

Elements of a Christian Worldview

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Christians and the Entertainment Media Culture

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and
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Is that a rug you're wearing?" she asked him, pointing to his head.

"Yeah, and what do you call that, a shower cap?" he fired back.

So it went. Two icons of pop culture, Madonna and David Letterman, were slugging it out on late-night television. Letterman, on one side, was in a unique position. The man who made a niche for himself by being outrageous found he had more than he could handle in the queen of shock-and-roll. On her side, Madonna was making the network world squirm with her tasteless comments through commercial breaks and then well past her time to leave.

When it was all mercifully over and Madonna was gone, Letterman framed the entire episode as he cracked, "Our next guest is Mother Teresa." The mountain of tension dissolved into laughter, not at Mother Teresa but at the massive incongruity of the thought of someone widely regarded as a saint appearing on the same television program as Madonna. Perhaps without intending to, Letterman pointed up a major concern for contemporary believers. Just how massive is the gap between Christianity and contemporary popular culture, and what kinds of challenges does this gap present?

What should be the relationship between Christians and popular culture? What biblical analogies and principles provide us with perspectives on how to relate to the wild sea of media entertainment we find ourselves floating in? This chapter deliberately limits itself to the popular culture of entertainment media. Film and television provide the literature and drama of contemporary society and by their pervasiveness and pumped-up volume almost drown out the voices of other popular culture productions. This generation is dominated by the visual entertainment media, which deserves special attention. Through stories of how Daniel, the people of Israel, the apostle Paul, and the historical church dealt with their surrounding cultures, I will try to derive an understanding of our contemporary predicament. In doing so, I wish to accomplish two things: (1) to articulate a position of critical discernment for those whose response to popular culture is either dread of "contamination" or, at the other extreme, complacent consumption and (2) to recommend a redemptive approach that seeks to transform culture.

Before we immerse ourselves in this discussion, it is worthwhile to affirm the central place of our Christian faith. I echo C. S. Lewis when he asserts that "the Christian knows from the outset that the salvation of a single soul is more important than the production or preservation of all the epics and tragedies of the world."¹ Christianity confesses the centrality of faith in Jesus Christ. Our lives are to be lived in happy submission to this per-

¹C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 14-15.

son, including an understanding of our rights and responsibilities as Christians. Probing a tension between the right to produce or review art and the responsibility to evaluate it, especially with regard to motion pictures, Mortimer Adler contrasted two ways suggested by Christianity. "It is not in the spirit of Savonarola that the arts must be scourged and expunged, but in the spirit of St. Thomas who, at the end of his life and in religious ecstasy, could say of his own *Summa Theologica*—incontestably magnificent as a production of human art—"It seems to me rubbish."² St. Thomas recognized that the glorious objects of culture are transitory and will pass away. In contrast, the holiest object presented to us, other than God himself, is our human neighbor; for he or she has been created in the image of God and for eternity. Our enjoyment and contemplation of culture must faithfully keep this set of priorities.

Defining Culture

"Culture," derived from the Latin *cultura*, refers to those social customs and products invented by humans and reflecting their beliefs and values. As currently interpreted, culture is characterized by the arts, habits, and behaviors of a social group. Thus the Victorian girls of the 1890s were as constrained by their culture as were the material girls of the 1980s. Both followed the fads and fashions that made up the popular culture, whether the "low" culture of the masses or the "high" culture of the elite.

In the nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold, English poet and critic, described culture as the normative act of "acquainting ourselves with the best that has been known and said in the world."³ People then tended to view culture as "cultivating" the best and brightest, the highest ideals of taste and refinement, the good things one hoped to be associated with: good books, good company, good clothes, good music, good theater, and the like. Goodness included both moral and aesthetic dimensions: One could be instructed about good things and simultaneously find delight.

Below the ideal of high culture is the culture that the mass of people actually want. Contemporary popular culture rarely concerns itself with what is "good." It has become more associated with what is held in common in a given society or what will sell. Culture that is consumed on a large scale becomes "popular, or pop, culture." Michael Jackson's album *Thriller*, James Cameron's *Titanic*, and Stephen Spielberg's *Jurassic Park*

²Mortimer J. Adler, *Art and Prudence* (New York: Arno Press, 1979), 92.

³Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Dogma: An Essay Towards A Better Understanding of the Bible* (London: Macmillan, 1924), Preface.

qualify—not necessarily because they are intrinsically good, but because they are enormously popular. These media arts appeal to the masses and do not require a high degree of intellectual sophistication or cultural refinement.⁴

The popular culture we address here is visual entertainment: film, television, video, and the new forms of techno-culture, such as interactive video games. In many ways, these image-based media exert a sometimes overt, sometimes subtle, but always powerful influence over the development of our culture. In this connection, Neil Postman sees the question of whether visual media shape or reflect culture as antiquated. In his view,

Popular Culture and the Church

George Lucas, director of the movie *Star Wars* and consequently a modern myth-maker, declares that film and television have supplanted the church as the great communicator of values and beliefs. (See Dale Pollack, *Skywalking: The Life and Films of George Lucas* [New York: Harmony Books, 1973], 139–144.) Introducing the 1994 PBS series *American Cinema*, John Belton paralleled going to the movies with a religious, ecstatic experience. Even the great 6,200-seat Roxy Theater in New York was advertised as “the cathedral of the motion picture.” (*American Cinema/American Culture* [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994], 3–4.) “The fact is incontrovertible,” wrote William Kuhns. “People today live ‘by the media’ whereas they once lived ‘by the book’” (*The Electronic Gospel: Religion and Media* [New York: Herder and Herder, 1969]). The possibility that the media replaces the pivotal role historically played by the church in shaping the values of a community is disconcerting, but understandable. The movies have become a virtual church for many.

Even within our own homes, one may find family devotions being supplanted by electronic household gods. Television can function as a private shrine to the god of images—a Greek or Olympian hearth god of ESPN, a personal Buddha of Public Broadcasting, or a Dionysian god of X-rated cable. Each one offers its own view of the good life. And often we lie prostrate before our god, even becoming couch potatoes.

The transformation from an oral, word-centered culture to an electronic, image-centered culture presents a special challenge to Christian scholars and students, especially in light of the now recognized power of images. The values promoted in the popular culture of television and film are seldom those of the Christian faith. Egotism, hedonism, covetousness, revenge, lust, pride, and a legion of other vices compete only too successfully with the Spirit’s fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). The task of Christians is to discover whether any of these scriptural values exist in particular

⁴Two pivotal works by John Fiske attest to the dominance of the entertainment media in shaping popular culture: *Television Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1987) and *Reading the Popular* (New York: Routledge, 1989). One of the most lucid and cogent Christian perspectives is Kenneth A. Myers’s *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1989).

television and film have become our culture.⁵

If Postman's assessment is slightly exaggerated, his assessment of the influence of visual media on contemporary culture undoubtedly raises basic questions for people of faith. For example, do we truly grasp the extent to which our lives and worldview are influenced by visual media—particularly by image-based entertainment media? Also, what responses should a Postman-like view of culture elicit from us? Thoughtful Christians have attempted to shape their responses within their understanding of the Scriptures. It is to some of these central scriptural issues that we now briefly turn.

in particular expressions of popular culture, to expose the false, and to celebrate the good and true. In this connection, Paul's recommendation to the Christians at Philippi holds true: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Phil. 4:8). Our contributions to popular culture as either viewers (consumers) or artists (producers) should follow Paul's exhortation to embrace integrity, virtue, and beauty in our thoughts and actions in spite of the popular culture's all-too-common emphasis on opposite values.

We have said that contemporary popular culture rarely concerns itself with what is good. Therefore, Christians must be extremely selective in the activities of popular culture they choose to participate in. Although a choice between what is popular and what is scripturally appropriate may not be easy, it may be necessary in order to maintain a healthy relationship with the Lord.

Works to consult: In her provocative study *The Electronic Golden Calf: Images, Religion, and the Making of Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 1990), Gregor T. Goethals penetrates the popular visual arts, exposing how they mediate values and shape character. William D. Romanowski expertly analyzes the religious role of entertainment in American life in his lively *Pop Culture Wars* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996). Three articles that explore the idea, promise, and threat of Christians and contemporary films are, respectively, Mark Coppenger's "Christian Perspective on Film" in Leland Ryken's *Christian Imagination* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 285–302; Terry Lindvall's "Spectacular Transcendence: Cinematic Representation of African American Christianity," *The Howard Journal of Communications* 7, no. 5 (1996): 205–220; and Roy M. Anker's "Yikes! Nightmares From Hollywood," *Christianity Today*, 16 June 1989, 18–23.

⁵Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin, 1985).

