaving them to spend eternity separated from the Creator God who loves them?

Notes

1. Berman, Paul. *Debating P.C.: The Controversy Over Political Correctness on College Campuses* (NY: Dell Publishing, 1992), 249.

2. Ibid., 253.

3. Ibid., 257.

4. Francis, Samuel, “The Other Face of Multiculturalism,” *Chronicles*, April, 1998, p. 33.

5. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p 5.

6. Guinness, Os & Seel, John, ed. *No God But God*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), p. 96.

7. Leo, John “History standards are bunk” *U.S. News & World Report* February 6, 1995, 23.

8. Ibid.

9. Dr. Paul Cameron, *Family Research* (Newsletter of the Family Research Institute, Inc.), April-June 1991.

Christians and Culture

What Should We Do with This Thing Called Culture?

What do you think of when you hear the word culture? Perhaps you refer to the arts. You may picture the way people dress, the way they eat, their language, their religion, their architecture, or a host of other perceptions. One of the most succinct definitions of culture is wide-ranging because it refers to “that which man does beyond biological necessity.”[{1}](#) Obviously such a definition indicates the importance of the term. Our lives are lived within culture. There is no escaping this thing called culture. But how is a Christian to respond?

Church history demonstrates that one of the constant struggles of Christianity, both individually and corporately, is with culture. Paul, for example, wrote two letters to Christians who lived in Corinth, a very challenging culture. Where should we stand? Inside? Outside? Ignore it? Become isolated from it? Should we concern ourselves with attempting to transform it?

In 1949 a theologian named Richard Niebuhr delivered a series of lectures entitled *Christ and Culture*.[{2}](#) Subsequently his thoughts were published and the book has become a classic. Niebuhr’s text focuses on five paradigms that describe how Christians have dealt with culture. A brief survey of these paradigms can help us see ourselves, and perhaps challenge us to consider changing the way we look at the world around us.

The first paradigm, *Christ against Culture*, describes those who choose to isolate themselves from the surrounding culture.

A descriptive contemporary phrase might be “the holy huddle” of Christians who dialog among themselves, but no one else. Second, the *Christ of Culture* perspective is exactly the opposite of *Christ against Culture* because it attempts to bring culture and Christianity together, regardless of their differences. Third, the *Christ above Culture* position attempts to synthesize the issues of the culture with the answer of Christian revelation. Fourth, *Christ and Culture in Paradox* refers to those who understand the tension between the Christian’s responsibility to both the cultural and the spiritual realms. Fifth, *Christ the Transformer of Culture* describes those who strive “to convert the values and goals of secular culture into the service of the kingdom of God.”[\[3\]](#)

Which of these paradigms describes your relationship with the culture in which you live? Or perhaps you have another paradigm to offer. No doubt we could engage in debate about the merits and demerits of all of them. But since we cannot do that at the moment, let us agree that we should at least give attention to our place in culture.

Christians are to observe and analyze culture and make decisions regarding our proper actions and reactions within it. A struggle is in progress and the stakes are high. But in order to struggle meaningfully and with some hope of influencing our culture, we must be thoughtful and informed.

Our work through Probe Ministries is dedicated to the proposition that the Lord can use Christians as salt and light. God has called us to offer a voice in both the Christian and the non-Christian communities. Among other things, this means that we have attempted to give attention to how this can be done for the glory of God. In particular, our involvement in the non-Christian community presents a special challenge. Much prayer and study have been focused on principles that should be considered before we engage with the culture. In this article, I will focus on five of these principles that apply to ministry within the culture.

Establishing Biblical Precepts

Unless you live in a cave, you have had to deal with the culture around you. You have sensed the need to give thought to how you might glorify God as you react to your culture. Or you may have experienced times of mental and spiritual trauma as you realized the sinful nature of what you experience around you. If you choose to interact with your culture, there are certain principles to be considered.

The first of these is the need for biblical precepts. That is, our minds should be filled with God's ideas before interacting with the culture. This is an understandable and universally stated declaration among evangelical Christians. Experience tells us we need to give life to the declaration. Are we responding to our culture based on biblical precepts, or are we responding to our culture based on other sources? Are we utilizing a Christian world view as we respond to culture, or are we unwittingly utilizing a naturalistic worldview? When we discuss things as Christians, do we focus on Scripture no matter what we might be discussing? "Contemporary Christianity is all too frequently shaped by the fact that when we meet we do so in an atmosphere resembling that of a committee or caucus, where the style is political and tactical, hardly scholarly, and almost never devotional or genuinely spiritual."^{4} Do we give serious attention "to the sacred text as the firm and only basis on which life and decisions should be based?"^{5} Indeed, without the "sacred text" evangelicals are left to grapple with their culture in much the same manner as those who do not claim allegiance to that text.

In order to affirm the primacy of Scripture in a cultural critique the Christian should first *read* his culture in the light of the Bible. Proper recognition of the culture is necessary before it can be addressed properly. In other words, we need a biblical "lens" through which we can see the

culture. The light of God's Word needs to be focused on the questions at hand. For example, the culture tends to *secularize* life. Most of us live, work, and play in the secular sphere. But *secularism* refers to a way of life that "excludes all considerations drawn from a belief in God or in a future state."[\[6\]](#)

Harry Blamires, a protégé of C.S. Lewis and an astute cultural critic, offers an insightful critique of secularism. The secularist's position can be defined only in negatives. There is no life except this life in time. There is no order of being except that which we explore with our senses and our instruments. There is no condition of well-being except that of a healthy and comfortable life in time. There is no God to be worshipped, for no God created us. There is no God to propitiate, for there is no God to offend. There is no reward to be sought and no punishment to be avoided except those which derive from earthly authority. There is no law to be obeyed except those which earthly authority imposes or earthly prudence recommends.[\[7\]](#)

Obviously, Blamires' observations are the result of seeing secularism with a scriptural lens. Biblical precepts allow him to offer such a critique. His example can be an encouragement for us. May God guide us as we apply biblical precepts to evaluate our culture.

Rejecting Cultural Biases, Developing Interaction

What do you think of the culture in which you live? In particular, what do you think of the broader American culture in which your sub-culture is found? For example, are you comfortable with the adage: "America: love it or leave it?" Or do you tend to think of certain other cultures as pristine, even if you have never visited them?

I have discussed the need to assess culture through the use of

biblical precepts, the first principle of cultural evaluation. The second principle is focused on what I call cultural bias. If we are to interact with cultures other than our own, and if we seek honestly to evaluate our own, we must be cautious of biases.

Carl F.H. Henry, a great theologian, apologist, and cultural critic has enumerated what he calls twenty fantasies of a secular society. One of these includes the thought that God “will protect the United States and its people from catastrophic disaster because of our commitment to freedom, generosity, and goodness.” Dr. Henry writes, “For many, God is an ever-living George Washington who serves invisibly as the father of our country. This vague political theology assumes that America can never drift irrecoverably beyond divine approval, and that the nation is intrinsically exempt from severe and final divine judgment.” Another fantasy is “that the American people are essentially good at heart in a world whose inhabitants are more prone to evil.”^{8} The anthropologist Charles Kraft responds to such thinking by writing that “much of the Christian populace has simply continued to assume that such features of our society as monogamy, democracy, our type of educational system, individualism, capitalism, the ‘freedoms,’ literacy, technological development, military supremacy, etc. are all products of our association with God and therefore can be pointed to as indications of the superiority of our culture over all other cultures.”^{9}

Missionaries who serve in cultures other than their own can speak to the danger of such fantasies. But we do not have to be foreign missionaries to experience the effects of cultural bias. The United States has become such a multicultural environment that Christians can and must understand the importance of rejecting cultural biases.

Interaction but not Accommodation

The third principle of cultural evaluation focuses on the need for interaction with culture, but not accommodation. There should be no fear in this if we are using biblical precepts, the first of our principles. But we need to be alert to the ways in which we can become enmeshed in the culture. In addition, we should be accountable to one another by offering warnings when we observe such entanglement.

Without cultural interaction evangelicals leave numerous important facets of contemporary cultural life without the light of truth they can offer. A cursory reading of post-Enlightenment history will demonstrate the progressive decrease of evangelical interaction and the subsequent lack of influence in strategic areas of culture. For example, American higher education has been guided by principles that leave Christian theism out of the picture.

It is crucial, though, that such interaction take place with a sense of accountability. The person who enters the culture without respect for the ideological dangers that reside there will prove to be foolish. The ideas, the sense of progress, and the pride of cultural accomplishment can lead us to give credit to man instead of God. May the Lord receive praise as He uses us to touch our culture!

A Positive Revolutionary Vision

The word *revolution* tends to have a negative connotation for most of us. A revolutionary most often is seen as someone who engenders rebellion and chaos. But a Christian's response to culture should include a positive revolutionary mindset. Christian thought and life should state things to culture that exhibit Christ's revolutionary vision for all people. A type of pluralism that tempts us to negate Christianity's claims and absolutes should not persuade Christians. Donald Bloesch speaks to this tension by juxtaposing what he calls prophetic

religion and culture religion. He writes: "Our choice today is between a prophetic religion and a culture religion. The first is anchored in a holy God who infinitely transcends every cultural and religious form that testifies to Him. The second absolutizes the cultural or mythical garb in which God supposedly meets us."[{10}](#) Our interaction with culture must have a prophetic voice. We must speak boldly to the culture knowing that the source of our proclamation is the sovereign God.

This means that Christians should not relegate their lives to what may be called a "Christian ghetto" or "holy huddle." Too many Christians live "a split life: they are forced to use many words and images that have a private meaning for them with which they are unable or unwilling to enrich the fund of public experience."[{11}](#) One may have a revolutionary vision and prophetic zeal, but too often it is directed toward his "ghetto" instead of the surrounding culture. To quote an old cliché: "He is preaching to the choir."

Notice how often conversations among Christians concentrate on problems presented by the surrounding culture. For example, discussion may focus on the latest outrage in the entertainment industry, or the newest bit of intrigue in Washington, or concerns about the sex education emphasized in public schools, or controversies surrounding issues of abortion, euthanasia, cloning, homosexuality, child abuse, or a host of other topics. Then notice if constructive suggestions are offered. Is attention given to the ways in which the Christian community might respond to such issues based on biblical precepts? Too often such a scenario does not include positive revolutionary cultural interaction.

Lesslie Newbigin, a perceptive cultural critic, offers two propositions regarding a Christian's revolutionary vision. First, Newbigin states he would not see Christians just "in that corner of the private sector which our culture labels 'religion', but rather in the public sector where God's will

as declared in Jesus Christ is either done or not done in the daily business of nations and societies, in the councils of governments, the boardrooms of transnational corporations, the trade unions, the universities, and the schools.” Second, “I would place the recovery of that apocalyptic strand of the New Testament teaching without which Christian hope becomes merely hope for the survival of the individual and there is no hope for the world.”^{12} Christianity is not to be privatized; it applies to all people in all places at all times.

If we choose to take Newbigin’s propositions seriously, we must not be naïve about the response we will receive. At this moment in American history the public sector often is antagonistic toward a Christian voice. Thus we should not be surprised when we are rejected. Instead, if we are stating God’s ideas we should rejoice, as did the early Christians when they suffered for His name (Acts 5:41). When truth rubs shoulders with untruth, friction is the result.

Glorifying God in All of Life

The words *whatever* and *all* are enormous. Can you think of something more than *whatever* or *all*? When the apostle Paul wrote his first letter to the church in Corinth he used these terms to describe how they should glorify God in their lives: “Whether, then, you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (I Cor. 10:31). Pagan Corinth certainly provided many opportunities for early Christians to learn how to respond to their culture. The same is true for Christians in our time. We live in and associate with a culture that constantly presents challenges. We are to glorify God in all we do, regardless of those challenges. “Where God is acknowledged as the Creator, man knows that the ultimate meaning of His creatures is the same as the meaning of all life: the glory of God and the service of men.”^{13} Our work within culture and our influence on it are part of what God will judge. Therefore, these works are important.

We are to remind ourselves and tell the culture that “the prophetic church witnesses to the breaking into history of a higher righteousness; it points people to a higher law.”[{14}](#) Carl F.H. Henry emphasizes this in a passage concerning education, but the implications cover much more:

The drift of twentieth century learning can be succinctly summarized in one statement: Instead of recognizing [God] as the source and stipulator of truth and the good, contemporary thought reduces all reality to impersonal processes and events, and insists that man himself creatively imposes upon the cosmos and upon history the only values that they will ever bear.[{15}](#)

God is sovereign; He is the Lord of *whatever* and *all* in all of life.

Thus we must be cautious about our emphases within culture. God changes things; we are His messengers. Our involvement is important, but it must be remembered that it is transitory. As beautiful and meaningful as the works of man may be, they will not last. The theologian Karl Barth emphasized this by relating his comments to the tower of Babel: “In the building of the tower of Babel whose top is to touch heaven, the Church can have no part. The hope of the Church rests *on* God *for* men; it does not rest *on* men, not even on religious men—and not even on the belief that men *with the help of God* will finally build that tower.”[{16}](#) Our hope is not found in man’s efforts. Our hope is found in God’s provision for eternity. But this does not denigrate our involvement with culture. “There is a radical difference between human culture generally, which is thoroughly secular, and that which is developed as a loving service to God.”[{17}](#) Utopia will never refer to this life. Since no culture “this side of the Parousia [Second Coming] can be recognized as divine we are limited to the more modest hope that life on earth may gradually be made better; or, more modestly still, gradually be made less bad.”[{18}](#) Christian’s

response to culture should be described with such modest hopes in view.

This article has focused on five principles that can strengthen a Christian impact on culture. Fill your mind with biblical precepts; be careful that you do not respond to the surrounding culture with cultural biases; be interactive, but not accommodating; develop a positive revolutionary mindset; and glorify God in all of life.

Notes

1. Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization* (London: Nisbet, 1948), 142.
2. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).
3. Donald G. Bloesch, *Freedom for Obedience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 227.
4. Charles E. Kinzie, "The Absorbed Church: Our Inheritance of Conformed Christianity," *Sojourners* 7 (July, 1978), 22.
5. Ibid.
6. Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1963), 58.
7. Harry Blamires, *Recovering the Christian Mind* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 59-60.
8. Carl F.H. Henry, *Christian Countermoves In A Decadent Culture* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1986), 32.
9. Charles H. Kraft, "Can Anthropological Insight Assist Evangelical Theology?" *The Christian Scholar's Review* 7 (1977), 182.
10. Bloesch, *Freedom for Obedience*, 244
11. Julius Lipner, "Being One, Let Me Be Many: Facets of the Relationship Between the Gospel and Culture," *International Review of Missions* 74 (April, 1985), 162.
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Art and the Christian

How should Christians think about art from a framework that starts with the Bible? The concept that people are made in God's image is reflected in the fact and the content of the art we produce.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

Art in our Lives

Where are you as you read this? You may be sitting in an office, reclining in a lounge chair at home, lounging in your back yard, sitting at a desk in your dorm room, or any other of a number of scenarios. Consider for a moment if art is part of your consciousness. If you are sitting in an office, is art anywhere within your vision? If you are reclining in a lounge chair, does the furniture have an artistic dimension? If you are lounging in your back yard, can the word art be used to describe any facet of what you see? If you are in your dorm

room, are you listening to music that is art?

