

# 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?"<sup>{1}</sup>

*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?"<sup>{2}</sup> 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?"<sup>{3}</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Some Concerns about Christian**

## Participation in Cinema{6}

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Biblical Examples of Gratuitous Violence**

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

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

the surrounding countries will experience. He writes:

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

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

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

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

over the evil men for punishment.

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

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

## **Weaker Brother Considerations in Viewing Film**

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

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



person to sin.

There are basically three positions related to Christians viewing film.

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

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

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

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

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

## **Appendix**

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

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

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

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

## **Notes**

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

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

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## **Living in the New Dark Ages**

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

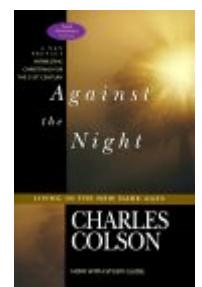
### **Is the Sun Setting On the West?**

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

## **The New Barbarism and Its Roots**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **The Darkness Increases and the New Barbarians Grow Stronger**

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

## **Where Do We Go From Here?**

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

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

### **The Family**

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

### **The Church**

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

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

## **The Classroom**

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

## **The State/Politics**

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

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

## **A Flame in the Night**

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

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

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

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

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

own pitiful intelligence.

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

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

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

## Notes

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

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

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

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## **Culture and the Bible**

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

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



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

## **The Golden Calf and the Tabernacle: Judging Culture**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Entering the Fray**

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



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

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

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

Second, even though Daniel and his companions learned from the

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

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

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

## **The World in the New Testament**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Corinthians and Culture**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Encountering the World**

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

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

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

ideologies that have become idols in our culture.

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

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

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

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

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

## Conclusion

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

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

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

Let us use the vehicle for the glory of God!

### Notes

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



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

2. Gene Edward Veith, *The Gift of Art: The Place of the Arts in Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 31.

3. Carl F.H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957), 420.

4. Edward J. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949), 48-49.

5. George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974). In particular, see chapters 17 and 29.

6. *Ibid.*, 225.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 226.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Everett F. Harrison, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Carl F.H. Henry, eds. *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), s.v. “World, Worldliness,” by Everett F. Harrison.

12. Ladd, 226.

13. *Ibid.*, 227.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 400.

16. R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1985), 209.

17. Ronald B. Allen, *The Majesty of Man: The Dignity of Being Human* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1984), 191.

18. Henry, 420.

19. *Ibid.*, 428.

20. F.W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953), 243.

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# The Worldview of Jurassic Park – A Biblical Christian Assessment

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

## The Intent Behind Jurassic Park

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **The Dangers of Science, Biotechnology, and Computers**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# The Avalanche of Evolutionary Assumptions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

## **They Clone Dinosaurs Don’t They?**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### Notes

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

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

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## Television – A Christian Response

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

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

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

## **The Rise and Influence of TV**

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

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

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

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

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

## **Can TV Be Redeemed?**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **How Should We Respond to TV?**

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

### **TV and Communication**

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

## **The Cultural Mandate and TV**

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

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

## **TV Is Still In Its Infancy**

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

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

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

## **TV and Visual Literacy**

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

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

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

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

## **Good Decisions About TV**

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

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

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

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

## Notes

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

17. Schultze, 94-95.

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## Is It Just Entertainment?

*The Christian enters the world of entertainment equipped with the knowledge of the clear biblical statements of God's will. He then applies that knowledge to the decisions he makes in regard to entertainment.*

Picture a grocery store in your mind. There are many aisles filled with a variety of products. Fresh fruit, vegetables, canned foods, bread, cereal, meat, dairy products, frozen foods, soap, and numerous other items can be found. When we shop in such a store we need to be aware of certain things. These may include the price, size, weight, variety, brand, quality, and freshness. After analyzing all of this, we are left with the most important part of the shopping trip—the decision! We must decide which of the products we will buy.

Our world is a lot like a grocery store. There are a variety of ideas (worldviews) to be considered. Those ideas can be seen and heard through television, music, movies, magazines, books, billboards, and bumper stickers, and other sources. In a sense, we are shopping in the grocery store of ideas. As Christians, we need to be aware of the products. We need to consider what is being sold. Then we need to decide if we should make a purchase.

Most of us want to be physically healthy. Unfortunately, sometimes we don't eat as if that were true. The same is true of our minds. We want to be mentally healthy. But too often we don't "eat" as if that were true! Our minds are often filled

with things that are unhealthy. This can be especially true of the entertainment we choose.

How can we become more aware of the products and make the right purchases when we “go shopping” in the world of entertainment? It is our intent to help answer this question.

A Christian is usually encouraged to think of God’s Word, the Bible, as the guide for life. Of course the challenge of such a position is found in practice, not theory. Living by the tenets of Scripture is not always an easy thing. And we can be tempted to think that God’s ideas are restrictive, negative, and life-rejecting. The “don’ts” of biblical teachings can appear to overshadow a more positive, life-affirming perspective.

## **Does God Intend for Us to Enjoy Life?**

Think of a series of three questions. First, if you make the Bible your standard for living, do you think that means life will be dull? Some Christians tend to live as if the answer is “yes.” This certainly applies to entertainment. It appears that we are to be so separate from the world that we can’t enjoy any part of it. Second, if you wrote a song, a poem, a novel, or if you painted a picture, sculpted a statue, etc., do you think you would know best how it should be sung, read, or understood? Of course the answer is “yes.” It came from your mind and imagination. You “brought it to life.” Third, if God created all things and knows everything about you, do you believe He knows how to bring true joy into your life? Again, the answer is obviously “yes.” You came from His mind and imagination. He “brought you to life.” He knows best how you should be sung, read, and understood. And He relays that information through His word, the Bible. He wants you to enjoy life, but with His guidelines in mind.

# What is God's Will for Entertainment?

Just what are those guidelines? What is God's will for us concerning entertainment?

Before this question is answered, it is important to understand that the Bible clearly teaches God's will for much of life. Too often we tend to think of pursuing God's will for reasons that include such things as a particular occupation or marriage partner, and other such important decisions that are not stated clearly in Scripture. But the Bible frequently teaches the will of God for daily living in obvious ways. The following passages demonstrate this:

- A wise man is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool is arrogant and careless (Prov. 14:16).
- Flee immorality (1 Cor. 6:18a).
- 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 (Phil. 4:8).

Obviously various types of contemporary entertainment are not mentioned in these verses. The Bible "does not endeavor to specify rules for the whole of life." (1) Thus we are challenged to make decisions about entertainment based upon the application of biblical principles. The Christian must know the "principles for conduct: which apply here, which do not, and why. Then he must decide and act. Thus, by this terrifying and responsible process, he matures ethically. There is no other way." (2) In fact, this process signifies our continual spiritual growth, or sanctification. As Hebrews 5:14 states: "Solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil." Most of us probably don't think of "training our senses," but such a concept surely should be a part of our thinking continually. And the application of such training to entertainment should



be clear.

Years ago I had an opportunity to demonstrate the use of “trained senses” when I attended a heavy metal rock concert at the invitation of a sixteen-year-old friend. He was a new Christian then, and we were spending a lot of time together. He had entered his new life after years of attachment to a certain popular rock musician who was the main act of the concert.

During the evening the musicians heavily emphasized the themes of sex, drugs, and violence, and the crowd of adolescents and pre-adolescents was encouraged to respond, and did. After awhile I asked my friend how Jesus would respond to what we heard and saw. His response indicated that for the first time he had begun to think about this form of entertainment—which had been very important to him—with Christian principles in mind.

Perhaps the most succinct statement of Christian ethical principles is found in 1 Corinthians 10:31: “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” Can you think of anything more than “whatever” or “all”? These all-encompassing words are to be applied to all of life, including our entertainment choices. My young friend made this discovery that night.

## **What Types of Entertainment are Evil?**

What types of entertainment are evil? A simple answer to this is, “None!” For example, the rhythm of rock music is not evil; television is not evil; movies are not evil; video games are not evil; novels are not evil, etc.

