

Friday Focus

From Emory

The Earthly Collision of the 'Cultural Comet'

Can Christians engage themselves in areas of the arts that are not distinctly Christian? Is attendance at a country music concert or a pilgrimage to hear the rock group *The Eagles* at best a waste of time, and at worst exposure to a defiling slice of carnal culture that corrupts our walk and diminishes our witness as Christians?

What is appropriate for one to engage in personally, and what parameters are there for school-endorsement or sanction for us as a classical and Christian school? As a Christian school, can we sing *Jingle Bells* at a 1st grade school Christmas program, allow our 2nd grade classes to hunt Easter eggs at a school family's home party, play secular music at school-sponsored dances and as athletic warm-up music, watch movies such as *Lion King* on a grammar school trip or *Ghost* on an 8th grade trip? If so, how do we justify this biblically, and what guidelines are used to guard our students?

Because we are a Christian school, should our rhetoric literature reading lists avoid authors, subjects, and even publishers of materials that are carnal and deal with characterization involving sin situations and passions that are antithetical to Christian love and grace? Should non-Christian publishers and authors be used?

These are questions with which PCS has had to grapple since its inception. In fact, we are not alone, as every other school (Christian or secular) has to make judgments and assess what is appropriate for their school.

Christian school engagement with the arts seems to be the place that the most volatile of the worldview/culture collisions occur and that is the subject of a book that I have quoted below.

The following are excerpts from the book: *Eyes Wide Open* by William Romanowski:

To be God's image bearer is to be human, and to be human is to be a cultural agent. God made humans and purposed them to carry on his creative work by doing culture, fashioning ways of life that promote love, kindness, mercy, justice, truth, and stewardship. The freedom to engage in cultural activity is a creational given, but after the human fall in sin, culture is oriented away from God's intentions for it. Some Christians take this to mean that God requires minimal cultural engagement, but that view does not resonate with Jesus' prayer for the disciples: '*My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you - protect them from the evil one.*' (John 17:15)

Because we are commanded by God to form and reform culture, Christians have to be actively engaged with culture: studying it, discerning positive and negative aspects, and working to redeem it. We are to be in the world but not of it, working to restrain evil and advance redemptive potentials. We are called to be salt in the world, working to enrich culture and preserve life-affirming aspects. We are also called to be a light to show the way for cultural development, uncovering and disentangling forces for good and evil, and redirecting unhealthy or destructive patterns toward principles in line with loving God and serving our neighbor. And the culture we are called to form and reform, to move toward redemption, includes even popular culture.

The Bible encourages believers to engage their culture in positive ways, while also providing a framework for critique of that culture.

Christians should understand that popular art engages what is common among people in the arena of human affairs. While we ought to be able to enjoy much of what other people enjoy, we should also be mindful of the biblical imperatives to be distinct and live in the light of our

convictions. The stories of Daniel and Paul give us an idea of how Christians today might think and act as a minority culture existing within a dominant mainstream one. This is a compelling reason why Christians should advocate greater pluralism in the popular arts, for there is a narrow range of perspectives available in the mass entertainment media, which is driven primarily by a need for greater profits.

As Christians renewed in Christ and restored as God's stewards, our task now after the fall is to work toward the progressive removal of the effects of sin everywhere, even in the most mundane activities. Paul writes: *'So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.'* (I Cor. 10:31) In motive and purpose, action and deed, Christian cultural endeavors should affirm that we are God's ambassadors in a fallen world – at home and in church, in the marketplace, government, schools, education, the media, and the arts.

As a Christian school, we have an obligation to our families to not only uphold and protect a perspective that is distinctively Christian, but to teach and train our students to discern and critique culture as we attempt to redeem it. This includes engagement with the popular arts.

Another area that is sometimes misunderstood in Christian culture is the question of whether it is appropriate for Christians to engage culture from a perspective that is primarily aesthetic. It is very much a part of our humanity to *enjoy* the aesthetic for the simple enjoyment alone. No one has ever been more human than our Lord when He was on this earth, and as we model ourselves in His likeness, both in purpose and through His sanctification, the reflection of that existence will include the enjoyment of God's creation.

As the Dutch theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper said: "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!'" It all belongs to Him, and it was created for our enjoyment and in fulfilling this purpose, it brings Him glory. Our purpose then, is to distinguish between what is good and what is capable of quality and value in the lives of our students in light of what Scripture calls us to do as Christians. The worldview application of what is truthful, beautiful, and good is a struggle with which all of our students will wrestle all of their earthly lives. They must learn to begin to distinguish these for themselves.

It is a difficult task, and one that is certain to create questions among those we serve as we grapple with secular culture, especially in the area of the arts. But we believe it is worth the struggle, although it will require more time, effort, and prayer when we engage culture than if we were to simply eliminate anything not deemed 'spiritual.'

The question then is, 'Do we have to spiritualize an activity in order to enjoy it?' Can we listen, see, or participate in an activity that involves the arts and yet does not have any direct evangelical message? Again, Romanowski asserts:

Ordained by God as part of human life, the aesthetic experience is a legitimate one that is enriched with creativity, deepening aesthetic features and solid critical evaluation in the created world. For this reason, Christians do not have to make popular art into a spiritual event in order to properly enjoy and delight in it. This is not only unnecessary but misconstrues its meaning, value, and purpose. Understanding the experience for what it is - primarily an aesthetic one - calls us to consider specific and distinct ways that Christians should be involved, not as minister and congregation, but as artist and audience. In other words, we should understand our participation in popular art not as a worship service but as an artistic venue for critical engagement.

"The invention of the arts, and other things which serve the common use and convenience of life, is a gift of God by no means to be despised, and a faculty worthy of commendation."

John Calvin, Commentary on Genesis