Creation and the Fall

An understanding of the Christian's relationship to culture can be grounded in two biblical doctrines: Creation and the Fall. Each emphasizes a particular truth regarding the human condition that seems to contradict or oppose the other. However, both are true and should exist in a healthy, fruitful tension. Otherwise, if we align ourselves with either doctrine, our responses to culture will differ considerably, and if we interpret either doctrine in isolation from the other or propose either doctrine as the exclusive means for dealing with popular culture, its meaning can be skewed and abused. I have chosen to label these two responses: creationist and conversionist.⁶

On one side we place the doctrine of God as Creator. The Scriptures declare, as does nature itself, that God created everything, and that He created it all good and pleasing. The Apostles' Creed confesses belief in God the Father, Maker of heaven and earth. In studying the doctrine of Creation, we discover from Genesis the good foundation for all of life. The Psalmist declares the glory of God in Creation (Psalm 19), and Paul points out that all men and women can clearly understand the divine nature by contemplating the created order (Rom. 1:19-20). Traces, clues, hints, whispers, and rumors of God's power and grace are scattered about this world, and human beings, according to Paul, have the vision to see the beauty of God's goodness. Every bush, if we could just see it as a burning bush, is a message from God to us as it was to Moses.

The creationist approach celebrates goodness in everything. It tends to be optimistic, romantic, at times even naive, in approaching life. Looking out of prison bars, it looks at the stars. It is a response full of gladness and gratitude, hope and delight, knowing that God himself made this world and that everything in it is good. The creationist receives the world with rejoicing, for he or she has eyes of faith to see God working for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purposes (Rom. 8:28). However, the creationist may neglect the problem of sin, evil, and the Fall, preferring, like Forrest Gump, to see goodness in all things.

Beside this affirming doctrine of God's most excellent handiwork is the clear, biblical doctrine of the Fall. That which was created good has become "depraved" (John Calvin's term) or "eclipsed" (Augustine's term).⁷ The Scriptures declare that be-

⁶I am indebted to H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1951), for my understanding of the relations of these two doctrines to culture.

⁷John Calvin, *A Compendium of the Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. Hugh T. Kerr (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 48-49, and St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Baltimore: Penguin Classics, 1961), 133.

cause Adam and Eve ate fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, their descendants and all creation itself were cursed and placed under the judgment of God. This being so, all creation must wait and groan for its redemption (Rom. 3:10; 8:22). In studying the doctrine of the Fall, we discover the tendency of all things to rot, or go bad, the human imagination as much as egg salad. Thus we are rightly suspicious of the corruption and perversion of human sin. Informed by the doctrine of the Fall, the conversionist sees the need for all things to be changed and made right.

Related to both Creation and Fall is the nature of human beings, creatures who are made in the image of God but who repudiate their Maker. The fact of the Fall calls for redemption; people need to be converted, transformed, made new. The conversionist notes Paul's observation in Romans where he points out that even though the sublime grandeur of God is evident, His human creation refused to give Him honor or thanks. They "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (Rom. 1:23). Humankind worshiped its own false images rather than God himself. And so all of us became slaves to perversion and depravity, desperately needing to be redeemed and rescued from our sin. The conversionist believes that even believers live in a corrupt and fallen world, with traps and snares set before our feet. We are in a dangerous world and must be wary, for Satan is on the prowl, seeking to devour us.

Creation and the Fall—these two doctrines define our predicament. We were created good, but we fell. We still bear the image of God, but it has been marred. Making us like himself, the God who speaks (or, as Francis Schaeffer wrote, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*) gave us an important feature of His nature: He made us communicators. He also made us, in Tolkien's word, subcreators.⁸ And as subcreators, our handiwork of communication is culture. The first culture of the human (as recounted by Scripture) was agriculture, the call to cultivate a garden, to put it in order. Then, in the garden, Adam, not God, named the animals, creating a culture of human language. And Adam and Eve were given "dominion," the responsibility to maintain order in their garden culture. God blessed Adam and Eve with a cultural mandate to rule over Creation, which He saw as very good (Gen. 1:31).

Though the Fall subverted the wholly good results of the cultural mandate, it did not change the mandate itself. The very first chapter of Genesis enjoins us to attend to the whole of cre-

"Creation and the Fall—these two doctrines define our predicament. We were created good, but we fell."

⁸J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," in *Essays Presented To Charles Williams*, ed. C. S. Lewis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 57.

"Though the Fall subverted the wholly good results of the cultural mandate, it did not change the mandate itself."

ation and to rule as regents in the name of God and for His glory.⁹ Regardless of the Fall, we humans have been given this special calling to be subcreators of culture, to be namers and identifiers of our fellow creatures. And we are still vested with the challenge to maintain the earthly order. But the Fall has

made both cultural tasks infinitely more difficult. There is a confusion of tongues, so to speak, in the current practice of "naming," and the rampant selfishness that resulted from the Fall has made the development of a redeemed culture an ongoing challenge.

Disagreements between creationist and conversionist views about popular culture stem from attitudes about the effects of the Fall. Ingrid Shafer characterizes the two groups as those who primarily "see the world fractured by original sin versus those who see the world connected by original blessing."¹⁰ The creationist position embraces a Garden of Eden perspective in which goodness and beauty are seen to be at the center of, or the basis of, all popular art and culture. The conversionist, on the other hand, sees a corrupt world in dire straits. Anything done or made by human effort is no better than dung (Philip. 3:8). Our best response, conversionists would say, is to be separate from the world, to reject it and its products.

Christians need to recognize the validity of both perspectives. At times we need to flee the pleasure offered us, as Joseph did (and Pinocchio on Pleasure Island did not). At other times we should freely partake of what is presented to us, enjoying the moonlight of popular culture, but recognizing that it is only sunlight secondhand. In today's world of cinema, the pleasure of watching the amazing ways of a man with a maiden (as Prov. 30:18-19 puts it) tastes like juicy grapes in such romantic comedies as Frank Capra's 1934 *It Happened One Night* or the 1987 Steve Martin comedy *Roxanne*.

The justification for Christians participating in popular culture derives from the principles of freedom and discernment. Each of us is invited not only to enjoy God but to enjoy His creation and His creatures. We can work *and* play to the glory of God, being free and wary. In later sections we shall consider

⁹The subject of the cultural mandate has been addressed in the truly wise and insightful words of Gene Edward Veith, Jr., in two works: *The Gift of Art* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1983) and *State of the Arts* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1991). See also Kenneth A. Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1989), and Leland Ryken, *Culture in Christian Perspective* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah Press, 1986).

¹⁰Ingrid Shafer, "Introduction: The Catholic Imagination in Popular Film and Television," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 19 (Summer 1991): 50-51.

two models for engaging popular culture. Our goal is to find a balanced model that integrates the two doctrines of Creation and the Fall and that will shape our souls and our appetites. At the same time, I am reminded of the mistake of the worldly-wise man of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* who savored the doctrines of the world and let them shape his soul as much as his stomach. We therefore turn our attention first to the task of discerning cultural values and the related problem of popular culture's power to seduce.

Discerning Cultural Values

The entertainment media culture can be defined as a value-packed commodity. Christians entering the temples of popular entertainment must become aware of what ideology and values are being sold to them, what message Hollywood is trying to sell. To become discriminating about these products one must first become discerning. Yet some people ask a preliminary question: whether we should even come into contact with popular culture. For the Christian all things, including interacting with the entertainment media, are lawful, but not all are necessarily profitable or edifying (1 Cor. 10:23; 16:12). Thus while God grants permission to the spiritually mature to explore and enjoy our world, wisdom dictates that we exercise prudence and discrimination. Can we attend all films to the glory of God? Certainly not. Many films would be a definite hindrance to our spiritual development. Will exercising our freedom offend some people? Probably so. Thus we must seek the good of our neighbor in making conscious choices about the entertainment we view. And we must ask ourselves, Is this worth my time and/or money from a scriptural perspective? Yet we cannot simply turn off the television set and consider ourselves safe from its impact. Millions of others don't turn it off and, like it or not, they become channels of its values. Moreover, some Christians may be called to work in the entertainment culture, either as artists or critics—to produce entertainment media or to critique it in all its beauty and ugliness. These are divinely sanctioned vocations, calls from God to interact with an industry whose ideologies and values often conflict with those of orthodox Christianity. It is thus crucial to be prepared, through sound teaching and with the full armor of God, to live and do battle in such a business that challenges Christian principles.

Culture often turns its signposts toward the ideals of truth, wisdom, and beauty. In the medieval era, talented dramatists presented morality plays that entertained while they instructed, and today William Bennett's *Book of Virtues* offers a fascinating compilation of old and new tales that enrich the human soul. In

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contemporary culture, however, vandals have marred the signs, even twisted them to point the wrong way. Some of the new signs are made of neon, flashing but not illuminating: They do not help us understand which way we should go. They point to physical attractiveness, material success, and individual accomplishment rather than eternal good. In soap operas like *Dynasty* and *Beverly Hills 90210*, viewers are intrigued by the plastic perils of the rich and beautiful. An astounding aspect of such shows is that we make gods and goddesses of their actors, many of whom portray greed, adultery, pride, and various vices, in a contemporary cult of celebrity.