Of course it is possible for some to claim, for instance, that pre-marital sex is legitimate entertainment. But the clear admonition of Scripture forbids such activity. And the underlying point is that sex is not intrinsically evil. The

one who is engaged in such activity is taking what is good and misusing it for evil. So evil does not reside in sex, rock music, television, etc. Types of entertainment are conduits for good or evil. People are evil. People who provide entertainment and people who use it can abuse it. A basic premise of theology is that man has a sin nature. We are prone to abuse all things. As Genesis 8:21 states, The intent of man's heart is evil from his youth.

## **What About Content?**

So the Christian is free to make entertainment a part of his life with an understanding that evil resides in people, not forms. But caution and discernment must be applied. We must be alert to the importance of our minds and what they can absorb through entertainment.

Perhaps we need to stop doing some of the things we normally do while listening to music, watching television, etc., so we can concentrate on the ideas that are entering our minds. We might be amazed at the ideas we'll notice if we take the time to concentrate. For example, an old TV commercial says, "Turn it loose! Don't hold back"! We may want to ask what "it" refers to, and we may want to know what is to be "held back." Such a commercial is a thinly-veiled espousal of hedonism, an ancient philosophy that says pleasure is the ultimate good. Ideas are powerful, and they have consequences, even when they come from something as seemingly innocuous as a TV commercial.

Consider the following illustration. Think of your mind as a sponge. A sponge absorbs moisture not unlike the way your mind absorbs ideas. (The difference is you are making choices and the sponge is not.) In order to remove the moisture, you must squeeze the sponge. If someone were to do the same with your "sponge brain," what would come out? Would you be embarrassed if the Lord were to be present? Biblical teaching says He is always present. If we honor Him, we'll enjoy life in the process.

If we are using our minds and thinking Christianly about entertainment we will be more alert concerning content. All entertainment is making a statement. A worldview, or philosophy of life, is being espoused through what we read, hear, or watch. Movies, for example, can range from the introspective existential comedies of Woody Allen to the euphoric pantheistic conjectures of Shirley MacLaine. We are challenged to respond to such content with our Christian worldview intact.

## **Are We in a Battle?**

We must take care of our minds. A battle is taking place in the marketplace of ideas. Entertainment can be seen as one of the battlefields where ideas are vying for recognition and influence. As 2 Corinthians 10:5 states, "We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ." And Colossians 2:8 warns us: "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ."

## **What About the Conscience?**

The place of the conscience should also be considered. We must be aware of the possibility of defiling our conscience (1 Cor. 8:7). As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 6:12, "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable." The believer who cannot visit the world without making it his home has no right to visit it at his weak points.(3) It is the responsibility of each of us to be sensitive to what the conscience is telling us when we encounter those weak points and respond in a way that honors God.

Thus I suggest three steps in cultivating sensitivity to our consciences. First, we should consider what our conscience is

relating prior to the entertainment. Is there something about what we've heard or seen that brings discomfort? If so, it may be a signal to stay away from it. Second, consider the conscience during the entertainment. If we're already watching and listening, are we mentally and spiritually comfortable? If not, we may need to get away from it. Unfortunately, too often the tendency is to linger too long and in the process we find that what may have disturbed us previously is now taken for granted. Third, consider the conscience after the entertainment. Now that it's over, what are we thinking and feeling? We should be alert to what the Lord is showing us about what we have just made a part of our lives.

## **What Do Others Say?**

In addition to an awareness of the conscience, we may benefit from what others have to say. Perhaps the advertising will provide information that will prove to be of help before we decide to participate. Frequently ads will tell us things about the content and the intent of the producers. Also, we may find it beneficial to be alert to what friends may say. The things we hear from them may indicate warning signs, especially if they are Christian friends who are attempting to apply biblical principles to their lives. In addition, some objective critics can offer insightful comments. There are ministries around the country, for example, dedicated to analyzing the latest movies. And there are others that attempt to cover a broader spectrum of entertainment from a Christian perspective. You may benefit from subscribing to their publications.

Of course this encouragement to consider what others say cannot exempt us from personal responsibility. To rely completely on others is an unhealthy practice that can lead to mental and spiritual stagnation. Each of us must be mentally and spiritually alert to the content of entertainment.

## Isn't It "Just Entertainment"?

Maybe you've heard someone say, "It's just entertainment"! Is this true?

The principles we have affirmed can lead to several common objections. Our answers to these objections can help us gain additional insight into how we think about contemporary entertainment.

First, some may say that what has been shown in a movie or some other entertainment is "just reality." But is reality a legitimate guideline for living? Do we derive an "ought" from an "is"? Saying that reality has been portrayed says nothing about the way things ought to be from God's perspective. Reality needs analysis and it often needs correction.

Second, a common statement is, "I'm just killing time." The person who says this may be doing exactly that, but what else is being killed in the process? The Christian redeems time; he doesn't kill it. As Ephesians 5:15-16 states, "Be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil."

Third, "It won't affect me" is a common objection. Tragically, these can be the proverbial "famous last words" for some. Ted Bundy, a serial killer who was executed for his crimes, began to look at pornography when he was very young. If you had warned him of the potential consequences of his actions in those early years, he probably would have said it wouldn't affect him. We can't predict the outcome of our actions with absolute clarity. In addition, we may not recognize the consequences when they appear because we have been blinded subtly over a period of time.

Fourth, others may say, "There's nothing else to do." This is a sad commentary on contemporary life. If that is true, then God has done a poor job of supplying us with imagination.

Spending hours watching TV each day, for instance, says a great deal about our priorities and use of our God-given abilities and spiritual gifts.

Fifth, young people in particular tend to say, "Everybody's doing it." It is highly doubtful that is true. More importantly, though, we must understand that God's principles don't rely on democracy. We may be called to stand alone, as difficult as that may be. Sixth, some may say, "No one will know." Humanly, this is absurd. The person who says this knows. He's somebody, and he has to live with himself. And if he is a Christian his worldview informs him that God knows. Is he trying to please God or himself?

Seventh, "It's just entertainment" can be the response. No, it's not just entertainment. We can't afford to approach contemporary entertainment with the word just. There is too much at stake if we care about our minds, our witness, and our future.

So what should we do? Should we become separatists? No, the answer to the challenge of entertainment is not to seclude ourselves in "holy huddles" of legalism and cultural isolation. Should we become consumers? No, not without discernment. As we said in the beginning of this series, when it comes to entertainment, we should be as selective in that "grocery store of ideas" as we are in the food market. Should we become salt and light? Yes! We are to analyze entertainment with a Christian worldview, and we are to "infect" the world of entertainment with that same vision.

## Notes

1. Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1957), 419.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 428.

## Additional Reading

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# Hope For a World Gone Bad

“Give me your money,” snarled the young intruder. He climbed my staircase, brandishing a knife and flashlight. Noises in the basement had distracted my Sunday afternoon study. I investigated when the sounds persisted. On the way to the basement I came face to face with a menacing looking 20 year-old. Recognizing the danger, I gave him the dollar bill in my wallet, then opened drawers as he ordered. My eyes kept darting back to the flashing knife blade. He snatched a small plastic bag containing white detergent. “What’s this?” he demanded. “Laundry soap.” “No, it’s drugs,” he countered.

Perhaps he was on drugs or out for revenge and had the wrong house. I assured him I hadn’t stolen his truck. When he seemed convinced of his error, he became nervous, cut the kitchen phone line, and headed for the door, “Just don’t call the cops,” he pleaded. Then he fled.

On the phone to 911, my heart pounding, I described the invader. Reports, investigations, and questioning ensued. For the next several nights’ sleep was fitful. Reinforcing the doors helped increase feelings of security. So did the news that this criminal was captured and sentenced to three years in prison.

But if this could happen in my own home, what hope was there for genuine safety?

