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Devil with a Blue Dress

by Douglas Wilson¹

SERIOUS CHRISTIANS have always had an uneasy relationship with popular entertainment, and the difficulty is certainly understandable. Presented with the problem of recreation and entertainment, we usually find Christians divided into two clusters. Some are entirely too comfortable with whatever the world dishes up in the name of the great god entertainment. Confronted with movies, plays, dancing, songs, videos, novels, short stories, television, magazines, etc.,

all aesthetic activity — the same list as given above — as *necessarily* worldly and not fitting for Christians. In short, some Christians think the Bible is not strict enough. It has always been this way. John Bunyan had to include a poetic defense of his fictional work as a preface to Part II of *Pilgrim's Progress*. "But some love not the method of your first..."²

How are we to respond to this difficulty? The answer is that we must keep both errors in mind. The Christian church must provide a hard-headed critique of the world's entertainment mania as it is, and the church must be careful to remember the far-reaching claims of our Lord's redemptive mission. *Everything* is to be brought into submission to Him.

The purpose here is, first, to articulate a brief defense against the charge that entertainment is *necessarily* worldly and to be completely avoided by Christians. At the same time, I want to show that the historic Christian assault on the stage (as well as other forms of popular entertainment) cannot be blown off as mere frenzied legalism. Many modern Christians listen to our fathers on this subject only long enough to discover that they thought "such and such" to be a "sin," and so moderns then summarily dismiss whatever these earlier critics had to say.

these believers demonstrate all the discernment of a vacuum cleaner. If one were to point out that their salad had three, huge garden slugs in it, they would maintain there is still a high percentage of lettuce. In short, many Christians are worldlings. They happily spend hours a night in front of the tube, pearl diving in a cesspool. Their occasional success in coming up with a pearl does not change our overall opinion of the wisdom of their efforts.

But, of course, on the other side we find our more stern brethren who regard

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Church and State:

A Lesson From the Past

*A Review Essay
by Lance Box*

A copy of the Master of Arts dissertation by Rev. Francis D. White titled, *Church and State in Presbyterian Missions Gulf of Carpentaria: 1937-47*, came into my hands recently. Not being a Presbyterian by tradition I need to be careful in my comments, but I feel that the work has some important lessons for us to learn. Essentially it shows that when a church becomes dependent upon the state for finance it loses its capacity to be the prophetic and evangelical voice that God intended it to be. There needs to remain a clear distinction between the civil offices and duties of the civil government, and the religious offices and duties of the church. To miss the two is to water down the effectiveness of both. All page numbers refer to pages in the dissertation and Bible quotations are from the Amplified Bible.

During the years 1933, 1934, and 1935, the Presbyterian Church of Queensland went through a period where church support of missions among indigenous Australians declined as expenses increased. Because of the work that was being done by Presbyterian missionaries among the indigenous people, "the State Government sustained almost half of the total budgeted

1. Reprinted by permission from *Credenda Agenda*, Vol. 7, No. 3., PO Box 8741 Moscow, Idaho 83843-1241 USA.

2. John Bunyan, *Works of John Bunyan* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), p. 170.

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We grant that *some* of our fathers *sometimes* went beyond the Scriptures in their treatment of "entertainment," and they did so in a manner inconsistent with Christian liberty. Nevertheless, if our modern brain-dead-through-watching-the-tube generation of Christians were shown to these older critics of the stage, they would certainly be confronted with an overwhelming temptation to offer us up as Exhibit A in support of their thesis. Put another way, our generation of saints *is not the model of Christian liberty it purports to be*, but rather an example of something referred to by the Westminster divines — "They who, upon pre-

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tence of Christian liberty, do practice any sin, or cherish any lust, do thereby destroy the end of Christian liberty. . . ." In other words, the foes of godly liberty are not merely to be found on the legalistic right but also on the libertine left.

In addition, we sometimes misunderstand the historical context of some of these older debates. For example, the Puritan opposition to King James' *Book of Sports* (in which the king tried to get everybody to play with frisbees on Sunday) was not based upon an opposition

to recreation as such. Rather, it reflected their opposition to such practices on the Lord's Day. In addition, the Puritans also opposed certain *kinds* of sports in themselves — cock-fighting, bear-baiting, etc. That is to say, their opposition was careful and qualified, not discriminate. So we must not simply react because so and so was opposed to such and such. We need to understand the context.

