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FOREWORD

In this Faculty Bulletin Pat Graham's study of Chronicles reminds us of God's concern for congruence between faith and life--integrity. Rick Marrs tells us that Christian integrity expresses itself not merely in religious exercises but in just and merciful conduct. David Worley and James Thompson explore the relation between faith and specific areas of life. Worley looks at the relationship between Christianity and the marketplace within the frame of Pauline thought. Thompson recalls Tertullian's pointed question (What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?) with particular reference to the arts--specifically, literature and theater. The concluding article reminds us that character and conduct are formed by our communities. It raises the issue of the impact of modernity upon the Christian community.

A word of appreciation is due my colleagues on the faculty the Institute for Christian Studies for their cooperation in presenting these essays. Special thanks are due to Mrs. Nancy Tindel, faculty secretary, for her help in preparing this issue of the Faculty Bulletin.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

THE CHRISTIAN, ENTERTAINMENT, AND THE ARTS

by James W. Thompson

At the end of the second century, Tertullian wrote a tract on The Shows, in which he warned his Christian audience against “the pleasures of the public shows.” Apparently many of Tertullian’s Christian contemporaries had maintained their interest in the various public spectacles of the period, and had seen no conflict between their Christian faith and the popular entertainment. When their attendance at the shows had been questioned, they had demanded a Scriptural reason why they should not attend the spectacles. In the opening section of Tertullian’s tract, he concedes that no biblical passage prohibits attendance at those popular events. There is no biblical passage, according to Tertullian, which says, “Thou shalt not enter circus or theater, thou shalt not look upon combat or show.”¹ Nevertheless, the stern church leader of North Africa was unyielding in his insistence that the public show was no place for a Christian. While he and his Christian contemporaries both cite Scripture as their authority in determining whether Christians

should attend theatric performances, they reach very different conclusions.

Those shows which Tertullian has in mind include a wide range of performances: athletic contests, chariot races, the gladiatorial combats, and theatrical performances. Tertullian objects to the Christian's presence at the athletic performances because one is inevitably forced in these circumstances to "stand in the way of sinners" and "sit in the seat of scoffers."² He objects to all theatrical performances because they encourage immodesty and licentiousness. The tragedies and comedies--the great productions of classical civilization--also fall under Tertullian's condemnation. For him, the great tragedians were nothing more than "impious and licentious inventors of crimes and lusts."³ If the tragedies record accounts of violence and adultery they should not be seen at all, for "it is not even good that there should be any calling to remembrance the atrocious or the vile."

Tertullian's views are deeply rooted in his belief that Christianity and culture live in opposition to each other. His famous question, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" has led him to reject all of the public shows of his time. Tertullian makes no distinction between those forms of entertainment which have "redeeming social value" and those which do not. Nor does his tract attempt to distinguish between the obscene and the acceptable forms of entertainment. All of the great plays--from the bawdy comedies of Aristophanes to the noble tragedies of Aeschylus--fall under his condemnation.

Tertullian was one of the first in the history of Christianity to address a significant question which the New Testament never mentions. From ancient times to the present, the problem has been discussed by Christian thinkers. Tertullian's stern view has been echoed in many circles until the present time. A significant number of Christian groups have forbidden attendance at the theater and the movies. However, Tertullian's position remains the view of the minority, for Christians have commonly accepted the cultural heritage which is exhibited in the literary and theatrical arts. Indeed, the Christian embrace of liberal education--the legacy of Athens, not Jerusalem--suggests that Tertullian lost the battle. The Christian heritage has been characterized by an openness to the literary heritage of Athens. Those who have rejected Tertullian's strict teaching have argued correctly that the world of arts and the theater has the capacity to enrich human life. Stories which contain violence and/or adultery, from Homer's Iliad to Hamlet or The French Lieutenant's Woman, have not been rejected because of these themes. The great works of fiction can enrich human life by introducing to us the complexity of human temptations and emotions. The appreciation of form, beauty and order in art is the appreciation of God's creation. Thus few Christians today would agree with Tertullian's rejection of theater. Whether entertainment offers us only an occasion for escape and relaxation, or provides insights about life, it is too valuable to be rejected in the sweeping

way in which Tertullian rejected them. It has thus been widely assumed among Christians that a good education involves an appreciation of the theater--whether in the classical forms inherited from Aeschylus or Shakespeare or in the modern forms offered by the movies.

