

Culture Wars

America at (Culture) War

Americans are highly polarized when it comes to issues of morality and social norms. We feel our collective blood pressure rise as we read the daily paper or watch the news on television. We all feel the tension caused by problems like teen pregnancies, abortion, crime, poverty, and political corruption. Factions from across the political spectrum respond with social programs and ideals that, if instituted, they are sure would make America a better place for all to live. However, the problem is that these programs or ideals are often in direct conflict with each other, presupposing very different assumptions about human nature. To highlight these differences, consider the following events.

In the early '90s the American Civil Liberty Union informed members of the California State Assembly's Education Committee that they were opposed to a bill the committee was considering. The bill, which called for traditional values in school curricula, was offensive to the ACLU because it would mandate that students be taught that monogamous, heterosexual relations solely within marriage is a traditional American value. The ACLU argued that this would be an "unconstitutional establishment of a religious doctrine in public schools."¹ They went on to contend that the bill was an obvious violation of the First Amendment.

More recently, a private school in Georgia asked a student to either change his behavior or leave the school. This, in itself, is not a rare event. However, the student wasn't a discipline problem and he wasn't failing academically. In fact, he was popular and liked by many on campus. The problem was that he was cross-dressing. He dressed and behaved as a woman and was accepted by many students as a female. When the

student chose to leave the school instead of changing his attire, the school's drama teacher remarked, "I really think that we all lost something precious that night." {2}

To many Americans, the ACLU's action in the first incident is incomprehensible. It seems reasonable, healthy, and obvious for schools to implement a "traditional values" model for sex education. Those on the side of the ACLU find it just as incomprehensible that anyone would see their position as unreasonable or unusual. Some might find the expulsion of the cross-dressing student to be grossly unfair, while most parents would wonder why the school took so long to act.

Regardless of your perspective, everyone agrees that Americans find themselves with deep differences on a number of fundamental issues that govern our daily affairs. Unfortunately, these deep differences have led some Americans to bomb a government building, shoot abortion doctors, or burn down a mountain top ski resort in order to further their cause.

This article will spotlight the culture war we find ourselves in and consider what a biblical response might be. Although few Christians fail to see the conflict in our society, particularly in our schools, they are far from united as to what our response should be. However, from a historical perspective, times of cultural disruption are often a great opportunity for the church, if it is being all that God desires it to be.

Orthodox vs. Progressive

Leaders of all political persuasions have taken note of the culture war that is engulfing our nation. To begin clarifying the issue, we will consider the contribution of two books that have helped to define the conflict for many religious and cultural conservatives: James Hunter's *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* and William Bennett's *The De-*

Valuing of America. Bennett argues that the battle over our culture is being fought between what he calls the liberal elite and the rest of society. The elite are “found among academics and intellectuals, in the literary world, in journals of political opinion, in Hollywood, in the artistic community, in mainline religious institutions, and in some quarters of the media.”{3} He feels that they are more powerful than their numbers would normally allow because they are looked upon as trend setters and opinion makers. Differing from traditional elite groups in American history, Bennett argues that these people reject the traditional bourgeois emphasis on work, frugality, sexual restraint, and self-control.”{4} As evidence for the existence of this elite, he refers to studies done by Stanley Rothman with Robert and Linda Richter. Their work portrays a media aristocracy that votes as a block for liberal candidates and on issues like abortion, gay rights, and the environment.{5}

Bennett adds that this elite is marked by a wholesale rejection of American ideals, a calling into question of what has been known as the American dream.{6} Evidence is not as significant as ideology for the elite. Their approach is “one of vindication, not investigation.”{7} If the middle class and the Republicans are for something, this group will instinctively be against it.

Hunter’s approach to defining the warring camps is subtler and, I feel, more accurate. He would argue that there is an elite on both sides of the culture war. On the one hand is what he calls the “orthodox” group. They have a commitment to an external, definable, and transcendent authority. From an evangelical perspective this is the God of the Bible. He is a consistent and unchangeable measure of value, purpose, goodness, and identity. Hunter would also include Jews and others who hold to a definable, unchanging, absolute authority.

Opposing this group are the “progressives.” Progressives are

defined by the ideals of modernism, rationalism, and subjectivism. To these people truth is more a process than a constant authority. It is an unfolding reality rather than an unchanging revelation. What is interesting about the progressives is that they often hold on to the religious heritage of the orthodox, but reinterpret its meaning for modern consumption. For instance, to a gay progressive, Christ came not to free us from the penalty of sin, but to free gays from the constraints of society. Although many progressives discard religion altogether, those who claim the Christian tradition have usually adopted a liberation theology, liberating the individual from any obligation other than to love each other in a very vague sense. To love each other seems to mean allowing people do whatever is expedient in their lives.

The real difference between the “orthodox” and the “progressives” is at the faith level. Whether a person calls himself or herself a Christian or not is not nearly as important as what kind of reality they place their faith in. Hunter believes that the culture war is a war of worldviews, and that these worldviews cause us to see the world differently. How then should a Christian, one who places his faith in the sacrificial death of Christ as an atoning payment for his sins, respond to this culture war?

The Angry Christian

Unfortunately, in the eyes of the secular world Christians are often seen as angry, intolerant people. At school board meetings, outside abortion clinics, even at the funeral of a homosexual who was murdered because of his lifestyle, Christians are there to angrily condemn sin and its perpetrators. It is almost as if Christians are surprised by sin and feel that their only response is to point people to the law of God. As a result, many outside the church see Christianity as a religion of law, similar to most other world

religions. This is a tragedy.

Although understandable, I don't believe that we are called as Christians to respond to the culture war in anger, especially anger directed at people. Although the wrath of God is evident in both the Old and New Testaments, condemnation of human anger is also present in each. Near the very beginning of human culture, God warns Cain about his anger and downcast face. Instead of seeking to do what was right, Cain was angry with God and his situation (Gen. 4:6-7). The wisdom literature of Proverbs teaches us, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger," and "A quick-tempered man does foolish things, and a crafty man is hated" (Prov. 14:17, 15:1).

In the New Testament, Paul condemns "hatred" and "fits of rage" immediately before listing the spiritual fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. James 1:19-20 is fairly straightforward in arguing that, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires." Jesus set an extraordinarily high standard against anger and hatred in His Sermon on the Mount. He taught, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment" (Matt. 5:21-22). Jesus is speaking to the root cause of much evil in any society: an angry, unforgiving heart.