## FARAWAY THOUGHTS

The petite, fortyish woman sat in the imposing gray room with a high, ornate ceiling, her thumb toying with the ring on her left hand. Despite murmuring in the background, Melissa’s thoughts were far away in the past, 15 years earlier—her wedding day. Bright lights, festive flowers, and joyful friends filled the church. She felt secure seeing Tom’s smile



and welcoming gaze as she strode down the aisle. "Do you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife ... for as long as you both shall live?" asked the black-robed minister. "I do," replied Tom with confidence,

A tear meandered down her cheek. Suddenly everyone in the gray room rose as if something important were happening. The entrance of another black-robed man interrupted Melissa's daydream. She heard Tom's voice: "Your honor, I am convinced that this marriage cannot be saved. There is no hope of reconciliation."

No hope? she wondered. Does he think that our 15 years of life, work, children, promises, struggles and successes amounted to nothing?

With her dreams dashed, the possibility of more unrealized expectations loomed enormously painful, was anything worth hoping for anymore?

## **IMAGES OF OUR WORLD**

"Turning to international news we have some startling video to show you from Eastern Europe," intoned the television newscaster somberly. "We must warn you that the pictures you are about to see are quite graphic and, because of the violence they depict, may not be suitable for small children."

The screen fills with images of emaciated, shirtless men, apparently prisoners behind a barbed-wire fence. The despair on their faces haunts you. Next come scenes of what was an outdoor marketplace. A bomb had landed at midday, sending shredded canvas, shattered tables, bloodied limbs, and broken bodies everywhere. Then the scene switches to hot, tired, thirsty Caribbean refugees in overloaded rafts, bobbing in the ocean.

The TV images seem familiar by now and almost blend together. Where was that carnage and starvation? Somalia? Rwanda? Sudan?

South Africa?

A vulture stalks a starving infant. Middle Eastern children throw stones. Their relatives wield automatic weapons. Their leaders shake hands and hail peace on the White House lawn. Will it last? Might a terrorist state harvest a nuclear bomb?

Can peace come to these troubled nations? Agreements are signed and broken. Often chaos reigns. "The world has gone bad," you decide, "What hope is there of people ever getting along?"

There is a good chance that you or someone you know has been a crime victim. Marriage is supposed to last forever. Now divorce increasingly rips apart hearts and homes, and with prospects of international peace rising and falling like a refugee raft on a stormy sea, is there anything that can save us from destroying ourselves? Will a baby born into our world today live to reach adulthood?

## **HUNGRY FOR HOPE**

Two millennia ago a baby was born into a similarly troubled world. A foreign power occupied his parents' homeland. Poverty, greed, theft, and corruption were commonplace. Marriages faltered. Authorities ruled that a husband could divorce his wife simply for burning supper.

At the time of this baby's birth, people were hungry for hope. They wanted freedom from violence, family strife, and political uncertainty. They wanted the assurance that somebody loved and cared for them, that life counted for something, that they could muster the strength to face daily challenges at home and work.

Ironically, some saw hope in the birth of this particular baby. His mother, during her engagement, had become pregnant out of wedlock while strangely claiming to remain a virgin. Though he was born in a humble stable, learned leaders

traveled great distances to have the child as a king.

In his youth scholars marveled at his wisdom. In his thirties he began to publicly offer peace, freedom, purpose, inner strength, and hope to the masses. His message caught on.

A woman who had suffered five failed marriages found in his teaching “living water” to quench her spiritual and emotional thirst. A wealthy but corrupt government worker decided to give half of what he owned to the poor and repay fourfold those he had swindled. Hungry people were fed. Sick people became well.

The young man’s family thought he had flipped. His enemies plotted his demise and paid one of his followers to betray this innocent man. His closest friends deserted him. He was tried, convicted, sentenced, and executed. In agony during his execution he yelled out a quotation from one of his nation’s most revered ancient writers: “My God, my God. Why have you forsaken me?”[{1}](#) At that moment he felt very alone, perhaps even hopeless.

## **FORSAKEN**

Many crime victims feel forsaken by God. So do many divorced people, war prisoners, and starving refugees. But this young man’s cry of desperation carried added significance because of its historical allusion.

The words had appeared about a thousand years earlier in a song written by a king. The details of the song are remarkably similar to the suffering the young man endured. It said, “All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads .... They have pierced my hands and my feet.... They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.”[{2}](#)

Historians record precisely this behavior during the young man’s execution.[{3}](#) It was as if a divine drama were unfolding as the man slipped into death.

Researchers have uncovered more than 300 predictions or prophecies literally fulfilled in the life and death of this unique individual. Many of these statements written hundreds of years before his birth-were beyond his human control. One correctly foretold the place of his birth. {4} Another said he would be born of a virgin. {5} He would be preceded by a messenger who would prepare the way for his work, {6} He would enter the capital city as a king but riding on a donkeys back {7} He would be betrayed for thirty pieces of Silver, {8} pierced, {9} executed among thieves, {10} and yet, though wounded, {11} he would suffer no broken bones.{12}

Peter Stoner, a California mathematics professor, calculated the chance probability of just eight of these 300 prophecies coming true in one person. Using conservative estimates, Stoner concluded that the probability is 1 in 10 to the 17th power that those eight could be fulfilled by a fluke.

He says  $10^{17}$  silver dollars would cover the state of Texas two feet deep. Mark one coin with red fingernail polish. Stir the whole batch thoroughly. What chance would a blindfolded person have of picking the marked coin on the first try? One in  $10^{17}$ , the same chance that just eight of the 300 prophecies “just happened” to come true in this man, Jesus. {13}

In his dying cry from the cross Jesus reminded His hearers that His life and death precisely fulfilled God’s previously stated plan. According to the biblical perspective, at the moment of death Jesus experienced the equivalent of eternal separation from God in our place so that we might be forgiven and find new life.

He took the penalty due for all the crime, injustice, evil, sin, and shortcomings of the world-including yours and mine.

Though sinless Himself, He likely felt guilty and abandoned. Then-again in fulfillment of prophecy {14} and contrary to natural law-He came back to life. As somewhat of a skeptic I

investigated the evidence for Christ's resurrection and found it to be one of the best-attested facts in history. [{15}](#) To the seeker Jesus Christ offers true inner peace, forgiveness, purpose, and strength for contented living.

## SO WHAT?

"OK, great," you might say, "but what hope does this give the crime or divorce victim, the hungry and bleeding refugee, the citizen paralyzed by a world gone bad?" Will Jesus prevent every crime, reconcile every troubled marriage, restore every refugee, stop every war? No. God has given us free will. Suffering—even unjust suffering—is a necessary consequence of sin.

Sometimes God does intervene to change circumstances. (I'm glad my assailant became nervous and left.) Other times God gives those who believe in Him strength to endure and confidence that He will see them through. In the process, believers mature.

Most significantly we can hope in what He has told us about the future. Seeing how God has fulfilled prophecies in the past gives us confidence to believe those not yet fulfilled. Jesus promises eternal life to all who trust Him for it: "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."[{16}](#)

He promised He would return to rescue people from this dying planet.[{17}](#)

He will judge all evil.[{18}](#)

Finally justice will prevail. Those who have chosen to place their faith in Him will know true joy: "He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain."[{19}](#)

Does God intend that we ignore temporal evil and mentally float off into unrealistic ethereal bliss? Nor at all. God is in the business of working through people to turn hearts to Him, resolve conflicts, make peace. After my assailant went to prison, I felt motivated to tell him that I forgave him because of Christ. He apologized, saying he, too, has now come to believe in Jesus.

But through every trial, every injustice you suffer, you can know that God is your friend and that one day He will set things right. You can know that He is still on the throne of the universe and that He cares for you. You can know this because His Son was born (Christmas is, of course, a celebration of His birth), lived, died, and came back to life in fulfillment of prophecy. Because of Jesus, if you personally receive His free gift of forgiveness, you can have hope!

Will you trust Him?

## Notes

1. Matthew 27:46.
2. Psalm 22.
3. Matthew 27:35-44; John 20:25.
4. Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:1.
5. Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18, 24-25; Luke 1:26-35.
6. Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 3:1-2.
7. Zechariah 9:9; John 12:15; Matthew 21: 1-9.
8. Zechariah 11:12; Matthew 26:15.
9. Zechariah 12:10; John 19:34, 37.
10. Isaiah 53:12.
11. Matthew 27:38; Isaiah 53:5; Zechariah 13:6; Matthew 27:26.
12. Psalm 34:20; John 19:33, 36.
13. Peter Stoner, *Science Speaks*, pp. 99-112.
14. Psalm 6:10; Acts 2:31-32.
15. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, pp. 185-273.

