

# Film and the Christian

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

## The Convergence of High and Low Culture

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

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

The church as a body has a long standing and somewhat

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

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

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

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

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

saying and why.

## **The Nature of Film and the Opportunity for Christians**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Some            Concerns            about            Christian**

## Participation in Cinema{6}

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Biblical Examples of Gratuitous Violence**

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

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

the surrounding countries will experience. He writes:

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

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

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

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

over the evil men for punishment.

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

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

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

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

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



person to sin.

There are basically three positions related to Christians viewing film.

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

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

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

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

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

## **Appendix**

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

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

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

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

## Notes

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

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

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## When the Good Guys Don't Win

Pop! Pow! Gunfire crackled from the house next door. My neighbor John, high on marijuana, was shooting at his friend who crouched in fear behind a corner of the building. No one was injured and the arrival of police calmed John down.

*That's strange*, I thought to myself another sunny morning as I left my home to jog. *Why would my car windshield be covered with ice crystals? It's July.* As I drew nearer, I realized the "ice crystals" were broken glass, courtesy of some Fourth-of-July vandals.

Fear, confusion, anger, helplessness. Life can seem out of control when we are violated. Each nighttime creak could be an intruder. Were the walls thick enough to stop bullets should John's cannabis exploits resume? What did I do to deserve this?

An alleged rape victim feels cheated when the DA refuses to prosecute the accused perpetrators. A medical exam showed rape trauma; two reliable eyewitnesses saw her pushed partially clad down some stairs and heard her screams for help. "It seems to me that I am the one on trial," she complains in frustration. A rape is the only crime where the victims are

treated with disrespect.”[{1}](#) An African-American mother says she’s paranoid that her well-behaved teenage son will be falsely suspected of being a criminal because of his race. Fear and fury drive her to nag him before he goes to the store: “Keep your hands out of your pockets. Don’t reach under your shirt. If there’s an itch, just live with it. In winter, keep your jacket open.”[{2}](#)

## **Terrorist Massacre**

Members of a multi-racial Cape Town, South Africa, church were enjoying a beautiful duet when the front door burst open. Terrorists sprayed the congregation with automatic rifle fire and tossed in two grenades, leaving 11 dead and 53 wounded. Lorenzo Smith pulled his wife, Myrtle, to the floor and lay on top of her to protect her. The second grenade exploded 6 feet away, sending a piece of shrapnel into her left side near her heart but missing him entirely. She died en route to a hospital.

“You’re no longer working here,” the personnel chief informs the career employee. The stellar worker had ruffled feathers by challenging ethical and financial misconduct of several company officers. Instead of applauding his integrity, the company showed him the door. Whistle blowing can be lonely.

Palestinians find their homes bulldozed. Israeli shoppers are massacred by suicide bombers in a crowded marketplace. Rwandans are maimed and slaughtered in tribal violence.

Bad things sometimes (often?) happen to good or seemingly innocent people. What should be done? How can the victims cope?

First, recognize where the problem stems from.

## Why Suffering?

“Why is there suffering in the world?” ranked first in a national survey to determine the top 40 questions of life.[{3}](#) Many human efforts to alleviate suffering and achieve happiness have borne some fruit, but each also contains examples of failure. Consider a few:

*Psychology.* Many psychologists offer hope based purely on human resources. Still, sometimes even the best and brightest give up in despair. Legendary psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim, who used his own survival of Nazi horrors to help heal others, eventually took his own life. Upon learning of his suicide, one colleague remarked, “It was as if the [psychological] profession itself had failed.”[{4}](#)

*Marxism.* Pointing at class antagonism as the culprit, Marxism aimed to create a “New Man” in a harmonious society devoid of such antagonism. Instead, it created an elite “Rich Man” as party chiefs lived in luxury while the masses remained disillusioned. “Workers of the World, We Apologize,” read the Moscow demonstrators’ banner as the Soviet Union crumbled.[{5}](#) Today’s Cubans eat lots of bananas and ride bicycles. North Koreans starve.

*Capitalism.* Is this political theory the answer? The market economy has raised standards of living, yet even nations like the United States boil with crime, racism, sexual discrimination and homelessness

Could we be missing the root of the problem? Could much human suffering be rooted in something deeper than flawed political systems or philosophical constructs? Could there be something wrong with the human heart?

