

TOWARDS A BIBLICAL ETHICS OF ENTERTAINMENT: AN INVESTIGATION REGARDING BOUNDARIES

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author seeks to begin establishing biblical boundaries for ethical discussions regarding entertainment. Recognized as a cultural force, leisure is an indelible part of the human experience. While embedded in a sinful world, leisure has its legitimate and important role in Christian life. The author argues that Christians should not refrain from partaking of this aspect of human life. Rather, they should inform their hearts biblically and follow the fourfold application of God's law in choosing wisely how to live. The Christian needs to look at the clear commandments of God, inform his own conscience, be mindful of the weaker brethren, and be careful not to bring unnecessary scandal to the culture around the church.

KEYWORDS

Entertainment; Ethics; Intercultural; Moral law; Law of love.

INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to begin establishing intercultural ethical boundaries for the enjoyment of entertainment in Christian life. Many Christians are oblivious to a sense of responsibility regarding their leisure time, while others live with their consciences burdened and unsure of how to enjoy the good things of life. This is a matter of pastoral concern, for it has to do with

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teaching people how to obey all that Christ has commanded regarding life in this world. It involves the difficult task of establishing patterns of behavior and thoughtfulness concerning cultural products. In this world of major cultural forces, how should we then live?¹ It is important to set limits to this article. Readers may be disappointed by the fact that this will not be an attempt to determine what kind of entertainment is allowed or not on the Lord's Day², for this would require an entire article in itself.

It also will not be about guidelines for producing Christian entertainment, Christian movies, and the like. It will not be an attempt to exhaust what the Bible says about entertainment, but an effort to find basic spheres that serve as boundaries for an ethic of entertainment. It is also worth noticing right away that some questions will be left unanswered, for they require work on the part of the reader to examine his own heart and choose wisely before God. The pharisaical way of setting up a list of rules that covers every possible case simply does not work in the real world.

The article has three main sections. First, I will briefly investigate the role and legitimacy of entertainment in human life. Secondly, I will seek biblical boundaries for leisure. This section will consider immutable aspects of God's law, as well as the more tentative terrain of culturally relative issues. I will look into intercultural elements, seeking to understand how a given activity can be perfectly legitimate for a given cultural group, while an anathema for another. I will deal with the matter of conscience, with the element of having a good reputation in the church and not causing the brother to stumble, and also with the issue of being salt and light in the culture.

1. THE PLACE OF ENTERTAINMENT IN HUMAN LIFE

1.1 *An indelible cultural phenomenon*

It may seem a little superfluous to discuss entertainment in such a vile world like ours. With so much suffering and widespread warmongering, terrorism, disasters of all sorts, why should theologians even spend time considering leisure? The answer is twofold: because in spite of this crazy broken world, people still care for entertainment, and because in this crazy

¹ "How should we then live" is the title of a book by Francis Schaeffer in which he explores the history of art and the worldviews associated with the different artistic movements. He also produced a film series based on the book. Watching this series along with dear cousins and mentors was likely the first serious contact I had with cultural analysis from a Biblical standpoint. Daniel and Davi, thank you.

² Interestingly, the Westminster Confession of Faith (XXI, 8) refers to what it calls lawful recreations as permissible, except in the Lord's Day. Obviously, this assumes that there is room for entertainment in Christian life.

broken world, entertainment is often the main relief valve of burdened hearts looking for eternity.³

The 20th century⁴ marked an unprecedented development in the industry of entertainment worldwide.⁵ While obviously always present in the history of humankind, entertainment has now become a major cultural driving force. The new possibilities that arose with globalization and the digital revolution mark a new era in terms of diversity and demand of entertainment options. One can tune their television sets to international media channels, use their Smartphones to play games, dwell in social media, watch videos produced by people all over the Earth, and much more. One can travel inexpensively to several parts of the globe and have unlimited access to all sorts of information. This industry grows in all areas. From comic books to professional sports and from *American Idol* to National Geographic Channel, the western world is permeated by countless options for diversion and recreation. Parks, theme park, beaches, movie theaters and many different places dedicated to the art of amusement are built daily. In fact many people see their work not as a vocation, but purely as means to get money for their entertainment, which is when they “really live.” Entertainment is indeed “a cultural superpower”.⁶

Why talk about entertainment and culture at all? Usually we quickly go to pragmatic questions regarding the benefits one will receive from it. And there are many. As an example, thinking in terms of cultural leisure will help the church understand its time and idolatries. In justifying his book on cultural analysis, Kevin Vanhoozer⁷ argues that understanding the time and culture in which one lives is essential to carry on the Great Commission. The church must remember that the western world is a missionary field. It is also relevant to consider that one does not need to justify partaking in a leisure activity by the

³ I deal more extensively with this matter in the article “A busca humana da diversão sob a ótica bíblica de criação-queda-redenção” [The human search for leisure under the Biblical perspective of creation-fall-redemption]. *Fides Reformata* XVI-2 (2011): 27-49.

⁴ Of course, the 21st century has already brought forth new and improved ways for entertainment. Those pertain to the digital revolution and are seemingly endless ways of procuring and consuming entertainment.

⁵ While it is a worldwide phenomenon, it seems to have greater preeminence in the United States. Las Vegas is the symbol of the American search for entertainment. It is much more than simply “Sin City,” with the classic ideas of gambling and prostitution, for much of the entertainment there is directed towards music concerts, theatrical productions, and shopping. The American production of entertainment elements is transmitted to the whole world.

⁶ LAYTHAM, D. Brent. *iPod, YouTube, Wii Play: Theological Engagements with Entertainment*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2012, p. 1.

