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 prophesies 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 Gaebelein said, "It is more difficult to be thoughtfully discriminating than to fall back upon sweeping generalization."(6) 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. Gaebelein, "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.

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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.”(7) 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.”(8) 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.”(9) 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

1. Lesslie Newbigin, “Can the West be Converted?” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 11 (October 1987).

2. T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), 100.

3. Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization* (London: Nisbet, 1948), 62.

4. Donald G. Bloesch, *Freedom for Obedience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 54.

5. E. Adamson Hoebel, *Anthropology: The Study of Man*, 3d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 5.

6. Harry Blamires, *Recovering the Christian Mind* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988), 10.

7. Bloesch, *Freedom,* 227.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 324.

11. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language,* s.v. “discernment.”

12. John Baille, *What is Christian Civilization?* (London: Oxford, 1945), 59.

13. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1941), 22.

14. Kenneth A. Myers, *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1989), 38.

15. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 25.

16. Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant, 1963), 37-38.

17. Newbigin, “West,” 359.

18. Blamires, *Christian Mind*, 58.

19. Ibid.

20. Bloesch, *Freedom*, 228.

21. Brunner, *Christianity*, 2.

22. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Christianity in a Secularized World* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 33.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., 35.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid., 37.

27. Ibid., 38.

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Disillusionment in the 1990’s

The changing social and economic conditions of the 1990s are turning this into the decade of disillusionment. Millions of baby boomers who grew up in a world that fed and nurtured their expectations are facing a world much different than the one in which they were raised. This crisis of disillusionment could also be called a crisis of “broken promises,” since the boomers came to expect that they would in adulthood be privileged to enjoy the fruits of the American dream. Instead, they are tasting the bitter fruit of despair and disillusionment.

The seeds of these circumstances were sown in earlier decades. During the 1980s, they took root and grew, creating a different set of circumstances for this generation in the 1990s.

Leading-Edge Versus Trailing-Edge Boomers

Although these circumstances have affected all baby boomers, they have hit one segment of the boom much harder than the others: the trailing edge. The members of this generation,

born during the boom's later years (1955-1964), have not fared as well as their older brothers and sisters. The reason is simple; they were born later.

Psychologist Kevin Leman has written about the effects of birth- order in a single family. The oldest child tends to be serious, responsible, even driven. The youngest child tends to be more carefree—sometimes even the family comic. The order of birth in a single family can often be a great predictor of personality traits.

Paul Light, in his book *Baby Boomers*, observes that "generations may be subject to the same kinds of birth-order effects that social psychologists find in families." Just as the first-born in a family receives a disproportionate amount of parental attention and nurturance, so first-born boomers received a disproportionate amount of societal attention and privilege.

The leading edge boomers were the first to college, the first to the jobs, and the first to the houses. In the American "first come- first serve" economy, the leading edge found better jobs, better opportunities for career advancement, and better house prices. The trailing edge found just the opposite.

For example, take house prices. A couple that bought a house before inflation and interest rates increased would be better off financially than a couple that bought a house with an inflated price. The leading edge bought houses before the prices went through the roof. They invested in an appreciating asset. By contrast, the trailing edge bought (or tried to buy) houses that were already inflated. Often just coming up with the down payment was difficult if not impossible.

In general, the earlier someone was born, the better are his or her chances of succeeding in the economy. Anyone who doubts the trend need only watch the devastating impact these

economic forces are having on the generation following the baby boom. Many “baby busters” cannot find a job that pays them enough to enable them to leave their parents’ home. Buying homes of their own seems like the impossible dream.

Actually the seeds of this current disillusionment were sown in the 1960s and 1970s. These later-born boomers were not reared in the optimism of the Eisenhower and Kennedy years. Camelot was an historical footnote. During their “Wonder Years” they experienced the assassinations of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy. They grew up during the Vietnam War. They saw anti- war protests on nightly television. Leading-edge boomers saw their idyllic visions unravel in the late 60s, but they still retained their childhood memories of a world of affluence and optimism. By contrast, trailing-edge boomers growing up in the 1960s saw a different world—a world of shattered dreams and discordant images.

While older boomers grew up in relatively stable families, younger boomers saw the divorce rate climb to unprecedented levels. Television shows about traditional families like the Andersons and the Cleavers were replaced by sitcoms about single parents like Julia and blended families like The Brady Bunch.