16. John 5:24.
17. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.
18. Revelation 20:10-15.
19. Revelation 21:4 NAS.

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## Rock Music

Many years ago now, my daughter and one of her best friends returned from their first “solo” trip to the local shopping center. They went into her bedroom, and soon I was hearing some unusual sounds. I listened more intently and eventually realized they had bought a 45-rpm recording of one of the popular songs of that year. Since I believed that my daughter and her friend were embarking on a new musical adventure, I thought it would be appropriate to investigate what was taking place.

To begin, I asked if they would mind if I also listened to the song. Then I asked to see the record jacket, which they handed to me. After listening to the lyrics of the first side, it became apparent that we were listening to a song about sexual promiscuity. In addition, the record jacket demonstrated that the singer agreed with her message. As we began to discuss what I heard and saw, it was obvious that a sensitive nerve had been touched. They were not exactly pleased with what I was saying. They did not share my perspective. After much talk and emotional wrangling (and a happy ending, I might add), I concluded that this scene is probably duplicated many times in Christian homes around the world. With the memory of this experience embedded in my mind, I began to look into the world

of contemporary music, and “rock” in particular.

Perhaps you have had a similar experience. Or perhaps you have heard or read statements concerning rock music from a variety of sources. The subject does not seem to lose its appeal with time. Christians have debated it for decades. Many have strong opinions and emotions about it, both pro and con.

As is true with many contemporary issues, it is very easy to take a generalized, extreme position on the subject of rock music. Some Christians say that we should reject all music found under the label of “rock” because there is something inherently evil in the medium. Others may not see that there are legitimate reasons for being concerned about rock. Christians should not take either of these positions. Rather, we should accept the sometimes-difficult challenge to be discerners. This applies to all the arts, including rock. But if we believe that all truth is of God, we should not let difficulties deter us from being honest with what we hear. Randall Petersen addresses this:

*The task for the Christian, as always, is discernment. What can we find in this pile of culture that Jesus likes? Remember, Jesus walked this beat. The Lord of music climbed through this pile inspiring children’s shouts and making crippled people dance for joy. He can help us sort through our society.(1)*

The task not only applies to rock music but to all the issues that confront us.

There are many biblical examples of discernment, but first we must understand the principle that all truth is of God. To quote Arthur Holmes:

*If God is the eternal and all-wise creator of all things, as Christians affirm, then his creative wisdom is the source and norm of all truth about everything. And if God and his wisdom*



*are unchangingly the same, then truth is likewise unchanging and thus universal.(2)*

As a result, truth can be found in many spheres of life other than the religious or peculiarly Christian community. Although this is not found in the Bible in a verse that can be quoted per se, it is implied throughout the Scriptures.

## **Discernment**

Once we grasp the principle that all truth is of God, we can then see that verses such as Heb. 5:14 and Phil. 4:8 apply very well to our discussion of rock music. The writer of Hebrews states, "Solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil" (NASB). We should be about the business of "training our senses." Otherwise, we will often accept falsehoods while rejecting the truth that is a part of many things that are not aligned under a "Christian" banner. In Phil. 4:8, Paul enumerates several ethical principles, including, "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." Then he states that we should let our minds "dwell on these things." Look at the world around you. If you find something worth keeping, keep it. If it needs to be discarded, discard it. And of course this also applies to rock music.

Kenneth Petersen has put it more graphically by stating that "we shouldn't be afraid to be selective—to pluck diamonds out of the mud." (3) Yes, there is a great deal of mud in this world. Yes, a lot of that mud is found in rock music, just as it is in all art and entertainment. As a result, we are faced with two options as believers. We can reject all art and entertainment, or we can responsibly practice discernment in our culture. The former can lead to stagnation and ineffectiveness; the latter can challenge the world with a

bold and positive witness. Our culture needs the “salt” and “light” we can offer. It needs the impact of redeemed minds.

In the preface to the *Wittenberg Gesangbuch* of 1524, Martin Luther shared thoughts about music that are still appropriate.

*I wish that the young men might have something to rid them of their love ditties and wanton songs and might instead of these learn wholesome things and thus yield willingly to the good; also, because I am not of the opinion that all the arts shall be crushed to earth and perish through the Gospel, as some bigoted persons pretend, but would willingly see them all, and especially music, servants of Him who gave and created them.(4)*

Luther’s comments are applicable to the subject of rock. But why should we share Luther’s concern for the arts, particularly music?

The first answer to this question is that God carries out His purposes in time and history. He may be “needling” us through contemporary music; He may be challenging us to be alert to the crucial issues and questions of our time that can be heard in much rock music.

Second, rock can tell us how a significant portion of our culture thinks. The answers, or lack of answers, that rock musicians give to their own questions ring true in the minds of millions of listeners.

Third, we can be sympathetic with many of the subjects found in rock. The difference is that often these musicians provide insights that are not of the Lord. Fourth, rock musicians are image-makers more often than not. They present a facade that is very attractive to adolescents. We need to analyze these images, which can be so powerful in the lives of our children, and react biblically.

We are often guilty of living in “Christian ghettos.” We may understand each other, but we don’t understand our culture, and our culture doesn’t understand us. In the New Testament we see that Jews and Gentiles were approached differently because their presuppositions were different. They were speaking different religious and philosophical languages. Today we are faced with the same task. If we are to communicate with our culture, we need to hear what it is saying. We need to see and hear the world views. We need to react as Paul did in Athens (Acts 17). We need to be discerners.

## **Steps Toward Discernment**

Discernment is the key, but how can we become discerners of rock music? Four simple categories will help us arrange our thoughts.

First, there is good music with a good message. This is the ideal combination. The music is of quality, and the message is true. We should all strive to hear and create this unity.

Second, we often hear good music with a bad message. The music may be of quality, but the message is false or misleading.

Third, bad music with a good message can creep into our listening habits. The quality of the music is poor, but the message is true. This category can be used to describe much of what is called “contemporary Christian music.”

The fourth is bad music with a bad message. This combination is more blatant in its degradation than are numbers two and three, but it is often more honest. For example, much of what is called “hard core” or “underground” is not presented as a well-done musical statement, and it is honest in its perception of a world gone wrong. The tragedy is that the perceptions are often false and the music is usually not worth a second hearing.

With these categories in mind we can now consider four steps

toward becoming discerners of rock music. The first step is to realize that all truth is of God and begin to incorporate this principle in our lives. As Marajen Denman has said, "Truth is truth, no matter who sings it."(5)

The second step is to **stop!** Stop what you are doing long enough to concentrate on what is being said through the music. Most of us, especially adolescents who spend so much time with rock as a companion, probably need to be more aware of the power of ideas. This can only be done if we take the time to concentrate.

The third step is to **listen!** Listen carefully to the message of the music. This especially applies to those young people who listen to certain songs or albums repetitively.

The fourth step is to **look!** Look at how the music affects your life in terms of such things as thoughts, physical tension and sensuality. It may help to encourage a teenager to ask himself a series of questions, such as, Where am I getting these rebellious ideas? Where am I getting these sexual fantasies? Why am I tempted to reject what I know to be true? Why am I depressed so much of the time? Why does the future look so hopeless?, etc. These four steps may take some time, but in most cases the effort brings reward.

Before we discuss the music and its messages, it is important to realize that rock music is as much a cultural phenomenon as it is a musical one. It is a source of personal and corporate identification. Many young people look to rock for more than music. They seek to identify themselves with a unique generation. It helps them declare their independence.