⁷ VANHOOZER, Kevin J.; ANDERSON, Charles A., and SLESMAN, Michael J., eds. *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007, p. 8. A very interesting project. Seeks to present a model and use it to analyze several cultural trends. Intends to be a starting point for further similar developments.

practical benefits it will achieve. Cornelius Plantinga wrote a very interesting and useful book about how reading widely outside the field of theology will help a preacher become a better communicator. There is practical, concrete value in reading widely. However, Plantinga insists that one ought to read for a broader reason than merely the practical gain that will come from it: “Good reading generates delight, and the preacher should enjoy it without guilt. Delight is a part of God’s shalom and the preacher who enters the world of delight goes with God.”⁸ We should read poetry and literature because it is delightful to do so. Christians often make a simply utilitarian use of good things. Another example is sport. While many do not even consider how their relationship with sports should be, others only have use for it if it results in practical and obvious things, such as better fitness or evangelism opportunities. Shirl Hoffman writes against such notion, explaining that we must learn first of all to enjoy sports for what they are, before looking for secondary benefits:

Reimagining sport as an autotelic, leisure-based experience means shunning flaccid rhetoric about the sports field as a training ground for character, or as a way of building strong bones and muscles, or as fertile ground for evangelism, or realizing any other practical benefit. Trying to justify sports on instrumental grounds is as misguided as trying to justify symphonic orchestras on grounds that they develop endurance in the muscles of violin players, or justifying meals at three-star restaurants because of the superior nourishment found there.⁹

How should the church of Jesus Christ relate to all this? Christians are, of course, involved in the entertainment options. There is disagreement, however, on how large this involvement should be. While some groups proclaim that being involved with the culture in events of entertainment is nothing more than worldliness, others uncritically assimilate all that is taught and sold by popular culture. Both cultural anorexia and cultural gluttony are very real problems. The issue of the relationship between Christians and culture deserves a much fuller treatment than allowed in these pages, and hopefully a future article will be solely dedicated to this purpose.¹⁰

⁸ PLANTINGA, Cornelius. *Reading for Preaching: The Preacher in Conversation with Storytellers, Biographers, Poets, and Journalists*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013.

⁹ HOFFMAN, Shirl J. *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2010, p. 267. This book is the culmination of a lifetime of thinking regarding the matter of Christianity and sports. Hoffman’s book is a must read.

¹⁰ For now, it is sufficient to point the reader to the recent works of D. A. Carson and Ted Turnau, as well as to the older J. Gresham Machen. Turnau in particular has been a very useful contemporary voice in the discussion. He obtained his Ph.D. at Westminster Theological Seminary (WTS), a school that has a very important role in the Reformed evaluation of culture. At WTS, in Philadelphia, William Edgar continues in this Schaefferian task with a distinct Vantillian flavor. There are, of course, the L’Abri influenced writers such as Os Guinness and Dick Keyes as well. The Fuller school also provides

1.2 *Should we partake of entertainment?*

The basic issue is: Does entertainment lie in the realm of the adiaphora, those neutral matters that are nor good nor evil?¹¹ It seems clear that the topic at hand is not morally neutral. The Bible does not, however, pronounce its verdict over every case and possibility. In some areas there is a great deal of necessary work of deduction and application of the Bible. This is not a matter of whether people will amuse themselves; they surely will. It is more a matter of pastoral ethical guidance about how to go about such entertainment. In fact, the influence of entertainment is hard to measure completely. Brent Laytham writes:

Therefore, since entertainment and discipleship are both formational processes, we need to ask how a century's journey from radio and silent cinema through the heyday of television or our brave new World Wide Web of entertainment possibilities has been shaping how we pray and praise, how we make disciples and decisions, how we feel and love, what we believe and hope.¹²

Entertainment is way more than mere diversion; it instills patterns of thought that are often undetectable because they work directly in the worldview.

Entertainment is inseparable from the world it inhabits. Its influence and relationships go well beyond its boundaries.¹³ Sports figures achieve higher worldwide recognition than politicians, preachers, and writers. Entertainment deeply affects the person. Nobody is a passive receiver of entertainment, but we filter the information through our worldview and emotional states.¹⁴ One

theological examination of popular cultural practices and products. The main proponents are Barry Taylor, Craig Detweiler, and Robert K. Johnston. Sometimes, however, they go too far in their use of postmodern categories. It is also well worth getting acquainted with the current Two Kingdoms debate, hopefully a topic for a future article.

¹¹ For an excellent introductory discussion on the topic of adiaphora, the origin of the term, the uses and issues related, see DOUMA, Jochem. *Responsible Conduct: Principles of Christian Ethics*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003, p. 157-174.

¹² LAYTHAM, *iPod, YouTube, Wii Play*, p. 2.

¹³ The boycott to the Olympic Games in Moscow (1980) shows that politics is deeply related to sport, as several studies demonstrate. The relationship of sports to politics and general culture is a fascinating field of study. See, for example, KUPER, Simon. *Soccer against the Enemy: How the World's Most Popular Sport Starts and Fuels Revolutions and Keeps Dictators in Power*. New York: Nation Books, 2006. See also WEILAND, Matt; WILSEY, Sean, eds. *The Thinking Man's Guide to the World Cup*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2006. A collection of essays on each of the 32 countries that participated in the Soccer World Cup 2006, with sociological elements, political analysis, cultural curiosities, and much sports facts and discussion. There are many other books in the area. The Soccer World Cup 2014 in Brazil rekindled a lot of these discussions.

¹⁴ Jerry Solomon points out that when King Saul heard David play for him, it sometimes soothed his heart (1 Sm 16:23) and in other occasions provoked his anger (1 Sm 18:10). The same activity can have different outcomes depending on manifold factors. See SOLOMON, Jerry. *Arts, Entertainment, & Christian Values*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2000, p. 113.

must always consider the current entertainment industry in its historical and economical aspects. It is part of the human search for diversion and meaning. This entanglement of motives makes it hard to examine and a source of constant debate.¹⁵

We do not have the room here to address fully the biblical legitimacy of entertainment. A previous article has addressed the reasons why people love leisure.¹⁶ Sufficient is to say for now that such desire has its source in legitimate creational desires, is distorted by the fallen human condition and finds much of its impulse in the redemptive qualities that are experienced through it.