Every popular cultural medium from feature films to music videos communicates a belief or value. All express an ideology or, as Richard Weaver points out, preach a sermon of sorts.¹¹ Some media messages may be overt—clearly showing the values they recommend. Obviously, classic Christian films like John Schmidt’s *SuperChristian* are straightforward in their presentation, as is a multileveled cinematic masterpiece like Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*. They are uncompromisingly explicit vehicles of communication. *SuperChristian* preaches that the inner person is much more important to God than the flashy external image; it says that image *isn’t* everything. *Schindler’s List* portrays the horror of the Jewish Holocaust, pounding into our consciousness that we must never forget the inhumanity mankind is capable of, the cruelty, the suffering. We must remember. One walks away from such films not only entertained but challenged to think about the message.

Other media, just as intentional, communicate indirectly. Producers, writers, and directors often communicate their values in parables, stimulating audience reflection through subtlety, irony, and ambiguity. Some directors intend audiences to wrestle with their material and discover for themselves the values planted in their stories.

Finally, cultural messages can be unintentional but no less significant. Regardless of whether one is producing *Nightmare on Elm Street Part VI*, *Jerry Springer*, *Married With Children*, or a Diet Dr. Pepper commercial, specific ideological viewpoints with aesthetic and moral values are being expressed. Audiences can read moral attitudes in any image, even if the message is ultimately nonsensical. As the Duchess said to Alice: “Tut, tut, child. Everything’s got a moral if only you can find it.”¹²

¹¹Richard Weaver, *Language Is Sermonic* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State Press, 1970), 201–225.

¹²Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (New York: New American Library, 1960), 84.

A seemingly mindless program like *Beavis and Butthead* recommends a certain way of looking at reality. Although it is intended as a satire on its own MTV audience, viewers, especially children, can still read other moral messages into it, as did the young boy who set another child on fire after watching a particular episode. The entertainment media culture recommends a certain way of looking at the world and offers specific behaviors as models.¹³ Christians who view the entertainment media culture must learn how to read those images and reject the ones that are incompatible with Christian standards and Scripture.

Seduction of Culture

Culture, like nature, abhors a vacuum. It rushes in to fill the void of human longing. In the process people can be seduced by the appearances of popular culture, which are counterfeits of the voice of God. The spiritual vacuum of the heart (which Augustine viewed as restless until it rests in God) may be quickly, but frothily filled with the fake religion of popular culture, involving the worship of money, sex, power, objects, and fame. In this section I shall script a bleak scenario so that we do not blithely dismiss the dangers of our subject. But remember, while this discussion deals with the darker side of our subject, even the darkness should not deter children of the light. Christians are meant to be the light of the world, which includes the darkness of an often godless entertainment culture.

Simulacra, or virtually real images, can easily seduce us. We have begun a slow, mindless move into cyberspace, an artificial, seemingly infinite world where humans travel on information highways and interface digitally rather than face-to-face. This new "reality" is almost neognostic (denying the reality of evil), exalting a new kind of spirituality, an electronic version, over the ordinary world. Its citizens prefer an artificial image to a person of flesh and blood, because the image is easier to manipulate, usually for one's own pleasure.

In ancient Israel, the primary bearers of ideological and narrative messages were the prophets and priests. One temptation of the Hebrew people was to surrender this vital function to pagan influences. Hebrew prophets repeatedly warned

"In ancient Israel, the primary bearers of ideological and narrative messages were the prophets and priests."

¹³The fact that even frothy television sitcoms provide social and political meanings is brought out in Darrell Y. Hamamoto's *Nervous Laughter: Television Situation Comedy and Liberal Democratic Ideology* (New York: Praeger, 1989). The book provides important critical analyses of how different decades of television comedies have preached competing versions of the American dream.

"Today, video and electronic media have become the primary bearers of ideology and morality."

them that heathen idols were mere sticks and stones; even so, these sticks and stones were often found seductive. Similarly, film images have the capacity to seduce. They create a way of looking at the world and shape the unwitting spectator into their kind of viewer. Like ancient idols of wood and stone, our celluloid and digitized images trigger emotions and physiological responses that properly belong to real life and true worship.

Today, video and electronic media have become the primary bearers of ideology and morality. The entertainment media seek to squeeze out the church and be the dominant authority in communicating values. But even more significant is that these new authorities have a hold on our attention that is more powerful, pervasive, and compelling than that of the church. The statues and stained-glass windows in the Notre Dame and Chartres cathedrals seem mute and silent compared to the explosive images created by the film industry.¹⁴

Popular culture is particularly potent in its visual impact in other ways as well. By presenting the female form as an image to be consumed by spectators, for example, it reduces every woman to an erotic commodity and reconstructs the man into a voyeur, or peeping Tom, who commits adultery with the image.¹⁵ Asherah (see sidebar) is reborn on screen. We dwell in a culture of unbelief, sex, violence, and death. We dwell in a world of advertising, artifice, and personality cults. What is frightfully disturbing is that most viewers know more about celebrities than about their next-door neighbors, or possibly even their own families.

The entertainment culture continually offers us narratives celebrating the Pelagian heresy, the false doctrine that human beings are essentially good people. This ancient, yet modern, heresy permeates the American popular culture of the twentieth century. Classical Hollywood cinema is grounded in the American dream, in which an individual can, by wit,

¹⁴Consider, for example, such films as *Die Hard* and *Waterworld*.

¹⁵Scott MacDonald points out that a key aspect of Hollywood film is the promotion of adultery. Citing feminist articles, he demonstrates that "the gaze in the movie theater is, for all practical purposes, gendered male: the pay off for the viewer, as often as not, is the eroticized female body, and the very fact of looking at conventional films becomes a form of repressed adultery. Just as so many men *in* films have sex with more than one woman, the male . . . spectator comes to 'know' the women in films in addition to whatever women they know in real life" ("From Zygote to Global Via Sue Friedrich's Films," *Journal of Film and Video* 44 [Spring/Summer 1992]: 31). This observation by secular critic MacDonald does sound a lot like Jesus' words in Matthew 5:27-28.

muscle, luck, inherent goodness, or mere grit, determine his or her (usually his) own salvation and destiny. Western rationalism, individualism, a dogmatic belief in the goodness of heroes, and self-determinism govern the narrative pattern of most Hollywood films. Heroes (usually male) shoot the villains, win the girls, destroy the evil universe, and triumph by their own skill and pluck. They are masters of their lives and fictional universe. Whatever Rambo or Rocky wills, he can do. But such ideology runs counter to the Christian doctrine of being lost in sin and in desperate need of God's grace and each other in the community of the church. Yet

Asherim

Asherim (plural for Asherah) were living trees or tree-like poles set up as sexual objects or high places for the devotion of ancient people. They symbolized fertility and the female principle in nature religions. Near most Phoenician altars, there existed an Asherah site promoting a worship of sexuality, offering soothing aromas to all their idols. Yet the worship was more akin to gross immorality than to reverence or praise. Incense was burned and sacrifices made at these high places on the mountain. Even in the city, Ezekiel cried out, "At the head of every street you built your lofty shrines and degraded your beauty, offering your body with increasing promiscuity to anyone who passed by. You engaged in prostitution with the Egyptians, your lustful neighbors, and provoked me to anger with your increasing promiscuity" (Ezek. 16:25-26).

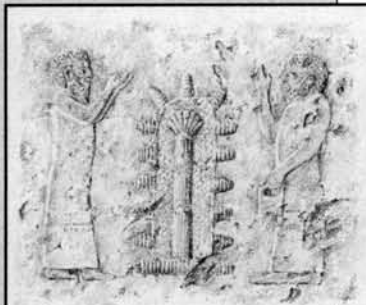
The Book of Deuteronomy forbade such practice. "Do not set up any wooden Asherah pole beside the altar you build to the Lord your God, and do not erect a sacred stone, for these the Lord your God hates" (Deut. 16:21-22). Forsaking the Lord, the people of God would bow down to these gods of carnality. Even King Solomon slipped from his wisdom and went after foreign

women (700 wives and 300 concubines). He found his heart turned away after their gods, such as Ashtoreth, the fertility goddess of the Sidonians.

Yet, pagan worship was not characterized only by the unrestrained sexuality around these giant phallic symbols. It was also marked by an obsession with violence. Human sacrifice was required by the national Moabite god, Chemosh (also set up by Solomon), and the Ammonite fire god, Molech, including children. And it was not unusual for adherents to whip themselves into a frenzy, like the pagan prophets in the super Baal contest with Elijah (Kings 17).

The idols, symbols, and graven images surrounding such worship portrayed and abetted sexual immorality and violence.