In fact, rock shares in the unique historical development of the idea of adolescence, which is much more recent than most of us realize. Adolescence has come to symbolize an attitude, a distinctiveness, a rite of passage espoused by millions of teens. While reflecting on the impact of rock concerts, the

writers of *Dancing in the Dark*, an excellent study of youth culture, state:

*Whatever else rock might be . . . a concert makes it clear that rock is a dramatic participatory anthem of teen life, freighted with the intense experience of what teens believe, feel, value, and do. Rock is at once a barometer of teen experience and the very weather they inhabit, at once the celebration of an ethos and the ethos itself.(6)*

An objective awareness of this ethos can lead us to more constructive dialogue concerning rock, especially with our own children. Rock is a major cultural force and has been since its inception. Millions have and will continue to identify with it at various times during their lives. If we don't realize this, the lines of communication are quickly broken. It is not enough to say, "Turn off that noise!" Like it or not, we must approach our children with the understanding that it's not just the music that attracts them. They need to be led to understand *whose* they are in Jesus Christ, and not just *who* they are within the scope of adolescent culture.

## **Musical Ingredients**

The musical ingredients of rock music have been the focus of rapt attention among Christians for many years. Some have attacked rock based upon supposed evils within the music itself. These attacks are misdirected. For example, many of us can remember debates concerning the use of certain instruments, such as guitars and drums, in worship. It was believed that there was something very wrong, if not evil, about using such instruments. With a few exceptions, this concern has been rightfully rejected.

Besides such instruments, the nature of the rock rhythm has been called into question and has sometimes been the subject of fierce arguments. The basic syncopation of rock, which is

usually in 4/4 time with an accent on the second and fourth beats, is not evil. It is often boring and uncreative, but it is not evil. Some groups experiment with assorted meters and chord progressions, but the majority of rock bands incorporate this basic rhythm. If there is a problem with rock, it is not to be found here.

Rock almost always has a message. The human voice is used to sing about something. Of course no one would claim there is something evil about the human voice. The message that is communicated can be cause for concern, but the voice itself is not the problem.

So rock music basically consists of certain instruments— such as guitars, keyboards, and percussion—a particular rhythm, and the human voice. And none of these is evil. People can be evil, and people abuse rock music, just as they abuse all parts of life. Our sin nature is actively involved in desecrating everything.

This desecration can best be seen in the lyrical content of the songs. We have come a long way from the inane “do-wa-diddies” of early rock history. It is at this point that those in the Christian community are challenged the most. The music alone may be of quality, but the message may be totally in opposition to a Christian worldview. A decision is required. Do I continue to listen, even though the message is awful? Or do I decide to reject it because of the message, even though I like the music?

Unfortunately, the well-worn statement, “I only listen to the beat!” is simply not true. If they are honest, most people who have heard a rock song several times can sing the lyrics upon request. When you consider the fact that most popular songs are heard dozens, if not hundreds, of times, it is not difficult to understand how the messages are embedded. The lyrics come through; we can’t escape that. This does not necessarily mean we always listen and think to the point of

really considering what the messages have to say, and that is exactly part of the problem. The lyrics can be subtly incorporated into our thoughts simply because we haven't stopped long enough to sort them out.

## **Common Themes**

As we listen to the messages of rock, we find that several themes appear. One of these is nihilism and its accompanying despair. Evidently large segments of our youth population are willing to pay to hear that the world is falling apart.

Hedonism is another theme. Sexual emphases, in particular, have long been staples of rock's lyrical content. Rebellion and violence are also prominent subjects. These can be found especially in rap, hard core, and heavy metal. Drugs, including alcohol, are also touted in some songs, although their glorification is not as prominent as in the past. Occasionally some groups will toy with occultic and satanic themes, but most of these are simply trying to sell recordings by attracting the curiosity of teens. These themes are by no means complete. The list of subjects would cover virtually everything imaginable, but these are the more prominent ones.

## **Parent/Child Communication**

Since this subject is too often the focus of intense arguments in the home, the following steps can help to alleviate the problem.

1. Pray over the issue together in order to make a dedicated effort to communicate.
2. Discuss the subject—don't scream about it.
3. Examine yourself to determine if you are acting hypocritically. For example, a parent should not scream at the child about rock and then turn on the latest country songs, which often deal with the same subjects that are found in rock.

4. The parent(s) should honestly seek to spend some time listening to the child's recordings. The child should honestly seek to go beyond the beat/sound in order to hear and see what is being emphasized.
5. The parent can turn on a rock station while driving to/from work.
6. The child can begin to be much more selective about when she listens to the music. The process of discernment cannot take place very easily if there is always something taking place while the music is heard.
7. Take some time to visit the local department or record store.
8. Visit the local library and check out any number of books on rock music. In fact, "topical bibles" of rock music are available. Pick the subject, and the book will lead you to the songs that deal with the subject.
9. The latest issues of various trade magazines can be read in the local library or purchased in some grocery stores or book stores. Some of the magazines print the lyrics of the latest songs.

When children see that parents are genuinely interested, they will often begin to respond positively to what is said. Challenge them to make a decision, but don't make it for them. Discernment, coupled with an attitude that is saturated in patience, will go a long way toward helping a young person make Christ-centered decisions that will last a lifetime.

Decisions are in order for many people. Perhaps some will find it necessary to "clean the closet" because of prior saturation in rock. Others need to be more discerning. But a rejection of rock and the wholesale acceptance of another form is not the answer. As soon as that takes place, the thinking process has stopped. All of one has been substituted for all of another. For instance, if we put gospel music in the place of rock without thinking about what we hear, we can be in danger of



accepting poor theology, if not heresy, on occasion. Each song, each piece of music should be judged on its own merit. No single artist can be accepted without thought. No single style can be accepted without thought. We are responsible to stop, listen, and look at all that we hear.

#### Notes

(1) J. Randall Petersen, "John Lennon, Rock Music, and American Culture," *Evangelical Newsletter*, 20 March 1981.

(2) Arthur F. Holmes, *All Truth Is God's Truth* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1977), 8.

(3) Kenneth W. Petersen, "Confronting the Sounds of Culture," *Evangelical Newsletter*, 30 MAY 1980.

(4) Quoted by Francis Schaeffer in *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1976), 90.

(5) Marajen Denman, "What's Music to Your Ears?" *Worldwide Challenge*, February 1983, 8.

(6) Quentin J. Schultze, et al., *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture, and the Electronic Media* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 148.

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## Music and the Christian

*Jerry Solomon encourages Christians to begin to think about the place and influence of music in their lives.*



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

Music is a pervasive part of contemporary culture. We hear it on elevators, in restaurants, on telephones while we wait for our party to answer, in offices, in hotel lobbies, and in virtually every corner of contemporary life. In fact, it permeates the airwaves so thoroughly we often do not realize it is there. Television uses music not only in musical programs but also in commercials and program soundtracks. Movies also utilize music to enhance the events shown on the screen. Radio offers a wide variety of music around the clock. The availability of recordings allows us to program music to suit our own listening tastes, and we can hear them in virtually any location. Concerts, especially in large cities, offer a potpourri of music to choose from.

There is also a wide variety of musical genres. Rock (with its assortment of styles and labels), rap, country and western, jazz, Broadway, folk, classical, New Age, and gospel provide us with a dizzying assortment of listening and performing options. Such permeation and variety provide us with a unique opportunity to practice discernment. Some may think this is unnecessary because they claim to listen only to "Christian" music. Nevertheless, the broader population of the evangelical community spends innumerable hours absorbing music, whether "Christian" or "secular."

Why should a Christian be interested and involved in the arts, music in particular? In his excellent work *Theology and Contemporary Art Forms*, John Newport lists several helpful points:

The first reason Christians should be interested in the arts is related to the biblical teaching that God reveals and carries on his redemptive purpose in time and history. The Christian community ...cannot cut itself off from the characteristic artistic vitalities of history—past and present. Second...the arts give a peculiarly direct access to the distinctive tone, concerns, and feelings of a culture... The artists not only mirror their age in its subtlest nuances,

but they generally do it a generation ahead of more abstract and theoretical thinkers. Third...the arts focus (in a remarkably vivid and startling way) on the vital issues and themes which are the central concern of theology. Fourth...the arts spell out dramatically the implications of various worldviews.(1)

The second, third, and fourth points are especially applicable to music. If music mirrors culture, if it tells us of important issues and themes; and if it shows the implications of various worldviews, it can tell us a great deal about our culture. Lyrically, music can be used as a medium for criticism, commendation, reflection, questioning, rebellion, and any number of other thoughts or emotions. When the musical language is employed to relay these thoughts or emotions the result can be significant.