Christians have for a long time lived in a practically syncretistic blend of Christianity and Platonism, where the spiritual realities take precedence and in fact become the only important side of life.¹⁷ One must seek to live, body and spirit, to the glory of God fulfilling his mission. As Jerry Solomon says:

A real man died in a real cross and was laid in a real, rock-hard tomb. The Greek ideas of “otherworldliness” that fostered a tainted and debased view of nature (hence, aesthetics) find no place in Biblical Christianity. Therefore the dichotomy between sacred and secular is alien to biblical faith.¹⁸

Douma reacts against what he calls a pietistic attitude that would say that a Christian should and could only find “enjoyment in a directly religious way only by contemplation, prayer and spiritual music”.¹⁹ All leisure activities, in order to be valid before God, would have to be in those areas or be useful activities such as crafts and studying. Douma argues against this position with Calvin to point to the fact that God would not have created flowers so beautiful and aromatic and humans with the sense of smell and vision if he were

¹⁵ ROMANOWSKI, William D. *Pop Culture Wars: Religion & the Role of Entertainment in American Life*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996, p. 23. Historically it comes in a time in which technologies have made communication easier and cheaper among parts of the world. The possibility of technical reproduction of the works of art has led to a massification of cultural products, popularization of its limits, and simplification of its goals. It is worth remembering how new technological developments usually bring along a technophobia. See, for example, Walter Benjamin’s concern that the possibility of technical mass reproduction of music might cause the lowering of the standards and of cultural heritage. See Benjamin’s seminal work in cultural studies: BENJAMIN, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1936. Accessed 08 September 2008. Available from <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>. A classic text by one of the major proponents of the Frankfurt School.

¹⁶ GAROFALO NETO, A busca humana de diversão.

¹⁷ This has roots in the Gnosticism that affected the early church. One sees flesh and the things that pertain to the physical world as inferior to what is merely spiritual. An interesting evidence of this distortion is the small percentage of current Christians who believe they will spend eternity in physical bodies in a physical New Earth and New Heavens. Most assume some sort of eternity in ethereal form.

¹⁸ SOLOMON, *Arts, Entertainment, & Christian Values*, p. 104.

¹⁹ DOUMA, *Responsible conduct*, p. 163.

against humans appreciating those things.²⁰ Man was created with the need to have rest and this is more than sleeping; it has to do with participating in the enjoyment of God's glorious creation.

It is wrong to assume that entertainment cannot be useful unless there is a visible product. Leisure may fulfill the basic need for rest and fellowship with other human beings. It is wrong to think that God cannot be glorified in watching a movie or playing sports. It has to do again with the heart attitude and how it is translated into actions. The desire to play, to entertain, to seek leisure, rest for body and mind is inherent to humankind, does not seem to result from the Fall. In all this we conclude that entertainment is an indelible part of human life. The Christian ought not to try to abstain from leisure, but rather seek to, as in everything else, enjoy it in a way that is glorifying to God and in accordance to his revealed Word.

2. THINKING ABOUT BIBLICAL BOUNDARIES

In this section, we will seek to explore some biblical boundaries to help the believer choose wisely and in submission to God's law regarding leisure.

2.1 *The law of God and entertainment*

The law of God has to set limits to art and entertainment, as it does regarding everything else. It is the final standard for all of life. Sadly, many Christians do not think that the Bible has to bear on their free time choices. Art and entertainment are not neutral factors to be objectively appreciated, without matters of the heart to be considered. When believers come to artistic appreciation, they should not leave aside the theological evaluation of a given object.²¹

The best way to deal with moral and aesthetical aspects is to place both under a theological interpretation of the event. A purely aesthetical or exclusively moral discussion will not get to the root of the problem.²² A theological

²⁰ Ibid., p. 164.

²¹ Consider for example the event of the golden calf (Ex 32). It was an idol made to represent the god who had brought Israel out of Egypt, perhaps an attempt of representing YHWH. When Moses went up into the mountain, the people, under the leadership of Aaron, produced a golden calf, a clear violation of God's commandments. A purely aesthetical consideration would look at it as an object of art and try to evaluate it as such. However, there are clearly moral and theological implications in making a golden calf and claiming that it brought them out of the land of Egypt. The law of God in this example limits the art and the entertainment.

²² Theologians of the Reformed tradition have for a long time pointed out how the religious heart, created in the image of God, is always at the root of any kind of human activity. Begin with John Calvin and his doctrine of the *sensus divinitatis*, as well as his ideas of man's heart being a forge of idols. Look at the works of Herman Dooyeweerd, Cornelius Van Til and others in their heritage. In particular, the contemporary works of Biblical counselors such as David Powlison, Jay Adams, Paul David Tripp, and Wadislau Gomes.

discussion, however, will try to discern from the event its religious roots, recognizing truth and beauty, but also error and idolatry. God's evaluation of the art object or leisure activity has often more to do with the intentions of the heart than with the form it is presented, pointing to Christians a way to follow.²³ Then it becomes possible for the believer to make an informed movement towards the moral and aesthetical considerations.

2.1.1 The Moral Law as Universal Parameter

The moral law, understood by the Westminster standards to be summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments (WCF XIX:2,3), is an expression of God's character. The commandments are not arbitrary restrictions from God, but a guide to freedom on living the way God designed man to live as his image. They are the guidelines of how people ought to live, particularly those who have been redeemed from the house of bondage.

By using the explicit commandments of the Bible, one can set boundaries to what kind of entertainment is permissible.²⁴ It is always wrong to break God's moral law; therefore, we have a clear boundary that regulates not only entertainment, but all of life. Stealing, fornicating, worshipping false God's and misusing God's name in a blasphemous joke are never acceptable forms of entertainment.