It is only a stone's throw from such graven images of wood, silver, and gold to our own photographic and electronic images that portray and encourage contemporary forms of erotic lust and aggression.



many films and television programs preach otherwise.¹⁶

Seduction by the media can occur in theological, ethical, or even aesthetic realms. Film and television may tempt us with views of the world that are nihilistic or utopian. They may tease us with stories that say that our actions have no moral consequences, that we may escape the wages of pride, revenge, lust, theft, and other sins. Or they may try to mesmerize us with images that are excessively romantic or disgusting.

Yet this seductive power is not bad in itself but in the purposes it is used for. Films can also seduce, charm, or persuade us into goodness, courage, charity, hope, faithfulness, holiness, and delight. Films as diverse as *Forrest Gump*, *The Lion King*, *The Elephant Man*, *Prince of Egypt*, *Amistad*, and *Schindler's List* have stimulated wholesome reflection and discussion.¹⁷

Recognizing popular culture's power to persuade, affect, influence—and, yes, seduce—what models are available and useful to us as we engage popular culture? Based on our earlier discussion of the biblical doctrines of Creation and the Fall, I now set forth two scriptural models that give clear warning of the dangers of popular culture and careful guidelines for participating in it.

Daniel's Model of Discernment

The history of God's people interacting with popular culture has teetered between creationist and conversionist, the extreme versions of which are the hopelessly naive and the rigidly legalistic. There is a problem with taking only one perspective.

¹⁶In their groundbreaking study *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson exegeted the narratives of classical Hollywood films to reveal goal-oriented protagonists as a "reflection of an ideology of American individualism and enterprise" (p. 16). People create or "cause" their own destinies. In contrast to such personal causality, classical Soviet films assumed stories were caused by the social and political factors of the collective. Other genres, such as film noir, operate in a fatalistic universe, in which treachery, existential despair, and inescapable determinism control the script. What is most remarkable and encouraging is a trend in which a few films, including *Forrest Gump*, *The Mission*, *Chariots of Fire*, *Babbette's Feast*, and even *The Time Bandits*, do acknowledge the possibility of divine causality, that someone outside the natural narrative may be involved in the outcome.

¹⁷The positive critical reviews of these films and others can be attained by subscribing to Ted Baehr's *Movieguide* (c/o The Christian Film & Television Commission, P.O. Box 190010, Atlanta, GA 31119) and various other cultural and art magazines that provide a biblical base, such as *Books & Culture* (P.O. Box 37011, Boone, IA 50037-2011), *The Alpha-Omega Film Report* (P.O. Box 25605, Colorado Springs, CO 80936), and *Inklings* (P.O. Box 12181, Denver, CO 80212-0181). I especially recommend the valuable insights of critic Michael Medved on PBS's "Sneak Previews." You should know what kind of film you are going to see before surrendering yourself to its seductive and hypnotic influences. Wisely choose which images may sleep in your imagination.

Neither model is satisfactory by itself. The creationist may be too naive and not notice the effects of the Fall upon all human beings. All of us have fallen away from goodness and none of us is immune to temptation. But the optimism of the creationist is a necessary check and balance to the pessimism of the conversionist. Knowing sin in the world and in ourselves, we tend to react legalistically and then to become judgmental. We seek to separate ourselves from cultures that are different from our own.¹⁸

Babylon was the center of an ancient Near Eastern empire that established a level of artistic and architectural splendor and beauty unequaled in the pagan world. The Babylonian gardens stood as one of the seven (cultural) wonders of the ancient world. The city's buildings were remarkable for their architecture and its walls stood impregnable and proud. King Nebuchadnezzar boasted, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" (Dan. 4:30) Into this powerful and prestigious center of culture came certain bright sons of Israel to be civil servants of the royal administration. One of them, Daniel, excelled the others. He represents one model for exploring the delicate and controversial issue of how the people of God can relate to popular culture.

The culture of Babylon, like ours, was overwhelmingly image-oriented. The dominant aesthetic of Babylonian culture could be seen in Nebuchadnezzar's construction of a spectacular golden image of himself. Graven images of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, stone, and brightly colored paints could be found in every nook and cranny, guiding and governing the life of the great empire. Also like ours, their culture found solace in mysticism, with soothsayers, magicians, astrologers, conjurers, and all manner of diviners.¹⁹ Yet, such "wisdom" could not prevent Nebuchadnezzar from going crazy and grazing like a cow (Dan. 5:28-33).

The culture of Babylon stressed beauty, excellence, innovation, vanity, and excess. It could easily have seduced a godly young man dropped into its luxurious lap. Yet Daniel created a consistent counterculture that transcended Babylonian opulence. In a country of overwhelming and attractive paganism,

"All of us have fallen away from goodness and none of us is immune to temptation."

¹⁸The etymological root of the word Pharisee is *parash*, meaning to "cleave, divide, separate." The Pharisee is one who separates himself or herself from the contamination of others and their culture. Their "separateness" is often revealed in a self-righteous posture.

¹⁹This suggests that New Age pop culture with all the celebrity psychic hotlines may be only the Old Age cultic religions dressed up in modern fashion.

this young Israelite steadfastly refused royal food and favors. However, his refusal was anything but a purist's asceticism. It was a clear statement about things that really mattered—his faith and Hebrew heritage.²⁰

Two key principles may be extracted from Daniel's example. First, he was well-established in his faith. He knew the law of God intimately. After years in captivity, Daniel and his companions remained solidly faithful to the Word of God, not only when their obedience meant running counter to the dominant culture, but also when it meant they might die for it.

The second principle, even more remarkable, was that Daniel saw and understood the Babylonian culture more clearly than did the most enlightened of his Babylonian contemporaries. He was a man who possessed "a spirit of the holy gods," as Belshazzar's queen described him. He was said to be full of "illumination, insight, and wisdom." God had given him and his friends knowledge and intelligence in every branch of literature and wisdom; Daniel even understood all kinds of visions and dreams (Dan. 1:17). Daniel was the last word, the best media critic around. He could even describe and interpret dreams he had not seen, previews of coming imperial attractions. As such, Daniel stood as a commendable prototype for God's people seeking to interact with popular culture, a balance between the creationist and conversionist approaches.

Like the creationist, Daniel was open to learning from all life and from studying the cultural practices, philosophies, and dreams of other people, even pagans. Yet like the conversionist,

Daniel critically evaluated the truth and goodness of their lifestyles. Even with the availability of the king's choice foods and wine, Daniel chose not to defile himself, but through self-control restricted his diet to vegetables and water. His knowledge of the fool, the sluggard, and the drunk of the *Book of Proverbs* from his

"Daniel was the last word, the best media critic around."

own culture made him aware of the dangers of temptation in a foreign culture. He was in Babylon, but not of Babylon.

Daniel tested his views of the Babylonian world in the light of his holy faith. He accepted the Babylonian culture for what it was and sought to understand it better than its own citizens understood it. But when it demanded his worship of the king or of anything his Hebrew faith found unacceptable, he rejected it. He was granted by God the gift of discerning the Babylonian culture and of knowing what was good and what was not. Surely Daniel's life of prayer, Scripture study, and circumspect judgment serves contemporary Christians as a commendable example of how to interact with popular culture.

²⁰At the very least his vegetarian experiment proved healthier than the more sumptuous Babylonian diet.

Paul's Transformational Model

A persistent problem confronting God's people has been the utter hegemonic power of the surrounding pagan cultures. (Hegemony can be understood as the informal but pervasive influence of culture over the values and attitudes of a group of people. Thus, as Michael Medved demonstrates in his book *Hollywood vs. America*, the media elite of Hollywood have hegemonic power over what is accepted as normal in our society.) Time and again, Israel compromised its faith and accommodated itself to the gods of the Philistines, Edomites, and others. These cultures were hostile to the Hebrew faith and culture. Rather than prohibiting the construction and worship of graven images, they encouraged it.²¹

The focus of cultural antagonism was the worship of Baal or Ashtoreth, cults fraught with the visual imagery of debasing rituals, including mutilation and murder. The popular cultic worship of the female Ashtoreth as religious prostitute and bloodthirsty war-goddess combined the familiar emphases of sex and violence that characterize much of contemporary popular culture. The role of the worshiper was his or her willingness to be seduced into unrestrained immorality through suggestive symbols. The writer of Proverbs continually warned young men against entering the seductive shrine of the prostitute, likening it to an ox going to slaughter (Prov. 7:21–22).²²

Literal idols and orgiastic rituals appear to be one thing—but much the same thing occurs symbolically when a culture itself becomes an idol, a deity, requiring its own form of ritualistic sacrifice. Referring to Israel's problem, the apostle Paul warned: "Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: 'The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry.' We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of

"A persistent problem confronting God's people has been the utter hegemonic power of the surrounding pagan cultures."

²¹Gene Edward Veith, Jr., offers insightful studies of the biblical foundations of art in his *State of the Arts* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1991). It must be pointed out that all artistic images were not forbidden to the Hebrews. They made room for visible religious items with the Tabernacle and priesthood, but they were primarily a people of the Word. The Tabernacle in all its symbolic splendor was overshadowed by a culture of poems, parables, psalms, and prophecies.