Some may respond that righteous indignation, or anger against sin is merely emulating Christ. After all, Jesus cleared the Temple with a whip and violently overturned the moneylender's tables. Are we not allowed the same righteous indignation? I think not, especially if we take seriously God's admonition to let Him be in charge of judgment and vengeance (Rom. 12:19). In fact, Paul tells us to feed our enemy if he is hungry, give

him drink if he is thirsty, and to overcome evil by doing good (Rom. 12:20-21). The difference between Jesus' righteous indignation and our anger is that Jesus, being God, has the right to judge, and being perfectly righteous His judgment is perfect. He knows the hearts of men and has no bias other than holiness itself. On the other hand, we are often most angry when our personal comfort is disturbed. To the watching world, Christians become the most interested in politics when their personal wealth or comfort is at stake.

I don't believe that God is calling His people to anger in America. We bring a message of grace to the lost, not a message of law.

Apathy

Many Christians have been active in the culture war since the early '80s. With the rise of conservative politics and the family values movement, Christians joined the Republican party in droves and joined numerous organizations in order to help fight against the moral decline of the nation. Given the popularity of the current Democratic President and what appears, in many ways, to be a rejection of the conservative moral agenda, it is tempting for many to simply retreat from activism all together.

Some Christians never did get engaged in a counter-cultural sense. In fact, an early evangelical leader in culture war activity, Francis Schaeffer, warned that most Christians were more concerned with personal peace and affluence than about having an impact in their society.{8} He was concerned that as the Christian- dominated consensus weakened, these two values would grow in their place. The picture of society we are left with is one in which people's lives are consumed by things, buying two SUV's and a nice big house in the suburbs, with a nice tall fence, color TV (a big color TV), and remote. These people do not want to know about the suffering in our urban ghettos or about the plight of Christians in other countries.

They want their lives to be unimpeded by the turmoil experienced by less affluent people.

Is it wrong to have a nice house and cars? No, it isn't. But neither is it the ultimate purpose to which our Lord has called us. Gathering nice things should not be motivating our daily activities. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandments were, He responded that we are to first, love God with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matt. 22:37), and second, love our neighbor as ourselves. For Christians, success in this life should be measured against these two goals. The rest of revelation, both the written Word and the life of Christ, gives us a picture of what this means in both the general culture and within the church. Christ gave us the Great Commission, to go into all nations making disciples and teaching what He taught (Matt. 28:19-20). Paul talks about us being living sacrifices and the renewing of our minds so that we will know the will of God (Rom. 12:1-2).

To be indifferent about sin is to not love God; this form of apathy is incompatible with true Christian faith. However, to be indifferent about suffering in the world is equally incompatible with our faith. To ignore oppression and hatred reveals a lack of love for our neighbors. Too often Christians only seem to get excited when their rights, whether property or religious, are threatened. This makes a mockery of our Lord's words when He said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35). In Romans 12 Paul talks about blessing those who persecute you, and if it is possible, to be at peace with everyone around you.

Hebrews 12 tells us to throw off everything that entangles us, everything that keeps us from running the race marked out for us by Jesus. We are to fix our eyes on Him, who endured the cross because its joyous result would be a redeemed people of God.

Ambassadors For Christ

When thinking about how to respond to the culture war in America, or in any culture, we must ask ourselves, What is it that we are trying to accomplish? In the language of real war, What are our tactical and strategic goals? Some might respond that we are here to fight sin, to rid our society of the evils of abortion, homosexuality, adultery, drug abuse, political corruption, etc. There are Christians who claim that our primary cultural objective is to reinstate the law of Moses by taking control of the government and using its legal authority to impose a moral society on the population. However, this does not appear to be the plan revealed to us in the New Testament.

In 2 Corinthians chapter five, Paul details the role we are to play in America or in any country we might live in. We are to be Christ's ambassadors, and our message is one of reconciliation with God. There are many religions pushing a message of law; Islam, Judaism, and most Eastern religions all focus on the works people must do in order to please God or the gods. They focus on how humanity must reform itself to gain God's favor. Christianity's message is grace, and as Christ's ambassadors we proclaim that God has reconciled us to Himself in Christ by making "Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." God is making the righteousness of Christ available to sinners; salvation is the crediting of Christ's righteousness to our personal account, thus satisfying the judgment of a holy God against our personal sins.

What about social activism, what about politics? Do we just share the gospel and ignore the problems facing our nation? No, we are to be salt and light in a decaying world. However, our trust is not in politics, which can only change a nation's laws and to a lesser degree its people's behavior. Even if abortion ended tomorrow, if every homosexual became

heterosexual, and if drugs and pornography were things of the past, people without Christ would still be lost in their sins.

The role of an ambassador is a complex one. He or she must be intimately familiar with the nature of their sovereign's kingdom. Christians must seek to know God and His message in a way that can be communicated to the culture they live in. Unfortunately, Christians often know the message, but have a difficult time communicating it in a way that the surrounding culture understands, and in a way that answers the questions being asked by that society. Stating the gospel accurately and in a meaningful manner is central to being an effective ambassador for Christ.

If we are to respond to the culture war by being ambassadors for Christ, then the vitality of the church becomes far more important than controlling the White House or Congress. Understanding how to communicate the gospel of Christ becomes infinitely more valuable than having the most potent political strategy. Being faithful to Christ in this way builds God's kingdom on earth and results in common grace as more and more believers participate in every aspect of our culture.

Notes

1. James D. Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 310.
2. *Dallas Morning News*, 30 October 1998, 7A.
3. William J. Bennett, *The De-Valuing of America* (Colorado Springs, CO: Focus on the Family Publishing, 1994).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Bennett, 12.
7. Ibid.

8. Francis A. Schaeffer, *How then Shall We Live* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1976), 205.

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer – A Christian Voice and Martyr

Todd Kappelman presents a stirring overview of Dietrich Bonhoeffer looking at both his life experience standing against the Nazis and some of his key perspectives on the true Christian life. He was a thought provoking voice for Christianity as well as a famous martyr.

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

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Man and His Mission

Since his death in 1945, and especially in the last ten years, Bonhoeffer's writings have been stirring remarkable interest among Christians, old and young alike. Thus, we are going to examine the merits of reading the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. We will do this by examining the man and his particular place in the canon of Christian writers, his background and historical setting, and finally three of his most important and influential works.

Bonhoeffer's importance begins with his opposition to the Nazi party and its influence in the German church during the rise of Hitler. This interest led him into areas of Christian

ecumenical concerns that would later be important to the foundation of our contemporary ecumenical movements. Many denominational factions and various groups claim him as their spokesman, but it's his remarkable personal life, and his authorship of difficult devotional and academic works, which have gained him a place in the history of twentieth century theology.