By the time boomers hit the job market, wages had stagnated. National attention on a potential energy crisis, an Arab oil embargo, and governmental attempts to control inflation made a bad economy worse. Prime entry-level jobs were hard to find and chances for career advancement seemed slim. Inflation peaked at 18 percent in 1979, and unemployment reached 11 percent in 1982—the highest level since before World War II. These certainly were **not** the “Wonder Years.”

Yet through the 1980s, boomer optimism buoyed spirits that perhaps tomorrow would be better, like it had been for their parents. Mom and Dad struggled through the Great Depression

and survived World War II to build a better life. Boomers hoped that the same would be true for them. But, for many, better never came, and they are facing an impending crisis of disillusionment in the 1990s.

Yuppies and Yuffies

Social commentators, always looking for new acronyms to describe portions of the population, dubbed these boomers "Yuffies": young, urban failures. Just as the name "yuppie" lacked demographic precision, so also the term "yuffie" is imprecise. Nevertheless, the term reinforces a point made in previous programs. Not all baby boomers are yuppies. Just the opposite. Most baby boomers are coming face-to-face with disillusionment and downward mobility. Definitions used in 1985 to describe yuppies and yuffies illustrate the point. Yuppies were defined as 25- to 39-year-olds who live in metropolitan areas, work in professional or managerial occupations, and earn at least $30,000 if living alone and $40,000 if married or living with someone else. Using that definition, there were only four million yuppies in 1985—constituting just 5 percent of all baby boomers.

Yuffies were defined as baby boomers making less than $10,000 a year. Although that definition seemed much too restrictive in terms of income, it still defined a full 40 percent of the baby boom generation. In 1985, yuffies were roughly eight times as numerous as yuppies.

In the 1990s the trend is continuing. A generation reared with great expectations must now come to grips with the reality of downward mobility.

Home Bittersweet Home

While the American dream has meant different things to different people, certainly one of the most universal, deeply-held parts of the dream has been owning a home. A Roper

Organization survey in 1989 reported that nearly nine out of ten adults listed “a home that you own” as part of the life they would like to have. This was nine percentage points ahead of a happy marriage and fourteen points ahead of a car or children.

Not only is home ownership part of the American dream; it is part of the American fantasy. A nationwide survey by Spiegel Inc. found that one out of ten Americans fantasizes about the “house of their dreams” every single day. The dream house has four bedrooms, three bathrooms, two fireplaces, seven closets, three televisions, four telephones, and is a short stroll from the beach. Other amenities include a media/entertainment center, an exercise facility, a library, a spa/whirlpool, a home office, and an indoor/outdoor pool.

If this characterization of American home fantasies is even close to accurate, no wonder more and more boomers are facing a crisis of broken promises. The American economy simply did not deliver. The dream of owning your own home is a relatively recent one. In 1946– the year the baby boom began–the majority of Americans were renters. Yet within one generation, more than two-thirds of Americans became home owners. The boom generation, growing up in the midst of this significant transition, came to see home ownership as a right rather than a privilege.

But the housing crunch in the 1970s began to change that perception. When the baby boom generation headed out into the world upon graduation, they found stagnant wages and increasing house prices. Both phenomena were due to the size of the baby boom generation. American couples could create millions of babies every year during the baby boom, but the American economy could not create millions of new jobs and millions of new homes in the 1970s. The sheer size of the generation was only one reason for rising home prices. The living patterns of this generation exacerbated the problem. Three lifestyle patterns are especially relevant. First, baby

boomers left the nest earlier than any other generation. Many left for college and never returned home but instead began looking for homes of their own. Second, boomers stayed single longer. Unlike their parents, who married early and then purchased houses, boomers in the 1970s often bought houses as singles, thereby creating an even greater demand on the housing market. Finally, boomers had higher divorce rates. This trend also created more demand for housing than would have occurred if they had assumed the lifestyle of their parents.

These three patterns converged to increase demand on housing. From 1960 to 1980, the total number of households grew by at least 10 million each decade. To put this dramatic increase in perspective, the rate of increase for households was three times faster than that of the population as a whole.