²²This image was brought out graphically in a 1987 melodrama produced by Adrian Lyne in which a brazen adulteress character seduced a married male character. She lived directly above a slaughterhouse, which foreshadowed the brutal slaughter of a pet rabbit and the climactic attempt to butcher his wife. The movie was a vivid and disturbing warning to anyone tempted to cheat on his or her spouse. It truly spelled out that the consequence of sin is death—as the terrible warning of the seventh chapter of Proverbs points out.

"The redemptive approach to popular culture flowers in the work of the apostle Paul."

them died" (1 Cor. 10:7-8). Paul insightfully called attention to the tendency of a pagan culture first to seduce its participants and then to swallow them in its excess and spit out their bones.

Anyone who has ever been part of the frenzy of a rock concert knows how easily the pulsating beat can reduce a listener to what the prophet described as a mule in heat (Jer. 2:24; Ezek. 23:20). Proverb 6:26 uses another metaphor: "For the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread."²³ These considerations all

point to what E. Michael Jones has called "Hollywood's Guilty Secret," the tendency of the media to propagate a Dionysian frenzy of sex, violence, and horror.²⁴ The gods of pagan popular culture lead to destruction. As God warned the ancient Israelites, "The worship of their gods will certainly be a snare to you" (Exod. 23:35).

In Paul's visit to Lystra (Acts 14), we see how the Hellenistic culture of his time had been deified. Culture itself became a god with its own cult following. After the miraculous healing of a lame man, the multitudes were certain Paul and Barnabas were really the Greek gods Hermes and Zeus. The temple priest of Zeus hastened to sacrifice oxen and garlands to these men who performed divine miracles. The crowds interpreted what was marvelous to them and tried to cram it into their cultural-religious worldview. Paul and Barnabas corrected the mistake, but only with great difficulty, thus showing us another approach to popular culture. This approach is called *redemptive* or *transformational*. It is rooted in the cultural mandate of Genesis and flowers in the work of the apostle Paul.

The redemptive approach recognizes the truth of both doctrines of Creation and the Fall. Yet it also recognizes that as Christ has redeemed us from being children of the dark to being children of the light, so we can be light in our culture: "Therefore do not be partners with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and

²³The adversarial relation of the Christian faith to the film and television industries has been spelled out in pamphlets by conservatives like A. W. Tozer's *Menace of the Religious Movie* (Wisconsin Rapids, Wis.: Rapids Christian Press, Inc.) and Gordon Lindsay's *Should Christians Attend the Movies?* (Dallas: The Voice of Healing Publishing Company, 1964). What is fascinating is that postmodernists are echoing the concerns of these Christians of a previous generation. Of particular interest are the works of Jean Baudrillard, whose titles indicate his view of the entertainment media: *Seduction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979) and *The Evil Demon of Images* (University of Sydney, Australia: The Power Institute, 1988).

²⁴E. Michael Jones, "Hollywood's Guilty Secret: How the Fetus Became a Monster; How Sex Became a Horror," *Culture Wars* 1, no. 1 (June 1995): 25-37.

truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible" (Eph. 5:7-13).

Christians are called children of light, even as we seek to usher light into a world of dark shadows and to bring out the results of the light. Paul was adept at finding openings for the gospel in the popular culture of his day. His communicative strategy of "becoming all things to all people" was put into practice at the Areopagus, where a Greek obsession, the worship of an unknown god, became a striking opportunity. Quoting Greek poets and referring to Greek games, races, and boxing matches, Paul took the Athenian culture as a starting point for introducing the light of the gospel. Rather than separating himself from their culture or consuming it uncritically, Paul explored it and found ways to adapt it to his own purposes. In this way he redeemed and transformed the popular culture of his day.

Sometimes confrontation was necessary. Paul realized that the profit motive underlay many of the cultural values in pagan society. Mammon (money: shekels, talents, drachma, dollar) was the real god behind most pagan gods. When Paul challenged Demetrius, the silversmith who made the figurines of Artemis, Demetrius rallied his associates with words any modern-day capitalist would embrace: "He called them together, along with the workmen in related trades, and said: 'Men, you know we receive a good income from this business'" (Acts 19:25). Paul subverted the culture of the money-merchants, attacking the source of profit by exposing the base values advertised in Ephesus. Prophetic critics today may also cause such riots among the commercial sponsors of our popular culture, especially when they convince audiences of the seductive power of the images employed by the mass media.²⁵ For Americans indeed spend an inordinate amount of money on entertainment.

Confrontation was not the only way to deal with the popular culture, as Paul demonstrated in other situations. The Book of Acts portrays apostolic interaction with the world as open, free, and transforming, though aware of the danger of false teachers coming in like savage wolves (Acts 20:29-31). Jesus' model of incarnational communication—of

"Christians are called children of light, even as we seek to usher light into a world of dark shadows."

²⁵Editorials attacked movie critic Michael Medved after his exposé of the movie industry's moral bankruptcy, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992). And the threat of not having lunch in the business anymore might well have struck K. L. Billingsley for his "Christian Critique of the World of Film," in *The Seductive Image* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1989).

coming into the world but remaining unstained by it—enables men and women of God to experience a breadth and diversity of cultural life without losing what is essential to our Christian life and testimony.

People of God do not easily accept cultural differences. It took a dramatic vision for Peter to be open to another culture. God commanded Peter to receive the unclean Gentiles into God's gracious Kingdom without changing their diet or most cultural practices (Acts 10:9–16; 11:1–18). The Council at Jerusalem agreed to overlook certain external matters of culture, such as circumcision, and asked only that Gentiles “abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:29). Paul was concerned that no unnecessary cultural yoke was to be hung on believers' necks.²⁶

As people of faith, we are permitted both to enjoy popular culture and to use its raw materials to produce ennobling and beautiful works of art. In other words, we are permitted to interact with the treasures of popular culture and marvel at what is good and lovely in them. We can take a simple entertaining film like *Home Alone* and find ourselves refreshed in watching a lost boy found and comforted in the confines of a church at Christmastime. We may also utilize the media to produce wholesome products in and through them, much as Ken Wales produced the television version of Catherine Marshall's inspiring book *Christy*.

Yet with a freedom to enjoy the gold and silver of pagan society, visual culture itself became a sort of stumbling block for the church. Early Christians found themselves walking a fine line between the dangers of idolatry and the advantages of imagery. In 725 Emperor Leo III of Constantinople sought to purge the church of what he saw as superstitious pagan influences. He banned the use of icons and religious pictures in worship.²⁷ Leo commanded his subjects to swear a hatred of images (imperial

²⁶Paul's sentiments would be echoed centuries later by Augustine in his discussion of “Egyptian gold” in *On Christian Doctrine*: “Just as the Egyptians had not only idols which the people of Israel detested and avoided, so also they had vases and ornaments of gold and silver and clothing which the Israelites took with them secretly when they fled, as if to put them to better use. They did not do this on their own authority but at God's commandment, while the Egyptians unwittingly supplied them with things which they themselves did not use well. In the same way, all the teaching of the pagans contain . . . also liberal disciplines more suited to the uses of truth . . . These are, as it were, their gold and silver.” When Christians separate themselves in spirit from their miserable society, they should take the enemy's treasure with them. When good or neutral things, whether ancient rhetoric or modern film, are “perversely and injuriously abused in the worship of demons” (as Augustine put it), the Christian should seize them and convert them to wholesome uses.

²⁷This is where the term *iconoclast*, “one who breaks images and smashes icons,” comes from.

portraits were permitted, however). His proclamation was opposed vigorously, however, by many artists and monks, and Pope Gregory of Rome rose up and excommunicated the iconoclasts. The use of images for and by the church was affirmed and celebrated.

The rejection of cultural images and icons was rooted in the dualism of the Manicheans (who sought to be more spiritual than God by condemning the visible world as evil) and in the worldviews of both the Jew and Moslem, who held the veneration of images to be idolatrous. Pope Gregory resisted these

Myth-Making and the Story of Stories

Often films are constructed from the stories of human experience, stories that are thought to be universal and what we may call mythic (See chap. 1, pp. 41-44). For example, the theme in Chris Columbus's hilarious slapstick *Home Alone* offers a variation on a age-old myth of being lost and then found. Myth must not be taken as meaning "lie" or "falsehood." Myth is not the opposite of truth. In art myth must be understood in its original sense, derived from the Greek *mythos*, as "story" or "tale." For C. S. Lewis, myth reaches deep into the heart of humanity and touches some transcendent reality that the forms of discursive thought cannot fully convey. The myth, or universal story, of a god who descends to earth and takes on human form can be found in many cultures, according to Lewis. In Christianity, however, one finds this story matched with historical fact. The myth actually happened in the real historical person of Jesus Christ. Such ancient myths as a corn god dying and coming back to life dimly parallel the true event of our own crucified and resurrected Lord. The fact that this curious story is repeated in various societies is evidence of its ultimate truthfulness, for one expects to see shadows and reflections of a genuine light. Indeed, some popular myths can whet the human appetite for the Christian faith, whether it be the messianic undertones in the movie *ET* or the hope of love, trans-

formation, and rebirth in *Beauty and the Beast*.