## Heart Disease?

History is replete with confirming evidence A United Nations

conference on the role of the university in the search for world peace ended early because “the delegates began quarreling too vociferously.”[\[6\]](#) Various attempts to establish utopian societies with uniform equality have crumbled due to internal strife.

“Everybody thinks of changing humanity,” noted Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, “but nobody thinks of changing himself.”[\[7\]](#) Simon Bolivar, the great liberator of Latin America, admitted in his later years, “I was all my life a slave to my passions. The essence of liberty is precisely that one can liberate oneself “[\[8\]](#)

“We have met the enemy,” announced the comic strip character Pogo, “and he is us.”

If, then, we live in a flawed world with people determined to live out their own inner sicknesses, what can we do? How do we cope with the resulting, unjust suffering? “Seek justice” was a North Carolina woman’s strategy as she recently sued her husband’s lover for destroying her marriage, winning a million-dollar settlement. Sometimes the right cause prevails in court. Often, though, both sides end up bitter and poorer.

Are there any other solutions? Anything that works?

- **Choose to look out for others.** In a commencement address at Duke University, ABC News commentator Ted Koppel said: “Maimonides and Jesus summed it up in almost identical words: ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,’ ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’”[\[9\]](#) After Hurricane Andrew devastated parts of Miami, I returned to my hometown to help rebuild. I was amazed to discover that thousands of volunteers from around North America had come at their own expense to help the poor reconstruct their homes. Most were with Christian mission organizations, motivated as Good Samaritans by their love of God and love of people.

- **Lessen the pain by sharing it.** During a particularly trying episode in my own life, my best friend deserted me, some trusted co-workers betrayed me, and my health and finances suffered. Close friends and my faith helped me emerge wounded but growing. Building friendships takes time and effort. Initiating communication, offering to help another move or to carpool, listening to hurts, offering a compliment or word of encouragement . . . all can help build strong bonds. Giving often motivates others to respond in kind. "Bearing one another's burdens" can make them lighter for both of you when you each need it.
- **Eliminate bitter roots.** Asking and/or granting forgiveness can help heal hearts. As Alabama governor, George Wallace preached "Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!" Two decades in a wheelchair gave him time to reflect on life, suffering and God. He eventually confessed his wrongs and asked forgiveness of his former racial and political enemies. South African Lorenzo Smith, who lost his wife to the grenade in church, turned and forgave his wife's murderers. "Bearing a grudge can corrode your soul," affirmed one wounded warrior. "If you nurse bitterness and refuse to forgive, it can keep you in bondage to your enemies. If you let it go and forgive regardless of your opponent's response you're free."

When the good guys don't win, you can curse the darkness. Or you can recognize the root problem and light a candle. May yours shine brightly.

## Notes

1. "Was it rape? Woman in G.T. case speaks out," *The Sun* (San Bernardino, CA), August 28, 1997, A12.
2. Deborah Mathis, "Stereotypes can leave Black mothers



paranoid for sons," *The Sun* (San Bernardino, CA), August 27, 1997, A9.

3. What are the Top 40 Questions of Life?" advertisement by Thomas Nelson Publishers in *USA Today*, ca. late 1980s or 1990.

4. Celeste Fremon, "Love and Death," *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, January 27, 1991, pp. 17-21, 35.

5. *Newsweek*. November 20, 1989, p. 11.

6. *Miami News*. September 4, 1969.

7. *World Christian/U* February 1989, p. U8.

8. Selden Rodman, "The Conqueror's Descent," *National Review*. October 15, 1990, p. 88.

9. Ted Koppel, "The Vannatizing of America," *DUKE Magazine*, July/August 1987, p. 36 (with biblical references from Matthew 19:19 and Luke 6:31).

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## Violence in Society

*Kerby Anderson helps us take a biblical perspective on a very scary and touchy issue: violence in America. Applying a Christian worldview, he shines the spotlight on areas of today's culture that should concern us all.*

### It's a scary world today!

Growing up used to be less traumatic just a few decades ago. Children back then worried about such things as a flat tire on their Schwinn and hoped that their teacher wouldn't give too

much homework.

How life has changed. A 1994 poll found more than half the children questioned said they were afraid of violent crime against them or a family member. Are these kids just paranoid, or is there a real problem?