The Christian acceptance of this literary and artistic heritage can too easily obscure the fact that Tertullian raised important questions about the forms of entertainment which Christians see. The question today is far more complicated than it has been in previous centuries, for we are no longer confronted with the simple question of "Athens or Jerusalem." The revolutions in the media have introduced new questions, as the movies, recordings and print media have offered possibilities which Tertullian could never have imagined. The accessibility of an extraordinary number of programming options, which has been made possible by the advent of cable television and the VCR, has made Tertullian's question more urgent than ever before. While these new possibilities can be used to continue the cultural heritage of Athens, they can also be used to pander and dehumanize. Where there is art, there will also be the abuse of art. Some novels may be enriching, and others may dehumanize and desensitize the reader. Some films may, in the tradition of the classics, help us understand life; others are clearly pornographic and without any "redeeming social value."

The widespread rejection of Tertullian's advice has left the Christian with a dilemma

which becomes increasingly acute, for Christians now must decide which art forms and which performances are appropriate for them. Those who do not accept Tertullian's conclusion must concede that he raised an important question, for few would deny that art forms can be so abused as to be destructive to the formation of Christian character. Those who reject his answer must offer an alternative one in determining the Christian's approach to arts and entertainment.

The alternative has not been an easy one to find. Indecency and pornography cannot be defined purely on the basis of the subject matter, language, or even the precise amount of clothing worn. The subjects of sex and violence, which are often the criteria used to determine obscenity, are not adequate to determine the presence of indecency. While these criteria may be helpful, they do not offer an absolute guide in determining the Christian's attitude to the world of literature and the visual arts. Tertullian's question must therefore become the subject of critical reflection.

New Testament Perspectives

Tertullian correctly observed that the New Testament never addresses the problem of the Christian and the theater. Indeed, in the only passages in the New Testament where forms of the word theatron appear, the word is used consistently for the theater as the place where victims receive public abuse. In Acts 19:29, 31, Paul is brought by the mob

to the theater in Ephesus. In other passages, theatron (and the related verb theatrizomai) is an image for public abuse. Paul employs a metaphor from the Roman practice of bringing victims condemned to death into the theater on public display when he says, “We became a spectacle (theatron) to the world, to angels, and to men” (1 Cor. 4:9). Similarly, the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews were “publicly exposed (theatrizomenoi) to abuse and humiliation.” Such passages suggest that the theater was primarily the place where Christians received abuse. In this situation, Tertullian’s question had not yet arisen.

Although the New Testament is silent on the Christian’s appreciation of the arts, its major witnesses offer perspectives which are helpful in answering Tertullian’s question. Indeed, despite the diversity of the New Testament writings, one conviction appears to be a unifying element in all of the major writings. It is the belief that the coming of Jesus Christ marks the end of the old aeon and the beginning of God’s “new creation.” Consequently Jesus, whose ministry is like “new wine in old wineskins,” challenges prevailing cultural values and creates a new “counterculture.” His parables present the new world of the kingdom as it calls in question the values of that society. His demand for discipleship was a summons to become a part of this new society.

The conviction that Christians form the new “counterculture” is dominant in the Pauline letters, where Paul describes the cross as the wisdom of God which stands in

opposition to all human wisdom. Christians who obey this word of the cross live already in God's new world, and are challenged not to be "conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:2). While Christians continue to live within the structures of this world, they have also been "rescued from this present evil aeon" (Gal 1:4). Thus they are aware of a Christian identity which distinguishes them from their own culture. Christians inhabit a "new world" (2 Cor. 5:17) and possess a new mind (Rom. 12:2).

The metaphor of the "stranger" or "pilgrim," which is employed both in Hebrews and 1 Peter, gives special emphasis to the motif of the Christian's distance from his culture. Both epistles associate the images with the church's identity in a hostile environment. In 1 Peter 4:4, a significant explanation is offered for the hostility of the local populace: "They are surprised that you do not now join them in the same wild profligacy, and they abuse you." The author does not specify what features of the Christian lifestyle aroused the hostility of the populace. He may have in mind both public festivals and the local customs of the inhabitants, especially as they were related to licentiousness and drunkenness.