Bonhoeffer was born on February 4, 1906 in Breslau, Germany (now part of Poland) and had a twin sister named Sabine. In 1933, before Hitler came to power, Bonhoeffer, a minister in the Lutheran church, was already attacking the Nazis in radio broadcasts. Two years later he was the leader of an underground seminary with over twenty young seminarians. That seminary is often seen as a kind of Protestant monastery, and is responsible for many of his considerations about the Christian life as it pertains to community. Later the seminary was closed by the Secret Police. In 1939, through arrangements made by Reinhold Niebuhr, he fled to the United States, but returned to Germany after a short stay. He believed it was necessary to suffer with his people if he was to be an effective minister after the war. The last two years of his life were spent in a Berlin prison. In 1945 he was executed for complicity in a plot on Hitler's life.

During the time that Bonhoeffer was in prison he wrote a book titled *Letters and Papers from Prison*. The manuscript was smuggled from jail and published. These letters contain Bonhoeffer's consideration of the secularization of the world and the departure from religion in the twentieth century. In Bonhoeffer's estimation, the dependence on organized religion had undermined genuine faith. Bonhoeffer would call for a new religionless Christianity free from individualism and metaphysical supernaturalism. God, argued Bonhoeffer, must be known in this world as he operates and interacts with man in daily life. The abstract God of philosophical and theological speculation is useless to the average man on the street, and

they are the majority who needs to hear the gospel.

We will examine three of Bonhoeffer's most influential and important works in the following four sections. The first work to be considered will be *The Cost of Discipleship*, written in 1939. This work is an interpretation of The Sermon on the Mount. It calls for radical living, if the Christian is to be an authentic disciple of Christ. The *Ethics*, written from 1940-1943, is Bonhoeffer's most technical theological exposition. It details the problems in attempting to build an ethical foundation on philosophical or theoretical grounds. Then we will examine more thoroughly *Letters and Papers from Prison*, one of Bonhoeffer's most personal and moving achievements.

The Cost of Discipleship

Bonhoeffer's most famous work is *The Cost of Discipleship*, first published in 1939. This book is a rigorous exposition and interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, and Matthew 9:35-10:42. Bonhoeffer's major concern is *cheap grace*. This is grace that has become so watered down that it no longer resembles the grace of the New Testament, the *costly grace* of the Gospels.

By the phrase *cheap grace*, Bonhoeffer means the grace which has brought chaos and destruction; it is the intellectual assent to a doctrine without a real transformation in the sinner's life. It is the justification of the sinner without the works that should accompany the new birth. Bonhoeffer says of cheap grace:

[It] is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the

cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.{1}

Real grace, in Bonhoeffer's estimation, is a grace that will cost a man his life. It is the grace made dear by the life of Christ that was sacrificed to purchase man's redemption. Cheap grace arose out of man's desire to be saved, but to do so without becoming a disciple. The doctrinal system of the church with its lists of behavioral codes becomes a substitute for the Living Christ, and this cheapens the meaning of discipleship. The true believer must resist cheap grace and enter the life of active discipleship. Faith can no longer mean sitting still and waiting; the Christian must rise and follow Christ.{2}

It is here that Bonhoeffer makes one of his most enduring claims on the life of the true Christian. He writes that "only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes." {3} Men have become soft and complacent in cheap grace and are thus cut off from the discovery of the more costly grace of self-sacrifice and personal debasement. Bonhoeffer believed that the teaching of cheap grace was the ruin of more Christians than any commandment of works.{4}

Discipleship, for Bonhoeffer, means strict adherence to Christ and His commandments. It is also a strict adherence to Christ as the object of our faith. Bonhoeffer discusses this single-minded obedience in chapter three of *The Cost of Discipleship*. In this chapter, the call of Levi and Peter are used to illustrate the believer's proper response to the call of Christ and the Gospel.{5} The only requirement these men understood was that in each case the call was to rely on Christ's word, and cling to it as offering greater security than all the securities in the world.{6}

In the nineteenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel we have the story of the rich young man who is inquiring about salvation and is told by Christ that he must sell all of his

possessions, take up his cross, and follow. Bonhoeffer emphasizes the bewilderment of the disciples who ask the question, "Who then can be saved?"^{7} The answer they are given is that it is extremely hard to be saved, but with God all things are possible.

Bonhoeffer and the Sermon on the Mount

The exposition of the Sermon on the Mount is another important element of *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it, Bonhoeffer places special emphasis on the beatitudes for understanding the incarnate and crucified Christ. It is here that the disciples are called "blessed" for an extraordinary list of qualities.

The *poor in spirit* have accepted the loss of all things, most importantly the loss of self, so that they may follow Christ. Those who *mourn* are the people who do without the peace and prosperity of this world.^{8} Mourning is the conscious rejection of rejoicing in what the world rejoices in, and finding one's happiness and fulfillment only in the person of Christ.

The *meek*, says Bonhoeffer, are those who do not speak up for their own rights. They continually subordinate their rights and themselves to the will of Christ first, and in consequence to the service of others. Likewise, those who *hunger and thirst after righteousness* also renounce the expectation that man can eventually make the world into paradise. Their hope is in the righteousness that only the reign of Christ can bring.

The *merciful* have given up their own dignity and become devoted to others, helping the needy, the infirm, and the outcasts. The *pure in heart* are no longer troubled by the call of this world, they have resigned themselves to the call of Christ and His desires for their lives. The *peacemakers* abhor the violence that is so often used to solve problems. This point would be of special significance for Bonhoeffer, who was writing on the eve of World War II. The *peacemakers* maintain

fellowship where others would find a reason to break off a relationship. These individuals always see another option.[{9}](#)

Those who are *persecuted for righteousness' sake* are willing to suffer for the cause of Christ. Any and every just cause becomes their cause because it is part of the overall work of Christ. Suffering becomes the way to communion with God.[{10}](#) To this list is added the final blessing pronounced on those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. These will receive a great reward in heaven and be likened to the prophets who also suffered.

Bonhoeffer's emphasis on suffering is directly connected to the suffering of Christ. The church is called to bear the whole burden of Christ, especially as it pertains to suffering, or it must collapse under the weight of the burden.[{11}](#) Christ has suffered, says Bonhoeffer, but His suffering is efficacious for the remission of sins. We may also suffer, but our suffering is not for redemptive purposes. We suffer, says Bonhoeffer, not only because it is the church's lot, but so that the world may see us suffering and understand that there is a way that men can bear the burdens of life, and that way is through Christ alone.

Discipleship for Bonhoeffer was not limited to what we can comprehend—it must transcend all comprehension. The believer must plunge into the deep waters beyond the comprehension and everyday teaching of the church, and this must be done individually and collectively.

Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's work *Ethics* was written from 1940-1943. Intended as lectures, this is his most mature work and is considered to be his major contribution to theology.[{12}](#) Christian ethics, he says, must be considered with reference to the regenerated man whose chief desire should be to please God, not with the man who is concerned with an airtight

philosophical system. Man is not, and cannot, be the final arbitrator of good and evil. This is reserved for God alone. When man tries to decide what is right and wrong his efforts are doomed to failure. Bonhoeffer wrote that "instead of knowing only the God who is good to him and instead of knowing all things in Him, [man] knows only himself as the origin of good and evil."[\[13\]](#) With this statement, Bonhoeffer entered one of the most difficult philosophical and theological problems in the history of the church: the problem of evil.

Bonhoeffer believed that the problem of evil could only be understood in light of the Fall of mankind. The Fall caused the disunion of man and God with the result that man is incapable of discerning right and wrong.[\[14\]](#) Modern men have a vague uneasiness about their ability to know right and wrong. Bonhoeffer asserted this is in part due to the desire for philosophical certainty. However, Bonhoeffer urged the Christian to be concerned with living the will of God rather than finding a set of rules one may follow.[\[15\]](#) And while Bonhoeffer was not advocating a direct and individual revelation in every ethical dilemma, he did believe that man can have knowledge of the will of God. He said that "if a man asks God humbly God will give him certain knowledge of His will; and then, after all this earnest proving there will be the freedom to make real decisions, and [this] with the confidence that it is not man but God Himself who through this proving gives effect to His will."[\[16\]](#)

Perhaps our first response to Bonhoeffer is that he appears to be some sort of mystic. However, it is imperative to understand the time in which he was writing, and some of the specific problems he was addressing. World War II was raging and the greatest ethical questions of the century were confronting the church. Good men, and even committed Christians, found themselves on opposing sides of the war. It would be ludicrous to suppose that right and wrong on individual or national levels was obvious, and that there was

universal agreement among Christians. In the midst of all of this confusion a young pastor-theologian and member of the Resistance could only advise that believers turn to Christ with the expectation that true answers were obtainable. Such confidence is sorely needed among Christians who face a world devoid of answers.

The strength of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* lies not in its systematic resolution of problems facing the church, but rather the acknowledgment that life is complex and that all systems outside of humble submission to the Word of God are doomed to failure. As unsettling as Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* may be, it is a refreshing call to the contemporary church to repent and return to a life characterized by prayer, the traditional mark of the early church.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Prison Correspondence

Our final consideration of the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was hanged in 1945 for his part in an assassination attempt on Hitler, will center on his *Letters and Papers from Prison* begun in 1942. These letters represent some of Bonhoeffer's most mature work, as well as troubling observations concerning the church in the turbulent middle years of the twentieth century.

The opening essay is titled *After Ten Years*. Here Bonhoeffer identifies with the evil of the times, and especially the war. He speaks of the unreasonable situations which reasonable people must face. He warns against those who are deceived by evil that is disguised as good, and he cries out against misguided moral fanatics and the slaves of tradition and rules.

In viewing the horrors of war, Bonhoeffer reminds us that what we despise in others is never entirely absent from ourselves.[\[17\]](#) This warning against contempt for humanity is

very important in light of authors such as Ernest Hemingway, Jean Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, whose contempt for the war turned into disillusion with humanity. This is a striking contrast between several witnesses to the war who came to very different conclusions. Bonhoeffer's conclusions were the direct result of a personal relationship with Christ. The conclusions of Hemingway, Sartre, and Camus were the pessimistic observations of those without a final hope.

Bonhoeffer faced death daily for many years and came to some bold conclusions concerning how believers might posture themselves toward this ultimate event. He argued that one could experience the miracle of life by facing death daily; life could actually be seen as the gift of God that it is. It is we ourselves, and not our outward circumstances, who make death potentially positive. Death can be something voluntarily accepted.[\[18\]](#)

The final question posed in this opening essay is whether it is possible for plain and simple men to prosper again after the war.[\[19\]](#) Bonhoeffer does not offer a clear solution, which may be seen as an insight into the true horrors of the war, as well as an open-ended question designed to illicit individual involvement in the problem.

Long before movies like *Schindler's List*, *Saving Private Ryan*, or *The Thin Red Line*, Bonhoeffer reported on the atrocities of the war. Some of the letters discuss the brutality and horrors of life in the prison camps, and one can certainly ascertain the expectation of execution in many of his letters. The thing that makes these letters so much more important than the popular films is that the letters are undoubtedly the confessions of one who is looking at the war as a Christian. Bonhoeffer was able to empathize with the problems faced by Christians living in such turbulent times.

Bonhoeffer's significance is difficult to assess completely and accurately, but two observations may help as we come to an

end of our examination of his work.^{20} We must always bear in mind the time of his writings. This explains much that we might at first not understand. Finally, any Christian would do well to read the works of one who gave his life in direct connection with his Christian convictions. There have been many martyrs in this century, but few who so vividly recorded the circumstances that lead to their martyrdom with both theological astuteness and a vision for future posterity.

Notes

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 30.
2. Ibid., 53.
3. Ibid., 54.
4. Ibid., 59.
5. Ibid., 87.
6. Ibid., 87.
7. Ibid., 94.
8. Ibid., 98.
9. Ibid., 102.
10. Ibid., 102.
11. Ibid., 102.
12. William Kuhns, *In Pursuit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, Image Books, 1969), 130.
13. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 19.
14. Ibid., 20.
15. Ibid., 38.
16. Ibid., 40.
17. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethage, trans. Reinhold Fuller and others, [rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1967)].
18. Ibid., 17.
19. Ibid., 17.
20. An excellent and more thorough consideration of Bonhoeffer's importance can be found in Eberhard Bethge's *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Another excellent book for those

interested in his life is the biography by Mary Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. These books are full of details about the personal life of Bonhoeffer and offer great insights into his Christian life.

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Millennial Cautions

Over twenty years ago, as a new Christian, I found myself mesmerized by Christian speakers and books that predicted future social and political events with newspaper-like details. I relished sharing those details with less biblically informed friends. They were amazed and sometimes frightened by what I thought the Bible was predicting about tomorrow's events. But as the years have progressed, I now wonder if that was an appropriate way to introduce my friends to Christianity. Many of the predictions that I shared have not come true. Did I make the claims of Christ more believable by focusing on prophecy or did I place roadblocks in the path of some, actually making their understanding of the gospel more difficult?

People seem to have an innate desire to know the future. Perhaps it is part of our need to be in control, see what's coming, and have time to prepare for it. As Charles Kettering once wrote, "My interest is in the future because I am going to spend the rest of my life there." Some people's lives are changed forever by those who claim to know the future. Hitler claimed that he and his followers were establishing a reign that would last a thousand years. A few short years after first making those claims, his nation, and much of the world, lay in ruins as a result of his violent vision. Recent examples of the dangers of unbalanced fascination with

prophecy include the odd Heaven's Gate cult, with their predictions of UFOs, death, and resurrection, and the Waco, Texas, sect led by David Koresh. Both groups, led by self-appointed "visionaries," influenced people in dramatically harmful ways.