Well, it turns out this is not some irrational fear based upon a false perception of danger. Life has indeed become more violent and more dangerous for children. Consider the following statistics: One in six youths between the ages of 10 and 17 has seen or knows someone who has been shot. The estimated number of child abuse victims increased 40 percent between 1985 and 1991. Children under 18 were 244 percent more likely to be killed by guns in 1993 than they were in 1986. Violent crime has increased by more than 560 percent since 1960.

The innocence of childhood has been replaced by the very real threat of violence. Kids in school try to avoid fights in the hall, walk home in fear, and sometimes sleep in bathtubs in order to protect themselves from stray bullets fired during drive-by shootings.

Even families living in so-called "safe" neighborhoods are concerned. They may feel safe today, but there is always a reminder that violence can intrude at any moment. Polly Klaas and her family no doubt felt safe in Petaluma, California. But on October 1, 1993, she was abducted from her suburban home during a sleepover with two friends. If she can be abducted and murdered, so can nearly any other child.

A child's exposure to violence is pervasive. Children see violence in their schools, their neighborhoods, and their homes. The daily news is rife with reports of child molestations and abductions. War in foreign lands along with daily reports of murder, rape, and robberies also heighten a child's perception of potential violence.

Television in the home is the greatest source of visual violence for children. The average child watches 8,000 televised murders and 100,000 acts of violence before finishing elementary school. That number more than doubles by the time he or she reaches age 18.

And the latest scourge is MTV. Teenagers listen to more than 10,000 hours of rock music, and this impact is intensified as they spend countless hours in front of MTV watching violent and sensual images that go far beyond the images shown on commercial television.

It's a scary world, and children are exposed to more violence than any generation in recent memory. An article in *Newsweek* magazine concluded: "It gets dark early in the Midwest this time of year. Long before many parents are home from work, the shadows creep up the walls and gather in the corners, while on the carpet a little figure sprawls in the glow emanating from an anchorman's tan. There's been a murder in the Loop, a fire in a nightclub, an indictment of another priest. Red and white lights swirl in urgent pinwheels as the ambulances howl down the dark streets. And one more crime that never gets reported, because there's no one to arrest. Who killed childhood? We all did."

**"As a man thinks in his heart, so is he."**

Violence has always been a part of the human condition because of our sin nature (Rom. 3:23). But modern families are exposed to even more violence than previous generations because of the media. Any night of the week, the average viewer can see levels of violence approaching and even exceeding the Roman Gladiator games.

Does this have an effect? Certainly it does. The Bible teaches that "as a man thinks in his heart, so is he" (Prov. 23:7). What we view and what we think about affects our actions.

Defenders of television programs say that isn't true. They contend that televised imagery doesn't make people violent nor does it make people callous to suffering. But if televised imagery doesn't affect human behavior, then the TV networks should refund billions of advertising dollars to TV sponsors.

In essence, TV executives are talking out of both sides of their mouths. On the one hand, they try to convince advertisers that a 30-second commercial can influence consumer behavior. On the other hand, they deny that a one-hour program wrapped around the commercials can influence social behavior.

So, how violent is the media? And what impact does media have on members of our family? First, we will look at violence in the movies, and then we'll take up the issue of violence on television.

Ezra Pound once said that artists are "the antennae of the race." If that is so, then we are a very sick society judging by the latest fare of violence in the movies. The body count is staggering: 32 people are killed in "RoboCop," while 81 are killed in the sequel; 264 are killed in "Die Hard 2," and the film "Silence of the Lambs" deals with a psychopath who murders women and skins them.

Who would have imagined just a few years ago that the top grossing films would be replete with blood, gore, and violence? No wonder some film critics now say that the most violent place on earth is the Hollywood set.

Violence has always been a part of movie-making, but until recently, really violent movies were only seen by the fringe of mass culture. Violence now has gone mainstream. Bloody films are being watched by more than just punk rockers. Family station wagons and vans pull up to movie theaters showing R-rated slasher films. And middle America watches these same programs a few months later on cable TV or on video. Many of the movies seen at home wouldn't have been shown in theaters

10-20 years ago.

Movie violence these days is louder, bloodier, and more anatomically precise than ever before. When a bad guy was shot in a black-and-white Western, the most we saw was a puff of smoke and a few drops of fake blood. Now the sights, sounds, and special effects often jar us more than the real thing. Slow motion, pyrotechnics, and a penchant for leaving nothing to the imagination all conspire to make movies and TV shows more gruesome than ever.