The commandments can serve as guides to what kind of activity may be enjoyed by a Christian. To begin with, in this discussion of entertainment one must take into account the issue of idolatry and the first commandment. If any form of entertainment, legitimate as it may be, takes the precedence over God in the Christian life, it then becomes illegitimate. One who puts his trust and takes pleasure in sports, in films, or anything else as a primary love will always be in error.²⁵

²³ See SOLOMON, *Arts, Entertainment, & Christian Values*, p. 23.

²⁴ It is important to recognize that the explicit sin forbidden in each of the commandments is only one of the sins that the commandment actually encompasses. They work more as categories. Related sins can be clearly deduced with the help of the Scriptures and reasonable thinking by good and necessary consequence. The Westminster standards, especially in the Larger Catechism, present a long list of sins associated with each commandment. Thus, for example, the ninth commandment forbids not only bearing false witness, but also demands the promotion and preservation of truth and reputations.

²⁵ In a very interesting discussion about idolatry, Richard Keyes explains that idols usually come in pairs, for they are always attempts to substitute the God who is both immanent and transcendent. See KEYES, Richard. *The Idol factory*. In *No God but God*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992, p. 37. A very thought-provoking essay on the matter of the idolatry of the heart. The idols may be immanent to provide the closeness of the human contact and proximity and may be simulating a transcendent expectation of value. For example, a person who idolizes basketball may have Michael Jordan as a transcendent idol, while having the intangible qualities of the sport such as struggle, skill, endurance, camaraderie, and other things he feels as immanent idols.

Of course, the application of these boundaries is not always clear-cut. An example: the seventh commandment forbids adultery and related sins, thus any kind of entertainment that causes the person to commit fornication would be ruled out.²⁶ In life, however, things are not that clear-cut. Does beach going cause you to stumble? How about watching women's volleyball? Things become more complicated when it comes to watching movies. What is the limit that a Christian should have in films that show sensuality? Is there a fixed limit for everyone? Does it depend on the purpose of the nudity? From this commandment, if it causes the person to sin, then the movie should be avoided. In the second part of the article we will deal with the matter of conscience.

The second commandment is one that generates controversy in its application. Some Christians believe that any kind of representation of deity is sinful. This would include representations of Jesus, for while he was fully human (thus visible) he was fully God and therefore impossible to be fully represented. This issue has divided many and still does. How can this commandment be applied in the matter of entertainment? The interpretation of the prohibition will set limits on what is allowed, even on what is no more than leisure.²⁷

The moral law is a primordial guide in examining what is allowed by God in terms of entertainment, and all the commandments can be used in such form. This does not mean that the interpretation and application of the ten precepts are always easy or without controversy, but that there are some clear limiting boundaries for all people. One may argue whether watching a movie about murder is right or wrong, but cannot argue that murdering for entertainment is right.

2.1.2 Civil and Ceremonial Laws

As part of God's revealed will, one cannot simply dismiss the civil and the ceremonial law. There is great need for the church to own these parts of the written revelation as profitable for our growth and learning (2Tim 3:14-17). How should we relate to the civil and ceremonial laws? How do they help us in setting boundaries for leisure activities?

The Reformed understanding of this matter is that while they are not binding on us, these laws have a lot to teach us. This article will not dwell on

²⁶ It is sadly the case that people seek to justify adultery and pornography as supposedly simple forms of harmless entertainment. They are not strictly committing adultery, yet they do sin in their hearts and this form of sin brings forth consequences that may last a long time.

²⁷ Some might consider making a stage play with an actor representing Jesus to be wrong, while others will accept it. Some would argue that one should not watch a movie if it involves any kind of representations of God. This would include classics such as *Ben-Hur* and *The Ten Commandments*. Besides the irony of thinking that the movie *The Ten Commandments* explicitly breaks one of them by displaying the burning bush, one has to consider whether the representations of Jesus in movies like *Ben-Hur* violate or not the commandment. While his face is never displayed, there is his hand and silhouette.

the very important matter of the outworking of the general equity principle (WCF, XIX:4). This principle deals with how the Old Testament law can be universally applied outside of the time and space context of the people of Israel. In its search for a proper biblical ethics, the church must turn to the Bible and make an effort to see that it is all profitable for the man of God, seeking to better define and study such matters.²⁸ It is sufficient for our goals to state that the ceremonial law has been abolished in Christ, and that it is the general Reformed position that the civil laws do not apply outside of the theocratic Israel. However, principles must be learned.

Leviticus presents an interesting example. While explaining how love works, Moses explains that part of love is not putting an obstacle to cause a blind man to stumble (Lev. 19:14). Because he is blind, he has no way of knowing it is there and will eventually get hurt. And one can easily see how people could derive great amusement from making people trip and fall. Although an outworking of the moral law, this has civil contours as well. And a very useful principle arises from it: that our entertainment should not be achieved at the expense of the defenseless and helpless is obvious and must be present in our own mind.

2.1.3 Preliminary Conclusions

In this entire discussion of how to use the Bible for ethics, one does well in following Douma's suggestion: the Bible is to be used as a guide, as a compass, and as a guard. It is a guide in all that it clearly teaches, even if different applications may be made to different cultures. It is a guard in providing a moral climate that will influence the thinking and limit the error in situations in which it does not speak clearly. It is a compass in those situations in which we seem to be lost and can have from it a safe direction in which to move towards answers.²⁹

God did not leave man without guidance in any area of life, and it is no different when it comes to entertainment. The moral law is to be universal, the defining boundary of what is acceptable or not in terms of entertainment. In their general equity, the civil and ceremonial laws are to be used as well in expanding or diminishing the boundaries set by the moral law. The fact that

²⁸ The issue is important for the life of the church and for missiology as well. See KREITZER, Mark R. *Universal Equity Principle: Toward an Intercultural Ethics*. Unpublished class syllabus, 2008. The intricacies of the discussion are very complex and for the sake of this article it is sufficient to say that the law of God, whether in its clear commandments or in whatever it is that can be correctly inferred as universal from the case laws, sets ethical boundaries for the world in all of life, including in the area of entertainment. All of it can be used to infer binding rules and universal principles for all peoples of the earth.