Having said this, it would be wrong to conclude that classical Protestants were of one mind in what they opposed. In his wonderful book, *War on the Idols*, Carlos Eire points out how effectively the Protestants of the Reformation used the stage for the advancement of the kingdom by attacking the idolatry of Rome. "The Protestant message was also often announced on the stage through dramatic poems or plays, which often combined sharp satire with theological argumentation."³ And the Puritan William Burkitt said this: "It being impossible for the mind of man to be always intent upon business, and for the body to be exercised in continual labors, the wisdom of God has therefore adjudged some diversion or recreation . . . to be both needful and expedient."⁴

Classical Protestantism has *not* been uniform in opposition to such things *considered in themselves*. And, even where such opposition did exist among Protestants, we would submit that once the context is understood, our generation of believers has much to learn from them.

So, what does the Bible say? Can the argument be sustained that diversionary words of literature, art, poetry, plays, etc. must be avoided by Christians?

The answer is clearly *no*. Christ made up fictional stories to make a point (Matt. 13:3). The apostle Paul quoted from the play Agamemnon written by the pagan Aeschylus (Acts 26:14) — an R-rated play, incidentally, not exactly packed with cheer and uplift. Although fully historical, the book of Job is written in the dramatic form of a play. The book of Psalms is a divine collection of poetry. The elder brother came in from the fields to find the household whooping it up — loud enough to be heard outside —

expenses for the maintenance of the four missions — Mapoon, Weipa, Aurukun and Mornington Island (p. 44). However, in return for the government support, the church workers were required to perform civil duties. This led to the situation where civil responsibilities took a higher priority than the Gospel imperatives. White writes, "Despite any evidence of shared concerns between the Church and the Government of the day, through its Chief Protector of Aborigines, the relationship was not one of partnership between peers. In both public communications and private correspondence, it becomes clear that the Church deferred to the Government on a wide range of issues. . . . [T]he increasing financial burden of mission work by 1937 had effectively consolidated the symbiotic relationship between Church and State, based largely on the role of the State as a limited financial underwriter of missions. The inevitable strings attached to such funding demonstrated that the Church was not effectively in control of its own work" (pp. 51, 73).

Later in the dissertation, Rev. White indicates that the control of the Queensland Government gained through its financial involvement with the missions radically altered the structure and direction of the missions. "[T]he Government of Queensland was in no small way responsible for the radical modification of the community at Mapoon as the years went by" (p. 123). The Church eventually received criticism for the breaking up of missions and the pain that was experienced by the aboriginal inhabitants. "The bitterness that has been directed towards the Church since the closure of Mapoon could have been avoided if the P.C.Q. [Presbyterian Church of Queensland — ed.] had understood more clearly the extent of what it was called to as well as what it was not called to. Not only was the Church compromised by its links with the State in general, but it also failed to take up its calling to care for a community which was marginalised from both European and traditional Aboriginal roots" (p. 132).

To sum up the situation, White writes, "The authority delegated by the State to the Church in the Gulf became the stumbling block upon which P.C.Q. Gulf

3. Carlos Eire, *War Against the Idols* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 100.

4. Cited in Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), p. 189.

through music and dancing (Luke 15:25).

Now this certainly means that such aesthetic activity is lawful, but what about the key word *diversionary*? Is it lawful to participate in or view such things for the purposes of recreation alone? To quote the father in the parable of the prodigal son, "It was *right* that we should *make merry* and be glad . . ." (Luke 15:32).

That Said . . .

If we were to establish that drinking beer is lawful, as it most certainly is, it does not follow that we should all charge out to commence a two-day marathon at the local pub. Christians should distinguish the use of a thing according to Scripture, and the abuse of that thing as seen in the local paper's Arts and Entertainment section. So what must we keep in mind when we consider entertainment? R.L. Dabney provides a good example of the "old school" attitude towards this.

True imaginative creativity is an arduous process, as Dabney points out. "To do what they profess to do, to give a correct picture of human life and character in a fictitious narrative, is extremely difficult." When entertainment reigns, every and any ambitious bumbler is invited to take a stab at creating his own little world for the rest of us to observe. We see this all around us, particularly in modern popular novels, and those ham-

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handed anti-morality plays that we call television sitcoms. "And he who suffers his views of life to be colored by such reading . . . is destined to nothing but blunders, disappointments and disgusts, when he attempts to buffet with the *hard realities* of the world." All fictional narrative is didactic, and it takes a godly genius to use such a medium to teach accurately and well.