History is replete with examples of the ways music has been vitally employed in various cultures. One of the more prominent examples of this can be found in the Psalms, where lyrics were merged with music to form a strategic voice for Israel's life. The same is true in contemporary life. The themes of rock, rap, and country music demonstrate how music can be a notable voice for the spirit of a culture, whether for good or evil.

In order to affect our culture we must listen to that voice. We must hear its questions and be sensitive to the needs that cry out for the answers God provides.

## **Can Music Be “Christian”?**

One of the continuing debates among evangelicals centers on how music is to be judged. Some say there is a particular musical style that is distinctly Christian. Others reject such a proposition. Some believe that certain musical styles are intrinsically evil. Others reject this. The examples of such conflict are numerous. It is important that we join the

dialogue. In the process we will observe several ways we should respond to the music of our culture.

First, the term "Christian music" is a misnomer. Music cannot be declared Christian because of particular ingredients. There is no special Christian musical vocabulary. There is no distinctive sound that makes a piece of music Christian. The only part of a composition that can make it Christian is the lyrics. In view of the fact that such phrases as "contemporary Christian music" are in vogue, this is a meaningful observation. Perhaps the phrase "contemporary Christian lyrics" would be more appropriate. Of course, the lyrics may be suspect doctrinally and ethically, and they may be of poor quality, but my point is concentrated on the musical content.

It is possible that misunderstandings regarding "Christian music" are the product of cultural bias. Our "western ears" are accustomed to certain sounds. Particular modes, scales, and rhythms are part of a rich musical heritage. When we hear music that is not part of that heritage we are tempted to label it, inaccurately, as unfit for a Christian's musical life.

We should realize that music is best understood within its culture. For example, the classical music of India includes quarter tones, which are foreign to our ears. They generally sound very strange to us, and they are often played on instruments that have a strange sound, such as the sitar. But we would be guilty of flagrant prejudice if we were to maintain that such music is un-Christian because it does not contain the tones we are used to hearing. Another example of the way evangelicals tend to misapply the term Christian to music can be understood by reflecting on how music may have sounded during biblical and church history. Scholars have begun to demonstrate that the music of biblical history may have been comprised of tonal and rhythmic qualities that were very different from what we are accustomed to in western culture.

The attitudes of Luther and Calvin toward the use of music show a disagreement concerning the truth of a particular Christian style. Charles Garside provides intriguing insights:

Luther had openly proclaimed his desire to use all available music, including the most obviously secular, for the worship of the church. . . . Calvin, to the contrary, now absolutely rejects such a deployment of existing musical resources.(2)

It is obvious that these great men did not agree on the nature of music.

Our musical preconceptions do not die easily, and they seem to recur periodically in church history. Once a style becomes familiar enough, it is accepted. Until then, it is suspect. More recent examples can be found in the controversies surrounding the use of instruments such as drums and guitars during worship services. Evangelicals need to be alert to their biases and understand that “Christian music” is a misnomer.

## **The “Power” of Music**

It is often claimed that music has “power” to manipulate and control us. If this were true, Skinnerian determinism would be correct in asserting that there is no such thing as personal choice or responsibility. Music, along with other “powers” found in our cultural settings, would be given credit that is not legitimate.

Best and Huttar address this by saying:

The fact that music, among other created and cultural things, is purported by primitives and sophisticates alike to have power is more a matter of the dislocation of priorities than anything else.(3)

Such beliefs not only stimulate a “dislocation of priorities,” they also stimulate poor theology.

The Bible tells us that early in their relationship David played music for King Saul. On one occasion what Saul heard soothed him, and on another occasion the same sounds infuriated him. In reality, though, the reactions were Saul's decisions. He was not passive; he was not being manipulated on either occasion by the "power" of the music.

Much contemporary thinking places the blame for aberrant behavior (sexual misconduct, rebellion, violence, etc.) on the supposed intrinsic potency of music to orchestrate our actions. Some extend this to the point of believing that music is the special tool of Satan, so when such behavior is exhibited he is the culprit. Again, Best and Huttar offer pertinent thoughts. They write:

Ultimately the Judeo-Christian perspective maintains that man is interiorly wrong and that until he is right he will place the blame for his condition outside himself.(4)

Admittedly, my point is a subtle one. We must be careful not to imply music cannot be used for evil purposes. But we must realize that the devil goads people who use music; he does not empower the music itself.

Current controversy among Christians concerning the rhythmic content of rock music is an example of the tendency to believe that some musical styles are intrinsically evil. For example, Steve Lawhead has demonstrated that the music of the early slaves probably did not include much rhythmic substance at all. The plantation owners would not have allowed drums because they could have been used to relay messages of revolt between the groups of slaves. This observation is central to the issue of rock music, because some assert that the syncopated rhythm of rock is the product of the pagan African backgrounds of the slaves. In reality, American slave music centered around the playing of a "banya," an instrument akin to the banjo, and not drums or other rhythmic instruments.(5)

Rock music is not intrinsically evil. It did not originate in a pagan past, and even if it did that would not mean that it is evil. Nevertheless, since it has been a prominent and influential part of American culture for several decades, it demands the attention of evangelicals. The attention it is given should begin with the understanding that the problems that are a part of rock do not reside in the music itself; they reside in sinful people who can and often do abuse it. The same can be said about any musical style, or any other art form.

## **The Quality of Music**

So far I have asserted two propositions concerning how Christians can respond to the music of their culture: the term Christian music is a misnomer, and no musical style is intrinsically evil. While both of these statements are true, they say nothing about the quality of music we choose to make a part of our lives. Thus my third proposition is that music should be evaluated based on quality. A proposal that includes judgments of quality is a challenging one. Evangelicals will find this especially difficult, because the subject of aesthetics is not a prevalent part of our heritage.

Evangelicals tend toward lazy thinking when it comes to analyzing the music of their culture. As Frank Gaebeline said, "It is more difficult to be thoughtfully discriminating than to fall back upon sweeping generalization."<sup>(6)</sup> There are several factors to be weighed if discriminating thought is to occur.

We should focus attention on the music within Christian life. This applies not only to music used in worship, but also to music heard via radio, CDs, concerts, and other sources.

Lack of quality is one of the themes of those who write about contemporary church music. Harold Best states: "Contentment with mediocrity as a would-be carrier of truth looms as a

major hindrance to true creative vision among evangelicals.”(7) Robert Elmore continues in a similar vein:

*There are even ministers who feed their congregations with the strong meat of the Word and at the same time surround their preaching with only the skimmed milk of music.(8)*

If negative declarations such as these are the consensus of those who have devoted ardent attention to the subject, what are the contents of a positive model? The answers to this are numerous. I will only relate some of the insights of one thinker, Calvin Johansson.

The first insight refers to movement. Music must move:

The principle here is that music needs to exhibit a flow, an overall feel for continuity, that moves progressively and irresistibly from beginning to end. It is not intended to hammer and drive a musical pulse into the mind.

This principle can be applied to the incessant nature of the rock rhythm we have previously discussed. The second insight has to do with cohesion:

Unity is an organic pull, a felt quality that permeates a composition so thoroughly that every part, no matter how small, is related.

The third insight relates to “diversions at various levels... Without diversity there would only be sameness, a quality that would be not only boring but also devastatingly static.”

The fourth insight focuses on “the principle of dominance... A certain hierarchy of values is adopted by the composer in which more important features are set against the less important.” The fifth insight shows that “every component part of a composition needs to have intrinsic worth in and of itself... The music demonstrates truth as each part of the composition has self-worth.”(9)



These principles contain ideas that the non-musician might find difficult to understand. Indeed, most of us are not accustomed to using language to discuss the quality of the music we hear other than to say we do or do not “like” it. But if we are going to assess the music of the broader culture accurately, we must be able to use such language to assess music within our own subculture. We must seek quality there.