²⁹ DOUMA, *Responsible Conduct*, p. 72-77.

there is discussion and variation of interpretation of the moral law does not change the fact that it is a limiting factor.

2.2 *Relative elements*

Any discussion in ethics must always look into universal standards, but it has to examine how those standards are applied in specific contexts. Especially when trying to find ethical guidelines that would work interculturally, one must not set aside such matters. As in any other aspect of the cultural life, entertainment varies in different groups and at times even within a given ethnic group according to socio-economic level, religion, and so forth. In this part of the article we will look into how an ethics of entertainment has to deal with the matter of what is acceptable personally by the conscience, what is acceptable culturally, and what is accepted ecclesiastically. Those three elements may have great variation in different cultures. It is crucial to notice, however, that we are not defending any form of relativism. We are simply stating that some things may very well be allowed, but one should refrain from it (1 Cor 6:12). This is not relativizing truth, but conjugating truth together with love.

2.2.1 Sinning against the conscience

Every Christian has the responsibility of guarding not only the body but also the mind from impurity (Rom 12:1,2). The sanctification of the whole person must take place. The conscience plays a very important part in this matter. Any consideration of popular culture must take into account the fact that there is no such thing as innocuous entertainment, as neutral art. Every form of human production is loaded with the presuppositions of the authors, is biased in some way.

The Westminster Confession of Faith (XX:2) teaches that God alone is Lord over the conscience. While guarded from being abused by others, the conscience is not, however, the final arbiter of right and wrong; it cannot be used as an excuse to avoid clear Biblical teaching, being constantly guided by the Scriptures. The issue of sinning against the conscience is a delicate one and must be carefully examined.

Going against what one believes to be wrong is sinful, for it means that a person is deliberately choosing to do something that he considers to be a violation of God's law. He sins even if the matter is not sinful in itself and the conscience is wrongly informed. He does necessarily sin in the given activity, but he certainly does sin in violating his conscience.³⁰

³⁰ Putting the matter in a practical example: if a Christian thinks that drinking alcohol is wrong, but still goes ahead and does it, the person has sinned in violating the conscience yet not necessarily in drinking alcohol. Or consider an exaggerated example. Suppose a man believes that playing Super Mario Bros to be a sinful thing considering that Mario eats mushrooms that give him powers and he stomps on

It is important to remember that weak Christians should always be striving to become more mature, stronger Christians. The conscience can and does err;³¹ it merely says that it is wrong to do wrong and right to do right. The conscience is to be informed constantly by the word of God, it is to be prepared and become freer from sin and closer to Christ. One's conscience may be seared against the teachings of God's word (1 Tm 4:2). When partaking of a given leisure activity, one does well to check his conscience before, during, and after the activity. It may be that we are violating this principle and trying to suffocate the voice of the troubled heart.³² The conscience is a powerful instrument if used correctly.

All this implies that a believer who considers going to the movies, for example, to be an impure activity, may very well mature and one day have no further reservations about such matter. The conscience is informed by the culture as well. The conscience of a Christian living in the south of the United States may have completely different parameters of conscience for the ethical limits of entertainment as compared to a believer in Amsterdam. Thus, obviously, the conscience is not in itself a perfectly safe guide, but must be combined with the other elements. Again, with maturity the boundaries of those limitations will become more similar for such believers, but will never become the same in this life, for one's cultural background will always influence to a certain extent.³³

When looking into the matter of the conscience, one does well to turn to the elements of motives and reasons of the heart. It may well be that a legitimate amusement activity becomes illicit not out of anything in itself, but because of the goals of the heart. Dealing with a practical example will help clarify the issue. A dating Christian couple may decide to rent a movie. While rated for minors,³⁴ it has elements of sexuality that can prove dangerously

defenseless creatures. Biblically there is no sin in playing Super Mario Bros. But if conscience accuses this man and if he chooses to go forth and pick up the joystick he will sin in the matter of violating his conscience. Later we will discuss the matter of informing the conscience so as to better adequate it to the law of God.

³¹ Douma points out that the Bible presents the conscience as a fallible guide (DOUMA, *Responsible Conduct*, p. 149). For instance, Paul said in 1 Cor 4:4 that he was as far as he knew free of guilt, but that the judgment had to come from the Lord.

³² SOLOMON, *Arts, Entertainment, & Christian Values*, p. 138.

³³ Which does not mean that one cannot rise above cultural sins and errors, only that the lens through which one views the world is affected by family, culture, church, and God's word, as well as by how God's word is interpreted by family, culture, and church.

³⁴ The movie ratings in the United States are as follow: G – all ages admitted; PG – some material may not be suitable for children; PG-13 – some material may be inappropriate for children under 13; R – under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian; NC-17 – no one 17 and under admitted. It must be noted that there is always controversy about the rating of the movies that tend to be in the borders of those ratings. The producers may always appeal to a given rate and often receive reduced grading. For a history of the different codes of restriction and how it came to this point, see ROMANOWSKI, *Pop Culture Wars*, p. 28-30. In Brazil the system works differently.

tempting for unmarried people. It may be the case she wanted to watch the movie because she was interested in the plot and thought it would be good entertainment, while he knew, and in fact hoped, that the content would lead to a situation of arousal and erotic interest. Two people performing the same activity, but the goal of the heart makes the ethical issue completely different. Thus the conscience and the reasons of the heart form a set of elements that limit what is to be considered a lawful leisure activity. Let us consider now another limiting factor.

2.2.2 Church and the law of love

In all situational ethics one has to consider the law of love. Jesus said the second great commandment is to love one's neighbor as oneself (Mt 22:39).³⁵ This has to do with the second relative area when it comes to delimiting the boundaries of what is correct. The church will set limits to what is acceptable behavior, and often those boundaries will not coincide with the limits of God's word. When analyzing how to act, one has to consider the church brethren as a whole and in many occasions to consider individual brothers who may stumble.