For a more extensive treatment of myth, see the following works:

C. S. Lewis, "Myth Become Fact" and "Christian Apologetics" in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 89-103.

Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, N.Y.: Archer Books, 1970).

Frank McConnell, *Storytelling & Myth-making* (New York: Oxford UP, 1979).

George Gerbner, "Television: Modern Myth-maker," *Media & Values*, 40-41, (Summer/Fall, 1987), 8-9.

William F. Fore, *Mythmakers: Gospel, Culture and the Media* (New York: Friendship Press, 1990).

Geoffrey Hill, *Illuminating Shadows: The Mythic Power of Film* (Boston: Shambhala, 1992).

Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1993).

Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr's, eds., *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1995).

negative opinions by championing a positive use of such cultural signs and symbols. The Council of Nicaea resolved the issue in 787, decreeing: "pictures, the cross, and the Gospels should be given due salutation and honorable reverence, not indeed that true worship, which pertains alone to the divine nature . . . For the honor which is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents, and he who shows reverence to the image shows reverence to the subject represented in it."²⁸

The image was justified in that it honored the historical realities of God working in human events. Rather than forbidding images, the church used icons in worship and teaching as a vital means of communication. Later, in the fourteenth century, Nicholas of Lyra articulated in his *Praeceptorium* three reasons for the institution of images. First, most people could not read words, but they could read images. Second, people remembered what they saw but forgot what they heard. And third, since human emotions were sluggish, images would move people into devotion. As the church recognized the value of attracting its congregation through visual means, it produced cycles of morality and miracle plays. However, the use of icons did result in some people putting more faith in the images rather than God. Contemporary Bible-believing Christians do not venerate icons but put their faith in Christ and have a personal relationship with Him.

The key for transforming the popular culture is to recognize, with the Apostle Paul, that one can adapt the vehicles of communication for one's audience. What that means for the church in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is that we must speak truth through visual images as well as through the spoken and written word.

Creating Media Culture

The arguments for and against Christian involvement in popular culture have not changed much over the centuries. Tensions between creationists and conversionists surfaced early in church history and are still with us today. An early twentieth-century example bears this out. Christian response to the advent of film was divided between a reaction against and a creative involvement with the new medium. The church recognized both dangers and opportunities in the new technology (a perspective that wisely recommends itself as CD-ROM, interactive media, and innovative forms of digital technology invade our worlds).²⁹

On one hand, the church condemned the technique and content of the "moving picture." Films were viewed as "the Devil's Camera," projecting the world, the flesh, and the devil into dark and dirty dens of iniquity. The church traditions that empha-

²⁸Walker, Williston, *A History of the Christian Church*, 3d ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 149.

²⁹Creative work is being done with the new technology by the American Bible Society in New York City.

sized human sinfulness and the need for repentance attempted to keep their congregations from all worldly amusements, including movies.

On the other hand, as early as 1898 Colonel Henry Hadley, an evangelist, saw moving pictures as a new and dynamic means of declaring the good news through visual parables. Hadley used films extensively in his evangelistic crusades in Atlantic City and the East Coast, drawing thousands of people to see his illustrated sermons. He believed that "these moving pictures are going to be the best teachers and the best preachers in the history of the world."³⁰

The value of popular culture for creativity as well as evangelism was not lost on keen observers. Writing in his 1922 book *Photoplay Writing*, William Lord Wright declared, "Nearly every plot element can be found in the Bible. Romance, adventure, sex problems—all can be found within the covers of the Book of Books, if you but know how to look for them. Shakespeare knew this and a number of his plots are but variations of the old, old parables and stories which the Bible presents."³¹

By 1920 over 2,000 churches used motion pictures, combining entertainment, education, and evangelism.³² Conservative Christians like Billy Sunday saw fresh potential in the popular new medium. His hope regarding its possibility for good was matched by his evangelistic boldness in mixing with the Hollywood community. In 1915 director Allen Dwan was directing a film entitled *Jordan Is a Hard Road*. Since one of his actors was to play an evangelist, Dwan recalled:

[I] got a fellow named Billy Sunday who was a well-known evangelist, like today's Billy Graham, and used him as my technical advisor. We put up a huge tent over in Hollywood across from the studio and filled it full of extras—not professional ones—just people off the streets. Now, in the story, Campeau is supposed to harangue them about religion and make them come to God, but I got Billy Sunday up there and he let them have one of his best hot lectures, and I had about three cameras filming only the audience. And pretty soon these people began to feel it, and the first thing you know, they were crawling up the aisles on their knees, coming up to Billy Sunday to be saved, hollering "Hallelujah" and going into hysteria. A terrific scene. No bunch of million-dollar actors could have done it. You could see the frenzy in their faces. And after we cut, he actually went on with a religious revival right there. Then I was able to put Campeau up there and let him go through the gestures of talk, cutting back all the time to these people I'd already shot. The effect was astonishing.³³

³⁰Terry Ramsage, *A Million and One Nights* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926), 375.

³¹William Lord Wright, *Photoplay Writing* (New York: Falk, 1922).

³²G. William Jones, *Sunday Night at the Movies* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1967), 25.

³³Peter Bogdonovitch, *Allen Dwan: The Last Pioneer* (New York: Praeger, 1971).

Here Billy Sunday models a healthy and encouraging enthusiasm, showing how a Bible-believing preacher would see his role of taking the good news everywhere, even to a film set.

In the earliest days of film industry, however, the Church was divided regarding the value of the new technology. Some questioned its worth. Other churches readily incorporated it for attracting and ministering to those outside their walls. In 1910 a minister named Reverend Jump envisioned the possibilities of what God might be able to do with film in the church. In his pamphlet *The Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture*, Jump argued that when Jesus set forth the essential meaning of Christianity in a universal language that should speak to men of every age and all races, he chose a dramatic story. He told the

Interactive Christians

When one of the first revolutionary communication technologies, the telegraph, made its debut, the prophetic message that Samuel Morse launched for public meditation was, "What hath God wrought?" We should be asking the same question today with the explosion of new interactive communication technologies.

After decades of research on the antisocial effects of media, nations around the world have discovered the powerful positive impact of prosocial entertainment during the 1980s and 1990s. Television soap operas have been used to promote literacy in Mexico, women's status in India, and agricultural innovation in Kenya. Popular music videos have encouraged teenage sexual abstinence in Latin America and the Philippines. Blockbuster films have improved health practices in Bangladesh and India.

The use of entertainment for education is rapidly diffusing in western countries too. Unfortunately, the pornographer is again creating a suspicion of the new media frontiers

like the Internet. Instead of allowing the potential corrupting uses of communication technology to make us retreat from the giants in the Canaan of Cyberspace, God's people should be aggressively seeking to know how He intends to use CD-ROMs, interactive virtual reality, and the World Wide Web for His purposes. Shouldn't we Christians assume that God has allowed us to use new digital imaging processes for more than simply visualizing interactions of ex-presidents with Forrest Gump or Elvis with Pizza Lovers?

Since God is the most creative being in the universe, Christians should be at the forefront of creatively exploring new communication technologies as means of propagating ideas, crafting messages, and communicating truth. The American Bible Society is using videotapes and CD-ROM to help believers visualize Scripture. The Christian Broadcasting Network is using animation to bring Bible stories to millions of television viewers in over forty nations. Ark Multimedia Publishing is teaching cre-



Dr. William J.
Brown

parable of the Good Samaritan, and then gave an example of ideal preaching, which many preachers of the present day seem to have completely overlooked:

Note some of the details of that sermon-story. It was not taken from the Torah, but from contemporary experience. It was an exciting robber story. It frankly introduced morally negative elements and left them negative almost to the end of the story. Was it not dangerous to the church establishment of that day to have its priest and Levite held up to ridicule as hypocrites and *poseurs*? And as for the robbers, not only did the story realistically describe their violent crime, but it left them victorious in their wickedness. They scurried off with their booty, unrepentant of their sins, chuckling at a man foolish enough to venture out alone on the notorious Jerusalem-Jericho road. Despite not being scriptural to

ationism, Project Light is teaching Bible-based language phonics, and Jubilee Tech International is teaching Bible in other languages, all on interactive CD-ROM. Beyond CD-ROM technology, we have an even more powerful means of communication: an international, decentralized, integrated, digital network capable of transmitting text, graphics, sound, and visual images across the globe at the speed of light.