On the other hand, a single person with vision can be a powerful force for positive change. William Wilberforce, after converting to evangelical Christianity in 1784, had a life-long desire to see an end to the international slave trade and of slavery itself in England and its colonies. His tenacity and vision had the remarkable impact of rallying both the British people and the powerful British navy toward achieving his goals. Another example of the positive impact that one person with vision can have is seen in the life of Dr. Martin Luther King. His prophetic "I have a Dream" speech on the steps to the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 has had, and continues to have, a profound effect on many people in America and the world regarding racial prejudice. It seems clear that an individual with an exceptionally strong vision for the future can have a great impact on it.

Sharing the truth of Christ's return can no doubt have a positive impact on people. Our Lord's return is a reality that all Christians claim as part of the hope mentioned in 1 Peter 3:15. Unfortunately, I have encountered Christians who spend too much time trying to determine when Christ will return. In fact, some prophecy experts have fallen into the trap of the early heretic Montanus who claimed prophetic powers and claimed to know the time of our Lord's return even though Jesus himself said that no one knows when He will return but the Father (Matt. 24:36). [\(1\)](#)

As we approach the year 2000, prophets and prophecies are expected to multiply in both the secular world and the Church. In this discussion, I will look at examples of prophecy experts who claimed to know more than they could deliver. My purpose is not to endorse one end-times system over another.

However, my hope is that Christians will be discouraged from claiming knowledge they do not possess and encouraged to keep their focus on the gospel message rather than on highly questionable prophetic schemes.

Christ's Return and the Church

A quick scan of the Internet reveals the popularity of prophetic claims. Along with sites on biblical prophecy, there are pages detailing the predictions of Edgar Cayce, the famous "sleeping prophet," and the fairly well-known Nostradamus. But there are many lesser-known prophetic sources as well, like one site called *Millennium Matters*. It has 583 pages of information on something called the "Deoxyribonucleic Hyperdimension," which predicts the awakening of a planetary entity on the earth in the near future. We might make fun of these prophecies, but imagine how Christians appear to others when we make false predictions about the return of Christ.

Attempting to predict the future is condemned in both the Old and New Testaments (Deut. 18; Acts 16) with warnings against divination and interpreting omens. Yet history has recorded the tendency of Christians to predict Christ's coming in every generation. Tertullian, a follower of Montanus in the second century, supported the idea of a near return when he wrote, "What terrible wars, both foreign and domestic! What pestilences, famines . . . and quakings of the earth has history recorded!" [\(2\)](#) He felt that these evidences alone were enough to indicate Christ's return. Novation in the third century and Donatus in the fourth, were both branded as heretics, but gathered a large number of followers by proclaiming the immanent return of Christ. Later, in the sixth century, Pope Gregory was sure that the end of the world was near. He wrote,

Of all the signs described by our Lord as presaging the end of the world, some we see already accomplished.... For we now see that nation arises against nation and that they press and

weigh upon the land in our own times as never before in the annals of the past. Earthquakes overwhelm countless cities, as we often hear from other parts of the world. Pestilence we endure without interruption. It is true that we do not behold signs in the sun and moon and stars but that these are not far off we may infer from the changes of the atmosphere. [\(4\)](#)

Pope Gregory's words sound quite contemporary, and remarkably similar to some current thinking on prophecy.

What I am warning against is not the preaching of Christ's return. Virtually all Christians believe that He will return physically and that a final judgment will follow. How then, do we respond to this truth? Christ uses the parables of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1-13) and the talents (Matt. 25:14-30) to teach His followers to be constantly ready for His return. We are to be ambassadors for Christ and the Kingdom of God, sharing the message of reconciliation that is found only in Him (2 Cor. 5:18-20).

One potentially damaging aspect of some prophecy teaching is the tendency to look for and find conspiracies that foretell Christ's return. Whether it be a renewed Roman Empire or a one-world government, Christians seem to relish a world of secret connections and commitments. We already know that the world system is hostile to the gospel, Jesus told us as much and warned of persecution. When we tend to see people through the lens of grand conspiracies, the natural response is to fight the conspiracy rather than share the gospel with the individual. The New Testament calls us to build God's Kingdom one heart at a time. We accomplish this not with legal or political power, but by sharing the good news revealed by God in a culturally relevant way.

The First Millennium

Predictions for the end of the world were prolific at the

close of the first millennium after Christ. Now we will look at some of these predictions and consider their impact on the Church.

In A.D. 950 Adso of Montier-en-Der wrote a "Treatise on the Antichrist" which was a response to a number of mid-century crises that had provoked widespread alarm and fear of an end-time apocalypse.[\(5\)](#) Five years later, Abbo of Fleury heard a preacher in Paris who announced that the Antichrist would be unleashed in the year 1000 and that the Last Judgment would soon follow.[\(6\)](#) At about the same time a panic occurred in the German army of Emperor Otto I because of a solar eclipse that the soldiers mistook as a sign of the end of the world.[\(7\)](#) And when the last Carolingian dynasty fell with the death of King Louis V in 987, many saw this event as a precursor to the arrival of the Antichrist. King Otto II of Germany had Charlemagne's body exhumed on Pentecost in the year 1000 supposedly in order to forestall the apocalypse. Both Halley's comet in A.D. 989 and a super nova in A.D. 1006 were interpreted as signs of the end. About the same time, the Moslem caliph, Al Hakim, destroyed the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem prompting apocalyptic fear in the west as well as violent anti-Jewish outbursts.[\(8\)](#)

The Calabrian monk, Joachim of Fiore (ca. A.D. 1135 1202) stands out as a key figure in medieval apocalypticism. On Easter Sunday in 1183 he was inspired to write his massive Exposition on Revelation. Later near the end of his life, he summarized his prophetic knowledge in the Book of Figures. His writings influenced a wide range of medieval events. The Franciscan order was founded on the basis that they would be the spiritual elite described in Joachim's "Age of the Spirit," a future time when God would send revelation directly to believers. Using Joachim's hints, writers concluded that the "Age of Grace" would end and the "Age of the Spirit" would begin in A.D. 1260. This prophecy, mixed with German social unrest, created a myth surrounding Frederick II. Having ruled

from 1220 to 1250, many believed that Frederick was the “Emperor of the Last Days” who would usher in the new Millennium.[\(9\)](#) The myth gained force when Frederick seized Jerusalem in 1229. When he died in 1250, a new myth started that Frederick would return from the dead. Two pseudo-Fredericks were burned at the stake by his successor to the throne. The Book of a Hundred Chapters stated that the returned Frederick would lead a fight against corruption in the state and the church, and that he will instruct his followers to “Go on hitting them” (referring to the Pope and his students) and to “Kill every one of them!”[\(10\)](#)

The Taborites, founded in A.D. 1415, also looked back to Joachim for their prophetic beliefs. They believed that once their persecutors were defeated, Christ would return and rule the world from Mount Tabor, a mountain they had renamed south of Prague. Their communal activities eventually turned bloody, prompted by tracts with lines like, “Accursed be the man who withholds his sword from shedding the blood of the enemies of Christ.”[\(11\)](#) After a crushing defeat at the hands of the German army, the group quickly disbanded.