If I had the pleasure of dialoguing with you in regard to these questions, no doubt we would have a very interesting conversation. Some of you may say, "No, art doesn't describe anything I see at the moment." Or, some of you may state, "I haven't thought of this before. You'll have to give me more time for reflection." Others may assert, "I only think of art within museums, concert halls or other such places that enshrine our art." Others may say, "Yes, art is very much a part of my daily life." But since I can't dialog with you in order to know what you are doing at the moment, and I certainly cannot see what you see, let me tell you where I am and what I see as I write these comments. I am sitting in my study at my desk while I am listening to the music of Bach. I see a clock on one of the bookshelves, a hand-painted plate I purchased in the country of Slovenia, a framed poem given to me by my daughter, several chairs, two floor lamps, a mirror with a bamboo frame, two canoe paddles I bought in the San Blas islands off the coast of Panama, a wooden statue I purchased in Ecuador, and a unique, colorful sculpture that was made by my son. As I mention these things, perhaps you are attempting to imagine them. You are trying to "see" or "hear" them and in so doing there are certain of these items you may describe as art. Your first response may be to say that the music of Bach, the hand-painted Slovenian plate, or the Ecuadorian statue can be described as art. But what about the chair in which I am sitting, the desk, the bookshelves, the chairs, or the lamps? Better yet, what about such items that are found where you live? Are they art?

Such questions are indicative of the challenges we face when we begin to consider the place of art in our lives. As an evangelical Christian I can state that art and the aesthetic dimensions of life have not received much attention within my formal training. Only through my own pursuit have I begun to think about art with a Christian worldview. And I have found my

experience is similar to what many have experienced within the evangelical community. Too often we have tended to label art as inconsequential or even detrimental to the Christian life.

Actually, there is nothing new about this. Our spiritual forefathers debated such issues. They were surrounded by Greek and pagan cultures that challenged them to give serious thought to how they should express their new beliefs. Art surrounded them, but could the truth of Christ be expressed legitimately through art? Could Christians give positive attention to the art of non-Christians? In light of such struggles it is my intention to encourage you to give attention to some of the basic elements of a Christian worldview of art and aesthetics in this essay. I believe you will find that our discussion can have significant application in your life.

Art and Aesthetics

Several years ago I was having dinner with a group of young people when our conversation turned to the subject of music. During the discussion I made a comment about how I believe there is a *qualitative* difference between the music of Bach and that of a musician who was popular among Christians at the time of our discussion. When one of the group at our table heard this, he immediately responded in anger and accused me of flagrant prejudice and a judgmental spirit. Even though I attempted to elaborate my point, the young man had determined that I was an elitist and would not listen any longer.

This incident serves as a reminder that one of the most prevalent ways of approaching art is to simply say that "beauty is in the eye (or ear) of the beholder." The incident also serves to show that concepts of "good" and "bad," or "beautiful" and "ugly," or other adjectives, are part of our vocabulary when we talk of art. This is true whether we believe such terms apply only to individuals or everyone. The vocabulary pertains to a field of philosophy called

aesthetics.

All of us deal with aesthetics at various times in our lives, and many of us incorporate aesthetic statements in daily conversations. For example, we may say, "That was a *great* movie." Or, "That was a *terrible* movie." When we make such statements we normally don't think seriously about how such terms actually apply to what we have seen. We are stating our opinions, but those opinions are usually the result of an immediate emotional response. The challenge comes when we attempt to relate *qualitative* statements about the movie as part of a quest to find universal guidelines that can be applied to all art. When we accept this challenge we begin to explain why some artists and their art is great, some merely good, and others not worthwhile.

Aesthetics and Nature

Perhaps one of the clearest ways to begin to understand the aesthetic dimension of our lives is to consider how we respond to nature. Have you ever heard anyone say, "That's an *ugly* sunset." Probably not, but surely you have heard the word *beautiful* applied to sunsets. And when you hear the phrase "beautiful sunset" you probably don't hear an argument to the contrary. Usually there is a consensus among those who see the sunset: it is beautiful. From a Christian perspective those who are there are offering a judgment concerning both the "artist" and the "art." Both the "cause" and "effect" have been praised aesthetically. Torrential waterfalls, majestic mountains, as well as sunsets routinely evoke human aesthetic response. The Christian knows that the very fabric of the universe expresses God's presence with majestic beauty and grandeur. Psalm 19:1 states, "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows forth his handiwork." Nature has been called the "aesthetics of the infinite." Through telescope or microscope, one can devote a lifetime to the study of some part of the universe—the skin, the eye, the sea,

the flora and fauna, the stars, the climate. All of nature can be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities which find their source in God, their Creator. In fact, we can assert that “the major premise of a Christian worldview, including a Christian aesthetic, is that God is the Creator.”(1)

Human Creativity

“You have a wonderful imagination! Are you an artist?” Has anyone said such things to you? If so, perhaps you responded by saying something that would reject the person’s perception of you. Most of us don’t see ourselves as imaginative, artistic people. Indeed, most of us tend to think of the artist and imagination as terms that apply only to certain elite individuals who have left a legacy of work. “The truth is that in discussing the arts we are discussing something universal to mankind.”(2) For example, anthropologists tell us all primitive peoples thought art was important.(3) Why is this true?

From the perspective of a Christian worldview the answer is found in how we are created. Since we are made in God’s image that must include the glorious concept that we too are creative. After creating man, God told him to subdue the earth and rule over it. Adam was to cultivate and keep the garden (Gen. 2:15) which was described by God as “very good” (Gen. 1:31). The implication of this is very important. God, the Creator, a lover of the beauty in His created world, invited Adam, one of His creatures, to share in the process of “creation” with Him. He has permitted humans to take the elements of His cosmos and create new arrangements with them. Perhaps this explains the reason why creating anything is so fulfilling to us. We can express a drive within us which allows us to do something all humans uniquely share with their Creator.

God has thus placed before the human race a banquet table rich with aesthetic delicacies. He has supplied the basic

ingredients, inviting those made in His image to exercise their creative capacities to the fullest extent possible. We are privileged as no other creature to make and enjoy art.

There is a dark side to this, however, because sin entered and affected all of human life. A bent and twisted nature has emerged, tainting every field of human endeavor or expression and consistently marring the results. The unfortunate truth is that divinely-endowed creativity will always be accompanied in earthly life by the reality and presence of sin expressed through a fallen race. Man is Jekyll and Hyde: noble image-bearer and morally-crippled animal. His works of art are therefore bittersweet.

Understanding this dichotomy allows Christians to genuinely appreciate something of the contribution of every artist, composer, or author. God is sovereign and dispenses artistic talents upon whom He will. While Scripture keeps us from emulating certain lifestyles of artists or condoning some of their ideological perspectives, we can nevertheless admire and appreciate their talent, which ultimately finds its source in God.

The fact is that if God can speak through a burning bush or Balaam's donkey, He can speak through a hedonistic artist! The question can never be how worthy is the vessel, but rather has truth been expressed? God's truth is still sounding forth today from the Bible, from nature, and even from fallen humanity.

Because of the Fall, absolute beauty in the world is gone. But participation in the aesthetic dimension reminds us of the beauty that once was, and anticipates its future luster. With such beauty present today that can take one's breath away, even in this unredeemed world, one can but speculate about what lies ahead for those who love Him!

Art and the Bible

What does the Bible have to say about the arts? Happily, the Bible does not call upon Christians to look down upon the arts. In fact, the arts are *imperative* when considered from the biblical mandate that whatever we do should be done to the glory of God (I Cor. 10:31). We are to offer Him the best that we have—intellectually, artistically, and spiritually. Further, at the very center of Christianity stands the *Incarnation* (“the Word made flesh”), an event which identified God with the physical world and gave dignity to it. A real Man died on a real cross and was laid in a real, rock-hard tomb. The Greek ideas of “other-worldly-ness” that fostered a tainted and debased view of nature (and hence aesthetics) find no place in biblical Christianity. The dichotomy between sacred and secular is thus an alien one to biblical faith. Paul’s statement, “Unto the pure, all things are pure” (Titus 1:15) includes the arts. While we may recognize that human creativity, like all other gifts bestowed upon us by God, may be misused, there is nothing inherently or more sinful about the arts than other areas of human activity.

The Old Testament

The Old Testament is rich with examples which confirm the artistic dimension. Exodus 25 shows that God commanded beautiful architecture, along with other forms of art (metalwork, clothing design, tapestry, etc.) in the building of the tabernacle and eventually the temple. Here we find something unique in history art works conceived and designed by the infinite God, then transmitted to and executed by His human apprentices!

Poetry is another evidence of God’s love for beauty. A large portion of the Old Testament, including Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, portions of the prophets, and Job contain poetry. Since God inspired the very words of

Scripture, it logically follows that He inspired the poetical form in such passages.

Music and dance are often found in the Bible. In Exodus 15 the children of Israel celebrated God's Red Sea victory over the Egyptians with singing, dancing, and the playing of instruments. In 1 Chronicles 23:5 we find musicians in the temple, their instruments specifically made by King David for praising God. And we should remember that the lyrical poetry of the Psalms was first intended to be sung.

The New Testament

The New Testament also includes artistic insights. The most obvious is the example of Jesus Himself. First of all, He was by trade a carpenter, a skilled craftsman (Mark 6:3). Secondly, His teachings are full of examples which reveal His sensitivity to the beauty all around: the fox, the bird nest, the lily, the sparrow and dove, the glowering skies, a vine, a mustard seed. Jesus was also a master story-teller. He readily made use of His own cultural setting to impart His message, and sometimes quite dramatically. Many of the parables were fictional stories, but they were nevertheless used to teach spiritual truths via the imagination.

We should also remember that the entire Bible is not only revelation, it is itself a work of art. And this work of art "has been the single greatest influence on art. It sheds more light upon the creative process and the use of the arts than any other source, because in it are found the great truths about man as well as God that are the wellsprings of art."(4)

Evaluating Art

Can the Bible help us evaluate art? Consider the concepts found in Philippians 4:8:

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable,

whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.

Let's concentrate for a few moments on this verse in order to see if it might at least provide the beginning of a framework for the evaluation and enjoyment of art.

Paul begins with *truth*. When considering art the Christian is compelled to ask, "Is this really true?" Does life genuinely operate in this fashion in light of God's revelation? And Christians must remember that truth includes the negatives as well as the positives of reality.

The second word refers to the concept of *honor* or *dignity*. This can refer to what we related earlier in this essay about the nature of man: we have dignity even though we are sinful. This gives a basis, for example, to reject the statements in the work of the artist Francis Bacon. Bacon painted half-truths. He presented deterioration and hopeless despair, but he didn't present man's honor and dignity.

The third key to aesthetic comprehension has to do with the moral dimension—what is *right*. Not all art makes a moral statement, but when it does Christians must deal with it, not ignore it. For example, Picasso's painting, *Guernica*, is a powerful moral statement protesting the bombing by the Germans of a town by that name just prior to World War II. Protesting injustice is a cry for justice.

Purity is the fourth concept. It also touches on the moral— by contrasting that which is innocent, chaste, and pure from that which is sordid, impure, and worldly. For instance, one need not be a professional drama critic to identify and appreciate the fresh, innocent love of *Romeo and Juliet*, nor to distinguish it from the erotic escapades of a *Tom Jones*.

While the first four concepts have dealt with facets of

artistic statements, the fifth focuses on sheer beauty: "Whatever is lovely." If there is little to evaluate morally and rationally, we are still free to appreciate what is beautiful in art.

The sixth concept, that of *good repute*, gives us impetus to evaluate the life and character of the artist. The less than exemplary lifestyle of an artist may somewhat tarnish his artistic contribution, but it doesn't necessarily obliterate it. The greatest art is true, skillfully expressed, imaginative, and unencumbered by the personal and emotional problems of its originators.

Excellence is yet another concept. It is a comparative term; it assumes that something else is not excellent. The focus is on quality, which is worth much discussion. But one sure sign of it is craftsmanship: technical mastery. Another sign is durability. Great art lasts.

The last concept is *praise*. Here we are concerned with the impact or the effect of the art. Great art can have power and is therefore a forceful tool of communication. Herein lies the "two-edged swordness" of art. It can encourage a culture to lofty heights, and it can help bring a culture to ruin. Paul undergirds this meaty verse by stating that we should let our minds "dwell on these things," a reminder that Christianity thrives on intelligence, not ignorance even in the artistic realm.

Thus it is my hope that we will pursue the artistic dimensions of our lives with intelligence and imagination. The world needs to see and hear from Christians committed to art for the glory of God.

Notes

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2. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980), 4.

3. Ibid.

4. Frank E. Gaebelien, "Toward a Biblical View of Aesthetics," in *The Christian Imagination*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), 48-49.

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Elvis Is Dead. (Deal With It.)

Elvis Lives

At least in the hearts of his fans.

And they are everywhere.

Twenty years after his death, our culture is still fascinated with the raven-haired, swivel-hipped entertainer. His songs fill the airwaves. His face graces postage stamps and velvet paintings in the U.S. and abroad. Thousands of the faithful annually trek to Graceland, his Memphis home, to pay homage to the king of rock and roll.

The National Association of Amateur Elvis Impersonators promotes the cause while the "Flying Elvi" (plural of "Elvis," get it?) jump from 13,000 feet. Featured in a hit movie, these Las Vegas daredevils combine skydiving with Elvis nostalgia. They're even available for Las Vegas weddings: "Why settle for just one Elvis look-alike," asks the ad, "when you can have the entire ten-Elvi team in attendance on your special day?" They "make terrific groomsmen as well as perfect Las Vegas-

style witnesses.”

Internet sites tout Elvis fan clubs and even Elvis baby food. A Santa Cruz, CA, mall displays a plaque commemorating an Elvis sighting. Former NFL coach Jerry Glanville often left two tickets for Elvis at the will call window on game days.

“Elvis is Greek” announced a college fraternity newsletter. Three members of Tau Kappa Epsilon at Arkansas State University discovered in a safe deposit box Elvis’s signature on a membership scroll and photos from his honorary induction. “It’s amazing what computers can do with photos,” cracked one cynic.

Even academics are into Elvis. The University of Mississippi has held International Conferences on Elvis Presley. Scholarly seminars included, “Civil Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and Elvis”; “Elvis, Faulkner, and Feminine Spirituality”; “Elvis: The Twinless Twins’ Search for Spiritual Meaning (Elvis’s twin brother died at birth), and “Elvis ‘n’ Jesus.”

America. What a country!

Hound Dog?

What is all this about, really? My own informal, nonscientific survey yielded fascinating analyses from many levels of society.

“It’s a national joke,” claims a San Diego housepainter.

“I gave my wife an Elvis Valentine’s Day candy box,” admits a Miami interior designer. “Our cat is named Elvis Presley,” explains his wife. “He’s fat with a black coat, white collar, and eyes that glaze over—Elvis in his later years.” The husband quips, “The other day, we had an Elvis sighting—in a tree.” (Was a hound dog responsible?)

A Sacramento van driver attributes today’s craze to “all the

lonely people who sit around and watch TV. “Besides,” the driver says, “Elvis’s grave wasn’t marked right, and there’s evidence he’s not really buried there. I read it in the tabloids.”

A California mayor feels people need to link up with something, to create a sense of belonging. “They could be seeking memories of better times,” she reasons. “Some people wish he was still alive. My husband is an Elvis fan. He knows Elvis is dead, but he likes the music.”

A southern California doctor wonders if fans may be bonding with a romanticized part of their youth. He adds, “People who don’t have God make a god out of all sorts of things.”