Dr. Harry Sova of Blue Ridge Interactive, Inc., advises creative Christian artists to invade the digital world:

"You can now produce your own multimedia movies, interactive games, reference materials, etc., with a minimum of equipment, expense, staff, and probably do all of this in a room over your garage or in your garage. Only a handful of people are now needed to take a project from writing stage to distribution. Production is no longer defined by the size of your studios, equipment, or how many power lunches were consumed in order to finance your last mega project. Use your God-given

talents and produce a music video, a family-oriented game, an epic motion picture, or a full-color magazine. Publish them on CD-ROM, videotape, digital audio, or the World Wide Web."

Some Christian students will be called to be the new creative artists to impact our world for Christ through the new media. Just as C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien were literary Christian thinkers who influenced many generations through their written work, God wants to gather an army of innovative Christians who will fuse imagination with the visual image to tell stories that redeem both our culture and individuals within it. New media technologies should be viewed as an exciting opportunity for Christians to use the power of entertainment-education to promote biblical values and beliefs and open electronic windows in our popular culture and let in the Light.

—Dr. William J. Brown, Dean, College of Communication and the Arts, Regent University.

the people who heard it, despite its level of excitement and its realistic and morally negative features, who dares assert that the story of the Good Samaritan has wrought harm in the world? Rather, it has earned for itself recognition as being the central parable of all Jesus' teachings.³⁴

This parable needed only a new title like "The Adventures of a Highwayman" or "Raiders of the Lost Samaritan" to make it a splendid movie. Jump believed that the church could easily adopt the form of visual media and communicate in a way commensurate with Jesus' own style. The church could pour new wine into new wineskins.

Christians are called to seize opportunities to translate their faith into the vernacular of the day, to communicate with the secular age through their visual media and challenge them on their own ground. In the lead article of the Fall 1993 issue of *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Bill Brown investigated what has been called "prosocial entertainment." Brown noted the internationally popular work of CBN's animated Super-Book series in its influence upon audience members' beliefs. In exploring the expanding influence of the entertainment media to address societal problems and promote ethical behaviors, he showcased filmmaking at Regent University:

In 1991, a popular award-winning film called *Turtle Races* was produced to tell the story of a young long-distance runner who works with handicapped children through the Special Olympics program. The film, intended to promote a better understanding and treatment of the physically impaired, was entirely produced by film students at Regent University in Virginia. A year later, film students at Regent produced *Crowning Glory*, another award-winning film about the struggles of a family helping their daughter fight the physical and emotional battles of cancer.³⁵

What was important about these two movies was a firm conviction that the media are not only persuasive for evil but for good as well. If we believe the media can change our attitudes about saving rain forests or wearing seatbelts or buying toothpaste, can they not also persuade us regarding integrity, chastity, faithfulness to God and to our families, and other positive virtues?

Scripture affirms both the liberty and the call of the people of God to go into the world. Missionary Elisabeth Elliot wrote of Naaman who, after his healing, inquired of Elijah whether it

³⁴Reverend Herbert A. Jump, *The Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture* (New Britain, Conn.: South Congregational Church, 1911).

³⁵William J. Brown and Arvind Singhal, "Ethical Considerations of Promoting Prosocial Messages Through the Popular Media," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 21, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 92-99. In "Using Pop Culture to Fight Teen Violence," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (21 July 1995), A5, Amy Magaro Rubin argues that positive proactive messages, as designed by Jay Winsten, director of Harvard's Center for Health Communication, have a powerful impact on youth.

was now possible or appropriate for him to go into the temple of pagan gods and help his master in his heathen worship. Elijah's words were simply, "Go in peace." The Christian likewise is called to go into the world, but not be of it. Some saints, exercising appropriate care and wisdom and with appropriate grounding in Scripture, may be called to go into Hollywood and work.³⁶ In doing so, they can be cultural tentmakers, the Bezalels of the media, not only putting out overtly religious propaganda, but weaving subtle, good stories for the cultural marketplace. This creative work has been done and is being done by Christians: David Puttnam (*Chariots of Fire, The Mission*), Matt Williams (*Home Improvement*), Don Hahn (*Beauty and the Beast, The Lion King*), Martha Williamson (*Touched By An Angel*), Chris Auer (*Big Brother Jake*), Peter Engel (*Saved By The Bell*), and others who have leavened the Hollywood culture with media of virtue and wholesome delight.³⁷ The challenge now is for future generations of Christian artists to pick up the torch and take the light of God (the Father of natural as well as spiritual lights) into the darkness of the twenty-first century.

When British journalist G. K. Chesterton visited America in 1927, he noted that Americans fell short of being true peasants like those in Oberammergau, Austria, who produced the Passion Play for their community. The defect in Americans is that "they do not produce their own spiritual food in the same sense as their own material food. They do not, like some peasants, create other kinds of culture besides the kind called agriculture. Their culture all comes from the great cities; and that is where all the evil comes from. You would hardly find in Oklahoma, what was found in Oberammergau. What goes to Oklahoma is not the peasant play but the cinema. And the objection to the cinema is not so much that it goes to Oklahoma as that it does not come from Oklahoma."³⁸ Christians from

"Scripture affirms both the liberty and the call of the people of God to go into the world."

³⁶Jesus prayed that God would not take His disciples out of the world but that they would be kept from the evil one (John 17:15). In this connection, I must acknowledge the vanguard work of Francis A. Schaeffer and his daring son Franky Schaeffer for providing spirited apologetics for Christians to be involved in the arts. See especially Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1979), and Franky Schaeffer, *Sham Pearls for Real Swine* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1990). However, I am more indebted to C.S. Lewis and his essays, especially "Christianity and Literature" and "Christianity and Culture" in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967).

³⁷Michael Medved, "Elites in Hollywood Rediscovering Traditional Religion," *Washington Times*, National Weekly Edition (May 1-7, 1995), 23.

³⁸G. K. Chesterton, "What I Saw In America," in G. K. Chesterton: *Collected Works*, 21 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 106.

Oklahoma, Missouri, and around the world must begin to produce wholesome, nutritious, and nourishing entertainment culture. We are called to sow our faith in the media and bring forth hearty and delicious fruit.

Critiquing Media Culture

We have been talking about utilizing the technical tools of the entertainment industry to produce worthwhile and morally

The Joy of Discernment



Dr. Ted Baehr

"I saw this movie the other night, and it was awful!" I hear these sentiments constantly from Christians who have distasteful experiences with the mass media of entertainment but seem clueless about how to find the good and exercise the critical awareness and discernment skills to get the most enjoyment out of a movie.

To give credit to the disenchanted, there is no doubt that there are many rotten movies out there, but the good news is that there were more good films coming out of Hollywood in 1994 and 1995 than had been released since the late 1960s. Whereas there were only a handful of family and wholesome mature audience movies released in 1990, in 1994 forty percent of the films released were aimed at families, and there were many films like *While You Were Sleeping*, *Clear And Present Danger*, *Shadowlands*, and *The Madness Of King George* which were aimed at mature audiences but contained no perverse sex, little or moderate violence and few foul words. The key is knowing about the movie you are about to see and then understanding the grammar of the movie to get the most out of it.

Christians must think about each

movie in several ways: what are its artistic values; for example, how does it amuse the audience? What kind of language does it use? and, how does it depict violence and sexual behavior? Further, what are its moral values; for example, how do the characters relate to each other? how accurate is it in presenting historical events? what is its worldview? and, what is its overall message? Is this movie appropriate for children? Teenagers? Adults? How does this movie compare with similar movies in its attitude toward society, politics, authority figures, and the causes and solutions of individual and social problems? For the Christian, of course, the message of every movie must ultimately be compared with the message of the Bible.

The key to this analysis and to developing critical media awareness skills is asking the right questions to gain discernment of the movie. The good news is that movies and other entertainment can be enjoyable and even fun if you have trustworthy guidance in choosing the good and if you have developed the media awareness skills to get the most out of the movie without being manipulated by it.

—Dr. Ted Baehr, publisher, *Movieguide*, Atlanta, Georgia.

ennobling alternatives. But another question remains: What practical steps can we take to avoid being contaminated when *consuming* popular culture? Several responses come to mind.