Children especially confront an increasingly violent world with few limits. As concerned parents and citizens we must do what we can to reduce the level of violence in our society through the wise use of discernment and public policy. We need to set limits both in our homes and in the community.

## **Does Media Violence Really Influence Human Behavior?**

Children's greatest exposure to violence comes from television. TV shows, movies edited for television, and video games expose young children to a level of violence unimaginable just a few years ago. The average child watches 8,000 televised murders and 100,000 acts of violence before finishing elementary school. That number more than doubles by the time he or she reaches age 18.

The violent content of TV includes more than just the 22 minute programs sent down by the networks. At a very young age, children are seeing a level of violence and mayhem that in the past may have only been witnessed by a few police officers and military personnel. TV brings hitting, kicking, stabbings, shootings, and dismemberment right into homes on a daily basis.

The impact on behavior is predictable. Two prominent Surgeon General reports in the last two decades link violence on

television and aggressive behavior in children and teenagers. In addition, the National Institute of Mental Health issued a 94-page report entitled, "Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties." They found "overwhelming" scientific evidence that "excessive" violence on television spills over into the playground and the streets. In one five-year study of 732 children, "several kinds of aggression— conflicts with parents, fighting and delinquency—were all positively correlated with the total amount of television viewing."

Long-term studies are even more disturbing. University of Illinois psychologist Leonard Eron studied children at age eight and then again at eighteen. He found that television habits established at the age of eight influenced aggressive behavior through childhood and adolescent years. The more violent the programs preferred by boys in the third grade, the more aggressive their behavior, both at that time and ten years later. He therefore concluded that "the effect of television violence on aggression is cumulative."

Twenty years later Eron and Rowell Huesmann found the pattern continued. He and his researchers found that children who watched significant amounts of TV violence at the age of 8 were consistently more likely to commit violent crimes or engage in child or spouse abuse at 30.

They concluded "that heavy exposure to televised violence is one of the causes of aggressive behavior, crime and violence in society. Television violence affects youngsters of all ages, of both genders, at all socioeconomic levels and all levels of intelligence."

Since their report in the 1980s, MTV has come on the scene with even more troubling images. Adolescents already listen to an estimated 10,500 hours of rock music between the 7th and 12th grades. Now they also spend countless hours in front of MTV seeing the visual images of rock songs that depict

violence, rebellion, sadomasochism, the occult, drug abuse, and promiscuity. MTV reaches 57 million cable households, and its video images are even more lurid than the ones shown on regular TV. Music videos filled with sex, rape, murder, and other images of mayhem assault the senses. And MTV cartoons like Beavis and "the other guy" assault the sensibilities while enticing young people to start fires and commit other acts of violence. Critics count 18 acts of violence in each hour of MTV videos.

Violent images on television and in the movies do contribute to greater violence in society. Sociological studies along with common sense dictate that we do something to reduce the violence in the media before it further damages society.

## **Television Promotes Not Only Violence But Fear As Well.**

Children see thousands of TV murders every year. And the impact on behavior is predictable. Various reports by the Surgeon General in the last two decades link violence on television and aggressive behavior in children and teenagers. In addition, the National Institute of Mental Health issued a 94-page report entitled, "Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties." They found "overwhelming" scientific evidence that "excessive" violence on television spills over into the playground and the streets. In one five-year study of 732 children, "several kinds of aggression (such as conflicts with parents, fighting and delinquency) were all positively correlated with the total amount of television viewing."

Confronted with such statistics, many parents respond that their children aren't allowed to watch violent programs. Such action is commendable, but some of the greatest dangers of television are more subtle and insidious. It now appears that simply watching television for long periods can manipulate

your view of the world— whether the content is particularly violent or not.

George Gerbner and Larry Gross working at the Annenberg School of Communications in the 1970s found that heavy TV viewers live in a scary world. “We have found that people who watch a lot of TV see the real world as more dangerous and frightening than those who watch very little. Heavy viewers are less trustful of their fellow citizens, and more fearful of the real world.”

So heavy viewers were less trustful and more fearful than the average citizen. But what constitutes a heavy viewer. Gerber and Gross defined heavy viewers as those adults who watch an average of four or more hours of television a day. Approximately one-third of all American adults fit that category.

They found that violence on prime-time TV exaggerated heavy viewers’ fears about the threat of danger in the real world. Heavy viewers, for example, were less likely to trust someone than light viewers. Heavy viewers also tended to overestimate their likelihood of being involved in a violent crime.

