

## **The Crow and the Raven**

*Aesop Fable*

A Crow was jealous of the Raven, because he was considered a bird of good omen. The Raven always attracted the attention of men, who noted by his flight the good or evil course of future events.

Seeing some travelers approaching, the Crow flew up into a tree. Perching herself on one of the branches, she cawed as loudly as she could. The travelers turned towards the sound and wondered what it foreboded. But one of the travelers said to his companion, "Let us proceed on our journey, my friend, for it is only the caw of a crow, and her cry, you know, is no omen."

*Those who assume a character which does not belong to them  
only make themselves ridiculous.*

# Engaging the Culture or Embracing It?

## The Subtle Danger of Syncretism

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Whether it be the holiday fantasy *The Polar Express* or the R-rated *The Matrix*, the gap between the Christian message and the implied message in some of Western culture's popular media, especially film, is narrowing—or so it is claimed. The subtle—and sometimes not-so-subtle—messages are compared to the analogies and parables used in Scripture, by which spiritual truth is taught through familiar themes of contemporary society. Since much of western society is engrossed in the world of film, we are encouraged to enter its borders in order to learn the language of the realm, hear the philosophy of its citizens, identify its worldview, and find the commonality that will allow us to build bridges for the sake of winning some to Christ.

None of this is new. Successful missionary endeavors thrive on these principles. However, wise missionaries know that danger exists in entering foreign territory. In an effort to identify with the people of another culture, they can be subtly drawn toward blurred boundaries of thought and action, justifying their choices by claiming to build social bridges. Some go beyond engaging the culture to embracing it without discernment, deceived by messages that appear to be godly and powerful but are based on lies and ungodly influence. The result is syncretism, a bonding of two opposing worldviews whose followers cannot see the inherent contradictions.

In 1990, a missionary on the island of Borneo arrived in a Dayak village one evening shortly before Easter for a scheduled literacy and Bible study class. During the informal visiting prior to the class, one of the students remarked, "It's just about time to put the blood on the doorposts again." Not sure she had heard correctly, the missionary asked, "What was that?"

"It's just about time to put the blood on the doorposts again." By now, everyone in the room was paying attention. They all began to sense that something was amiss. One of them said, "Is it okay to do that?"

The missionary paused and then asked, "Where are you getting the blood?" Some of them immediately saw the problem. Blood for the doorposts came from sacrificed chickens, and they knew the Protestant missionaries taught the cessation of all blood sacrifices. The local Catholic priest, however, had "baptized" the old rituals and incorporated them into Christian beliefs, giving the Dayaks a supposed functional substitute for their pagan rites. Since the words for

Easter and Passover are similar,<sup>1</sup> the two holy days became confused. Putting blood on the doorposts made sense in a culture that relied upon charms and rituals to ward off evil spirits.<sup>2</sup>

Such syncretism is common now even as it was in the days of the early church. The Judaizers had difficulty seeing Christianity as a new work of the Spirit and so tried to impose the Mosaic Law on the Gentiles. Greeks interpreted the gospel through their own philosophies and came up with ideas that persist to this day in western culture. Around the world, the teachings of Christ have been mixed with long-held superstitions and practices from other belief systems.

The Church has continually been faced with the challenge of purifying itself of syncretistic doctrine and pagan practices. A Christianity untainted by corrupt practices can identify syncretism with little difficulty. However, a Christianity that has lost its holiness will not only fail to recognize the full extent of a culture's depravity but will also end up embracing some of that culture as its own.

Such is the danger for those who want to reach out to pop culture in American society.<sup>3</sup> In an attempt to follow the model of Christ's incarnational ministry, they move into a foreign culture to engage its citizens, sometimes forgetting that they are in the territory of Satan. The risk is syncretism, a baptizing of pop culture into Christianity.

### *Blurred boundaries*

Few would want to return to the day when Christians rejected movies and theater out of hand. As misguided as churches may have been in making absolute prohibitions, we might nevertheless do well to reconsider their fears. Their concern was worldliness—that way of life in which the Christian shares the world's values, losing sight of holiness in order to fulfill a desire for pleasure. They instinctively knew that spiritual danger lurks in the world's pleasures and that virtue can easily be compromised.