## **Pop Music**

Another factor in musical discrimination applies to the way we approach music outside our subculture. The Christian is free to enter culture equipped with discernment, and this certainly applies to music. We need not fear the music of our culture, but we must exercise caution.

Assessments of quality also apply here. The Christian should use the principles we discussed above to evaluate the music of the broader culture.

We should also be aware of the blending of music and message, or lack of it. The ideal situation occurs when both the medium and the message agree.

Too often the music we hear conveys a message at the expense of musical quality. Best explains:

The kind of mass communication on which the media subsist depends on two things: a minimal creative element and a perspective that sees music only as conveying a message rather than being a message. Viewed as a carrier, music tends to be reduced to a format equated with entertainment. The greater the exposure desired, the lower the common denominator.(10)

The messages of our culture are perhaps voiced most strongly and clearly through music that is subordinated to those messages. The music is “canned.” It is the product of cliches and “hooks” designed to bring instant response from the

listener. As Erik Routley stated, "All music which self-consciously adopts a style is like a person who puts on airs. It is affected and overbearing."(11) This condition is so prevalent in contemporary music it cannot be overemphasized.

Another concern is found in certain features of what is usually called "popular culture." Music is a major part of pop culture. Kenneth Myers, among others, has identified certain culture types beginning with "high," diminishing to "folk," and plummeting to "popular." Popular culture "has some serious liabilities that it has inherited from its origins in distinctively modern, secularized movements." Generally, these liabilities include "the quest for novelty, and the desire for instant gratification."(12) In turn, these same qualities are found in "pop" music.

The quest for novelty is apparent when we understand, as Steve Lawhead states, that the whole system feeds on the "new"—new faces, new gimmicks, new sounds. Yesterday in pop music is not only dead; it is ancient history.(13)

The desire for instant gratification is the result of the fact that this type of music is normally produced for commercial reasons. Continuing, Lawhead writes that

...commercialism, the effective selling of products, governs every aspect of the popular music industry. From a purely business point of view, it makes perfect sense to shift the focus from artistic integrity to some other less rigorous and more easily managed, non artistic component, such as newness or novelty. Talent and technical virtuosity take time to develop, and any industry dependent upon a never-ending stream of fresh faces cannot wait for talent to emerge.(14)

We do not offer God our best when we employ this approach. Additionally, we do not honor God when we make the products of such thinking a consistent part of our lives.

## Notes

1. John P. Newport, *Theology and Contemporary Art Forms* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1971), 17-24.
2. Charles Garside, Jr., *The Origins of Calvin's Theology of Music: 1536-1543* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1979), 19.
3. Zondervan Pictorial Dictionary, s.v. "Music," by Harold M. Best and David Huttar.
4. Ibid.
5. Steve Lawhead, *Rock of This Age* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1987), 51-52.
6. Frank E. Gaebelien, "The Christian and Music," in *The Christian Imagination: Essays on Literature and the Arts*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), 446.
7. Harold M. Best, "Christian Responsibility in Music," in *The Christian Imagination*, 402.
8. Robert Elmore, "The Place of Music in Christian Life," in *The Christian Imagination*, 430.
9. Calvin M. Johansson, *Music and Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1984), 93-95.
10. Ibid., 412-13.
11. Erik Routley, *Church Music and the Christian Faith*, (Carol Stream, Ill.: Agape, 1978), 89.
12. Kenneth Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1989), 59-64.
13. Steve Lawhead, *Turn Back the Night: A Christian Response to Popular Culture* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1978), 97.
14. Ibid., 98.

# Christianity and Culture

At the close of the twentieth century American evangelicals find themselves in a diverse, pluralistic culture. Many ideas vie for attention and allegiance. These ideas, philosophies, or world views are the products of philosophical and cultural changes. Such changes have come to define our culture. For example, pluralism can mean that all world views are correct and that it is intolerable to state otherwise; secularism reigns; absolutes have ceased to exist; facts can only be stated in the realm of science, not religion; evangelical Christianity has become nothing more than a troublesome oddity amidst diversity. It is clear, therefore, that western culture is suffering; it is ill. Lesslie Newbigin, a scholar and former missionary to India, has emphasized this by asking a provocative question: "Can the West be converted?"(1)

Such a question leads us to another: How is a Christian supposed to respond to such conditions? Or, how should we deal with the culture that surrounds us?

Since the term *culture* is central in this discussion, it deserves particular attention and definition. Even though the concept behind the word is ancient, and it is used frequently in many different contexts, its actual meaning is elusive and often confusing. *Culture* does not refer to a particular level of life. This level, sometimes referred to as "high culture," is certainly an integral part of the definition, but it is not the central focus. For example, "the arts" are frequently identified with culture in the minds of many. More often than not there is a qualitative difference between what is a part of "high culture" and other segments of culture, but these distinctions are not our concern at this time.

T. S. Eliot has written that culture "may . . . be described simply as that which makes life worth living."(2) Emil Brunner, a theologian, has stated "that culture is

materialisation of meaning.”(3) Donald Bloesch, another theologian, says that culture “is the task appointed to humans to realize their destiny in the world in service to the glory of God.”(4) An anthropologist, E. Adamson Hoebel, believes that culture “is the integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the result of biological inheritance.”(5) All of these definitions can be combined to include the world views, actions, and products of a given community of people.

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. Harry Blamires writes: “No thoughtful Christian can contemplate and analyze the tensions all about us in both public and private life without sensing the eternal momentousness of the current struggle for the human mind between Christian teaching and materialistic secularism.”(6)

Believers are called to join the struggle. But in order to struggle meaningfully and with some hope of influencing our culture, we must be informed and thoughtful Christians. There is no room for sloth or apathy. Rev. 3:15-16 states, “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I spit you out of My mouth.”

God forbid that these words of condemnation should apply to us.

## **Transforming Culture**

Church history demonstrates that one of the constant struggles of Christianity, both individually and corporately, is with culture. Where should we stand? Inside the culture? Outside? Ignore it? Isolate ourselves from it? Should we try to transform it?

The theologian Richard Niebuhr provided a classic study concerning these questions in his book *Christ and Culture*. Even though his theology is not always evangelical, his paradigm is helpful. It includes five views.

First, he describes the "Christ Against Culture" view, which encourages opposition, total separation, and hostility toward culture. Tertullian, Tolstoy, Menno Simons, and, in our day, Jacques Ellul are exponents of this position.

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. Liberation, process, and feminist theologies are current examples.

Third, the "Christ Above Culture" position attempts "to correlate the fundamental questions of the culture with the answer of Christian revelation."<sup>(7)</sup> Thomas Aquinas is the most prominent teacher of this view.

Fourth, "Christ and Culture in Paradox" describes the "dualists" who stress that the Christian belongs "to two realms (the spiritual and temporal) and must live in the tension of fulfilling responsibilities to both."<sup>(8)</sup> Luther adopted this view.

Fifth, "Christ the Transformer of Culture" includes the "conversionists" who attempt "to convert the values and goals of secular culture into the service of the kingdom of God."<sup>(9)</sup> Augustine, Calvin, John Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards are the chief proponents of this last view.

With the understanding that we are utilizing a tool and not a perfected system, I believe that the "Christ the Transformer of Culture" view aligns most closely with Scripture. We are to be actively involved in the transformation of culture without giving that culture undue prominence. As the social critic Herbert Schlossberg says, "The 'salt' of people changed by the

gospel must change the world.”(10) Admittedly, such a perspective calls for an alertness and sensitivity to subtle dangers. But the effort is needed to follow the biblical pattern.

If we are to be transformers, we must also be “discerners,” a very important word for contemporary Christians. We are to apply “the faculty of discerning; discrimination; acuteness of judgment and understanding.”(11) Matthew 16:3 includes a penetrating question from Jesus to the Pharisees and Sadducees who were testing Him by asking for a sign from heaven: “Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot *discern* the signs of the times?” It is obvious that Jesus was disheartened by their lack of discernment. If they were alert, they could see that the Lord was demonstrating and would demonstrate (in v. 4 He refers to impending resurrection) His claims. Jesus’ question is still relevant. We too must be alert and able to discern our times.