This is Paul's teaching in Romans 14, when he explains that love should take precedence over our partaking even in good and lawful things. Christians should lovingly be careful as to how and when they join in leisure activities if such are generally seen by their brethren as violations of God's law. A very important yet difficult task of the church is to balance the principles of Christian liberty and those of brotherly love.³⁶ Each believer has different standards when it comes to what is acceptable entertainment for a Christian or not. These standards may come from the word of God or may simply be traditions inculcated by the family, the culture or the church.

For example, for a long time the majority of the churches in the United States adopted a position of being against going to the movie theater. This came after a period when the church was against the theater in general.³⁷ Later theater became more accepted as an artistic enterprise and the films came to be seen

³⁵ Douma points out that love to the neighbor is not the only thing to be considered as some distortions of Christianity have done (*Responsible Conduct*, p. 128). He claims that we cannot speak of love apart from the commandments; in fact, loving God with all of one's heart, mind and soul comes as the first great commandment (Mt 22:38).

³⁶ While much prized by Christians in different degrees, the matter of Christian liberty must be carefully considered not to end up in slavery. One can easily be so consumed by the liberty to smoke, or to drink, or to watch movies that he ends up being enslaved to those matters. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that "all things are lawful to me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything" (1 Cor 6:12).

³⁷ For a good discussion of Christianity and its relationship to theater in history, see ROMANOSWKL, *Pop Culture Wars*, p. 83-104.

as merely entertainment. Yet, this is still the case in several parts of the world. It is worth noticing that while some segments of the church have problems with any form of art, others seem to make too big a separation between art and entertainment, creating idiosyncrasies.³⁸ How should a Christian who has no pangs of conscience regarding going to the movies act if his church culture is against it? In love and in truth. In love refraining from doing it if it will cause brothers to stumble, and at the same time seeking to bring the truth of God's word to shed light in the matter, by teaching and changing mentalities. The option of joining another church group is also to be considered.

It may be the case that the ecclesiastical community is setting forth barriers around the commandments of God. This is dangerous, of course. One of the major complaints that Christians have against film going has to do with the issue of the amount of sexuality and violence in the movies. This is a serious objection and should not be hastily brushed aside. Kappelman³⁹ demonstrates that there is a need of evaluating what is the purpose of the violence: is it merely graphic diversion, or is it there to make a point and move the story to important conclusions? A movie might very well use violence to demonstrate the human depravity, the need for redemption, the power of God's saving grace (and his common grace), the futility of human life under the sun, and so forth. A movie produced by unbelievers will necessarily come to conclusions about life and its meaning.⁴⁰ By God's common grace some of those may be correct, and Christians should value those moments. Even when the conclusions are wrong they are valuable, for every fact in the world reveals God, even if in the negative way. Every element of creation, even the distortion of creation, is a possible starting point for apologetics and evangelism. It is interesting that at times far more subtle ideas and themes are displayed in movies with lower rating restrictions, and people do not seem to react so strongly to such. However the issue at hand must be addressed. Some authors have demonstrated that the Bible contains several instances of intense violence, foul language, and quite

³⁸ One example is the Christian fundamentalist college Bob Jones University, in Greenville, SC. While very strict in its entertainment code for its students, nevertheless it is not against every form of art, having the largest collection of religious Christian art in the Americas. It is interesting to notice that other Christian groups in the same town, while not having problems with most of the entertainment options forbidden in BJU, nevertheless refrain from visiting the art museum in BJU because of the many depictions of Jesus.

³⁹ KAPPELMAN, Todd. *Film and the Christian*. In *Arts, Entertainment, & Christian Values*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2000, p. 123.

⁴⁰ This happens because unbelievers, while rebelling against the true God, still operate in his world and largely usurp Biblical presuppositions in order to operate and create in the world. For further discussion, see VAN TIL, Cornelius. *The defense of the faith*. 4th ed. Ed. K. Scott Oliphint. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008, p. 343. Van Til's primary use for the idea was in the realm of science, but this can be expanded to the whole of human activity.

explicit sexuality. One could argue that if a movie was made out of the books of Judges, Samuel and Kings, it would be forbidden for children.⁴¹

Yet there is the need to follow Romans 14 and abstain for what can be of ruin to the faith of a weaker brother. There is also the issue of submitting to the authority of the church which the person has voluntarily decided to join. This makes a limiting boundary around what a Christian should enjoy in his entertainment. In all this the believer has his liberty of entertainment limited by what the church considers to be right and by the concern not to cause the weaker brother to stumble.

2.2.3 The culture, salt and light

Another limiting factor in the consideration of the ethical limits of entertainment has to do with the culture. The individual Christians and the Christian community are called to be good witnesses of Christ.⁴² Cultural elements play a large role in which activities are considered publicly acceptable, and there is much divergence in this matter.⁴³

When it comes to applying this rule to entertainment, there are instances in which the application is clear and useful in all cultural backgrounds; in other cases the boundaries become fuzzier. This is not to say that culture ought to dictate to Christians how to behave, but that the matter has to be considered to some extent. Because of sin usually the cultural climate will be more open and liberal than what Scripture allows. Any kind of entertainment that violates a clear biblical prescription is sinful no matter what the culture says about it. To use an extreme example, if a given culture sees adultery lightly and even

⁴¹ Kappelman lists several examples of extreme violence, graphically described in the Bible, such as the story of the Levite's woman who is raped and killed, his husband then sending pieces of her to the twelve tribes and generating more violence (Judges 19 and 20). See KAPPELMAN, *Film and the Christian*, p. 125-127. Brian Godawa, a Christian screenwriter, has a whole appendix in which he lists examples of explicit sexuality, violence and even of foul language in the Bible in a very interesting discussion. See GODAWA, Brian. *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002. A very good discussion by a Reformed author. He is a professional screenwriter and has many good points. Godawa has a very good discussion on difficulties Christians have with movies, such as violence and foul language.