And if this is true of adults, imagine how much TV violence affects children’s perception of the world. Gerbner and Gross say, “Imagine spending six hours a day at the local movie house when you were 12 years old. No parent would have permitted it. Yet, in our sample of children, nearly half the 12-year-olds watch an average of six or more hours of television per day.” This would mean that a large portion of young people fit into the category of heavy viewers. Their view of the world must be profoundly shaped by TV. Gerbner and Gross therefore conclude: “If adults can be so accepting of the reality of television, imagine its effect on children. By the time the average American child reaches public school, he has already spent several years in an electronic nursery school.”



Television violence affects both adults and children in subtle ways. While we may not personally feel or observe the effects of TV violence, we should not ignore the growing body of data that suggests that televised imagery does affect our perception and behavior.

Obviously something must be done. Parents, programmers, and general citizens must take responsible actions to prevent the increasing violence in our society. Violent homes, violence on television, violence in the movies, violence in the schools all contribute to the increasingly violent society we live in. We have a responsibility to make a difference and apply the appropriate principles in order to help stem the tide of violence in our society.

## **Some Suggestions for Dealing with Violence in the Media**

Christians must address this issue of violence in our society. Here are a number of specific suggestions for dealing with violence.

1. Learn about the impact of violence in our society. Share this material with your pastor, elders, deacons, and church members. Help them understand how important this issue is to them and their community.
2. Create a safe environment. Families live in the midst of violence. We must make our homes safe for our families. A child should feel that his or her world is safe. Providing care and protection are obvious first steps. But parents must also establish limits, provide emotional security, and teach values and virtue in the home.
3. Parents should limit the amount of media exposure in their homes. The average young person sees entirely too much violence on TV and at the movies. Set limits to what a child watches, and evaluate both the quantity and quality of their

media input (Rom. 12:2). Focus on what is pure, beautiful, true, right, honorable, excellent, and praiseworthy (Phil. 4:8).

4. Watch TV with children. Obviously we should limit the amount of TV our children watch. But when they watch television, we should try to watch it with them. We can encourage discussion with children during the programs. The plots and actions of the programs provides a natural context for discussion and teach important principles about relationships and violence. The discussion could focus on how cartoon characters or TV actors could solve their problems without resorting to violence. TV often ignores the consequences of violence. What are the consequences in real life?

5. Develop children's faith and trust in God. Children at an early age instinctively trust their parents. As the children grow, parents should work to develop their child's trust in God. God is sovereign and omnipotent. Children should learn to trust Him in their lives and depend upon Him to watch over them and keep them safe.

6. Discuss the reasons for pain and suffering in the world. We live in the fallen world (Gen. 3), and even those who follow God will encounter pain, suffering, and violence. Bad things do happen to good people.

7. Teach vigilance without hysteria. By talking about the dangers in society, some parents have instilled fear—even terror—in their children. We need to balance our discussions with them and not make them hysterical. Kids have been known to become hysterical if a car comes down their street or if someone looks at them.

8. Work to establish broadcaster guidelines. No TV or movie producer wants to unilaterally disarm all the actors on their screens out of fear that viewers will watch other programs and

movies. Yet many of these same TV and movie producers would like to tone down the violence, but they don't want to be the first to do so. National standards would be able to achieve what individuals would not do by themselves in a competitive market.

Violence is the scourge of our society, but we can make a difference. We must educate ourselves about its influence and impact on our lives. Please feel free to write or call Probe Ministries for more information on this topic. And then take time to apply the principles developed here to make a difference in your home and community. You can help stem the tide of violence in our society.

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## **The Sinfulness of Humanity**

Over the last couple of years we have witnessed some incredible events in our world. In Europe, communism has become a thing of the past. In South Africa, apartheid finally appears to be on the way out. The former Soviet Union is in the throes of reorganization as it moves toward democracy and free enterprise.

Such events, coupled with recent successes on the battlefield, have caused many Americans to feel tremendously optimistic about the future. It has become fashionable to appeal to a new world order in which nations will cooperate with one another in a spirit of peace, and some have even suggested that we are on the edge of the millennial kingdom.

Don't get your hopes up.

It's easy to be optimistic when looking at the trend of world events, but it's a little more difficult when one takes human nature into consideration. The sinfulness of humanity may be an uncomfortable subject, but it is absolutely necessary to understand sin in order to understand both ourselves and the world in which we live.