First, our minds must be set on the things above (Col. 3:1–2). Our priorities in life must be to serve God and our neighbors. Many of us become so preoccupied with a televised music video or an NBA basketball game that we meet any interruption with growls, grunts, stony silences, or other “don’t bother me” responses. If we become so obsessed with our own entertainment that God or one of His servants cannot call us out from it, we have sold our lives to a love of the world. The media, even produced by Christians or celebrating a Christian message, must always be put aside for truly important human interactions. We should not swallow popular entertainment junk food merely because we have nothing else to do. We may watch to enjoy ourselves, but not just because it is there—lest we become too easily what Jerry Kozinski called “videots.”³⁹

Second, having put love of Christ and our neighbors at the center of our lives, we must critically assess our own worldview and our own character. Daniel’s intimate experience with the living God and his studied understanding of his faith and religious tradition equipped him to meet any foreign culture. Do we know what our moral, spiritual, and aesthetic norms are? If not, we are obligated to discover them. In addition, we should become aware of and confess those weaknesses and temptations we are prone to. How are we affected by scenes featuring profanity, nudity, violence, or sex? How do images of the horrific and the occult affect us? Do we have an inordinate fascination with grief or suffering, even romantic suffering? Do films tempt us to covet certain lifestyles? Let us examine our own motives for watching. Against which standards do we measure what we will watch? Scriptural or popular culture? God has set those twinges of conscience and guilt in our hearts for a reason. Through its media the world offers the temptations of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. And they are not called temptations for nothing. There *is* something perversely fascinating and inviting about portrayals of sex, violence, heroism, and success in the media. It is foolish for Christians to expose themselves to what may haunt or hurt them. Likewise, let us recognize what ennobles and encourages us. Are there certain narratives that help us recognize human dignity, encourage us, breathe compassion into us, or enable us to see aspects of life that we need to see (but would rather not)?

Third, we cannot merely watch passively, chomping “the chewing gum for the eyes;” rather, we should learn to critically apply aesthetic, ethical, and theological categories to distinguish good from bad entertainment. A film may be technically

³⁹Jerry Kozinski, *Being There* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970).

brilliant or a model of superb acting, but at the same time morally destructive. On the other hand, a program may be theologically sound but aesthetically dull and inferior. One could possibly enjoy a film for its entertainment and yet find it reprehensible for its worldview. We must realize that the film or program we are about to see is implicitly arguing for some particular way of viewing life. It promotes a certain way of looking at revenge, forgiveness, religion, parents, the opposite sex, perhaps even the

"We should learn to critically apply aesthetic, ethical, and theological categories to distinguish good from bad entertainment."

value of a college education. (On this last point, it is pertinent to ask how *The Absent-Minded Professor*, acceptable to most Christians, differs from *Animal House*.) Quentin Schultze argues that each television and film story "functions as the Bible for millions of people."⁴⁰ In what ways do these products of the

entertainment media form the bases for people to conduct their lives? The mind must be kept alert. Many films seek to subvert the workings of the mind by appealing exclusively to the senses, the gut, the imagination. Some films arouse, disturb, or excite even to the point of prompting unthoughtful viewers to act out what they see, just like the viewer of *Beavis and Butthead*. One is what one eats. Walt Whitman wrote that there was a child who went forth and everything he saw became a part of him. What is becoming a part of us? We must remain ever vigilant, even in the leisure of our casual entertainment.⁴¹

We don't need to view much of entertainment media to find out if it is bad. Our standards based on Scripture (not the standards of popular culture), plus the witness of the Holy Spirit within us, should screen many products of popular culture from our consideration, to say nothing of our attendance.

Polishing our critical skills for viewing requires us to acquire a basic grammar and understanding of production. We can learn to recognize the rhetorical and emotional effects that the choice of actors and actresses, music, lighting, film angles, and a host of other editing techniques have on our responses to different films or television programs. We can probe as well the explicit and implicit values of the film. What, for instance, is its view of human nature and the human dilemma? What moral or intellectual positions does it take? Is its view of life relativistic, existentially meaningless, deterministic, romanticized? How

⁴⁰Quentin Schultze, *Television: Manna From Hollywood?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986).

⁴¹Bob Briner has crafted a very sensible set of action steps for dealing with media criticism in his *Roaring Lambs: A Gentle Plan to Radically Change Your World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993). He also showcases Regent University alumnus Frank Schroeder as an independent director of quality family films (*Pistol Pete*) who helps to introduce wholesome entertainment into the media marketplace.

does it portray religion, God, church, or Christianity? Does it contribute to our perceptions of life as more violent or ridiculous or sublime? Finally, our perspectives on the media should be continually tested within or against a community of family, friends, church, professors, and other Christians. Such candid and open interaction of discussion and debate is certain to leave a greater impact on us than the program itself.

Conclusion

Ultimately our call as Christians in a multicultural world must not only be to critically discern and enjoy the cultures of other people and learn from them, but to bring forth our own cultural fruit. We are under a cultural mandate as Christians to be salt and light in this world, not only to be followers of Christ but to be redemptive agents in our society. In the early days of silent film, Presbyterian biblical scholar J. Gresham Machen preached that Christianity must remain connected to and pervade all areas of human activity. "Any branch of human endeavor . . . must be brought into some relation to the gospel. It must be studied either to be demonstrated as false or in order to be made useful in advancing the Kingdom of God."⁴² We should ask ourselves, Do our choices lead us toward God or away from God?

The whole of human life must be brought into subjection to the wisdom and light of God. We must not naively consume film, television, or video games; rather we must seek not only to understand what persuasive messages these media convey but also how to use them to communicate biblical truths.

These two challenges exist for Christians: (1) to be circumspect about what we both consume and produce in the popular entertainment culture and (2) to serve Living Bread to a world sated with moral junk food. The church may interrupt the world's cultural agenda by producing Christian artists who entertain an audience willing to hear and ponder a parable. Servants of God like Daniel were able not only to interpret the dreams of pagans but to receive their own dramatic dreams as well and communicate them in compelling ways to fascinated audiences.

In conclusion let us consider the collapse of the Tower of Babel, confusing tongues and culture, and another biblical event: Pentecost, which brought together many tongues and cultures in the proclamation of the gospel. Cultures can find their proper place in the kingdom of God. Though we do not escape from culture, we are not to be conformed to it. Redeemed and transformed, we obey the cultural mandate to enjoy what is good and beautiful and to exercise our own gifts and talents in contributing to everything that glorifies God. When

⁴²J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity and Culture" in *The Banner of Truth* (June 1969).

we place culture under the Lordship of Christ we find a freedom to enjoy and cultivate it. We find that as we work and worship to the glory of God, we may also engage our culture—both as consumers and producers of culture—to the glory of God. With this understanding in mind, Mother Teresa following Madonna on *Letterman* might not have been so odd after all. In fact, the humble but tough little saint of God might well have entered the entertainer's life as an answer to prayer.⁴³

Review and Discussion Questions

1. How does Lindvall define "culture," "high culture," "popular culture," and "visual entertainment popular culture"? What are the relationships among these notions of culture?
2. Explain what is meant when William Kuhns says, "The fact is incontrovertible. People live 'by the media' whereas they once lived 'by the book.'" Do you agree with Kuhns?
3. Lindvall says that all popular entertainment media communicate beliefs and values. What does this mean? How does it occur? Give examples from television, videos, or films.
4. "The image has the capacity to seduce." What does Lindvall mean by this comment? Is the term *seduce* too strong a word for what he means? Explain your response and provide examples from the entertainment media to make your point.
5. Explain Lindvall's notions of the creationist and conversionist approaches to contemporary entertainment media. Are these two approaches compatible with each other or do they represent completely separate approaches?
6. What does Lindvall mean when he speaks of Daniel's "model of discernment"? What are the strengths and weaknesses of trying to apply Daniel's experience in ancient Babylon to our situation in today's world? Are the situations sufficiently similar to make a valuable comparison?
7. What is the "transformational model" that the author describes? How does it exemplify the doctrines of Creation and the Fall? Describe how it might work when applied to a process such as television or film production?
8. In your opinion, has the Christian community mastered or even competently used the production technology associated with television and film? Is it appropriate for the Christian community to do so? If so, under what circumstances and for what purposes?
9. In one way or another, most of us are *consumers* of products

⁴³Gary Liddle, Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at Evangel University and Michael Palmer, Professor of Philosophy at Evangel University provided extensive, valuable editorial assistance. Dayton Kingsriter, a member of the editorial board of Logion Press, provided thorough commentary on all aspects of the manuscript, for which I thank him.

created and distributed by the entertainment media. Summarize Lindvall's recommendations for avoiding being contaminated by what we consume. How would you evaluate his recommendations? Can you think of additional recommendations?

10. Lindvall says, "Contemporary popular culture rarely concerns itself with what is 'good,'" and "[t]he values promoted in the popular culture of television and film are seldom those of the Christian faith." What are the implications for Christians contemplating participation in such a culture?

Extended Projects for Reflection

1. If you have viewed a film or television program recently, develop a critique of it using either Lindvall's recommendations or some guidelines of your own. If you use your own guidelines, explain why they are useful and adequate for such a task.

2. Think of a film or television program that exemplifies values that ennoble us, accentuates human dignity, or in some way articulates a message of hope, compassion, justice, or love. Explain how the film or TV program articulates its message.

3. Suppose you are a film producer. Describe a film that you will produce that meets the following criteria:

- a. It is intended to attract a contemporary college-age audience
- b. It presents a Christian theme and assumes a Christian worldview
- c. It deals realistically with evil
- d. It is an artistic film (not a documentary)

How will your film attempt to satisfy these criteria?

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