Indeed. Deep reverence and even worship characterize many pilgrims to Graceland. Some hold candlelight ceremonies, offer flowers, and display icons.

One scholar at Mississippi’s International Conference notes that “without looking at spirituality, you can’t explain the Elvis phenomena...There’s a tremendous force that brings people back to Graceland.”[\[1\]](#)

Are You Lonesome Tonight?

Elvis’s August 16, 1977 death brought an unusual outpouring of grief—feelings of loneliness and despair. Those feelings, though perhaps not as intense now as when he died, are still very real in many people.

“I get so depressed,” admits a Texas woman. “Anytime I’ve got anything bothering me, I can get in my car and turn on the stereo and listen to Elvis and just go into a world of my own. It’s like he’s right there singing directly to me...It’s like he’s always there to solve everything.”[\[2\]](#) “I sit and talk to him,” claims a New Jersey follower. “I feel he hears what I say to him and he gives me the will to go on when things are really bad...Somehow you talk to Elvis.. I know if anybody ever

saw me, they would probably tell me I was crazy, but I do. I love him. I talk to him and I know he understands and I feel so much better after. I think I always will.” {3}Some fringers actually believe Elvis is still alive. My informal survey encountered no actual Elvis spotters, though a few claimed they had seen the Energizer Bunny.

“I’m not a weirdo like that,” you might say. “What’s this craze got to do with me?”

Years of interacting with people on six continents have convinced me that nearly everyone is looking for happiness and fulfillment in life. Some seek it through fame, success, wealth, or career. Others look to relationships, friends, or family.

Pursuits from sports to sex can be driven by the need to fill a void. Probably everyone has at least one “Elvis” in his or her life, a person or idea or team or goal or possession or practice to which they are devoted and from which they seek happiness.

Many feel a spiritual emptiness, a need to personally connect with something that represents greatness, something that will replace inner loneliness with friendship, fear with love, and desperation with hope.

Loneliness is rampant today. Broken marriages, fragile relationships, and general incivility have raised emotional armor over hurting hearts. Newspaper personal ad sections swell with pleas for companionship. Lonely singles and lonely marrieds search cyberspace for someone to connect with. Humans need belonging and acceptance.

Once I was in a motel room convalescing from surgery. My best friend had just deserted me. Some coworkers had betrayed me. The inner pain felt like the worst argument I’d ever had, multiplied by a trillion—like I was being reamed out by an emotional Roto-Rooter. Loneliness ran deep.

Then a close friend called to ask how I was doing. What a lift! Everyone needs friendship to counter loneliness.

Love Me Tender

We also need love. Los Angeles psychiatrist William Glasser says everyone needs to love and be loved and to feel a sense of worth— both to themselves and to others. He says we each need to become involved with at least one other person who cares for us and for whom we care, someone who will accept us for what we are but tell us when we act irresponsibly. Without “this essential person,” he writes, “we will not be able to fulfill our basic needs”^{4}It’s nice to be accepted based on our looks, personality, or performance, but these criteria can also bring fear and pressure. What if my looks change or I don’t perform well? Will I still be loved?

To be loved unconditionally, to be accepted in spite of our faults, can bring peace and contentment and motivation to excel. “You are so special to me,” says a spouse “I want to please you,” feels the mate.

Human love is great but not perfect. People can disappoint us or give us wrong advice. Those you trust can show their selfish side, use you for their own ends, or discard you. Is there something better?

Besides friendship and love, we also need hope. A study showed that many of the 31,000 Allied soldiers imprisoned in Japan and Korea during the 1940s suffered from lack of hope. Although they were offered sufficient food, more than 8,000 died. Psychiatric researcher and editor Dr. Harold Wolff believed many of them died from despair. He wrote, “Hope, like faith and a purpose in life, is medicinal. This is not merely a statement of belief, but a conclusion proved by meticulously controlled scientific experiment.”^{5}Ultimately, however, searches for hope based purely on human endeavor lead to emptiness. For most of us, there will always be someone

faster, richer, more intelligent or articulate, better looking or more popular than we are. Our favorite teams will lose. Our heroes will show their faults. Even if you reach the top, what then? According to the latest statistics, the death rate in this nation is still 100 percent.

Oddly enough, some clues to solving our struggles with loneliness and our quest for love and hope may lie in one of the songs Elvis recorded. Few may realize that Elvis's only Grammy Award for a single came for his 1967 recording of "How Great Thou Art," a famous hymn. The lyrics, which likely reflected his own spiritual roots, speak in "awesome wonder" of God's creation of the universe as a majestic display of His power.

The God this song alludes to is described elsewhere as a friend of those in need. If we let Him in our lives, He promises to be there in our successes and in our failures, when others praise us and when they desert us, when things are going well and when we're painfully lonely.

"How Great Thou Art" also tells how all this is possible. Because of God's great love for us, He sent His Son here to die, to carry the burden of humanity's injustices, selfishness, and wrongs.

God's love is endless, and He offers us hope. When we tell Him our problems, unlike Elvis, He can do something about them. And not only can we rely on Him for our needs today, but the Bible promises a new heaven and earth in the future, free from death, sorrow, crying, and pain. [{6}](#) Jesus Himself promised, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24).

Friendship, love, and hope— from one who cannot fail us. Sounds great. But is it true?

Jesus Is Alive. Live with It!

Jesus said the final test of the truth of His claims would be His resurrection. Historical records indicate that he was executed on a cross and declared dead. His body was wrapped like a mummy and placed in a solid-rock tomb. A huge stone sealed the tomb's entrance where an elite Roman guard kept watch.

On the third day the stone had been rolled away and the body was missing but the grave clothes remained in place. Hundreds of people witnessed him walking around alive again. Cowards became heroes as ten of His previously frightened disciples were martyred for their faith.

Some years ago, as a skeptic myself, I discovered that His resurrection is actually one of the best-attested facts of history.[\[7\]](#) It's all true!

If you're longing to link with someone great, He's the greatest. Since Jesus is alive, you, too, can know Him as a friend.

Elvis Presley is dead. Chances are, you might have hints that some of the "Elvises" in your life really have little or nothing lasting to offer. But Jesus is alive. Care to meet Him?

Notes

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State Heart Assembly, n.d.), quoted in S. I . McMillen, M.D., *None of These Diseases*, Old Tappan (NJ): Fleming H Revell, 1968,p. 110.

6. Revelation 21: 1,4.

7. See, for instance, Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, San Bernardino (CA): Campus Crusade for Christ. 1972.

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Movies and Morals

The movie industry is spending billions of dollars to grab the undivided attention of the movie-going public. The majority of the film makers work very hard at increasing the technical quality of their movies so that you and your family will keep coming back for more. There is no doubt, statistically speaking, that these efforts have been very successful.

Movie theaters are doing better than ever. Oh, they are not the grandiose movie houses with giant chandeliers and ostentatious splendor that some of us can remember. The new movie theaters are big, unappealing buildings containing many small, very plain looking theater rooms. But, attendance is not a problem. In fact, we live in a country filled with the magic screen. Television, which we thought would bring down the movie theaters, has become an extension of the phenomenon through the vast market of video movies.

Statistics tell us that the average child spends many hours viewing movies, either in theaters or on video. Is it not reasonable to conclude that such media can affect his or her view of the world? In particular, can their understanding of

ethical guidelines be affected? As is true with all media, movies contain someone's ideas about life. What do the producers, writers, and directors want to convey? Do their ethical perspectives align with those you want to teach your children? Unfortunately, the world of movies is too often a world apart from God.

What are we as parents and concerned adults to do? Well, for one thing we can try to use movies to help our kids learn the lessons they should be learning. There are lessons that can be gleaned from the vast library of video movies, but it will take some effort on our part to know how to guide our children's viewing habits and to interact with them in the process. We must make the medium work to accomplish our goals, and make certain that what they are exposed to in movies is helping to develop healthy minds. Tragically, too many parents use movies as a babysitter for their children. Thus, such parents are often not aware of what their children are watching, yet in reality they should be watching films together so the family can discuss what they are viewing.

In this essay we will explore some ideas concerning how you can use movies to discuss ethics and morality with your older children. We will introduce some principles and guidelines that you can use in order to lead them to make good value judgments. This is very important because you can never assume that your children see the evil in certain situations, nor that they grasp the moral climate of a story. In fact, if they are not regularly hearing the wisdom a parent can provide, they may be buying into a deformed world view.

During our discussion we will use particular movies as examples. But many films can be used, even ones that show the dark side of life, as long as we are not exposing ourselves to material that we know in our conscience we should not be viewing. We will be dealing with films that for the most part work well with older children. Many of the films are also in book form, so reading the story would enhance the process. So,

let's look at some ideas about how we might teach ethics while viewing movies.

Popular Films and Ethical Dilemmas

As we seek to help our children glean ethical lessons from movies, they will, of necessity, come face-to-face with challenging ethical dilemmas. There is a certain amount of safety, however, in first encountering ethical tests in the realm of the imagination through movies or literature. This is especially true if a parent is actively participating and helping the young person think through the alternatives.

Let's continue this thought by examining some scenes from *Jurassic Park*.⁽¹⁾ This film includes the very contemporary issue of bioethics. Genetic engineering can be used for both good and evil. The movie presents in vivid detail a type of dilemma frequently faced today; that is, If we have the ability to do something, does that mean we should go ahead and use that ability? Does capability = justifiability?

You may want to emphasize the hard-learned lessons of the scientists in this story and use the implications of biotechnology gone astray. Discuss with your children some of the rapidly growing medical procedures such as test tube babies, surrogate parents, genetic manipulation, and artificial insemination. Debate whether the *Jurassic Park* scientists merely proceeded in an irrational and irresponsible manner, or whether they were in fact trying to play the role of God, thus trespassing into an area they should have never invaded. Perhaps they were so caught up in the excitement of the possibilities that they never stopped to consider whether the "invasion" should have taken place.

Another area of ethical discussion is in the realm of computer ethics, a subject that may be of great interest to your child. The computer security design in *Jurassic Park* was out-dated and poorly conceived. It hinged upon one person, Dennis Nedry,

who turned out to be the weak link in the whole system.(2) The design flaws allowed one person with a self-serving motive to shut down the whole system.

In his greed for greater wealth, Dennis, the core programmer, shut down the security system and jeopardized the whole project. In security systems, as in our legal system, we must develop a design on the basis of fallen human nature. All of us should realize that we are capable of the worst of evils. We must design safeguards into our security systems to protect against those who go astray. For example, even the President of the United States can't begin an atomic attack without others being involved in the process. This is a safeguard for all of us.

A film such as this also gives you an opportunity to encourage your children to think beyond the exciting technology of the production. Dinosaurs that appear so real and frightening are one thing, but ideas implanted in the script are another.

For a deeper analysis of Jurassic Park you may want to read Probe's article, [The Worldview of Jurassic Park](#) by Dr. Ray Bohlin.

Another film that you may use with older children is *Class Action*(3), a story about a daughter's relationship with her father in the context of battles over personal and legal ethics. (Warning, it does have an "R" rating for language.) At stake in this film is the code of ethics of the California Bar Association. It shows that we may not evade responsibility just because we wish to do so. The film is based on the Ford Pinto gas tank case, and there are many interesting developments in the areas of legal, business, and engineering ethics.

Discuss the concept of cost-benefit analysis and what role, if any, it plays in ethical dialogue. In this type of analysis a company computes the cost of making the necessary changes to

correct a situation against the cost of paying off the anticipated number of lawsuits that would arise if the problem is not corrected. Bottom line decisions are too often made based on money, rather than the effect on people's lives.

Ethical Struggles on the High Seas

Now, let's investigate *Billy Budd*, a classic movie which seethes with ethical conflict. This powerful story is "a stark dramatization of man's fight between good and evil. The battle is fully realized in the personal and physical struggle between Billy Budd, a young innocent sailor on a British man-of-war and his superior, the cold, cruel and often vicious Claggart. When Billy Budd's strong belief in goodness is threatened by Claggart's equally strong force of evil, the consequences for both individuals are tragic and lasting."⁽⁴⁾ The film is based on Herman Melville's book of the same title.⁽⁵⁾ Billy Budd, the popular deck hand, is convicted of murder and is sentenced to be hanged from the yardarm. In the process of his court martial, stimulating ethical questions are surfaced. But remember, this is a classic black and white film. Some children will have difficulty paying attention. You may want to develop in your children a taste for thought-provoking types of movies by first using more popular films, such as *Jurassic Park*. Then you may decide to explore the classics later.

Billy Budd is a good movie to watch with your older children. You may even want to hit the stop button from time to time during the dialogue. See if your children understand the dilemma that Captain Vere is experiencing as he struggles with the decision of Billy Budd's fate.

Consider some hints of what to look for. For example, the issue of peer pressure versus responsibility is apparent. Captain Vere was very concerned about what the crew would do when they heard about the verdict, because Billy Budd was very popular among the crew members. How often do we make decisions

based more on what we fear our peers will think or do rather than on what we know is right?

This discussion may lead to a second example of great concern. To whom are we responsible? Captain Vere, as the commissioned captain of the vessel, was solely responsible for the ship and all the personnel on board. Yet he was not totally an independent agent; he was accountable to the fleet admiral. He knew the requirements of military law. There were demands of duty upon him.(6) The question that Captain Vere seemed to ignore was whether he had a responsibility to a power higher than man, i.e., God. Was the captain's only choice to follow the letter of the law?

In following the letter of the law, Captain Vere made the right legal decision, but his decision showed a lack of moral courage. He knew he was executing a righteous man, although technically a guilty one. In the end it is Billy Budd who demonstrates the highest level of moral inspiration. About to be hanged, Billy Budd proclaims, "God bless Captain Vere!" This was a moment of great pathos that can stir moral outrage.

Billy Budd is a thought-provoking film that will be worth your time and concentration. Not only is it based on a great story; it also benefits from fine acting and production.

Carpe Diem, "Seize the Day"

In the movie *Dead Poets Society*, John Keating, a prep school English teacher played by Robin Williams, challenges his students with these words: "Carpe Diem, lads! Seize the day. Make your lives extraordinary!"(7) In this bold statement he is telling his prep school students to seize the moment or enjoy the day, trusting as little as possible to the future.

One of the major questions in the film is, "What is the meaning of life?" First you should understand the background of these prep school boys. This is a very upper class school

supported by rich, respectable parents. It's an institution that is very establishment-oriented. Keating, the inspired English teacher, seeks to instill in his boys a sense of passion for poetry and the arts that goes beyond just understanding it. But, he totally ignores the spiritual life beyond mere human feelings.

In discussing this film with your children you may want to point out the fallacy of a "Carpe Diem" philosophy of life. How does it contrast with the Christian perspective of our being strangers and pilgrims in this world with our hope set on being with Christ for all eternity? What are the positive aspects of this philosophy? Here you might compare and contrast this approach to life with that of the book of Ecclesiastes. A "Carpe Diem" philosophy of life does encourage living life to the fullest, at least in the senses, but, who or what are these boys taught to rely upon? Themselves or God? Does this philosophy promote a full-orbed spiritual life?

Another fascinating film about human nature and ethics is Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*.⁽⁸⁾ The story contains Allen's existential philosophy. This worldview is even summarized in the closing narrative of the film. According to the existentialist, we must give meaning to an indifferent universe, and we define ourselves by the choices we make. Thus we are nothing but the sum total of our choices. The existentialist's only hope is that future generations may learn from our choices and have a greater understanding of life.