Although all of these prophecies were misguided, it would be a mistake to doubt the sincerity of the individuals. However, the events surrounding the end of the first millennium should temper our desire to make predictions about the coming new millennium. Next, we will look at more recent predictions that have been just as wrong.

Recent Predictions

People want to know the future and are eager to follow those who claim to predict it. When a Jehovah’s Witness knocks on your door, prophecy is used as a hook to gain entrance. A recent best-selling book *The Bible Code* claims to have uncovered a hidden code in the Old Testament that predicts many modern-day events as well as a nuclear holocaust in the year 2000 or 2006. Many New Age books are sold on the claim

that channelers have access to future events when connected to those on another spiritual plane. Because of the emotional power of prophecy, the temptation for Christians to make dramatic claims about future events is great. Discernment and care must be used so that the integrity of the gospel message is not compromised. There is no doubt that Scripture teaches a Second Coming of Christ and that a final judgment will follow. However, there is considerable disagreement among Bible-believing Christians regarding the signs that foretell these events and our ability to predict when Christ will return.

One of the favorite past-times of date setters is to attempt to identify the Antichrist, a powerful figure who will appear immediately prior to Christ's return. This guessing game has a long tradition, going back to the time right after Jesus' death. The early church fathers Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Cyprian, and Augustine all believed that this person would be present immediately prior to Christ's return. During the Middle Ages, some churchmen identified the Antichrist as a Moslem, such as Saladin, but others pointed to a Jew, and some even pointed to the Pope. During the American Revolution it was popular to cast King George III in the role of Antichrist, but the Earl of Bute and British general John Burgoyne also got nominations.

Other familiar names to be included in this long list of suspected Antichrists are Napoleon, the British Parliament, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Joseph Stalin. Since World War II, the Pope still makes the list as does Jewish leader Moshe Dayan, the assassinated Egyptian leader Anwar el-Sadat, Spain's King Juan Carlos, and Korean cult leader Sun Myung Moon. For some, Mikhail Gorbachev and Saddam Hussein are naturals for the job.

The mark of the Beast, the number 666, has been used in very creative ways to support many different Antichrist theories. Although many conservative theologians have seen the number 666 from Revelation 13 as symbolic of all that is evil and a

blasphemous parody of the perfection that the Bible attributes to the number 7, others attempt to use the number to identify an individual.[\(12\)](#) The advent of the computer has caused some to see it as the Beast. One writer noted that if the letter "A"=6 and "B"=12 and "C"=18, and so on, the word computer adds up to 666. The same writer also observed that the words "New York" added up to 666.[\(13\)](#) Some pointed to John Kennedy because he had received 666 votes for the vice-presidency in 1956.[\(14\)](#) Others pointed to Henry Kissinger because his name in Hebrew added up to 111 or 666 divided by 6.[\(15\)](#) Even Ronald Reagan was considered because his first, middle, and last names all had six letters.[\(16\)](#)

The striking number of attempts to identify the Antichrist and the significance of the number 666 should at least give us a sense of humility before adding another name to the list. Perhaps we should follow the example of Irenaus in the second century. Seeing the many efforts to identify the Antichrist in his day, he cautioned against the practice and believed that the name was deliberately concealed until it would be obvious in the day of the Antichrist's arrival.

The U.S. in Prophecy

As the year 2000 gets closer, prophets and their prophecies will explode in number. A popular topic for prophecy experts is the future of the United States. Although prophecy expert John Walvoord has written, "No specific mention of the United States or any other country in North America or South America can be found in the Bible,"[\(17\)](#) this has not, and probably will not, stop others from seeing detailed references to the U.S. and its future in Scripture.

The depiction of the United States in end-times scenarios has varied over the years. There is a long tradition of seeing the U.S. as the New Israel. Near the end of his life, Christopher Columbus wrote, "God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which He spoke in the Apocalypse of St.

John . . . and he showed me the spot where to find it.”[\(18\)](#) In 1653 the New England historian Edward Johnson wrote that the U.S. “is the place where the Lord will create a new heaven and a new earth,” a theme that Jonathan Edwards picked up nearly a hundred years later.[\(19\)](#)

This notion that the colonies held a special place in God’s redemption plan continued to spread as the colonies grew. By the time of the War for Independence, this conception changed from a primarily religious or spiritual role to a civic one as well. In 1808 Elias Smith, a New England evangelist, argued that the Great Awakening in America, as well as the American and French revolutions, had set the foundation for the end-time age described in the Bible.[\(20\)](#) In his book *White Jacket* in 1850, Herman Melville writes, “We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. . . God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls.”[\(20\)](#)

This ardent belief in America’s millennial role reached its peak during the Civil War. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Julia Ward Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” and Lincoln’s “Second Inaugural Address” all contained allusions to Scripture and apocalyptic themes. Although this trend did not disappear, the twentieth century found Christian thinkers beginning to see the U.S. in another light. In 1937 Arno Gaebelein wrote that the U.S. had been overrun by the powers of darkness[\(21\)](#) and in 1949 Wilbur Smith saw American society described in the list of end time evils of 2 Timothy.[\(22\)](#) More and more, America was being identified with Babylon rather than with the New Israel.

Since the 1960s, prophecy writers have pointed out America’s long list of moral failures as evidence that God will soon focus His wrath on us. Many of them hold that the increase in abortion, homosexuality, godless education, divorce, crime, and pornography in our nation will soon seal our fate and lead

to our downfall as a nation.

This may be the case, but the many different interpretations of America's future role in God's end-times plan should cause a great deal of humility and prudence concerning our own ability to know what God has in mind for this nation. Once one goes beyond the general principal that God blesses those who conform to His moral guidelines, we are on shaky ground. Perhaps we would be far better off seeking a pure heart rather than trying to discern what role America will play in the millennium or who the Antichrist might be. Jesus is coming again. Worrying about the details or the exact time of His return is pointless if it does not turn us toward a holy life. As Jesus said, "Which of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matt. 6:27).

