

Responding to Pop Culture: The Need for Holiness and Engagement

Railing against popular culture is as common among **conservatives** as asphalt is on the highway. Yet righteous indignation and wounded outrage—while understandable, justified and sometimes necessary—by themselves are insufficient responses to the society around us.

Many Christians have sought proactively to respond to a culture whose major feature is a pandemic of moral erosion. In the arts and the media, efforts are being made to offer not just theologically sound but well-written, aesthetically appealing films and television programs, magazines whose journalistic standards and creativity are high, and music that reflects deeply upon the character and work of God. And there are numerous wonderful Christian ministries to persons in various, and frequently serious, kinds of need, ranging from orphans and sexually trafficked youth to women in crisis pregnancies and young men needing involved and compassionate male role models.

All to the good. But we have to be mindful that our culture is not something apart from us, something that can be observed with detachment or rejected with ease. If the culture is an ocean, Christians are afloat—sometimes barely—in it. Saying we will avoid pop culture completely is sort of like a fish saying it dislikes water.

It's clear that the culture around us is infusing Christian thought and practice far too much. Any brief review of the data indicates that the believing church is fraught not just with the consequences of sin but potent and sometimes controlling presuppositions of our anti-theistic era. As Ken

Myers wrote in his great book *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes*: "Popular culture has the power to set the pace, the agenda, and the priorities for much of our social and our spiritual existence, without our explicit consent. It requires a great effort not to be mastered by it."

As much as on individuals, this has taken a huge toll on the family. **Pop culture** has both exploited and widened family collapse. Consider the effect of television on family life. TV is but one culprit in this effort, but certainly a critical and representative one. As journalist Greg Braxton [notes](#), "The family unit itself has markedly changed since the mid-1970s, when the Federal Communications Commission pressured the top three networks to institute a 'family viewing hour' from 8 to 9 p.m.

"Over the last four decades—as divorce and single parenthood climbed sharply—the percentage of children younger than 18 living in a two-parent household slid from roughly 85 percent to 67 percent, according to statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau.

"Meanwhile, the family viewing hour policy, born from protests about the rising tide of sex and violence on TV in the early 1970s, was scrapped by the courts within a couple of years, leaving the networks to pledge their best effort in maintaining suitable family programming in that prime-time hour."

"Family hour" has now become a forum for the suggestive, the mocking, the demeaning and the culturally destructive. In a compelling piece in *The Atlantic*, left-of-center writer Jonathan Chait essentially [admits](#) that the critique of television long offered by social traditionalists has been an accurate one: "A trio of communications professors found that watching *Will & Grace* made audiences more receptive to **gay rights**, and especially viewers who had little contact in real life with gays and lesbians. And that one show was merely a

component of a concerted effort by Hollywood—dating back to *Soap* in the late '70s, which featured Billy Crystal's groundbreaking portrayal of a sympathetic gay character, through *Modern Family*—to prod audiences to accept homosexuality."

Chait even concedes, in a terse but potent statement, "We liberals owe not a small measure of our success to the propaganda campaign of a tiny, disproportionately influential cultural elite." Candor never was more surprising or more distressing.

Television is but one means by which a godless, self-exalting zeitgeist finds expression. Another, even more disturbing example: Pop culture increasingly treats little girls as baubles, not persons. Anecdotal evidence compiled by the American Psychological Association [indicates](#) that the sexualization of young girls is well underway: "Although extensive analyses documenting the sexualization of girls, in particular, have yet to be conducted, individual examples can easily be found. These include advertisements (e.g., the Skechers 'naughty and nice' ad that featured Christina Aguilera dressed as a schoolgirl in pigtails, with her shirt unbuttoned, licking a lollipop), dolls (e.g., Bratz dolls dressed in sexualized clothing such as miniskirts, fishnet stockings and feather boas), clothing (thongs sized for 7- to 10-year-olds, some printed with slogans such as 'wink wink'), and television programs (e.g., a televised fashion show in which adult models in lingerie were presented as young girls). Research documenting the pervasiveness and influence of such products and portrayals is sorely needed."

The list could go on and on, from Lady Gaga to prepubescent transvestitism to the increasing social acceptance of pornography to the relentless stream of films about the dead, vampires and mass murderers.

Praying about how to interact with and participate in popular

culture; intelligent and consistent resistance to its evils; finding or creating hope-giving alternatives; disciplining one's habits and shaping those of one's children; entering cultural and academic professions with a Christian vision to reshape them—these and many other good ideas abound.

To do any of these things effectively, however, means that one must have sufficient discernment to recognize the subtlety and pervasiveness of evil throughout our culture. One must be aware that the myriad fine and near-invisible threads of sin exist and learn how to see them.

Christians must become like ancient Israel's "sons of Issachar, men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do" (1 Chron. 12:32). An awareness of the gravity and extensiveness of the decay around us—much of it unapparent, at first, just as rotten wood can be masked by seemingly healthy bark—is the first step toward fighting and changing it.

In turn, a careful study and thorough knowledge of the Word of God; a healthy and continuous life of prayer; mature Christian fellowship; reading of books that increase wisdom rather than deplete it; and actively sharing the gospel and thereby engaging, spiritually and intellectually, with the needs of our day are essential for holy participation in and leadership of our culture.

"When we ... criticize culture, we might bear in mind Karl Barth's advice to young theologians to read both the Bible and the newspaper, but to 'interpret newspapers from your Bible,'" writes theologian Christopher B. Hays. Good counsel, to which I would add that writing for and editing one's newspaper might be exactly the cultural calling to which God is urging you.

Participation without pollution; engagement without moral enervation; using every venue of media, the arts, politics,

business, etc., to share the good news of Jesus' atoning death and victory over the grave—these are the ends toward which believers can and must strive if faithfulness to “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 1:2) in our culture truly is our goal.

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