⁴² Called to be salt and light by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:13-16). Peter reflects Exodus 19 in pointing out that the covenant community is to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. Peter applies this to the missionary task of the church (1 Pe 2:9,10). On a note about individuals, Paul says that those who desire to be elders must have a good reputation among the unbelievers (1 Tm 3:7). In Titus 2 he shows how the behavior of the Christian individuals will either bring blasphemy to God's word (v. 5) or become an adornment to the Gospel (v. 10).

⁴³ For example, some forms of killing of animals for entertainment (game hunting) are culturally acceptable in the United States. In Brazil this is generally seen as wrong, at least among Christians. It is considered by many to be bad stewardship of God's resources just as much as gambling. A violation of the 3rd commandment in making light use of something by which God reveals himself (his creation).

encourages it as heartily entertainment, this is biblically wrong regardless of the cultural elements.⁴⁴

When it comes to the example of enjoying films, it can be more complicated to discern. There are, however, clear boundaries. Pornographic movies are sinful to watch due to many reasons, and this truth is applicable to all cultures. However, some cultures may say that a given movie is pornographic and others will consider it as perhaps dangerously sensual but still acceptable. In this case, in order to avoid bringing a scandal to the Gospel, Christians should refrain from watching a movie that is a taboo in the society even if the conscience and the church allows, at least in a way that is public. On the other hand, some things will be allowed by the culture and not by the church.⁴⁵

A complicating element has to do with declaring the ethical limits in different chronological cultural contexts. A given movie might be considered pornographic in the 1920's United States and yet would currently receive a PG-13 rating. It would have been off-limits for a Christian in 1920 to go and publicly watch a movie that the society, the church and maybe even himself would consider to be wrong. Yet this same movie may perhaps be currently enjoyed without violating the principles of submitting to the church and society and admissible within God's moral law.⁴⁶ There is a limit in this reasoning, of course. One has to say that X-rated movies will never be permissible for a believer, even if they become socially accepted in the future.

While it is important to submit to the culture for the sake of being of good reputation and to the state as obedience to God's command, the church should never refrain from doing prescribed acts because the state disapproves. One example is worship. Because it is commanded in the Bible, the culture may openly be against, but the church should never stop doing it. When it comes to the matter of the personal entertainment of specific Christians, one has to be more flexible in order to be salt and light of this world. The church walks a fine balance between being counter-cultural and being relevant to the culture.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Jerry Solomon wrestles with this same issue, coming to the conclusion that the basic modes of entertainment (movies, novels, television, and videogames) are not evil in themselves, but in their content they become so. Yet there are things that while being claimed as entertainment, such as pre-marital sex, are in fact clearly out of the boundary of God's word. See SOLOMON, *Arts, Entertainment, & Christian Values*, p. 136.

⁴⁵ For example the Roman gladiator games were clearly immoral recreation for they involved the slaying of human life for the sake of entertainment. This brutality involved the breaking of God's clear commandments and also was a great display of human wickedness. It is possible to make a parallel between those games and boxing. Many people enjoy and pay to watch fights that are bloody and in certain situations result in death. Does the fact that the knockdown is the ending point instead of death make it more acceptable to the Christian?

⁴⁶ The matter might be different if he would buy the movie for private enjoyment.

⁴⁷ To further complicate the matter, one has to make a distinction between what the law of the country allows and what the culture considers to be wrong. It may be the case that a given form of

3. THE PRINCIPLES IN CONJUNCTION

This article does not seek to give final answers, but is an effort at setting up principles that will help the church navigate the fun and tumultuous waters of contemporary entertainment. This final section is an attempt to bring the conclusions of this present essay into a visual form. A Venn diagram will be used to try to put the different restricting elements together and display a cohesive structure in which the Christian may live and seek entertainment.

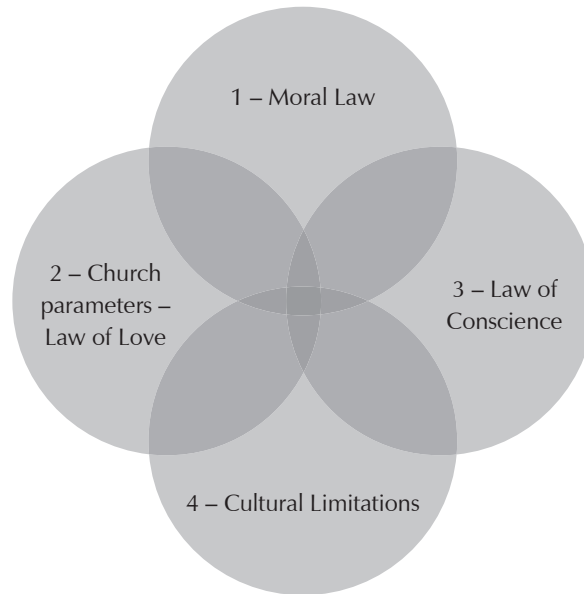
The four circles represent the areas discussed above: the explicit law, the law of love (not causing the brethren to stumble), the law of the conscience and the aspect of being salt and light. In an unfallen world (and the world to come) these circles coincide fully. God's law is what we want and the church and society are the same. But in this fallen world under the sun these circles do not coincide. We must look for the intersection of the circles in order to find out what is permissible.