Notes

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2. Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), p. 7.
3. Ibid., p. 11.
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5. <http://www.mille.org/1000-dos.htm>, p.1.
6. Ibid., p. 2.
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17. Ibid., p. 247.
18. Ibid., p. 225.
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22. Ibid., p. 231.

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Titanic: A Critical Appraisal

***Titanic* as Romance and History**

James Cameron's epic film *Titanic*, the most expensive film in history, swept the 1998 Oscars and has been both praised and scorned by critics. The Christian community has been especially tough on Cameron and what they properly sense to be an overly romanticized and unnecessarily cheesy retelling of the historic maiden voyage and untimely ending of the largest moving man-made object of its day. Many people who wanted to see a historic drama with special effects, realistic sets, and period costumes were surprised to learn that they would also have to endure a romantic love story, complete with frontal nudity, which celebrated an adulterous affair between a young third class steerage passenger and a wealthy first class socialite who is engaged to be married.

Although many of my initial suspicions were justified when I saw *Titanic*, I was also pleasantly surprised by how much I enjoyed the story. I would like to offer some guidelines that might assist those who are struggling with an interpretation,

or who may be wondering if they too would enjoy this film.

First, I believe that one must realize that there are actually two stories within the film. The main story is not that of the *Titanic* itself but rather the romantic liaison between Jack Dawson, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, and Rose De Witt Bukatar, played by Kate Winslet. The second story, the one bearing the film's title, is the tale of one of the greatest disasters of the modern industrial age, the sinking of the *Titanic*. Unfortunately, it is the romantic story which most viewers will remember, and the one that is most celebrated. I say unfortunately because there are valuable historic and moral lessons to be learned from the retelling of this tragedy if one will take the time to sift through all of the romantic drivel which threatens to suffocate it.

There is the danger of going to see *Titanic* and forgetting that it is a story that has been retold for most of this century without much of the romanticism that Cameron and Hollywood include in their latest retelling. The real story of the *Titanic* is not about the celebration of heroic individualism and personal autonomy. It is about a single machine which has become a symbol in the twentieth century for man's technological brilliance, resourceful imagination, and inability to completely master his universe. The monuments and personal testimonies include acts of cowardice and bravery, accounts of class conflict, and excessive celebrations of wealth that would make most people blush.

Rushing to hasty judgment about James Cameron's account of the *Titanic* is neither wise nor expedient. I believe that too often our tendency is to reject films, literature, and the arts in general because there are a few things we find objectionable. Francis Schaeffer always cautioned us against hasty judgment when evaluating the arts.⁽¹⁾ Schaeffer believed that the work of understanding a particular piece of art and the artist should always precede an evaluation. For many viewers, the romantic overshadowing of the historic event may

prove to be overwhelming and, ultimately, the film will have to be rejected. Likewise, the careful viewer may find that the historic story and its moral lessons are preserved, managing to shine through the Hollywood commercialism and romantic sentimentality.

***Titanic*: Romance Hollywood Style**

Having introduced the dual nature of *Titanic*, a fictionalized romance and a factually inspired historic costume drama, I will now examine each aspect separately. By inserting the romantic plot into *Titanic*, Cameron presumes that a modern audience will not be interested in a historic costume drama, even one about the *Titanic*, without some form of entertainment to elevate the boredom of mere history. As his vehicle, Cameron chooses the love story between Jack Dawson (Leonardo DiCaprio), a young bachelor in third class and Rose De Witt Bukatar (Kate Winslet), a young socialite who is engaged to be married.

Jack wins his ticket on the *Titanic* in a last minute poker game and jumps from the gang plank just as the fated ship is pulling out of the harbor. He is the embodiment of the classic male adventurer. Jack has no ties to friends, family, or country. His days are occupied with whatever adventure he chooses and he answers to no man. By contrast, Rose is a beautiful young woman who is accustomed to the finer things in life, a member of the upper class and a lady in every sense of the word. Her family has come to financial ruin, and the only means of rescuing their fortune is for her to marry back into wealth. Rose, distraught with her arranged marriage, is contemplating suicide by jumping overboard when Jack comes to her rescue.

Jack is an amateur artist specializing in portraiture and the human figure. Rose is impressed with Jack's talent and proposes that he paint her in the nude. Jack naturally complies with Rose's request and we see Kate Winslet in the

film's only nude scenes. Jack and Rose fall in love, consummate their love out of wedlock, and Rose begins to scheme for a way out of her marital commitment. When the ship begins to sink, it is Jack who leads Rose through the maze of hazards, assists her after the ship sinks, and is finally responsible for her survival. Their love is portrayed as triumphing over natural disasters and societal constraints. They will not be denied by man or God.

We should not vicariously live sinful adventures through the lives of others, whether in film or literature.(2) When we applaud the sinful behavior of others, we participate in their sin and are thus guilty. Likewise, to remain silent is a sin.(3) Too often a film like *Titanic* inspires young people, Christian and non-Christian alike, to applaud sinful behavior. Young people frequently see romantic adventure and thrilling lifestyles in characters like Jack and Rose. What they often fail to realize is the sinful nature of the romance in the film and the direct contradiction of biblical principles. If young people are going to continue to watch films with mixed messages like those of *Titanic*, it is imperative that we discuss the philosophical and doctrinal content in an intelligent and reflective manner.

Men and women are born with a fallen nature and we should expect to see this nature in fictional literature and film. What we should not do is celebrate this fallen nature and revel in wickedness. And too many people, especially young people, applaud *Titanic* on the basis of the romantic triumphs of Jack and Rose.

Humanistic Confidence and Technological Arrogance in *Titanic*

Having discussed the romantic aspect of *Titanic*, discussion of the historic nature of the film is at hand. In order to accomplish this more fully, one must begin with an

understanding of the thinking prevalent when the *Titanic* was built and the place that its demise has held throughout the twentieth century.

Understanding the historical milieu of the beginning of this century is a prerequisite for grasping what the *Titanic* meant to those who lived at that time. Following the rebirth of classical studies in the Renaissance, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were characterized by a vigorous application of the scientific method to almost all aspects of life. The Enlightenment period was a time marked by some of the greatest discoveries of mankind, discoveries which have so impacted our lives that we cannot imagine our modern society without them.

The first and second Industrial Revolutions followed the Enlightenment period, and the modern world as we know it came into being. The confidence from the Enlightenment period, coupled with the obvious engineering and technical successes in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, fostered a confidence in man's ability to master his universe that was unrivaled in any preceding period.