Second, when one gives himself to the point of indulgence to entertainment, he finds his sensibilities excited by all the fictional hubbub. "They [the fictional

works] must be animated and full of incident, or they will not be popular." But God intended for such aroused sensibilities to *issue forth in good works*. When pity brings forth tears, the usual pattern should be to reach out a helping hand, or to motivate and prepare the reader to do so. The response should *not* be to reach out for the next book in the best-selling *Love's Thumping Heart* series. But the indulgent participant's sensibilities are simultaneously excited, and the godly release of them frustrated. "And thus, by equal steps, he becomes at once *sentimental and inhuman* . . . the novel reader sits weeping over the sorrows of imaginary heroes and heroines, too selfish and lazy to lay down the fascinating volume and reach forth his hand to relieve an actual sufferer at his door." Before we rush to dismiss Dabney at this point, we should consider our national sins in the light of his charge. *Sentimental and inhuman*. We conduct massive search-and-destroy missions on the genetically imperfect preborn. But if they somehow make it past the prenatal gauntlet of our murderous medical establishment, we create special parking spaces for them, coordinate Special Olympics, give everybody a medal, and reach for the Kleenex. We *are* sentimental and inhuman — emotionally and spiritually schizophrenic. How did we get that way?

Third, because a world is "created" in a world of fiction, it may be created according to the author's will. And if he is in rebellion against the God of Scripture, he will utilize his talents to *lie*. "So it is perfectly easy to paint truth at the bottom and error at the top when falsehood holds the brush." Those Christians who care about the contents of entertainment usually limit their complaints to the obvious — nudity, blasphemy, porno-violence, etc. — although our Christian culture is so far gone that many believers have come to take on-screen immorality and nudity right in their stride. But voyeurism is scripturally gross, and cannot be sanitized through getting the woman's permission. To be entertained with on-screen nudity, etc. is simply such voyeurism with high-tech support, and to defend such is spiritual impudence — as though peeping at window sills could be made lawful through using *expensive* binoculars.

missions fell rather than the cornerstone upon which they were built. The Church lost something of its prophetic independence for the sake of temporal patronage and material security. To the extent that the Church both accepted and benefited from the sponsorship of the State, to that extent the Church has suffered the same ignominy heaped upon past Governments and their agents" (p. 162).

This is not meant as a criticism of those who gave their lives sacrificially to bring the Gospel to the native inhabitants of Australia. These precious people worked faithfully under extremely difficult circumstances, and it would appear that the support of the wider Church was thin. There are some lessons that we can learn. First, we who are not on the field need to be generous in our giving to missions and missionaries. To us the Apostle James writes: "Come now, you rich [people], weep aloud and lament over the miseries — the woes — that are surely coming upon you. Your abundant wealth has rotted and is ruined and your [many] garments have become moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are completely rusted through, and their rust will be testimony against you and it will devour your flesh as if it were fire. You have heaped together treasure for the last days. [But] look! [Here are] the wages that you have withheld by fraud from the labourers who have reaped your fields, crying out (for vengeance), and the cries of the harvesters have come to the ears of the Lord of hosts" (James 5:1-4).

Second, we need to be clear on the limits of the call and scope of those who are set aside as ministers of the Gospel. To become entangled in civil affairs is to rob the people of God. We need Christians who are called to civil government to administer such civil affairs, but those who are apostles of the faith need to carry in their hearts the injunction of Acts 6:2: "It is not seemly or desirable or right that we should have to give up or neglect [preaching] the Word of God in order to attend to serving at tables and superintending the distribution of food."

Third, that God is jealous over His people; He will not allow any other God to take His place. When the Church looks to the State, it is saying that God is not able to provide in His gracious Providence. God has promised to

Still, while revulsion against overt immorality is necessary and valuable, frequently left out are worldview considerations. *What is the author saying, and is it true?* Worldview analysis requires hard work, and someone who sits in front of the box for a no-brainer, slack-jaw session does not want the intellectual challenge.

And left out are considerations of the subtle didactic effect of such material. "The usual tendency of these words is to familiarize the reader to viewing, without revulsion . . . the characters of duelists, drunkards, seducers, and other villains." Thus modern Christians are still opposed to the fornication going on next door, but they are no longer outraged and scandalized by it, as they would have been fifty years ago. The reason for this

lack of outrage can be found in the searing effects of godless entertainment on the conscience, when mindlessly taken in. The subtle didactic lie has been — "you may still believe that these things are wrong *for you*, but you may no longer believe them to be a big deal, and under no circumstances may you impose your morality on others." *Yessir*, we all say.

And last, consider what a tremendous expenditure of time and money goes into all this foolishness. Scripture tells us to redeem the time, but our stadiums, coliseums, theaters are packed, and packed all the time. They are packed with people, most of whom have nothing better to do, and too much money and time on their hands. As Dabney observed, such things serve well in the murder of time.

supply all our needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus, However, His supply is conditional upon our obedience to His injunctions. Perhaps often we engage ourselves in religious activity but fail to first wait on God to find out what He wants to do. He will finance anything that He has originated, but makes no such promise for our "good ideas."