The four categories are:

- 1 – Explicit commands of God's law – This delineates forms of entertainment that are within or without the spectrum of what is permissible under God's law. The categories have somewhat unclear boundaries when it comes to applying principles from the civil and ceremonial laws in a contemporary culture;
- 2 – The church sphere – This circle has to do with what the believing community sees as allowed or not. The size of this circle will be different in each local congregation, in each different culture. Activities considered outside this circle may be however appreciated in the privacy of the home;
- 3 – Conscience – This set limits for the believer regarding those things that his conscience allows. This circle should gradually change during the life of the person, as the conscience is informed by the Scriptures and the person grows in grace.

entertainment is considered unlawful by the government and the society in general accepts it. For example, a communist country that forbids the use of radio. Some people would want to use the radio for entertainment and perhaps even to receive ideas from the outside world. Radio and television have made ideas popular in areas where pure economic power could not penetrate, such as in the countries controlled by the former Soviet Union in which "creativity flourished under the communist regimes of Eastern Europe". After some freedom was gained, the film industry in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland became even more prolific and distinguished. See HOBBSAWM, Eric. *The Age of Extremes: The Brief 20th Century 1914-1991*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996, p. 506. (A very useful history of the 20th century by a noted historian. Deals with economics, politics and culture, relating these aspects masterfully.) Would it be wrong to seek this form of entertainment because the government forbids such? It seems that here there must be considered the matter of the spheres of sovereignty, for the government is overstepping its boundaries in trying to regulate matters of private liberty.

- 4 – Society – This circle points to what the culture as a whole approves or not as legitimate forms of entertainment. This will change in time and space.



The center of the diagram, where all the circles overlap, is the valid area of entertainment for the Christian in a public form. When it comes to private entertainment, the circles of church and society become less relevant, because one can enjoy a given activity in private without violating the conscience or God's law.

A given activity may be allowed by the word of God, recognized as legitimate by the believer's conscience, legitimate in the eyes of society, and yet be wrong in the eyes of the church. Other activities may be allowed by the church, by the culture and by God's law, yet a barrier for the believer's conscience. Maybe this person believes that any kind of film going experience is wrong, even though that person's congregation has no problem with it. Film going would then be outside of the lawful things, because it violates the conscience and the person should refrain from it until the conscience changes in the sanctification process.

Other activities may be allowed by the law of God, accepted by the church and the person's conscience, but bring shame to the gospel because the culture sees that as wrong. There needs to be then careful consideration of why this is so. It may be that the believer should do it anyway, or maybe should refrain from it. If this is a matter commanded by the Bible (worship, marriage and so forth) then one has to be counter-cultural and do it anyway. If, however, the matter is not commanded by God, being only a matter of personal enjoyment and entertainment, then it would be best not to make a scandal out of it.

CONCLUSION

Entertainment is an indelible part of the present world. The church has before her the choices of cowering away, of assimilating all without discrimination, or of seeking to appreciate and redeem the culture. In the difficult matter of being relevant and not falling into sin, the ethical considerations of God's law, of the conscience, of the culture and of the weaker brother must be taken into account. The Christian has the freedom to enjoy the entertainment available in this world, but this freedom is not to sin, rather it is geared towards enjoying God's created beauty, truth, and love.

In an ideal situation, there would be only one circle. Man's conscience would be perfectly aligned to God's expressed will. The society around would also coincide. The pastoral task of ministering God's word involves leading Christians unto maturity, in a way that makes their consciences become better aligned with God's Word. By their common action it may be that society will also to a certain degree get better aligned in its comprehension of what is lawful leisure. And the church itself will get closer in tune to God's word.

This article has attempted to put forth basic boundaries for the enjoyment of the culture, and there is certainly still much to be said and examined in this matter. This work is submitted as a humble attempt at clarifying some issues and helping the church of Jesus Christ to be relevant in the culture and to be salt and light in this beautiful yet fallen world.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Some additional relevant resources are: BILLINGSLEY, K. L. *The Seductive Image: A Christian Critique of the World of Film*. Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989. CAMPBELL, Richard H.; PITTS, Michael R. *The Bible on the Film: A Check-List, 1897-1980*. Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1981. A thorough list of movies that portray Biblical passages, even when there is considerable liberty in adding or changing content. DETWEILER, Craig; TAYLOR, Barry. *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003. A good volume exploring the current cultural global setting and its reflection on pop culture. Many valuable examples. GAROFALO NETO, Emilio. *The Globalization and Contextualization of the Film Industry*. Jackson, MS: unpublished. GEIVETT, R. Douglas; SPIEGEL, James S. *Faith, Film and Philosophy: Big Ideas on the Big Screen*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007. A very good volume with insightful analysis of several important movies. GRENZ, Stanley. "What does Hollywood have to do with Wheaton? The place of (pop) culture in theological reflection." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, June 2004, 303-314. GUINNESS, Os; SEEL, John. *No God but God*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992. An excellent compilation of articles on church, society and much more. JOHNSTON, Robert K. *Useless Beauty: Ecclesiastes through the Lens of Contemporary Film*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004. A very interesting book, in which the author uses contemporary films to illustrate several passages from the book of Ecclesiastes. JOHNSTON, Robert K. *Reel Spirituality – Theology and Film in Dialogue*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006. Seeks to be a foundational book in the approach of movies by theologians and Christians in general. Very useful, good examples of interpreting films in the light of the Bible. JOHNSTON, Robert K. *Reframing Theology and Film*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007. This project seeks to deal with some criticisms received after the previous book and expand the interdisciplinary aspect of the discussion on movie analysis and how theology relates to movies. MAY, John R., ed. *New Image of Religious Film*. Kansas City, KS: Sheed & Ward, 1997. POLLAND, Larry W. *The Last Temptation of Hollywood*. Highland, CA: Master Media International Inc., 1988. POSTMAN,

RESUMO

Neste artigo, o autor quer começar a estabelecer os limites bíblicos das discussões éticas sobre entretenimento. Reconhecido como uma força cultural, o lazer é uma parte indelével da experiência humana. Ainda que enraizada em um mundo pecaminoso, a diversão tem um papel legítimo e importante na vida cristã. O autor argumenta que os cristãos não devem se abster de participar desse aspecto da vida humana. Antes, devem informar seus corações bíblicamente e seguir a quádrupla aplicação da lei de Deus ao escolher sabiamente como viver. O cristão precisa considerar os mandamentos claros de Deus, informar sua própria consciência, ter em mente os irmãos mais fracos e tomar cuidado para não trazer escândalo desnecessário à cultura em torno da igreja.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Entretenimento; Ética; Intercultural; Lei moral; Lei do amor.

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