If our parents' and grandparents' churches objected to the movies, it was because of the sex and violence that were portrayed so graphically. In 1930, in response to public pressure, and especially to a movement led by Catholic women, Hollywood finally agreed to censor itself, establishing the Motion Picture Production Code.<sup>4</sup>

That was 75 years ago. Rating systems still exist, though greatly modified from the 1930 code. Today's boundaries are based on what is deemed suitable for certain ages rather than recognizing that some subjects are not suitable at all. For the most part, Christians have gradually adjusted their own standards to the more liberal codes. In rejecting the legalism that so often became pharisaical hypocrisy, Christians have celebrated the freedom to immerse themselves hours at a time in the world of film if they so choose, sometimes with discernment, oftentimes without.

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<sup>1</sup> *Paska* and *Paskah*.

<sup>2</sup> The author is the missionary in this story. The incident occurred in a Dayak village of West Kalimantan in early 1990.

<sup>3</sup> This paper is looking primarily at Christianity and pop culture in America. The principles, however, could easily be applied to other cultures.

<sup>4</sup> Also known as the Hays Code. See Appendix A.

The world of film is alluring. The technology alone can be fascinatingly creative. As an art form, it is morally neutral. It remains neutral, however, only until it is put into the hands of an agent, at which time it adapts to the moral, immoral, or amoral nature of its user.

Many voices have spoken out against the prevailing moral decadence in modern film. Some, however, such as Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, have taken another view. They are among the admittedly few who claim that a lot of good exists in pop culture.

We celebrate the rise of pop culture as among the most profound, provocative, exciting expressions of legitimate spiritual yearning in at least one hundred years. We turn to pop culture in our efforts to understand God and to recognize the twenty-first-century face of Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

God is speaking through pop culture, they claim, “lurking in the songs, shows, and films.”<sup>6</sup> They therefore not only engage the culture but embrace it,<sup>7</sup> seeing it as a “revolutionary” means of “subverting and frustrating those religious authorities who desperately cling to black-and-white answers in an increasingly gray world.”<sup>8</sup>

Thus indicating a rather low view of existing churches, they propose a “revolution” by sending people, particularly students, into pop culture with their “feet planted firmly in the world,”<sup>9</sup> to proclaim “the power, the wisdom, and the relevance of God.”<sup>10</sup> In so doing, students are to develop their theology from the culture itself before applying biblical interpretation.<sup>11</sup>

Their proposal is not as revolutionary as they imagine. Ever since Philip took the gospel to the Samaritans, God’s people have been moving into cultures different from their own, demonstrating the power and love of Jesus in new places. Detweiler and Taylor, however, have their priorities out of order. First, legitimate theology is forged in the Scriptures, not from culture. Trying to understand God by looking at culture without applying the truth of God’s own revelation will result in a skewed deity and a twisted interpretation of culture. The one who wishes to understand God must have his feet firmly planted in the Scriptures, not in the world. Although it is legitimate to hunt for ways that God might still be working in a culture that has rejected the revelation he has already given, they have taken relevance to a dangerous level by searching for a twenty-first century Jesus different from the God-Man presented in the first century.

Secondly, having one’s feet “firmly planted in the world” is at odds with scriptural teaching about our heavenly citizenship. Indeed, we are to be God’s salt and light in this world. Nevertheless, we are not to be so enamored of this world that it becomes the place we find our identity. Scripture teaches that we are not to firmly plant ourselves here but rather to consider our-

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<sup>5</sup> Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Italics in the original.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

selves pilgrims and strangers in a world to which we do not belong.<sup>12</sup> We are to be in the world but not of the world.<sup>13</sup> A Christianity that has already compromised itself can easily move from being tempted by the world to actually loving the world, unable any longer to see the world's entertainment ("lust of the eyes") with God's eyes.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, pursuing the lost that are trapped in the philosophy of the age is a legitimate ministry. Even as missionaries cross oceans to bring Jesus to those who are ensnared in animistic religions, God's representatives need to cross philosophical borders to bring the real Jesus to pop culture. They need to learn from history, though. Rather than considering themselves to be so revolutionary that they are charting new territory, they need to heed the lessons learned in missions.