Many people like to focus on our tremendous potential as a society, maintaining that the only thing preventing us from fulfilling that potential is inadequate education. For example, consider the following statement from the second Humanist Manifesto:

*Using technology wisely, we can control our environment, conquer poverty, markedly reduce disease, extend our life-span, significantly modify our behavior, alter the course of human evolution and cultural development, unlock vast new powers, and provide humankind with unparalleled opportunity for achieving an abundant and meaningful life.*

Humanists recognize the fact that such utopian dreams are not guaranteed, but they believe our potential for progress is essentially unlimited. If we as a society decide that we really want to achieve something, we are capable of achieving it.

The Bible presents a very different view of humankind and our future. From a biblical perspective, we have all violated God's laws, and our continuing tendency is not to seek the well-being of others but to seek our own satisfaction. Consider the following words from Romans chapter 3:

*There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, there is not even one.*

These words may sound pretty pessimistic, especially when compared with modern humanism, but they are true. We all know our own failings. God says that we are to be holy just as He is holy (1 Peter 1:15, 16), and we cannot honestly say that we meet that standard. You and I recognize that we have selfish desires, that we rebel against God, that we often find it easier to cheat people than to love them. The Bible tells us that everyone else has the same problem. As Paul put it, All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23).

## **Forgiveness for Sin**

Thinking about the sinfulness of humanity is unpleasant at best, but we must first understand that all humankind has sinned if we are to realize that, even so, all is not lost. The most important thing to realize about human sinfulness is that forgiveness is available!

The Bible says that we have all broken God's laws, and we all deserve punishment as a result. Jesus Christ, however, came to take that punishment on our behalf. Let me explain it this way. We have been sentenced to death because of our sin. God's justice demands that the sentence be carried out. If He were to simply lay the sentence aside, then He wouldn't be a very fair judge, and He is always fair.

At the same time, God's love demanded that He provide a way of forgiveness. He provided that forgiveness through Jesus Christ. By dying on the cross for our sins, Jesus paid the penalty that we should have had to pay. He took the punishment for our sins.

Since God's justice has been satisfied in the person of Jesus Christ, we are able to have peace with God through Jesus (Rom. 5:1). All we have to do to experience that peace is to place our trust in Jesus, believing that He died to take the punishment that we deserved (John 3:16). When we trust in Christ, our sins are forgiven. We no longer need to be afraid

of death or of God's future judgment. We have been declared righteous in Christ, and we are at peace with God.

The idea that someone would or could take our punishment seems very strange to many in today's culture. The film *Flatliners* provides an excellent illustration of the way our world thinks about sin and life after death. In the film, several medical students take turns killing and then reviving one another, hoping to learn something about life after death. In their near-death experiences, they are confronted with past sins, in which they have offended not God but other human beings. They themselves must atone for their sins by making peace with the people they have wronged. There is no mediator to take their place. In addition, the sins for which they suffer are much less grievous than one might expect. What could a person do to obtain forgiveness for actions much worse than teasing another child or even causing another person's accidental death? Apparently nothing. Reflecting the perspective of many in our culture, *Flatliners* seems to say that there is no God to offend, no Christ to bear our punishment, and no hope for those who have committed grievous sin. What a sad perspective!

## **The Continuing Presence of Sin**

When we accept God's forgiveness by placing our trust in Christ, we are completely freed from the penalty of sin. At the same time, however, we continue to experience the presence of sin. We still have the capacity, even the tendency, to rebel against God and to act independently of Him (Gal. 5:16-17). God's goal for us as Christians is that we would consistently obey Him, and the indwelling Holy Spirit works to change us from the inside out, but the process won't be completed until we are in the presence of God in heaven (Rom. 8:12-25; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:7-18). In the meantime, we continue to struggle with the fact that we are sinful people.

As fallen creatures, we will always want to say no when God says yes and yes when He says no. All too often, we seek to

please ourselves rather than to please God.

This thought doesn't sound very encouraging, and some have maintained that talking about the sinfulness (or depravity) of humanity causes Christians to have a pessimistic attitude about life. I disagree. Understanding that everyone is sinful gives us a realistic appraisal of life, one that explains the headlines we see in each morning's paper. If our natural tendency as sinful people is to seek power and control for ourselves or to lie, cheat, and steal, then we should expect people to act that way. Expecting these actions doesn't make them right, but it makes them understandable. Recognizing the sinfulness of humanity doesn't excuse crime, but it does protect us from the disillusionment that so many experience when their optimistic ideals eventually fall apart.