In order to transform the culture, we must continually recognize what is in need of transformation and what is not. This is a difficult assignment. We cannot afford to approach the responsibility without the guidance of God’s Spirit, Word, wisdom, and power. As the theologian John Baille has said, “In proportion as a society relaxes its hold upon the eternal, it ensures the corruption of the temporal.”(12) May we live in our temporal setting with a firm grasp of God’s eternal claims while we transform the culture he has entrusted to us!

## **Stewardship and Creativity**

An important aspect of our discussion of Christians and culture is centered in the early passages of the Bible.

The first two chapters of Genesis provide a foundation for God’s view of culture and man’s responsibility in it. These chapters contain what is generally called the “cultural mandate,” God’s instructions concerning the care of His

creation. Included in this are the concepts of “stewardship” and “creativity.”

The mandate of stewardship is specifically found within 1:27-28 and 2:15, even though these two chapters as a whole also demonstrate it. Verse 28 of chapter 1 reads, “And God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

This verse contains the word *subdue*, an expression that is helpful in determining the mandate of stewardship. First, it should be observed that man is created “in the image of God.” Volumes have been written about the meaning of this phrase. Obviously, it is a very positive statement. If man is created in God’s image, that image must contain God’s benevolent goodness, and not maliciousness. Second, it is obvious that God’s created order includes industriousness, work—a striving on the part of man. Thus we are to exercise our minds and bodies in service to God by “subduing,” observing, touching, and molding the “stuff” of creation. We are to form a culture.

Tragically, because of sin, man abused his stewardship. We are now in a struggle that was not originally intended. But the redeemed person, the person in Christ, is refashioned. He can now approach culture with a clearer understanding of God’s mandate. He can now begin again to exercise proper stewardship.

The mandate concerning creativity is broadly implied within the first two chapters of Genesis. It is not an emphatic pronouncement, as is the mandate concerning stewardship. In reality, the term is a misnomer, for we cannot *create* anything. We can only redesign, rearrange, or refashion what God has created. But in this discussion we will continue to use the word with this understanding in mind.



A return to the opening chapter of Genesis leads us to an intriguing question. Of what does the "image of God" consist? It is interesting to note, as did the British writer Dorothy Sayers, that if one stops with the first chapter and asks that question, the apparent answer is that God is creator.(13) Thus, some element of that creativity is instilled in man. God created the cosmos. He declared that what He had done was "very good." He then put man within creation. Man responded creatively. He was able to see things with aesthetic judgment (2:9). His cultivation of the garden involved creativity, not monotonous servitude (2:15). He creatively assigned names to the animals (2:19-20). And he was able to respond with poetic expression upon seeing Eve, his help-mate (2:23). Kenneth Myers writes: "Man was fit for the cultural mandate. As the bearer of his Creator-God's image, he could not be satisfied apart from cultural activity. Here is the origin of human culture in untainted glory and possibility. It is no wonder that those who see God's redemption as a transformation of human culture speak of it in terms of re-creation."(14)

As we seek to transform culture we must understand this mandate and apply it.

## **Pluralism**

*Pluralism* and *secularism* are two prominent words that describe contemporary American culture. The Christian must live within a culture that emphasizes these terms. What do they mean and how do we respond? We will look at pluralism first.

The first sentence of professor Allan Bloom's provocative and controversial book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, reads: "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative."(15)

This statement is indicative of Bloom's concern for the fact that many college students do not believe in absolutes, but

the concern goes beyond students to the broader population. *Relativism, openness, syncretism, and tolerance* are some of the more descriptive words for the ways people are increasingly thinking in contemporary culture. These words are part of what I mean by *pluralism*. Many ideas are proclaimed, as has always been the case, but the type of pluralism to which I refer asserts that all these ideas are of equal value, and that it is intolerant to think otherwise. Absurdity is the result. This is especially apparent in the realm of religious thought.

In order for evangelicals to be transformers of culture they must understand that their beliefs will be viewed by a significant portion of the culture as intolerant, antiquated, uncompassionate, and destructive of the status quo. As a result, they will often be persecuted through ridicule, prejudice, social ostracism, academic intolerance, media bias, or a number of other attitudes. Just as with Bloom's statement, the evangelical's emphasis on absolutes is enough to draw a negative response. For example, Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6). Such an exclusive, absolute claim does not fit current pluralism. Therefore, the pluralist would contend that Jesus must have meant something other than what is implied in such an egocentric statement.

It is unfortunate that Christians often have been absorbed by pluralism. As Harry Blamires puts it, "We have stopped thinking christianly outside the scope of personal morals and personal spirituality."(16) We hold our beliefs privately, which is perfectly legitimate within pluralism. But we have not been the transformers we are to be. We have supported pluralism, because it tolerates a form of Christianity that doesn't make demands on the culture or call it into question.

Christianity is not just personal opinion; it is objective truth. This must be asserted, regardless of the responses to the contrary, in order to transform culture. Christians must

affirm this. We must enter our culture boldly with the understanding that what we believe and practice privately is also applicable to all of public life. Lesslie Newbigin writes: "We come here to what is perhaps the most distinctive and crucial feature of the modern worldview, namely the division of human affairs into two realms— the private and the public, a private realm of values where pluralism reigns and a public world of what our culture calls 'facts.'"(17)

We must be cautious of incorrect distinctions between the public and private. We must also influence culture with the "facts" of Christianity. This is our responsibility.

## **Secularism**

Secularism permeates virtually every facet of life and thought. What does it mean? We need to understand that the word *secular* is not the same as *secularism*. All of us, whether Christian or non-Christian, live, work, and play within the secular sphere. There is no threat here for the evangelical. As Blamires says, "Engaging in secular activities . . . does not make anyone a 'secularist', an exponent or adherent of 'secularism'."(18) Secularism as a philosophy, a world view, is a different matter. Blamires continues: "While 'secular' is a purely neutral term, 'secularism' represents a view of life which challenges Christianity head on, for it excludes all considerations drawn from a belief in God or in a future state."(19)

Secularism elevates things that are not to be elevated to such a high status, such as the autonomy of man. Donald Bloesch states that "a culture closed to the transcendent will find the locus of the sacred in its own creations."(20) This should be a sobering thought for the evangelical.

We must understand that secularism is influential and can be found throughout the culture. In addition, we must realize that the secularist's belief in independence makes

Christianity appear useless and the Christian seem woefully ignorant. As far as the secularist is concerned, Christianity is no longer vital. As Emil Brunner says, "The roots of culture that lie in the transcendent sphere are cut off; culture and civilisation must have their law and meaning in themselves." (21) As liberating as this may sound to a secularist, it stimulates grave concern in the mind of an alert evangelical whose view of culture is founded upon God's precepts. There is a clear dividing line.

How is this reflected in our culture? Wolfhart Pannenberg presents what he believes are three aspects of the long-term effects of secularism. "First of these is the loss of legitimation in the institutional ordering of society." (22) That is, without a belief in the divine origin of the world there is no foundation for order. Political rule becomes "merely the exercising of power, and citizens would then inevitably feel that they were delivered over to the whim of those who had power." (23)

"The collapse of the universal validity of traditional morality and consciousness of law is the second aspect of the long-term effects of secularization." (24) Much of this can be attributed to the influence of Immanuel Kant, the eighteenth-century German philosopher, who taught that moral norms were binding even without religion. (25)

Third, "the individual in his or her struggle towards orientation and identity is hardest hit by the loss of a meaningful focus of commitment." (26) This leads to a sense of "homelessness and alienation" and "neurotic deviations." The loss of the "sacred and ultimate" has left its mark. As Pannenberg writes: "The increasingly evident long-term effects of the loss of a meaningful focus of commitment have led to a state of fragile equilibrium in the system of secular society." (27)

Since evangelicals are a part of that society, we should

realize this “fragile equilibrium” is not just a problem reserved for the unbelieving secularist; it is also our problem.

Whether the challenge is secularism, pluralism, or a myriad of other issues, the Christian is called to practice discernment while actively transforming culture.

#### Notes

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