The *Titanic*, built during the early and formative years of this century, was truly a modern project in that it was built out of the confidence acquired by the western world during the previous two centuries of progress. Designed by Thomas Andrews, and built by The White Star Line in England, the *Titanic* was completed in 1912 and weighed over 45,000 tons. It was the largest moving man-made object of its day, and eyewitness accounts of it were often marked by a daunting reverence for her sheer size and presence.

The *Titanic* was the pride of the White Star Line and became, for many, a symbol for man's ability to accomplish anything he endeavored. The designers, captain, and engineers claimed that she was the fastest and safest luxury liner on the ocean. We even hear the infamous boast that "God couldn't sink her."

Rather than objecting to this type of statement, or assuming a posture of righteous indignation, Christians should understand that lines such as these accurately reflect the true spirit of the time. The *Titanic* may be understood as an overwhelming example of sinful pride on the part of many individuals in that era. She was able to inspire in many, from designers and builders to the hundreds of thousands of men and women who participated in her glory, a false estimation of man's control of the universe.

In 1985, 73 years after the *Titanic* sank, Eva Hart, the last living survivor who was old enough at the time to remember the actual events surrounding the fateful night, had many interesting things to say about the disaster. She said that the entire catastrophe could simply be attributed to man's arrogance and desire to demonstrate mastery over his universe. We now know that the *Titanic* was traveling too fast to react quickly to the report of icebergs ahead. Coupled with an arrogant over-confidence, this caused a disaster that need never have happened. James Cameron's *Titanic* provides a new opportunity to reconsider some of the lessons that many hold to be fundamental aspects of this tragic event.

Class Conflict, Religion and Heroism in *Titanic*

I have discussed the technological arrogance which is usually cited in reference to the *Titanic* disaster and has been part of the story for most of this century. I now want to examine some additional aspects of the film which are valuable as moral lessons and interesting from historical perspectives.

First, and something that has caught many by surprise, is the glaring presence of class conflict in the movie. Men and women from every class of society and many ethnic origins were on the maiden voyage of the *Titanic*. The early part of this century was characterized by an extreme class consciousness.

People were extremely conscious about their social and financial status, and upward mobility was very rare. In the film, as in real life at the time, the poor and the rich have little association with one another. On the occasions when their lives intersect, it is the rich who have all of the benefits and the poor who endure most of the pain and suffering. In *Titanic* we have an opportunity to see this class division from a unique perspective. We can find rich and poor characters with whom we genuinely sympathize, as well as those whom we despise. For the most part though, James Cameron portrays the rich as oppressive, rude, and arrogant. This may or may not be a true perspective of that time, but it does capture the distinction. In the film we are given the opportunity to attend one party for first class passengers and a separate celebration for third class passengers. The third class folks look like they are having every bit as much fun as the first class passengers, and possibly more.

The heroic aspect of the *Titanic* legend remains intact in Cameron's film. All of the historical facts are not perfect and there have been outcries from some about the portrayal of specific individuals in the film in a manner that is unflattering and factually false. However, the film is true to the account that many people went down honorably and courageously with the ship. Many of the crew remained at their stations throughout the sinking. We witness Captain Edward John Smith's (Bernard Hill) disbelief at the sinking of the great ship, as well as his willingness to go down with her. The musicians who played while the ship was sinking in order to provide a calming background are portrayed as noble and of unflinching courage. There are scenes in which men of all classes step aside so that women and children from all classes can get to the life boats. There was not perfect equality, calm, or heroism. However, there were enough heroic and noble acts performed that night to merit respect for those individuals.

I also found the treatment of Christians to be fair and realistic in the brief scene dealing with the religious life of the passengers. Groups are seen in prayer as the ship sinks. Eva Hart also testified that the last song the band played as the *Titanic* went down was *Nearer My God To Thee*.(4)

The Problem of Pain and the Sovereignty of God

To conclude this appraisal of *Titanic*, I will discuss the theological questions that are raised and offer some insights for discussion. Regardless of one's position on the film, the factual account of 1500 persons losing their lives in a disaster that did not have to happen raises some serious issues. Many Christians believe that God is in control and that, had He wished to do so, He could have intervened in the *Titanic* disaster. In this instance God did not intervene, and many innocent people perished, including women, children, and infants.

C. S. Lewis summarizes the problem of pain and suffering in this way. "If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both."(5)

The first part of this problem, which pertains to God's goodness, presupposes that the sinking of the *Titanic* was not good, and that God allowed an evil thing to take place. One response might be that He allowed this to take place to avoid a larger disaster, such as a collision involving two ocean liners. Or perhaps there was a plague or virus on the ship which would have stricken a large portion of the American population, and God prevented the *Titanic* from reaching its destination in order to save millions. While this is pure speculation, it does illustrate that we, being finite, do not have the same perspective as God in determining what is good

or evil.

The second part of this problem questions God's ability to intervene in human affairs. Here the argument would be that God saw the *Titanic* in danger, but was powerless to stop the disaster. Any Christian who believes the Scriptures knows that God has miraculously intervened in human affairs in the past, and could do so again at any time. The fact that He apparently did not act may be accounted for by supposing that God saw a greater good in allowing the *Titanic* to sink. Furthermore, He may have been instrumental in her sinking just as He was instrumental in stopping the Tower of Babel from being built.(6) Again, the point here is not to argue this position specifically, but to show that we do not completely understand how God works in every situation. In Isaiah 55:8-9 the prophet declares that God's thoughts and ways are not man's. His understanding is higher than ours. We should expect His actions to be higher also.

The presence of natural, moral, and gratuitous evil in the world is one of the greatest challenges to the consistency of Christian truth claims. *Titanic* is a wonderful opportunity for believers and non-believers to engage one another. When we remember that over 1500 people perished in the 1912 *Titanic* disaster and thousands of friends and family members were also dramatically affected, the problem of pain and suffering should not be neglected. Very few, if any, of the passengers on board the *Titanic* that night thought it would be their last night on earth. Yet for many, it was just that. Though we can use film as an easy escape and a vehicle for vicarious living, we should both realize and maximize the potential for dialogue and the opportunity for contact with our culture afforded through a film like *Titanic*.

For Further Reading

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Notes

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3 I Jn. 5:17

4 *The Titanic*. Public Broadcasting System. Aired on channel 13, Dallas, TX, May 4, 1998, 9:00 PM.

5 C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (The Macmillian Company: New York, 1944), 14.

6 Gen. 11

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.
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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.

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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

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9. Charles H. Kraft, "Can Anthropological Insight Assist Evangelical Theology?" *The Christian Scholar's Review* 7 (1977), 182.

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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. Gaebeline, "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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6. Revelation 21: 1,4.
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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 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 opthamologist, 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*, PO 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).

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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 paradisal. 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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