One can observe from the advice given in 1 Peter 2:13--3:7 that the church's pilgrim identity did not bring about a total separation from the culture. Christians are summoned to adapt to the system of government (2:13-17) and family life. The ancient practice of

slavery is assumed (2:18-25). Christians are even married to pagans (3:1-7). Thus while the pilgrim existence has not removed Christians from their culture, it has provided them with the resources necessary to reject the elements of that culture which were unacceptable to those who had become pilgrims for the sake of Christ. Those who live in that culture and interact with it daily have evoked the hostility of the populace because of their refusal to participate in immoral practices.

Perspectives for the Present

Although the New Testament does not comment explicitly on the problem which has been faced from Tertullian to the present, it does offer a helpful paradigm in our assessment of the arts from a Christian perspective. The early Christian view that the Christian has entered a new world, with its own way of knowing and seeing, offers us a perspective for approaching the problem. Whereas Tertullian rejected the theater entirely while his opponents argued for the appropriateness of activities not explicitly prohibited in the New Testament, this task of assessment requires an assessment of individual works from the perspective of the Christian faith.

Amos Wilder described this process as “Christian discrimination.” In Theology and Modern Literature, Wilder wrote,

Certain elements in the church feel an obligation to come to terms vigorously with modern culture and its various expressions on the basis of sound theological norms. Such Christian assessment is directed for one thing toward the popular arts of the time, whether

moving picture, radio, television, and comic strip or the best-seller novel and the Broadway success. Judgment need not always be disapproving. A great deal of the make-believe, entertainment, and even escape in such art forms is both talented and innocent; but distinctions must be drawn between the genuine and the specious, between works which relate themselves to reality and those which falsify it. And if the real nature of things can be falsified by a crass sensationalism of sex and violence, it can also be falsified by pseudo-idealism and sentimentality.⁴

Although Wilder was primarily concerned with the making of aesthetic judgments, one may go beyond Wilder and affirm that the Christian makes moral judgments on his entertainment. T. S. Eliot wrote,

In ages like our own, in which there is no such common agreement, it is the more necessary for Christian readers to scrutinize their reading, especially works of imagination, with explicit ethical and theological standards.⁵

He also argued that

Our religion imposes our ethics, our judgment and criticism of ourselves, and our behaviour toward our fellow men. The fiction that we read affects our behaviour towards our fellow men, affects our patterns of ourselves.⁶

Thus he concluded that what we read affects us as entire human beings. Therefore, according to Eliot, the Christian approaches literature with standards over and above those applied by the rest of the world; and “by these criteria and standards everything that we read must be tested.”

Eliot’s argument follows naturally from the conviction that the Christian’s entry into a new world places him in tension with his culture. His case for Christian discrimination can also be applied to the movies and the other arts. However, Christian

discrimination does not mean that the Christian's entertainment consists only in those forms which provide the Christian point of view, for literature offers prefabricated ideological solutions--even the Christian solution--often fails as good literature. Christian discrimination involves rather a recognition of that which distorts reality and offers a vision of life which inhibits the transformation of the Christian into his image. Those portraits of human life which pander to the taste for violence and distorted sexuality are not the only forms of obscenity, but they are significant in their capacity to dehumanize and desensitize. This Christian discrimination demands most that Christians have the sensitivity to recognize that which is unhealthy in the formation of Christian character.

How is the Christian to decide what is appropriate to read and see? The fact that our courts have not been able to give a definition of pornography does not mean that it does not exist. Former Justice Potter Stewart said, when he admitted that obscenity is difficult to define, "I know it when I see it." Christian discrimination gives the Christian the sensitivity to recognize the problem.

While Tertullian's answers may be largely unacceptable, he recognized an important problem and articulated a response. If we find the middle ground between Tertullian and his contemporaries difficult to define, we will benefit by a continuing attempt to answer the question: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"

Notes

- ¹ De Spectaculis III.
- ² De Spectaculis III.
- ³ De Spectaculis XVII.
- ⁴ Amos Wilder, Theology and Modern Literature (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) 64.
- ⁵ T. S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature," in Religion and Modern Literature, ed. G. B. Tennyson and Edward E. Ericson, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1975) 21.
- ⁶ T. S. Eliot, 24.

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