In spite of its existential point of view, the film does contain some excellent lessons on moral choices and the penalty of sin. Judah Rosenthal, played by Martin Landau, is a wealthy ophthalmologist, revered as a pillar of society. But he has a mistress and his world begins to crumble around him when she threatens to expose their affair. He eventually has her killed. While this story develops, we are able to observe the different moral reasoning between those who believe in a God

who is there and cares, and those who live a life devoid of God. We see the contrast between those who believe in a moral structure to life, those who believe you only go around once, as well as those who believe "might makes right."

As you discuss this film, key in on the moral struggle Judah goes through after the tragic deed is done. The dining room vision he has when he returns to his childhood home is especially poignant. You will want to note that even though Judah's father is seeking to make a stand for God, his closing remark is a fallacy, even though it demonstrates great loyalty to God. God is truth and defines truth. God will never stand opposed to the truth. In fact, we can only understand truth in the context of understanding God.

Our children are growing up in a world heavily influenced by existential thought. It is important in viewing this film to describe this non-biblical perspective of life.

Guidelines for Viewing Films

We will conclude this essay with some guidelines and possible resources for more productive film viewing:

1. You may want to subscribe to a movie review newsletter such as *Movieguide: A Biblical Guide to Movies and Entertainment*, Good News Communications, Inc., P.O. Box 9952, Atlanta, GA 30319, or *Preview: Family Movie & TV Review*, P.O. Box 832567, Richardson, TX 75083-2567. Their website is www.PreviewOnline.org.

2. Take note of the ratings and read a review as you attempt to determine if a movie conforms to the established non-Christian ethical standards of Hollywood. You may have had the experience of walking out of "PG" movies wondering why they held a "PG" instead of an "R" rating. Or perhaps you have seen "R" rated movies that were far less offensive than some "PG" offerings.

3. Before exposing yourself and your children to a film that may be questionable, you may want to talk with friends who have already seen it in order to discover what they recommend. But you should also exercise caution with these recommendations. Everyone's perspective is different, so don't rely on referrals alone.

4. Don't hesitate to walk out of a movie or to shut off a video that offends your conscience. Your mind and your time are far more important than the money invested. The more movies we see that we know we shouldn't, the more jaded we become about what offends us. We become desensitized. For example, we may allow our children to see sex scenes that years ago would have been very troubling. Or we may find ourselves watching senseless violence and gore without being offended.

5. You may want to invest in books on how to analyze films, such as *The Art of Watching Films*, by Joseph M. Boggs.

6. Never go to a movie with the attitude of just shutting down your mind and being entertained. Always think as you watch. Be a good critic. It can be especially helpful to attend a film with someone who will discuss it with you afterwards.

7. Finally, think through what you want to learn from the film, such as the film's premise and how it relates to biblical truth. How are various roles portrayed? How accurate is the historical perspective? What part, if any, does religion play? How do you feel after watching the film? How are various ethnic and other groups of people depicted? Or was there redemptive value in the film?(9)

Above all, be involved with your children in what they are watching. Help them develop a sensitivity to the ethical dimension of their everyday lives. Train them to pay attention to the moral choices they make. Education begins in the home. There is no doubt about it, children are establishing some of

their values from what they see in movies. We need to develop an interest so that we know what our children are watching. Then we can use opportunities to interact with them to discover what they are learning from what they watch. Help them begin to think God's thoughts after Him as they enter the world of movies.

Notes

1. Jurassic Park, Disney, 1993.
2. For deeper study in this area you may want to refer to Mitch Kabby's analysis in Network World. 10(30):89, 26 July 93.
3. *Class Action*, Fox Video, 1990.
4. *Billy Budd*, Key Video, a division of CBS/Fox Video, 1985.
5. Herman Melville, *Billy Budd and Other Tales* (New American Library, 1961).
6. For those who want to study ethical theory (for example, families involved in home schooling), this would be a good point to discuss the ethical teaching of Kant. His "categorical imperative" is based on a sense of duty. Through your actions you must treat individuals as an end in themselves, not only as a means. See Rex Patrick Stevens, *Kant On Moral Practice* (Atlanta: Mercer University Press, 1981).
7. *Dead Poets Society*, Touchstone Home Video, 1989.
8. *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, Orion Home Video, Orion Pictures Corp., 1989.
9. Lois Beck, "The Discerning Moviegoer: Watch What You Watch," *The Bridge* (Messiah College, Mechanicsburg, Penn).

Film and the Christian

How should a Christian view films? Todd Kappelman, a longtime film critic, calls us to exercise discernment in distinguishing between art and mere entertainment, without damaging our spiritual vitality.

The Convergence of High and Low Culture

An examination of the history of our century will reveal the importance of viewing and studying film for any individuals who wish to understand themselves and their time and place. Film is essential because the distinction so many make between so called "high" and "low" culture has in fact disappeared (if it ever existed in the first place).

Approximately one hundred years ago the dawn of electronic technology, beginning with the invention of the radio, gave birth to mass media and communications. The increase in leisure time and wealth fostered the birth and development of an entertainment industry. The decline in the quality of education and the explosion in the popularity of television sealed the union between what was traditionally considered "high" art and popular culture. Western society is now defined more strictly by the image, the sound, and the moving picture than by the written word, which defined previous centuries. Seldom does anyone ask, "What have you read lately?" One is much more likely to hear the question, "What have you seen lately." We have become, for better or worse, a visually oriented society. Because literature is no longer the dominant form of expression, scriptwriters, directors, and actors do more to shape the culture which we live in than do the giants of literature or philosophy. We may be at the point in the development of Western culture that the Great Books series needs to be supplemented by a Great Films series.

The church as a body has a long standing and somewhat

understandable tradition of suspicion concerning narrative fiction, the concepts of which apply here to our discussion of film. A brief examination of positions held by some Christians from the past regarding written fictional narratives may help us to understand the concern some have with involvement in fictional narratives as recorded on film.

Alcuin, an influential Christian leader of the ninth century was extremely concerned about the worldliness he saw in the church. One of the things that troubled him the most was the monks' fondness for fictional literature and stories about heroes such as Beowulf and Ingeld. Writing to Higbald, Alcuin said: "Let the words of God be read aloud at the table in your refractory. The reader should be heard there, not the flute player; the Fathers of the Church, not the songs of the heathen. . . . What has Ingeld to do with Christ?"[\[1\]](#)

Tertullian, the father of Latin theology, writing six centuries earlier voiced a similar concern about Christians involved in secular matters when he said: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"[\[2\]](#) Specifically, Tertullian believed that the study of pagan philosophers was detrimental to the Christian faith and should be avoided at all costs.

Paul, the apostle, writing to the Church at Corinth, said: "What partnership does righteousness have with iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial?"[\[3\]](#)

Conclusion: The objections raised against the arts, both past and present, do have merit and should not be dismissed too quickly. Christians have a right and a responsibility to make sure that entertainment and art are not used in a manner that is damaging to their spiritual welfare. It is often a difficult call. For example, many Christians objected to the work of Federico Fellini and Ingmar Bergman in the fifties and sixties, yet men such as Francis Schaeffer thought that it was necessary to pay attention to what these individuals were

saying and why.

The Nature of Film and the Opportunity for Christians

Properly understood film is a narrative medium, a kind of “visual book” with a beginning, middle, and ending that contains some degree of resolution. All film is not created equal; some movies are made with the express purpose of providing diversionary entertainment, while others represent the sincere efforts of artists to make works of art that reflect human emotions and call people to a more reflective existence. This second category of film should be considered an art form and is therefore worthy of the same attention that any other art such as the ballet, sculpture, or painting receives.

Art is the embodiment of man’s response to reality and his attempt to order his experience of that reality.^{4} Man has always and will continue to express his hope and excitement, as well as his fears and reservations about life, death, and what it means to be human through the arts. He will seek to express his world through all available means, and presently that includes film. *Schindler’s List*, a recent film by Steven Spielberg, is an excellent example of film’s ability to express man’s hopes and fears.

As a picture of reality, film is able to convey an enormous range of human experiences and emotions. The people one encounters in films are frequently like us whether they are Christian or not. Often the people we see in the better films are struggling with some of the most important questions in life. They are attempting to find meaning in what often appears to be a meaningless universe. These people are often a vehicle used by a director, producer, or writer to prompt us to ask the larger questions of ourselves.

Film is not and should not be required to be “uplifting” or

“inspiring.” Christians should remember that non-Christians also have struggles and wrestle with the meaning of life and their place and purpose in the universe. Christians and non-Christians will not and should not be expected to come to the same conclusions to the problems they face in the fictional universe of film. The Scriptures indicate that Christians and non-Christians are different, and this should be a point of celebration, not alarm, for the Christian audience.

T. S. Eliot, speaking about literature, but with much that can be applied to film, had this advice for the Christian:

Literary criticism should be completed from a definite ethical and theological standpoint... It is necessary for Christian readers [and film goes by extension], to scrutinize their reading, [again film by extension], especially of works of imagination, with explicit ethical and theological standards.[\[5\]](#)

Therefore, Christians should take their worldview with them when they attend and comment on any film. They should be cautious about pronouncing a film that does not conform with Christian beliefs or their particular notion of orthodoxy as unfit for consumption or undeserving of a right to exist as art.

Conclusion: The need for participation in film arises from not only the diversity of material with which the medium deals, but also from the plurality of possible interpretations concerning a given film. Christians have an opportunity to influence their culture by entering the arena of dialogue provided by film and contending for their positions and voicing their objections with sophistication, generosity, and a willingness to hear from those of opposing beliefs.

Some Concerns about Christian

Participation in Cinema{6}

Christians are often concerned about the content of certain films and the appropriateness of viewing particular pieces. This is a valid concern that should not be dismissed too quickly and certainly deserves a response from those who do view objectionable material. The two primary areas of concern leveled by the many detractors of contemporary culture as it pertains to film are found in the categories of gratuitous sex and violence. It is crucial that Christians understand the exact nature of sex and violence, gratuitous and otherwise, and how it may be employed in art. Taking only violence as the representative issue of these two concerns, we must ask ourselves what, if any, redeeming value does it have, and can it be used and viewed under some circumstances?

We might turn to the use of gratuitous violence in literature in order to better understand the role of violence in film. If the former is understood and embraced (albeit with reservation), the latter may also be understood and embraced (again with caution) as a means of expression employed by a new image-driven culture.

The image of gratuitous violence in modernity has one of its first and most important articulations in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Recall that in the poem the sailor shoots an albatross for absolutely no reason and is condemned by his fellow sailors, who believed the bird was a good omen, to wear the dead body around his neck. The ship is ravaged by plague, and only the cursed mariner survives. After many days of soul searching on the ghost ship, the mariner pronounces a blessing upon all of creation and atones for his wrongs. A sister ship saves the man, and he begins to evangelistically tell his story to anyone who will listen.

Every time this poem is read in a class or other group there is invariably some person who is fixated on the act of

violence and emphasizes it to the point of losing the meaning of the entire poem. The story is about a mariner who realizes the errors of his ways, repents, and comes to a restored relationship with creation and other men. For Coleridge, the act of violence thus becomes the vehicle for the turning of the character's soul from an infernal orientation to the paradisaical. Other authors have used similar methods. Dante, for example, repeats a similar pattern when he explored the spiritual realms in his poetic chronicle *The Divine Comedy*. First, he takes his readers through the harshness, pain, and misery of the Inferno before moving into Purgatory and finally into the bliss and joy of Paradise. Dostoyevsky composed four novels that begin with the heinous crime of Raskolnikov and develop to the salvation of the Karamazov brothers.

Conclusion: The writers mentioned here and many serious, contemporary film makers often explore the darkness of the human condition. They don't do it simply to posture or exploit, but to see deeply and lay bare the problems and tensions. But, they also do it to look for answers, even the light of salvation/Salvation. The picture is not always pretty, and the very ugliness of the scene is often necessary to accurately portray the degree of depravity and the miracle of salvific turns in fiction. By virtue of their full acquaintance with the dark side of the human condition, when they propose solutions, these solutions appear to be viable and realistic.

Biblical Examples of Gratuitous Violence

The prohibition against and objections to the use of violence in film may be understood better through an examination of the use of violence in the Bible.

One example found in Scriptures is in the thirteenth chapter of the book of Isaiah. In verses fifteen and sixteen the prophet is forecasting the particulars of the future Assyrian military invasion and the conditions the people of Israel and

the surrounding countries will experience. He writes:

Whoever is captured will be thrust through; all who are caught will fall by the sword. Their infants will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses will be looted and their wives ravished (Isaiah 13:15-16).

The prophet is talking about the impaling of men by the conquering armies, the willful smashing of infants upon the rocks, and the raping of women. In an oral and textual based society, those who heard the words of Isaiah would have been able to imagine the horrors he described and would have made mental images of the scenes.

In an image-driven society if this scene were to be part of a movie, a scriptwriter and director would have actors and actresses play the parts, and the violence would be obvious to all. Recall the scene in *The Ten Commandments* where the Egyptian armies attempted to follow Moses across the Red Sea. One sees horses and soldiers trapped under tons of water. Their bodies go limp before they can get to the surface. And those who can make it to the top face certain death trying to swim back to shore. In spite of these, and other horrific scenes, this movie is often held to be a "Christian classic" and deemed to be a good family film by many.

A second and even more disturbing example of gratuitous violence in the Bible is found in the twentieth chapter of *Judges*. Here a Levite and his concubine enter the house of an old man from the hill country of Ephraim to spend the night. While they are there, some wicked men in the city want to have homosexual relations with the Levite traveler and demand that the old man hand them over. The evil men take the man's concubine, rape and kill her, leaving her dead body in the doorway. The traveler is so distraught that he cuts his concubine into twelve pieces and sends the body parts back to his fellow Israelites. The Israelites then form a revenge party and go into battle with the Benjamites who will not turn

over the evil men for punishment.

Again, if this story were to be translated into a visual medium the scenes of rape and later dismemberment of a body, even if they were filmed in standards from the forties or fifties, would be very disturbing.

Conclusion: The purpose of the violence in these examples may be that the details in each passage provide information which serves as a reason for a latter action. Or, the information provided shows us something about the nature of God and the way He deals with sin. If both these examples show a difficult, but necessary use of violence in telling a story, then perhaps violence may be used (portrayed) for redemptive purposes in fictional mediums such as film. This is not an airtight argument, rather the issue is raised as a matter for consideration while keeping in mind that Christians should always avoid living a vicariously sinful life through any artistic medium.

Weaker Brother Considerations in Viewing Film

Paul's great teaching concerning meat sacrificed to idols and the relationship of the stronger and weaker brothers to one another is laid out in 1 Corinthians 8. We should remember that Paul clearly puts the burden of responsibility on the stronger brother. It is this person who should have the interest of the weaker brother in mind.

Persons who exercise rampant Christian freedom when watching films that are objectionable to some others does not necessarily mean that they are strong Christians. It could indicate that these people are too weak to control their passions and are hiding behind the argument that they are a stronger brother. Do not urge others to participate in something that you, as a Christian, feel comfortable doing if they have reservations. You may inadvertently cause the other

person to sin.

There are basically three positions related to Christians viewing film.

The first of these three is prohibition. This is the belief that films, and often television and other forms of entertainment, are inherently evil and detrimental to the Christian's spiritual well being. Persons who maintain this position avoid all film, regardless of the rating or reputed benefits, and urge others to do the same.