The belief that all persons are sinful can actually be a very liberating concept. We no longer place expectations on ourselves or others that no one could fulfill. We no longer demand perfection, for we expect a degree of failure. With regard to current events, we do not join those who continually hope for some kind of global transformation apart from divine intervention. We recognize that sinful people will continue to govern every nation, even our own, and that they will always seek their own interests.

The founders of this country believed in the sinfulness of humanity; indeed, this view of human sinfulness is central to the United States Constitution. We do not believe in giving any single individual limitless power, because we do not trust anyone enough to put him or her in that position. We regard a system of checks and balances, through which each person's decisions must ultimately be approved by others, as safer than a government in which unlimited power is entrusted to one individual.

I am not saying that humanity should simply accept its lot; we must certainly work to improve our society. A proper

understanding of human nature, however, prevents us from seeking to fulfill impossible goals through unrealistic means and keeps us from placing too much faith in humanity. We need to be involved in the political and social arenas, but we should not place too much hope in our involvement. Human sinfulness will keep us from doing all that we would like, but we must continue to do all that we can.

## **The Politics of Sin**

Many people believe that humanity is basically good and that all we need to do to improve our society is provide a healthy psychological and physical environment. This belief is appealing because it makes us feel like we are in control of our own destiny, but unfortunately it isn't true. Humans are not good creatures in a bad environment. If anything, we are sinful creatures in a relatively good environment.

In this country we elect representatives who promise to uphold our interests in the public realm. Yet year after year we are disappointed when they break their promises. They may institute some helpful programs and make a few choices that we agree with, but often the entire exercise seems futile. One reason behind this sense of futility is that politics is built upon compromise, but another reason is that political programs are unable to deal with humanity's real problem—sin. Barry Goldwater, who served many years in the United States Senate, said it this way:

*We have conjured up all manner of devils responsible for our present discontent. It is the unchecked bureaucracy in government, it is the selfishness of multinational corporate giants, it is the failure of the schools to teach and the students to learn, it is overpopulation, it is wasteful extravagance, it is squandering our national resources, it is racism, it is capitalism, it is our material affluence, or if we want a convenient foreign devil, we can say it is communism. But when we scrape away the varnish of wealth,*



*education, class, ethnic origin, parochial loyalties, we discover that however much we've changed the shape of man's physical environment, man himself is still sinful, vain, greedy, ambitious, lustful, self-centered, unrepentant, and requiring of restraint.*

That is a pretty profound statement, and it is one with which the Bible would agree. Political programs have no effect on society's real problem, the fact that we are all sinful and self-centered.

When we look at the seeming hopelessness of the situation, it is easy to see why some Christians have grown apathetic. They say, We try as hard as we can and it doesn't do any good. Why bother to keep trying? Theirs is a good question. Many Christian activists felt the same way at the end of the 1980s. Christians had been more involved in this country's politics than ever before, and there were several events in which they seemed to pull out all the stops. Many Christians lobbied intensively for the confirmation of Robert Bork to the U.S. Supreme Court, seeing him as a vital tool in their aim to bring an end to the abortion industry in this country. Their efforts failed. The troops were marshalled several more times during legislative battles on Capitol Hill, but they fell short more times than they succeeded. Many grew weary in the fight. I know I did.

Looking back on that decade, we have to ask, What did we expect? Did we expect our politicians to abandon the appeal of special-interest groups in favor of altruistic ideals and biblical ethics? We should not have been so naive. The sinfulness of humanity means that people will always tend to enhance their own power and seek their own interests. When they do otherwise, we take their actions as grace, but we do not expect them to act in accordance with anything but their own interests.

That's why we as believers must continue to be active in political and social causes. True, we do struggle with our own sinfulness, but we are being transformed by the person of Jesus Christ, transformed to the extent that we should no longer fit comfortably into our culture (Rom. 12:1-2). Jesus said that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and what He meant by that is that we are to be distinctive representatives of God in a world that is trying to forget Him (Matt. 5:13-16; cf. Phil. 2:15). If we abandon our culture, we abandon that duty. We realize that we won't necessarily win the day, but we might. In any case, we'll have done the right thing.

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