Another reason for the increased cost of home ownership involved the changing perception of a home as an investment. The tax advantage of owning a home in the 1970s and early 1980s was compelling. When the federal income tax was first enacted in 1913, “interest on indebtedness” was exempt. Therefore, a home owner receives a mortgage-interest deduction—effectively a tax subsidy for owning a house rather than renting an apartment. On the other hand, a renter must pay for his apartment with after-tax dollars, and any return from his savings is subject to taxation.

Suddenly, people who would not have normally considered owning a house (singles, couples who preferred apartment living, etc.) were buying homes in record numbers simply because they were good investments. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, net increases in home owner equity were more than three times larger than total personal savings out of income.

Soon the frenzy became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Rising home prices seemed like a good way to beat inflation. The increased demand drove prices even higher, spurring even more demand.

According to one writer,

> *They bought and sold homes like traders in the pork- belly pit. It was the 1980s, and hundreds of thousands of baby boomers, two-income-couples with ready access to credit, were buying New York real estate.*

Taken together, all of these factors worked to price many couples out of the housing market. To illustrate the impact, compare the difference between buying a new home in 1949 and buying a house in the 1980s. In 1949, a 30-year-old man purchasing a median-priced house only needed to commit 14 percent of his income. A new "Cape Cod" house in Levittown, New York, went for just $7,990.

By 1983, the convergence of the various factors already mentioned radically altered the equation. Now a 30-year-old man needed to commit 44 percent of his income to meet the carrying charges on a median-priced house. That same year, 65 percent of all first-time home buyers needed two paychecks to meet their monthly payments. The demographics of first time home buyers in 1989 further illustrate this point. The median home price for first-time buyers went over the $100,000 mark (actually $105,200) in that year. The average first-time buyer was nearly thirty-something (29.6), and most first-time buyers (87%) needed dual-incomes to qualify. The prospects for a typical renter to become an homeowner are discouraging. Apartment rents stabilized during the late 1980s, but at record high levels. Only four out of ten young renters had sufficient income to qualify for the mortgage on a median "starter house." Coming up with a down payment was no easier. According to Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies, even with a 10 percent down payment mortgage, only 20 percent of white renters and 4 percent of black renters can afford a typical starter house.

Careers in Crisis

Although boomers saw their parent's salaries and job opportunities increase, this has not been the case for them. Wages stagnated in 1973, thus reducing boomer earning potential. By the end of the 1970s, *Fortune* magazine estimated that baby boomers had effectively lost ten years' income when compared with the earnings of the generation just preceding them.

In the 1970s and 1980s, many couples were able to cope with declining wages by living off two incomes. Many middle-class couples compensated primarily due to the strength of the wife's increased income since men's earnings remained relatively flat during this period. But even the wife's additional income could not forestall the economic impact on families. Young families with two paychecks today earn about the same as a couple that lived only on the husband's salary in the 1970s.

The problem intensified in the 1990s. The size of the boom generation caused part of the problem. The resulting discrepancy between job supply and job demand first affected the number of entry-level positions that baby boomers could find.

Now boomers find themselves competing for increasingly scarce management-level positions. As one rises in the corporation, the number of management positions decreases as the corporate pyramid narrows. In the early 1980s, economists were writing about the presence of too many people vying for too few management-level positions, causing a bottleneck at the middle management level. Changes in the corporate world throughout the 1980s exacerbated the problem. "Downsizing," "streamlining," and "merging" are just a few of the terms used to describe the twisting of the corporate pyramid into an almost unrecognizable polygon. Driven by the twin goals of improving productivity and enhancing a company's ability to

compete, major corporations have eliminated whole levels of middle and upper management.

This generation often finds itself facing two dismal prospects: career plateauing and the potential of a mid-life layoff.

Belt-tightening measures in the 1980s forced employees to be content with lower wages and smaller wage increases. One research economist predicts that “Salaries will probably barely keep up with the cost of living and taxes….I think we’re looking at very modest wage increases in the 1990s.” For a generation raised on high expectations, the reality of lower wages and fewer and smaller increases can lead to disillusionment.

Although the conclusion may seem like bad news for society as a whole, I believe that it is good news for the church of Jesus Christ. This generation has effectively turned its back on the gospel, in part because it has had it so good. Boomers didn’t feel like they needed anyone or anything. Now that they are coming to grips with discouragement and disillusionment, they may be more open to the gospel. If that is so, then churches and individual Christians can use the trends in our society to maximize their influence for Jesus Christ.

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