Abstinence is the second position. This is the belief that it is permissible for Christians to view films, but for personal reasons this person does not choose to do so. This may be for reasons ranging from a concern for the use of time or no real desire to watch film, to avoidance because it may cause them or someone they are concerned about to stumble. Willingly abstaining from some or all films does not automatically make one a weaker brother, and this charge should be avoided! One should avoid labeling a fellow Christian "weaker" for choosing to abstain from participation in some behavior due to matters of conscience.

Moderation is the final position. This is the belief that it is permissible to watch films and that one may do so within a certain framework of moderation. This person willingly views some films but considers others to be inappropriate for Christians. There is a great deal of disagreement here about what a Christian can or cannot and should or should not watch. Although some of these disagreements are matters of principle and not of taste, Christian charity should be practiced whenever one is uncertain.

Conclusion: There is a valid history of concern about Christian involvement in the arts and fictional and imaginative literature. This issue extends to the medium of film and manifests similar concerns about film and Christians

who view film. However, because film is one of the dominant mediums of cultural expression, film criticism is necessary. If Christians do not make their voices heard then others, often non-Christians, will dominate the discussion. All films contain the philosophical persuasions of the persons who contribute to their development, and it is the job of the Christian who participates in these arts to make insightful, fair, and well-informed evaluations of the work. Not everyone feels comfortable in viewing some (or any) films and the Christian should be especially mindful of the beliefs of others and always have the interest of fellow believers as well as non-believers in mind. While "film," the artistic expression of the cinematic medium has been the focus and not "movies," the entertainment based expression, much of what has been said of the former is applicable to the later.

Appendix

Christians should be aware that the freedoms exercised in participation in the film arts are privileges and should not be practiced to the point of vicarious living through escape into fictitious worlds. In 1 Corinthians 10: 23-31 (and 6:12) the Apostle Paul writes that "everything is permissible, but not everything is constructive."

He is addressing the issue of meat sacrificed to idols in chapter 10 and sexual purity in chapter 6. This may serve as a guide for Christians who are concerned about their involvement in film and a caution against construing what is written here as a license to watch anything and everything. The Apostle is very careful to distinguish between that which is permissible and that which is constructive, or expedient. What Paul means is that, in Christ, believers have freedoms which extend to all areas of life, but these freedoms have the potential to be exercised carelessly or without regard for others, and thus become sin. The guiding rule here is that Christians should seek the good of others and not their own desires. This would mean that anyone who is participating in film that is

objectionable should have the interests of others, both believers and non-believers, in mind. We live in a fallen world and almost everything we touch we affect with our fallen nature, the arts notwithstanding. If we are to be active in redeeming the culture for the glory of God, then by necessity we must participate in the culture and be salt and light to a very dark and unsavory world. It is imperative that Christians who are active in their culture and interested in participating in the ever growing "culture wars," remember Paul's admonition in Philippians that we "work out our salvation daily with fear and trembling." Anything less would be flirting with spiritual disaster and would not bring glory to God.

Parents concerned for the spiritual and psychological welfare of their children would do well to offer more than a list of prohibitions against what films can be viewed. As with anything that involves issues of Christian freedom, maturity in individual matters must be taken into account. The example of a young child's first BB gun may serve as an illustration. In some instances a child may be ready for the first air rifle at age twelve or thirteen. Other children may not be ready until they are eighteen, and some may best served if they never possess the gun in question. Parents should realize that film is a narrative medium which often contains complex philosophical ideas. To continue to absorb films at the current rate and not offer thoughtful criticism on what we are watching is equivalent to visiting museums and announcing that the Picasso or Rembrandt retrospective is "cool" or "stupid." If we are concerned parents, and wish to gain the respect of our children, we can and must do better than this.

Notes

1. "Letter to Higbald," as quoted in Eleanor S. Duckett, *Alcuin, Friend of Charlemagne* (New York:Macmillan, 1951), 209.
2. Tertullian, *On the Against Heretics*, chap. 7.
3. Paul, 2 Corinthians 6:14-15.

4. John Dixon, Jr., *Nature and Grace in Art*, as quoted in Leland Ryken's *The Liberated Imagination*, p.23.
5. T. S. Eliot, *Religion and Literature*.
6. Much of the material for this section was first articulated by Jeff Hanson, my co-editor, in the March/April issue of *The Antithesis*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1995.

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Living in the New Dark Ages

*Former Probe staffer Lou Whitworth reviews Charles Colson's important book, *Against the Night: Living in the New Dark Ages*. Colson argues that "new barbarians" are destroying our culture with individualism, relativism, and the new tolerance.*

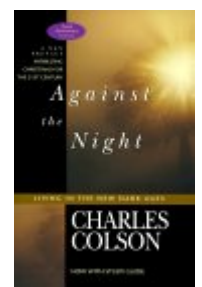
Is the Sun Setting On the West?

It was 146 B.C. In the waning hours of the day a Roman general, Scipio Africanus, climbed a hill overlooking the north African city of Carthage. For three years he had led his troops in a fierce siege against the city and its 700,000 inhabitants. He had lost legions to their cunning and endurance. With the Carthaginian army reduced to a handful of soldiers huddled inside the temple of their god Eshmun, the city was conquered. And with the enemy defeated, Scipio ordered his men to burn the city.(1)

Now, as the final day of his campaign drew to a close, Scipio Africanus stood on a hillside watching Carthage burn. His face, streaked with the sweat and dirt of battle, glowed with the fire of the setting sun and the flames of the city, but no smile of triumph crossed his lips. No gleam of victory shone from his eyes. Instead, as the Greek historian Polybius would

later record, the Roman general “burst into tears, and stood long reflecting on the inevitable change which awaits cities, nations, and dynasties, one and all, as it does every one of us men.”

In the fading light of that dying city, Scipio saw the end of Rome itself. Just as Rome had destroyed others, so it would one day be destroyed. Scipio Africanus, the great conqueror and extender of empires, saw the inexorable truth: no matter how mighty it may be, no nation, no empire, no culture is immortal.



Thus begins Chuck Colson’s book, *Against the Night: Living in the New Dark Ages*, a sober yet inspirational book on facing the future as involved Christians. He returns to this scene frequently in the book as a reminder of the transitory nature of nations and cultures. The author, chairman of Prison Fellowship and ex-Watergate figure turned Christian evangelist, sets forth a warning for the church and for individual believers.

Just as the Roman general Scipio Africanus saw in the flames of the city of Carthage the future fall of Rome and its empire, Colson believes that we are likely witnessing in the crumbling of our society the demise of the American experiment and perhaps even the dissolution of Western civilization.

And just as the fall of Rome led into the Dark Ages, the United States and the West are staggering and reeling from powerful destructive forces and trends that may lead us into a New Dark Ages. The imminent slide of the West is not inevitable, but likely unless current, destructive trends are

corrected. The step-by-step dismantling of our Judeo-Christian heritage has led us to a slippery slope situation in which destructive tendencies unchecked lead to other unhealthy tendencies. For example, as expectations of common concern for others evaporates, even those who wish to retain that value become more cautious, reserved, and secretive out of self-defense, further unraveling the social fabric. Thus rampant individualism crushes to earth our more generous impulses and promotes more of the same. Other examples could be enumerated, but this illustrates the way one destructive, negative impulse can father a host of others. Soon the social fabric is in tatters, and impossible to mend peaceably. At this point the society is vulnerable both from within and from without.

The New Barbarism and Its Roots

We face a crisis in Western culture, and it presents the greatest threat to civilization since the barbarians invaded Rome. Today in the West, and particularly in America, a new type of barbarian is present among us. They are not hairy Goths and Vandals, swilling fermented brew and ravishing maidens; they are not Huns and Visigoths storming our borders or scaling our city walls. No, this time the invaders have come from within.

We have bred them in our families and trained them in our classrooms. They inhabit our legislatures, our courts, our film studios, and our churches. Most of them are attractive and pleasant; their ideas are persuasive and subtle. Yet these men and women threaten our most cherished institutions and our very character as a people. They are the new barbarians.

How did this situation come to pass? The seeds of our possible destruction began in a seemingly harmless way. It began not in sinister conspiracies in dark rooms but in the paneled libraries of philosophers, the study alcoves of the British museums, and the cafs of the world's universities. Powerful movements and turning points are rooted in the realm of ideas.

One such turning point occurred when Rene Descartes, looking for the one thing he could not doubt, came up with the statement *Cogito ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am." This postulate eventually led to a new premise for philosophical thought: man, rather than God, became the fixed point around which everything else revolved. Human reason became the foundation upon which a structure of knowledge could be built; and doubt became the highest intellectual virtue.

Two other men, John Stuart Mill (1806-73) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) contributed to this trend of man-based philosophy. Mill created a code of morality based on self-interest. He believed that only individuals and their particular interests were important, and those interests could be determined by whatever maximized their pleasure and minimized their pain. Thus the moral judgments are based on calculating what will multiply pleasure and minimize pain for the greatest number. This philosophy is called utilitarianism, one form of extreme individualism.

Another form of individualism was expressed by Rousseau who argued that the problems of the world were not caused by human nature but by civilization. If humanity could only be free, he believed, our natural virtues would be cultivated by nature. Human passions superseded the dictates of reason or God's commands. This philosophy could be called experimental individualism.

Mill and Rousseau were very different. Mill championed reason, success, and material gain; and Rousseau passion, experiences, and feelings. Yet their philosophies have *self* as a common denominator, and they have now melded together into radical individualism, the dominant philosophy of the new barbarians.

According to sociologist Robert Bellah, pervasive individualism is destroying the subtle ties that bind people together. This, in turn, is threatening the very stability of our social order as it strips away any sense of individual

responsibility for the common good. When people care only for themselves, they are not easily motivated to care about their neighbors, community life devolves into the survival of the fittest, and the weak become prey for the strong.

The Darkness Increases and the New Barbarians Grow Stronger

Today the prevailing attitude is one of relativism, i.e., the belief that there is no morally binding objective source of authority or truth above the individual. The fact that this view tosses aside 2,500 years of accumulated moral wisdom in the West, a rationally defensible natural law, and the moral law revealed by God in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures seems to bother very few.

Relativism and individualism need each other to survive. Rampant individualism promotes a competitive society in which conflicting claims rather than consensus is the norm because everyone is his or her own standard of "right" and "wrong" and of "rights" and "obligations." The marriage of extreme individualism and relativism, however, has produced a new conception of "tolerance."

The word *tolerance* sounds great, but this is really tolerance with a twist; it demands that everyone has a right to express his or her own views as long as those views do not contain any suggestion of absolutes that would compete with the prevailing standard of relativism.

Usually those who promote tolerance the loudest also proclaim that the motives of religious people are suspect and that, therefore, their views on any matter must be disqualified. Strangely, socialists, Nazis, sadomasochists, pedophiles, spiritualists, or worshipers of Mother earth would not be excluded. Their right to free expression would be vigorously defended by the same cultural elite who are so easily offended when Christians or other religious people express their views.

But this paradoxical intolerance produces an even deeper consequence than silencing an unpopular point of view, for it completely transforms the nature of debate, public discussion, and consensus in society. Without root in some transcendent standard, ethical judgments become merely expressions of feelings or preference. "Murder is wrong" must be translated "I hate murder" or "I prefer that you not murder." Thus, moral claims are reduced to the level of opinion.

Opponents grow further and further apart, differing on a level so fundamental that they are unable even to communicate. When moral judgments are based on feelings alone, compromise becomes impossible. Politics can no longer be based on consensus, for consensus presupposes that competing moral claims can be evaluated according to some common standard. Politics is transformed into civil war, further evidence that the barbarians are winning.

Proponents of a public square sanitized of moral judgments purport that it assures neutrality among contending moral factions and guarantees certain basic civil rights. This sounds enlightened and eminently fair. In reality, however, it assures victory for one side of the debate and assures defeat of those with a moral structure based on a transcendent standard.

Historically, moral restraints deeply ingrained in the public consciousness provided the protective shield for individual rights and liberties. But in today's relativistic environment that shield can be easily penetrated. Whenever some previously unthinkable innovation is both technically possible and desirable to some segment of the population, it can be, and usually will be, adopted. The process is simple. First some practice so offensive it can hardly be discussed is advocated by some expert. Shock gives way to outrage, then to debate, and when what was once a crime becomes a debate, that debate usually ushers the act into common practice. Thus decadence becomes accepted. History has proven it over and over.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Questions arise in our minds: How bad is the situation? Is it too late to stop or reverse the downward trend? If it's too late, do we wait, preserve, and endure until the winds of history and God's purpose are at our backs?

When a culture is beset by both a loss of public and private values, the overall decline undermines society's primary institutional supports. God has ordained three institutions for the ordering of society: the family for the propagation of life, the state for the preservation of life, and the church for the proclamation of the gospel. These are not just voluntary associations that people can join or not as they see fit; they are organic sources of authority for restraining evil and humanizing society. They, and the closely related institution of education, have all been assaulted and penetrated by the new barbarians. The consequences are frightening.

The Family

The family is under massive assault from many directions, and its devastation is obvious. Yet the family and the church are the only two institutions that can cultivate moral virtue, and of these the family is primary and foremost because "our very nature is acquired within families."⁽²⁾ Unfortunately when radical individualism enters the family, it disrupts the transmission of manners and morals from one generation to the next. Once this happens it is nearly impossible to catch up later, and the result is generation after generation of rude, lawless, culturally retarded children.

The Church

The new barbarians have penetrated our churches and tried to turn them into everything except what God intended them to be. Even strong biblical churches have not been immune to their influence. Yet only as the church maintains its

distinctiveness from the culture is it able to affect culture. The church dare not look for “success” as portrayed in our culture; instead its watchword must be “faithfulness”; only then will the church be successful. The survival of the Western culture is inextricably linked to the dynamic of reform arising from the independent and pure exercise of religion from the moral impulse. That impulse can only come from our families and from our churches. The church must be free to be the church.

The Classroom

The classroom has also been invaded by radical individualism and the secular ideas of the new barbarians. We must resist putting our young people under unbridled secularistic teaching, especially if it isn't balanced by adequate exposure to Christian principles and a Christian worldview.

The State/Politics

Government has a worthy task to do, i.e., to protect life and to keep the peace, but it cannot develop character. To believe that it can do so is to invite tyranny. First, most people's needs and problems are far beyond the reach of government. Second, it is impossible to effect genuine political reform, much less moral reform, solely by legislation. Government, by its very nature, is limited in what it can accomplish. We need to be involved in politics, but we must do so with realistic expectations and without illusions.

Our culture is indeed threatened, but the situation is not irreversible if we model the family before the world and let the church be the church.

A Flame in the Night

This is an important work, one that every Christian would benefit from reading. Though Colson's subject—the ethical, moral, and spiritual decline that many observers forecast for

our immediate future—is bleak, the work isn't morose or gloomy. His focus is on opportunities and possibilities before us regardless of what the future holds. In the book's last section, he calls for the church and for individual Christians to be lights in the darkness by cultivating the moral imagination and presenting to the world a compelling vision of the good. He outlines three steps in that process.

First, we must reassert a sense of shared destiny as an antidote to radical individualism. We are born, live, and die in the context of communities. Rich, meaningful life is found in communities of worship, self-government, and shared values. We are not ennobled by relentless competition, endless self-promotion, and maximum autonomy, nor are these tendencies ultimately rewarding. On the other hand, commitment, friendship, and civic cooperation are both personally and corporately satisfying.

Second, we must adopt a strong, balanced view of the inherent dignity of human life. All the traditional restraints on inhumanity seem to be crumbling at once in our courts, in our laboratories, in our operating rooms, in our legislatures. The very idea of an essential dignity of human life seems a quaint anachronism today. As Christians we must be unequivocally and unapologetically pro-life. We cannot disdain the unborn, the young, the infirm, the handicapped, or the elderly. We cannot concede any ground here.

Third, we must recover respect for tradition and history. We must reject the faddish movements of the moment and look to the established lessons from the past. The moral imagination (our power to perceive ethical truth^[3]) values reason and recognizes truth. It asserts that the world can be both understood and transformed through the carefully constructed restraints of civilized behavior and institutions. It assumes that to approach the world without consideration of the ideas of earlier times is an act of hubris in essence, claiming the ability to create the world anew, dependent on nothing but our

own pitiful intelligence.

In contrast to such an attitude, the moral imagination begins with awe, reverence, and appreciation for order within creation. It sees the value of tradition, revelation, family, and community and responds with duty, commitment, and obligation. But the moral imagination is more than rational. It is poetic, stirring long atrophied faculties for nobility, compassion, and virtue.

Imagination is expressed through symbols, allegories, fables, and literary illustrations. Winston Churchill revived the moral imagination of the dispirited British people in his speeches when he depicted the threat from Hitler not as just another war, but as a sacrificial, moral campaign against a force so evil that compromise or defeat would bring about a New Dark Ages. British backbones were stiffened and British hearts were ennobled because Churchill was able to unite rational, emotional, and artistic ideas into a common vision.

Western civilization and the church are currently engaged in a war of ideas with new barbarians. Whether we have the will to be victorious will depend in large measure on the strength and power of our moral imagination. Charles Colson's book, *Against the Night: Living in the New Dark Ages*, can give us guidance in this crucial task.

Notes

1. This essay is in large measure a condensation of several chapters of the author's work; consequently, quotations and paraphrase may exist side by side unmarked. Therefore, for accuracy in quoting, please consult the book: Charles Colson, with Ellen Santilli Vaughn, *Against the Night: Living in the New Dark Ages* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant, 1989).

2. Russell Kirk, *The Wise Men Know What Wicked Things Are Written on the Sky* (Washington:Regnery Gateway, 1987), 24.

3. For fuller discussion see Russell Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things: Observations of Abnormity in Literature and Politics* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1969), 119.

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Culture and the Bible

This is not a Christian culture. We are living in an environment that challenges us to continually evaluate what it means to live the Christian life. So how do we respond? The

answer begins with the Bible. Our view of culture must include biblical insights. In this essay we will strive to investigate selected passages of Scripture pertaining to culture.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

The Golden Calf and the Tabernacle: Judging Culture

Chapters 31-39 of Exodus provide a unique perspective of culture and God's involvement with it. On one hand the work of man was blessed through the artistry of Bezalel, Oholiab, and other skilled artisans as they cooperated to build the tabernacle (35-39). On the other hand, the work of man in the form of the golden calf was rejected by God (31-34). This contrast serves to suggest a guideline with which we can begin to judge culture.

Chapter 31:1-11 contains God's initial instructions to Moses concerning the building of the tabernacle in the wilderness. Two important artisans, Bezalel and Oholiab, are recognized by God as being especially gifted for this work. These men were skilled,(1) creative people who were able to contribute significantly to the religious/cultural life of the nation of Israel. But at this point in the narrative the scene changes dramatically.

While Moses was on the mountain with God, the people became impatient and decided to make a god, an idol. This prompted an enraged response from both God and Moses. The end result was tragic: three thousand were slain as a result of their idolatry.

Then the attention of the people was directed toward the building of the tabernacle. Chapters 35-39 contain detailed accounts from God pertaining to the tabernacle, and the subsequent work of the skilled artisans, including Bezalel and Oholiab. The finished product was blessed (39:42-43).

In this brief survey of a portion of Israel's history we have seen two responses to the work of man's hands: one negative, the other positive. The people fashioned a piece of art, an idol; the response was negative on the part of God and Moses. The people fashioned another piece of art, the tabernacle; the response was positive and worthy of the blessing of both God and Moses. Why the difference in judgment? The answer is deceptively simple: the intent of the art was evaluated. And it was not a matter of one being "secular" and the other "sacred." Art, the cultural product, was not the problem. "Just as art can be used in the name of the true God, as shown in the gifts of Bezalel, so it can be used in an idolatrous way, supplanting the place of God and thereby distorting its own nature."(2)

Art is certainly a vital element of culture. As a result, we should take the lessons of Exodus 31-39 to heart. Our evaluation of culture should include an awareness of intent without being overly sensitive to form. If not, we begin to assign evil incorrectly. As Carl F.H. Henry says, "The world is evil only as a fallen world. It is not evil intrinsically."(3)

These insights have focused on certain observers of cultural objects as seen in art: God, Moses, and the people of Israel. In the first case God and Moses saw the golden calf from one perspective, the people of Israel from another. In the second case all were in agreement as they observed the tabernacle. The people's perception changed; they agreed with God's intent and aesthetic judgement. The lesson is that our cultural life is subject to God.

Entering the Fray

How do you react when you're out of your comfort zone: your surroundings, friends, and family? Do you cringe and disengage yourself? Or do you boldly make the best of the new locality?

The first chapter of Daniel tells of four young men who were transported to a culture other than their own by a conquering nation, Babylonia. Their response to this condition provides us with insights concerning how we should relate to the culture that surrounds us. Daniel, of course, proves to be the central figure among the four. He is the focus of our attention.

Several facets of this chapter should be noted. First, Daniel and his friends were chosen by the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, to serve in his court. They were chosen because of their "intelligence in every branch of wisdom ... understanding ... discerning knowledge ... and ability for serving in the king's court" (v. 4). Second, they were taught "the literature and language of the Chaldeans" (v. 4). Third, Daniel "made up his mind" that he would not partake of the Babylonian food and drink (v. 8). Fourth, "God granted Daniel favor and compassion" with his superiors even though he and his friends would not partake of the food (v. 9-16). Fifth, "God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every branch of literature and wisdom" (v. 17). Sixth, the king found Daniel and his friends to be "ten times better than all the magicians and conjurers who were in all his realm" (v. 20).

This synopsis provides us with several important observations. First, evidently there was no attempt on the part of Daniel and his friends to totally separate themselves from the culture, in particular the educational system of that culture. This was a typical response among the ancient Jews. These young men were capable of interacting with an ungodly culture without being contaminated by it. Evangelicals are often paranoid as they live within what is deemed an unchristian culture. Perhaps a lesson can be learned from Daniel concerning a proper response. Of course such a response should be based on wisdom and discernment. That leads us to our second observation.

Second, even though Daniel and his companions learned from the

culture, they did so by practicing discernment. They obviously compared what they learned of Babylonian thought with what they already understood from God's point of view. The Law of God was something with which they were well acquainted. Edward Young's comments on v. 17 clarify this: "The knowledge and intelligence which God gave to them ... was of a discerning kind, that they might know and possess the ability to accept what was true and to reject what was false in their instruction." (4) Such perception is greatly needed among evangelicals. A separatist, isolationist mentality creates moral and spiritual vacuums throughout our culture. We should replace those vacuums with ideas that are spawned in the minds of Godly thinkers and doers.

Third, God approved of their condition within the culture and even gave them what was needed to influence it (v. 17).

Evangelicals may be directed by God to enter a foreign culture that may not share their worldview. Or, they may be directed to enter the culture that surrounds them, which, as with contemporary western culture, can be devoid of the overt influence of a Christian worldview. If so, they should do so with an understanding that the Lord will protect and provide. And He will demonstrate His power through them as the surrounding culture responds.

The World in the New Testament

In and *of*: two simple words that can stimulate a lot of thought when it comes to what the Bible says about culture, or the world. After all, we are to be in the world but not of it. Let's see what the New Testament has to say.

The terms *kosmos* and *aion*, both of which are generally translated "world," are employed numerous times in the New Testament. A survey of *kosmos* will provide important insights. George Eldon Ladd presents usages of the word: (5)

First, the world can refer to “both the entire created order (Jn. 17:5, 24) and the earth in particular (Jn. 11:9; 16:21; 21:25).”(6) This means “there is no trace of the idea that there is anything evil about the world.”(7) Second, “kosmos can designate not only the world but also those who inhabit the world: mankind (12:19; 18:20; 7:4; 14:22).”(8) Third, “the most interesting use of kosmos ... is found in the sayings where the world – mankind – is the object of God’s love and salvation.”(9)

But men, in addition to being the objects of God’s love, are seen “as sinful, rebellious, and alienated from God, as fallen humanity. The kosmos is characterized by wickedness (7:7), and does not know God (17:25) nor his emissary, Christ (1:10).”(10) “Again and again ... the world is presented as something hostile to God.”(11) But Ladd reminds us that “what makes the kosmos evil is not something intrinsic to it, but the fact that it has turned away from its creator and has become enslaved to evil powers.”(12)

So what is the Christian’s responsibility in this evil, rebellious world? “The disciples’ reaction is not to be one of withdrawal from the world, but of living in the world, motivated by the love of God rather than the love of the world.”(13) “So his followers are not to find their security and satisfaction on the human level as does the world, but in devotion to the redemptive purpose of God” (17:17, 19).(14)

The apostle Paul related that “‘worldliness’ consists of worshipping the creature rather than the creator (Rom. 1:25), of finding one’s pride and glory on the human and created level rather than in God. The world is sinful only insofar as it exalts itself above God and refuses to humble itself and acknowledge its creative Lord.”(15) The world is seen as it should be seen when we first worship its creator.

This summary of *kosmos* contributes several points that can be applied to our survey. First, the world is hostile toward God;

this includes the rebellion of mankind. Second, this hostility was not part of the original created order; the world was created good. Third, this world is also the object of God's redemptive love and Christ's sacrifice. Fourth, the world is not to be seen as an end in itself. We are always to view culture in the light of eternity. Fifth, we are to be about the business of transforming the world. "We are not to follow the world's lead but to cut across it and rise above it to a higher calling and style."(16) Or, as Ronald Allen says: "Ours is a world of lechery and war. It is also a world of the good, the beautiful, and the lovely. Eschew lechery; embrace the lovely— and live for the praise of God in the only world we have!"(17)

We are in need of a balance that does not reject beauty, but at the same time recognizes the ugly. Our theology should entail both. The world needs to see this.

Corinthians and Culture

"You're a Corinthian!" If you had heard that exclamation in New Testament times you would know that the person who said it was very upset. To call someone a Corinthian was insulting. Even non-Christians recognized that Corinth was one of the most immoral cities in the known world.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians contains many indications of this. The believers in Corinth were faced with a culture which resembled ours in several ways. It was diverse ethnically, religiously, and philosophically. It was a center of wealth, literature, and the arts. And it was infamous for its blatant sexual immorality. How would Paul advise believers to respond to life in such a city?

That question can be answered by concentrating on several principles that can be discovered in Paul's letter. We will highlight only a few of these by focusing on certain terms.

Liberty is a foundational term for Christians entering the culture, but it can be misunderstood easily. This is because some act as if it implies total freedom. But "The believer's life is one of Christian liberty in grace." (18) Paul wrote, "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything" (6:12, 10:23). It must be remembered, though, that this liberty is given to glorify God. A liberty that condones sin is another form of slavery. Thus, "Whether ... you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (10:31). In addition, we must be aware of how our liberty is observed by non-believers. Again Paul wrote, "Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God" (10:32).

Conscience is another term that figures prominently in how we enter the culture. We must be very sensitive to what it means to defile the conscience. There must be a sensitivity to what tempts us. "The believer who cannot visit the world without making it his home has no right to visit at his weak points."¹⁹ As a result, we need to cultivate the discipline that is needed to respond to the ways the Spirit speaks through our conscience.

Yet another term is brother. In particular, we should be aware of becoming a "stumbling block" to the person Paul calls a "weaker brother." This does not mean that we disregard what has been said about liberty. "A Christian need not allow his liberty to be curtailed by somebody else. But he is obliged to take care that that other person does not fall into sin and if he would hurt that other person's conscience he has not fulfilled that obligation." (20) This requires a special sensitivity to others, which is a hallmark of the Christian life.

On many occasions the Probe staff has experienced the challenge of applying these principles. For example, some of us speak frequently in a club in an area of Dallas, Texas

called “Deep Ellum.” The particular club in which we teach includes a bar, concert stage, and other things normally associated with such a place. Some refer to the clientele as “Generation Xers” who are often nonconformists. We can use our liberty to minister in the club, but we must do so with a keen awareness of the principles we have discussed. When we enter that culture, which is so different from what we normally experience, we must do so by applying the wisdom found in God’s Word to the Corinthians.

Encountering the World

How do you get a hearing when you have something to say? In particular, how do you share the truth of God in ungodly surroundings?

Paul’s encounter with Athenian culture (Acts 17:16-34) is illustrative of the manner in which we can dialogue with contemporary culture. His interaction exhibits an ability to communicate with a diversity of the population, from those in the marketplace to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. And he exhibits an understanding of the culture, including its literature and art. Paul was relating a model for how we can relate our faith effectively. That is, we must communicate with language and examples that can be understood by our audience.

Verse 16 says that Paul’s “spirit was being provoked within him as he was beholding the city full of idols.” We should note that the verb translated “provoked” here is the Greek word from which we derive the term paroxysm. Paul was highly irritated. In addition, we should note that the verb is imperfect passive, implying that his agitation was a logical result of his Christian conscience and that it was continuous. The idolatry which permeated Athenian culture stimulated this dramatic response. Application: the idolatry of contemporary culture should bring no less a response from us. Materialism, Individualism, Relativism, and Secularism are examples of

ideologies that have become idols in our culture.

Verses 17 and 18 refer to several societal groups: Jews, God-fearing Gentiles, Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, as well as the general population, namely “those who happened to be present.” Evidently Paul was able to converse with any segment of the population. Application: as alert, thinking, sensitive, concerned, discerning Christians we are challenged to confront our culture in all of its variety and pluralism. It is easier to converse with those who are like-minded, but that is not our only responsibility.

In verse 18 some of the philosophers call Paul an “idle babbler” (i.e., one who makes his living by picking up scraps). Application: we should realize that the Christian worldview, in particular the basic tenets of the gospel, will often elicit scorn from a culture that is too often foreign to Christian truth. This should not hinder us from sharing the truth.

The narrative of verses 19-31 indicates that Paul knew enough about Athenian culture to converse with it on the highest intellectual level. He was acutely aware of the “points of understanding” between him and his audience. He was also acutely aware of the “points of disagreement” and did not hesitate to stress them. He had enough knowledge of their literary expressions to quote their spokesmen (i.e., their poets), even though this does not necessarily mean Paul had a thorough knowledge of them. And he called them to repentance. Application: we need to “stretch” ourselves more intellectually so that we can duplicate Paul’s experience more frequently. The most influential seats in our culture are too often left to those who are devoid of Christian thought. Such a condition is in urgent need of change.

Paul experienced three reactions in Athens (vv. 32-34). First, “some began to sneer” (v. 32). They expressed contempt. Second, some said “We shall hear you again concerning this”

(v. 32). Third, “some men joined him and believed” (v. 34). We should not be surprised when God’s message is rejected; we should be prepared when people want to hear more; and we can rejoice when the message falls on fertile soil and bears the fruit of a changed life.

Conclusion

We have seen that Scripture is not silent regarding culture. It contains much by way of example and precept, and we have only begun the investigation. There is more to be done. With this expectation in mind, what have we discovered from the Bible at this stage?

First, in some measure God “is responsible for the presence of culture, for he created human beings in such a way that they are culture-producing beings.”(21) Second, God holds us responsible for cultural stewardship. Third, we should not fear the surrounding culture; instead, we should strive to contribute to it through God-given creativity, and transform it through dialogue and proclamation. Fourth, we should practice discernment while living within culture. Fifth, the products of culture should be judged on the basis of intent, not form. Or, to simply further:

We advance the theory that God’s basic attitude toward culture is that which the apostle Paul articulates in I Corinthians 9:19-22. That is, he views human culture primarily as a vehicle to be used by him and his people for Christian purposes, rather than as an enemy to be combatted or shunned.(22)

Let us use the vehicle for the glory of God!

Notes

1. The word “skill,” which is frequently employed to describe artisans in these chapters (NASB), is from the Hebrew word *hakam*, meaning “wise.” One of its main synonyms is *bin*, basically meaning “discernment”. Thus, the skillful person is one

who, in the minds of the Israelites, was also “wise” and “discerning” in his artistry.

2. Gene Edward Veith, *The Gift of Art: The Place of the Arts in Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 31.
3. Carl F.H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957), 420.
4. Edward J. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949), 48-49.
5. George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974). In particular, see chapters 17 and 29.
6. *Ibid.*, 225.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 226.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Everett F. Harrison, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Carl F.H. Henry, eds. *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), s.v. “World, Worldliness,” by Everett F. Harrison.
12. Ladd, 226.
13. *Ibid.*, 227.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, 400.
16. R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1985), 209.
17. Ronald B. Allen, *The Majesty of Man: The Dignity of Being Human* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1984), 191.
18. Henry, 420.
19. *Ibid.*, 428.
20. F.W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953), 243.

The Worldview of Jurassic Park – A Biblical Christian Assessment

Dr. Bohlin examines the message of Jurassic Park, bringing out some of the underlying messages on science, evolution, new age thinking, and cloning. The movie may be entertaining, but a Christian scientist points out some of the misconceptions people are taking away from the movie. Remember, this is just a piece of fiction—not a scientific treatise.

The Intent Behind Jurassic Park

Driving home after seeing the movie *Jurassic Park* in the first week of its release, I kept seeing tyrannosaurs and velociraptors coming out from behind buildings, through intersections, and down the street, headed straight at me. I would imagine: What would I do? Where would I turn? I certainly wouldn't shine any lights out of my car or scream. Dead give-aways to a hungry, angry dinosaur. Then I would force myself to realize that it was just a movie. It was not reality. My relief would take hold only briefly until the next intersection or big building.

In case you can't tell, I scare easily at movies. *Jurassic Park* terrified me. It all looked so real. Steven Spielberg turned out the biggest money-making film in history. Much of the reason for that was the realistic portrayal of the dinosaurs. But there was more to *Jurassic Park* than great special effects. It was based on the riveting novel by Michael Crichton and while many left the movie dazzled by the dinosaurs, others were leaving with questions and new views of science and nature.

The movie *Jurassic Park* was terrific entertainment, but it was

entertainment with a purpose. The purpose was many-fold and the message was interspersed throughout the movie, and more so throughout the book. My purpose in this essay is to give you some insight into the battle that was waged for your mind throughout the course of this movie.

Jurassic Park was intended to warn the general public concerning the inherent dangers of biotechnology first of all, but also science in general. Consider this comment from the author Michael Crichton:

Biotechnology and genetic engineering are very powerful. The film suggests that [science's] control of nature is elusive. And just as war is too important to leave to the generals, science is too important to leave to scientists. Everyone needs to be attentive.[{1}](#)

Overall, I would agree with Crichton. All too often, scientists purposefully refrain from asking ethical questions concerning their work in the interest of the pursuit of science.

But now consider director Steven Spielberg, quoted in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*: “There’s a big moral question in this story. DNA cloning may be viable, but is it acceptable?”[{2}](#) And again in the *New York Times*, Spielberg said, “Science is intrusive. I wouldn’t ban molecular biology altogether, because it’s useful in finding cures for AIDS, cancer and other diseases. But it’s also dangerous and that’s the theme of *Jurassic Park*.”[{3}](#) So Spielberg openly states that the real theme of *Jurassic Park* is that science is intrusive.

In case you are skeptical of a movie’s ability to communicate this message to young people today, listen to this comment from an eleven-year-old after seeing the movie. She said, “*Jurassic Park*’s message is important! We shouldn’t fool around with nature.”[{4}](#) The media, movies and music in

particular, are powerful voices to our young people today. We cannot underestimate the power of the media, especially in the form of a blockbuster like *Jurassic Park*, to change the way we perceive the world around us.

Many issues of today were addressed in the movie. Biotechnology, science, evolution, feminism, and new age philosophy all found a spokesman in *Jurassic Park*.

The Dangers of Science, Biotechnology, and Computers

The movie *Jurassic Park* directly attacked the scientific establishment. Throughout the movie, Ian Malcolm voiced the concerns about the direction and nature of science. You may remember the scene around the lunch table just after the group has watched the three velociraptors devour an entire cow in only a few minutes. Ian Malcolm brashly takes center stage with comments like this: "The scientific power...didn't require any discipline to attain it...So you don't take any responsibility for it." [\[5\]](#) The key word here is responsibility. Malcolm intimates that *Jurassic Park* scientists have behaved irrationally and irresponsibly.

Later in the same scene, Malcolm adds, "Genetic power is the most awesome force the planet's ever seen, but, you wield it like a kid that's found his dad's gun." Genetic engineering rises above nuclear and chemical or computer technology because of its ability to restructure the very molecular heart of living creatures. Even to create new organisms. Use of such power requires wisdom and patience. Malcolm punctuates his criticism in the same scene when he says, "Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, they didn't stop to think if they should."

Malcolm's criticisms should hit a raw nerve in the scientific community. As Christians we ask similar questions and raise similar concerns when scientists want to harvest fetal tissue

for research purposes or experiment with human embryos. If Malcolm had limited his remarks to *Jurassic Park* only, I would have no complaint. But Malcolm extends the problem to science as a whole when he comments that scientific discovery is the rape of the natural world. Many youngsters will form the opinion that all scientists are to be distrusted. A meaningful point has been lost because it was wielded with the surgical precision of a baseball bat.

Surprisingly, computers take a more subtle slap in the face—surprising because computers were essential in creating many of the dinosaur action scenes that simply could not be done with robotic models. You may remember early in the movie, the paleontological camp of Drs. Grant and Satler where Grant openly shows his distrust of computers. The scene appears a little comical as the field-tested veteran expresses his hate for computers and senses that computers will take the fun out of his quaint profession.

Not so comical is the portrayal of Dennis Nedry, the computer genius behind *Jurassic Park*. You get left with the impression that computers are not for normal people and the only ones who profit by them or understand them are people who are not to be trusted. Nedry was clearly presented as a dangerous person because of his combination of computer wizardry and his resentment of those who don't understand him or computers. Yet at the end of the movie, a young girl's computer hacking ability saves the day by bringing the system back on line.

The point to be made is that technology is not the villain. Fire is used for both good and evil purposes, but no one is calling for fire to be banned. It is the worldview of the culture that determines how computers, biotechnology, or any other technology is to be used. The problem with *Jurassic Park* was the arrogance of human will and lack of humility before God, not technology.

The Avalanche of Evolutionary Assumptions

There were many obvious naturalistic or evolutionary assumptions built into the story which, while not totally unexpected, were too frequently exaggerated and overplayed.

For instance, by the end of the book and the film you felt bludgeoned by the connection between birds and dinosaurs. Some of these connections made some sense. An example would be the similarities between the eating behavior of birds of prey and the tyrannosaur. It is likely that both held their prey down with their claws or talons and tore pieces of flesh off with their jaws or beaks. A non-evolutionary interpretation is simply that similarity in structure indicates a similarity in function. An ancestral relationship is not necessary.

But many of the links had no basis in reality and were badly reasoned speculations. The owl-like hoots of the poison-spitting dilophosaur jumped out as an example of pure fantasy. There is no way to guess or estimate the vocalization behavior from a fossilized skeleton.

Another example came in the scene when Dr. Alan Grant and the two kids, Tim and Lex, meet a herd of gallimimus, a dinosaur similar in appearance to an oversized ostrich. Grant remarks that the herd turns in unison like a flock of birds avoiding a predator. Well, sure, flocks of birds do behave this way, but so do herds of grazing mammals and schools of fish. So observing this behavior in dinosaurs no more links them to birds than the webbed feet and flattened bill of the Australian platypus links it to ducks! Even in an evolutionary scheme, most of the behaviors unique to birds would have evolved after the time of the dinosaurs.

A contradiction to the hypothesis that birds evolved from dinosaurs is the portrayal of the velociraptors hunting in packs. Mammals behave this way, as do some fishes such as the sharks, but I am not aware of any birds or reptiles that do.

The concealment of this contradiction exposes the sensational intent of the story. It is used primarily to enhance the story, but many will assume that it is a realistic evolutionary connection.

Finally, a complex and fascinating piece of dialogue in the movie mixed together an attack on creationism, an exaltation of humanism and atheism, and a touch of feminist male bashing. I suspect that it was included in order to add a little humor and to keep aspects of political correctness in our collective consciousness. Shortly after the tour of the park begins and before they have seen any dinosaurs, Ian Malcolm reflects on the irony of what *Jurassic Park* has accomplished. He muses, "God creates dinosaurs. God destroys dinosaurs. God creates man. Man destroys God. Man creates dinosaurs." To which Ellie Satler replies, "Dinosaurs eat man. Woman inherits the earth!" Malcolm clearly mocks God by indicating that not only does man declare God irrelevant, but also proceeds to duplicate God's creative capability by creating dinosaurs all over again. We are as smart and as powerful as we once thought God to be. God is no longer needed.

While the movie was not openly hostile to religious views, Crichton clearly intended to marginalize theistic views of origins with humor, sarcasm, and an overload of evolutionary interpretations.

***Jurassic Park* and the New Age**

Ian Malcolm, in the scene in the biology lab as the group inspects a newly hatching velociraptor, pontificates that "evolution" has taught us that life will not be limited or extinguished. "If there is one thing the history of evolution has taught us, it's that life will not be contained. Life breaks free. It expands to new territories, it crashes through barriers, painfully, maybe even dangerously, but, uh, well, there it is!...I'm simply saying that, uh, life finds a way."

Evolution is given an intelligence all its own! Life finds a way. There is an almost personal quality given to living things, particularly to the process of evolution. Most evolutionary scientists would not put it this way. To them evolution proceeds blindly, without purpose, without direction. This intelligence or purposefulness in nature actually reflects a pantheistic or new age perspective on the biological world.

The pantheist believes that all is one and therefore all is god. God is impersonal rather than personal and god's intelligence permeates all of nature. Therefore the universe is intelligent and purposeful. Consequently a reverence for nature develops instead of reverence for God. In the lunch room scene Malcolm says, "The lack of humility before nature being displayed here, staggers me." Malcolm speaks of Nature with a capital "N." While we should respect and cherish all of nature as being God's creation, humility seems inappropriate. Later in the same scene, Malcom again ascribes a personal quality to nature when he says, "What's so great about discovery? It's a violent penetrative act that scars what it explores. What you call discovery, I call the rape of the natural world." Apparently, any scientific discovery intrudes upon the private domain of nature. Not only is this new age in its tone, but it also criticizes Western culture's attempts to understand the natural world through science.

There were other unusual new age perspectives displayed by other characters. Paleobotanist Ellie Satler displayed an uncharacteristically unscientific and feminine, or was it New Age, perspective when she chastened John Hammond for thinking that there was a rational solution to the breakdowns in the park. You may remember the scene in the dining hall, where philanthropist John Hammond and Dr. Satler are eating ice cream while tyrannosaurs and velociraptors are loose in the park with Dr. Grant, Ian Malcolm, and Hammond's grandchildren. At one point, Satler says, "You can't think your way out of

this one, John. You have to feel it.” Somehow, the solution to the problem is to be found in gaining perspective through your emotions, perhaps getting in touch with the “force” that permeates everything around us as in *Star Wars*.

Finally, in this same scene, John Hammond, provides a rather humanistic perspective on scientific discovery. He is responding to Ellie Satler’s criticisms that a purely safe and enjoyable *Jurassic Park*, is not possible. Believing that man can accomplish anything he sets his mind to, Hammond blurts out, “Creation is a sheer act of will!” If men and women were gods in the pantheistic sense, perhaps this would be true of humans. But if you think about it, this statement is truer than first appears, for the true Creator of the universe simply spoke and it came into being. The beginning of each day’s activity in Genesis 1 begins with the phrase, “And God said.”

Creation is an act of will, but it is the Divine Will of the Supreme Sovereign of the universe. And we know this because the Bible tells us so!

They Clone Dinosaurs Don’t They?

The movie *Jurassic Park* raised the possibility of cloning dinosaurs. Prior to the release of the movie, magazines and newspapers were filled with speculations concerning the real possibility of cloning dinosaurs. The specter of cloning dinosaurs was left too much in the realm of the eminently possible. Much of this confidence stemmed from statements from Michael Crichton, the author of the book, and producer Steven Spielberg.

Scientists are very reluctant to use the word “never.” But this issue is as safe as they come. Dinosaurs will never be cloned. The positive votes come mainly from Crichton, Spielberg, and the public. Reflecting back on his early research for the book, Michael Crichton said, “I began to

think it really could happen.”{6} The official *Jurassic Park* Souvenir magazine fueled the speculation when it said, “The story of *Jurassic Park* is not far-fetched. It is based on actual, ongoing genetic and paleontologic research. In the words of Steven Spielberg: This is not science fiction; it’s science eventuality.”{7} No doubt spurred on by such grandiose statements, 58% of 1000 people polled for *USA Today* said they believe that scientists will be able to recreate animals through genetic engineering.{8}

Now contrast this optimism with the more sobering statements from scientists. The *Dallas Morning News* said, “You’re not likely to see *Tyrannosaurus Rex* in the Dallas Zoo anytime soon. Scientists say that reconstituting any creature from its DNA simply won’t work.”{9} And *Newsweek* summarized the huge obstacles when it said, “Researchers have not found an amber-trapped insect containing dinosaur blood. They have no guarantee that the cells in the blood, and the DNA in the cells, will be preserved intact. They don’t know how to splice the DNA into a meaningful blueprint, or fill the gaps with DNA from living creatures. And they don’t have an embryo cell to use as a vehicle for cloning.”{10} These are major obstacles. Let’s look at them one at a time.

First, insects in amber. DNA has been extracted from insects encased in amber from deposits as old as 120 million years.{11} Amber does preserve biological tissues very well. But only very small fragments of a few individual genes were obtained. The cloning of gene fragments is a far cry from cloning an entire genome. Without the entire intact genome, organized into the proper sequence and divided into chromosomes, it is virtually impossible to reconstruct an organism from gene fragments.

Second, filling in the gaps. The genetic engineers of *Jurassic Park* used frog DNA to shore up the missing stretches of the cloned dinosaur DNA. But this is primarily a plot device to allow for the possibility of amphibian environmentally-

induced sex change. An evolutionary scientist would have used reptilian or bird DNA which would be expected to have a higher degree of compatibility. It is also very far-fetched that an integrated set of genes to perform gender switching which does occur in some amphibians, could actually be inserted accidentally and be functional.

Third, a viable dinosaur egg. The idea of placing the dinosaur genetic material into crocodile or ostrich eggs is preposterous. You would need a real dinosaur egg of the same species as the DNA. Unfortunately, there are no such eggs left. And we can't recreate one without a model to copy. So don't get your hopes up. There will never be a real *Jurassic Park*!

Notes

1. Sharon Begley, "Here come the DNAsaurs," *Newsweek*, 14 June 1993, 61.
2. Patrick Cox, "*Jurassic Park*, A Luddite Monster," *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 July 1993.
3. Steven Spielberg, quoted by Patrick Cox, *WSJ*, 9 July 1993.
4. Cox, *WSJ*, 9 July 1993.
5. From this point on all dialogue is from the movie *Jurassic Park*, Kathleen Kennedy and Gerald R. Molen, Producers, copyright 1993, Universal City Studios, Inc., and Amblin Entertainment.
6. Michael Crichton, quoted in "Crichton's Creation," *The Jurassic Park Official Souvenir Magazine*, (Brooklyn, N.Y.: The Topps Company, Inc., 1993), 4.
7. "Welcome to Jurassic Park," *The Jurassic Park Official Souvenir Magazine*, (Brooklyn, N.Y.: The Topps Company, Inc., 1993), 2.

8. American Opinion Research poll of 1,000 adults from May 7-24, 1993 cited in *USA Today*, Friday, June 11, 1993, 2A.
9. Graphic inset, "How Real is *Jurassic Park?*," *The Dallas Morning News*, Monday, 14 June 1993, 10D.
10. Begley, "Here Come the DNAsaurs," 60-61.
11. Raul J. Cano, Hendrik N. Poinar, Norman J. Pieniasek, Aftim Acra, and George O. Poinar, Jr. "Amplification and sequencing of DNA from a 120 135-million-year-old weevil," *Nature* 363 (10 June 1993): 536-38.

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Television – A Christian Response

Years ago I witnessed something that has been written indelibly in my memory. The occasion was a week-long summer conference for high school students on the campus of a major university. I was serving as the leader of one of the groups at this conference. In fact, I was given the elite students. They were described as the "Advanced School" because they had attended the conference previously, and they had leadership positions on their respective campuses.

Each of our teaching sessions, which were usually focused on matters of worldviews, theology, cultural criticism, and evangelism, began with music. Before one memorable session the music leader began to play the theme music from various television shows of the past. To my great surprise the students began to sing the lyrics to each of the tunes with great gusto. They were able to respond to each theme without

hesitation; the songs were ingrained in their memories. Obviously they had heard the themes and watched the programs numerous times during their relatively young lives. Whether it was "Gilligan's Island," "The Beverly Hillbillies," "Green Acres," "Sesame Street," or a host of others, they knew all of them. Whereas many of these bright students could not relate a good grasp of biblical content, they had no problem recalling the content of frivolous television programs that were not even produced during their generation.

The Rise and Influence of TV

In a short period of time television has cemented itself in our cultural consciousness. As you read the following titles of television programs certain memories will probably come to mind: "The Milton Berle Show," "I Love Lucy," "The Steve Allen Show," "The \$64,000 Question," "The Millionaire," "Leave It To Beaver," "Gunsmoke," "The Andy Griffith Show," "Candid Camera," "As the World Turns," "The Twilight Zone," "Captain Kangaroo," "Dallas," "Happy Days," "Let's Make a Deal," "The Tonight Show," "Sesame Street," "M*A*S*H*," "All in the Family," "The Cosby Show," "Monday Night Football."

Perhaps you remember a particular episode, a certain phrase, an indelible scene, a unique character, or, as with my high school friends, the title tune. These television programs, and a litany of others, have permeated our lives. It is difficult, if not impossible, to find a more pervasive, influential conduit of ideas and images than television. For a large segment of the population "television has so refashioned and reshaped our lives that it is hard to imagine what life was like before it."(1)

This powerful medium began to gather the attention of the population soon after World War II. "By 1948, the number of stations in the United States had reached 48, the cities served 23, and sales of TV sets had passed sales of radios."(2) But it was not until "1952 . . . that TV as we

know it first began to flow to all sections of the United States.”(3) Interest was so intense that “by 1955 about two-thirds of the nation’s households had a set; by the end of the 1950s there was hardly a home in the nation without one.”(4) And by 1961 “there were more homes in the United States with TV than with indoor plumbing.”(5) Such statistics have continued to increase to the point where “99 percent of all households possess at least one TV, and most have two or more.”(6)

So the middle- to late-twentieth century has included the development of one of the most dramatic and powerful methods of communication in recorded history.

Can TV Be Redeemed?

But as with all media, the Christian should weigh carefully the use and abuse of TV. Some are quick to call it an “idiot box” while continuing to watch it endlessly. Others, borrowing from a famous poem by T.S. Eliot, may disparagingly refer to TV as a “wasteland.” Still others, as with certain evangelists, may claim that TV is the most powerful tool yet devised for the spreading of the gospel.(7)

But whether your perception of TV is negative or positive, the Christian must understand that the medium is here to stay, and it will continue to have a significant influence on all of us, whether we like it or not. And whether we are discussing TV or any other media, it is the Christian’s responsibility “to maintain an informed, critical approach to all media while joyfully determining how best to use every medium for the glory of God.”(8)

There is no doubt this is a challenging endeavor, because at first glance it may be difficult to picture ways in which TV can be used legitimately for God’s glory. Perhaps many of us tend to have what may be called the “Michal Syndrome.” Michal, King David’s wife, rebuked David for dancing before the ark of

God. She had concluded that the "medium" of dancing in this manner was shameful. But Scripture obviously demonstrates that she was the one to be rebuked in that she "had no child to the day of her death" (2 Samuel 6:12-23). We will do well to heed at least one of the lessons of this story and be cautious if we are tempted to reject TV outright as a potentially unredeemable avenue of expression.

This is an important thought in light of the fact that many highly esteemed thinkers have espoused pessimistic analyses of TV. For example, Malcolm Muggeridge, the great English sage, wrote: "Not only can the camera lie, it always lies." (9) In fairness we must add that Muggeridge added balance in his critique and even agreed to be interviewed on William Buckley's "Firing Line," but his skepticism continues to be well-chronicled. Jacques Ellul has written in the same vein. Neil Postman, another respected critic, wrote an oft-quoted book entitled *Amusing Ourselves To Death* in 1985. In his volume Postman argues that Aldous Huxley's belief that "what we love will ruin us" is a perfect description of TV. (10) More recently Kenneth Myers, an insightful cultural critic, also has concluded that it is highly doubtful that the medium can be redeemed (11) (that is, brought under the Lordship of Christ and conformed to His teachings). Such gloomy perspectives continue to be expressed by many of those who study media.

On the other hand, such viewpoints have been questioned, if not rejected, by many other well-qualified critics. Their analyses of TV usually are based upon a more optimistic view of technology. Clifford Christians, a communications scholar, writes: "I defend television. Contrary to Postman and Ellul, I do not consider it the enemy of modern society, but a gift of God that must be transformed in harmony with the redeemed mind." (12) Quentin Schultze, another communications scholar, believes that many Christian intellectuals "are comfortable with printed words and deeply suspicious of images, especially mass-consumed images." (13) David Marc, an American

Civilization professor, offers a provocative outlook by relating that the “distinction between taking television on one’s own terms and taking it the way it presents itself is of critical importance. It is the difference between activity and passivity. It is what saves TV from becoming the homogenizing, monolithic, authoritarian tool that the doomsday critics claim it is.”(14) We must view TV with an active mind that responds with a Christian worldview. We are responsible for what TV communicates to us.

How Should We Respond to TV?

So it is obvious there are great disparities of opinion among those who think about TV more than most of us. How can we humbly approach the subject while considering both positions? I propose that we reflect on an answer to this question by giving attention to several facets of a response.

TV and Communication

First, we should remember that as with many contemporary forms of communication and entertainment, the Bible does not include explicit insights about TV. We are left to investigate applicable passages and gather perspectives based upon our study. Let’s consider some of those passages and see if we can discover needed insights.

Neil Postman relates an intriguing thought regarding the second of the Ten Commandments: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth” (Exod. 20:4, NASB). Postman’s response to this verse is that “it is a strange injunction to include as part of an ethical system unless its author assumed a connection between forms of human communication and the quality of a culture.”(15) Postman’s statement strongly suggests that the ways in which we communicate significantly influence our lives. He continues by stating that “iconography thus became blasphemy so that a

new kind of God could enter a culture.”(16)

There is much food for thought in such statements. First, it is true that the “author,” in this case God via the personality of Moses, was emphasizing the importance of “forms of communication.” But it is a misapplication of the text to conclude anything more than that it is not permissible for man to form visual images of God. Second, it is also true that “forms of communication” are connected to the “quality of a culture.” But again it is a mis-application to conclude that visual images cannot be a positive or beneficial part of that quality. Third, it is not true that “iconography thus became blasphemy” for the people of God. If that were so it would make a mockery of the tabernacle and temple that were so important in the cultural and religious life of the Israelites (in particular, see Exod. 31 and 35-40). Both structures contained icons that were representative of God’s revelation, and they were filled with images that were pleasing to the eye. There was an aesthetic dimension. Of course the icons were not representative of God Himself, but they were representative of His actions and commands. They symbolized God’s presence and power among His people.

The point of this dialogue with Postman and his analysis of the second commandment is that he has related one of the more prominent biases against TV. That is, TV is an image-bearer, and thus it is inferior to forms of communication that are word-bearers. Even if we were to concede that this is true, it does not follow that the inferiority of TV means that it cannot be a legitimate form of communication. It simply means that it may be inferior to other forms. Steak may be superior to hamburger, but that doesn’t mean steak should be our only food.

Let’s reverse the emphasis upon the superiority of written communication by considering a contrast between reading the letters of the apostle Paul and actually being in his presence and hearing him expound upon them. Most of us would probably

say that actually hearing Paul is superior to reading him, but few of us would say that reading his letters is not a worthwhile enterprise. If we follow Postman's reasoning, and the reasoning of other critics, we may be tempted to conclude that the issue of inferiority/superiority could lead us to reject reading Paul because that does not provide the same level of communication as would his actual presence. Television may be inferior to other things in our lives, but that doesn't mean it must be excluded.

The Cultural Mandate and TV

Second, we should analyze TV in light of the cultural mandate. Clifford Christians has related that Christians "often seem to be aliens in a strange land." That is, we are living in a secularized society that makes it increasingly difficult to assert biblical principles. But he goes on to draw a parallel between the ancient Israelites in their Babylonian captivity to our present condition. He quotes the prophet Jeremiah: "Build houses and live in them; and plant gardens, and eat their produce... And seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare... For I know the plans that I have for you," declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope'" (Jeremiah 29:4,7,11).

This passage can serve to remind us that we are to "convert cultural forms, not...eliminate them wholesale." (17) The Israelites were forced to live in a culture not their own, but they were still enjoined to "cultivate" it. In the same sense we should be cultivating the medium of television.

TV Is Still In Its Infancy

Third, we should give thought to the fact that TV is still in its childhood. As a result, it is possible that it has not yet realized its potential beyond the banalities that we tend to associate with it at the present time. A study of the history

of various media indicates that all of them have proceeded through stages of development, and that is still true. For example, even though drama was born in ancient Greece, its development had to wait to a great extent until Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Era. During this period, the theater began to acquire its present form, and many were outraged. It was a suspicious and inferior form of communication in the opinion of the learned and pious. And with this development came the idea of a "spectator" who observed the action and dialogue on the stage. This manner of communication or entertainment led the London city fathers to eradicate it from the city into the suburbs. Thus the famous Globe theater was built on the south side of the Thames and not in the walled city.(18)

So it could be that many of us, like the London city fathers, are too impatient, or we are biased toward certain media. We often cry that there is reason to be impatient or biased because of the TV content that has become so much a part of our lives. Yes, there is too much violence, sex, secularism, and there are too many vapid plots and insipid dialogue. But our concerns about content should not automatically lead us to assume that the medium is irredeemable. Perhaps we have not allowed TV the time it may need to attract its most creative and redeeming champions. And again, this is where the Christian should enter armed with the cultural mandate. The Christian who seeks to communicate through TV should understand its peculiarities and surpass the unimaginative, superficial, narcissistic productions offered by too many contemporary Christians.

TV and Visual Literacy

Fourth, we should give consideration to the possibility that many of us are visually illiterate. Just as the disciples of Jesus were frequently "parable illiterate," we may have need for more insights as to how to react to TV. This may sound strange since such a great percentage of the population spends so much time with TV. Unfortunately, most of us don't "view"

TV. Instead, we “watch” TV. That is, we don’t often engage in a mental, much less verbal, discussion with the images and dialogue.

The critical viewer of television has the difficult job of translating the tube’s images into words. Then the words can be processed by the viewer’s mind, evaluated and discussed with other viewers. This is a crucial process that all Christians must engage in if they hope to be discerning users of the tube.(19)

Much of current television is designed to appeal to the emotions, as opposed to the intellect. The frenetic style of MTV, for example, is increasingly used for everything from commercials to news programs. Unless we want to leave TV as a medium that only applies to our emotions, we must find ways to interact intellectually with what TV delivers. And perhaps more importantly, we need to encourage a new generation to become visually literate to the point that they will begin to affect the use of the medium.

Good Decisions About TV

Fifth, many of us need to make decisions prior to spending time with the medium. This should be done not only for ourselves, but for our children and grandchildren. Perhaps a good rule for turning on the tube is to “map out” what may be worthy of our attention each day. Of course this means that we will have to spend a few minutes to read about what is available. But surely this will prove to be beneficial. Instead of automatically activating the power switch as part of a daily routine, regardless of what may be “on” at the time, selectivity should be routine.

Television is with us and will continue to exert its influence in ways that are difficult to predict at the present time. The proliferation of cable TV, the increasing interest in satellite systems, the unfolding of futuristic technology,

virtual reality, and a host of other developments will probably force us to give even more attention to TV than we have to this point in its history.

So as Christians it appears that we will continue to have the same dilemma: do we reject the medium, or do we redeem it? Since we are called to glorify God in all we do, it appears we should not leave TV out of this mandate. Let us commit ourselves to the redemption of television.

Notes

1. Douglas Gomery, "As the Dial Turns," *Wilson Quarterly* (Autumn 1993), 41.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. John W. Kennedy, "Redeeming the Wasteland," *Christianity Today* (2 October 1995), 92-102.
6. Quentin J. Schultze, *Redeeming Television* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992), 28.
7. Malcolm Muggeridge, *Christ and the Media* (Grand Rapids, Mich.:
8. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), viii.
9. Kenneth A. Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians & Popular Culture* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1989), 157-77.
10. Clifford G. Christians, "Television: Medium Rare," *Pro Rege* (March 1990), 2.
11. Schultze, 28.
12. David Marc, "Understanding Television," *The Atlantic Monthly* (August 1984), 35-36.
13. Postman, 9.
14. Ibid.
15. Christians, 5.
16. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Creators* (New York: Random House, 1992), 308 9.

17. Schultze, 94-95.

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