### **Lesson #1: Incarnational Ministry**

Incarnational ministry, now an accepted principle of missions, involves adopting something from a new culture while still keeping one's own identity. It began with Jesus Christ himself. God became human so that we could see what God was truly like and live accordingly. In so doing, however, Jesus did not give up his identity as God. Although he took on a human body with all its physical limitations, he did not exchange his godly thinking patterns for sinful human ones.

Born as a Jew, Jesus lived like a Jew. However, he did not live like all Jews. As a respected rabbi, he could debate the learned Pharisees and challenge intellectuals like Nicodemus. Yet, those who were closest to him were not these elite members of society but commoners from Galilee. Even worse, Jesus ate and drank with sinners, those dregs of society disenfranchised by the politically correct religious leaders. Nevertheless, he established boundaries. He mingled with sinners because he loved them, but he did not adopt their underlying worldview or participate in their sins.

Resistant to the idea at first, the Apostles eventually realized that "going into all the world" meant making some changes in their own lifestyle. Peter had to give up his Jewish ethnocentricity when God revealed that Gentiles were not untouchables but co-heirs of the gospel.<sup>15</sup> Paul lived like a Jew when he was among the Jews in order to avoid offense. He deliberately adapted his lifestyle in foreign cultures, i.e., Greek rather than Jewish, for the sake of the kingdom of God.<sup>16</sup> Later, in his first letter to the Corinthians, he defended himself against his accusers by explaining that he became all things to all men so that he might win them to Christ.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Heb. 11:13, 1 Pet. 2:11, KJV; NIV, *aliens and strangers*.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Jn. 2:15-16.

<sup>14</sup> Detweiler and Taylor describe themselves as fans of pop culture (8) and as having a love for pop culture (15). The same claims were made when they spoke at the NW regional meetings of ETS in March 2005. Although they admit that pop culture is not the ideal, they still insist it *is* "our" culture, the air we breathe (15). The question is whether it *should* be. Christians have a choice: they can submit to the culture or they can live as strangers in it.

<sup>15</sup> Acts 10-11.

<sup>16</sup> Paul adapted not only his lifestyle but also the way he presented the gospel. When among the Jews, he used the Scriptures to argue that Jesus was the Christ, building on the Jews' belief that the Scriptures were true and could be trusted. When proclaiming the gospel to Gentile unbelievers in the Areopagus, however, he based his arguments on

In following Christ's example, the Apostles mingled with the people of all stations of life wherever they went. They made adaptations, but in each case, the adaptations were social, not moral. The apostles did not take on the philosophy of the foreign cultures but merely adapted their lifestyle in such a way as not to give unnecessary offense. They believed in maintaining righteousness and charged new believers to do the same: Live holy lives now—with each other, in your homes, and in the marketplace.

The church, as the visible body of Christ on earth, must show God's righteous character while living among people who are entrenched in the perverse, ungodly cultures of the world. That is incarnational ministry: changing one's normal lifestyle in order to communicate effectively but at the same time refraining from getting involved in any sin that is an inherent part of the culture.

Going into pop culture requires the same. It would be impossible to live in pop culture and not come in contact with the moral degradation that it accepts. However, one cannot afford to compromise the sanctity of body and spirit by deliberately involving oneself in the conduct which that degradation has promoted. Just as a missionary to a pagan tribe must reject its demonic practices, so also the pop-culture missionary must reject everything that compromises godliness of character.

Detweiler and Taylor are walking on treacherous ground here. They claim that "getting the message out supersedes the highest of principles.... Have such people compromised? Sure. Haven't we all?"<sup>18</sup> Sure, *we* have, but Jesus did not. Our model for incarnational ministry is not other human beings but the Savior. He did not compromise during his temptation, his ministry, or his trial and crucifixion. The result was death. Nevertheless, the message "got out" because the message itself has power.

We are continuing Christ's ministry, not inventing one of our own. The end does not justify the means. We dare not compromise godliness for acceptance, using Paul's "all things to all men" to justify our choices. Wanting to "fit in" is understandable, but compromising righteous living to do so is not permissible. "The man or woman who lives by faith does not fit in."<sup>19</sup>

### *Establishing symbolic boundaries*

Hudson Taylor has been used as an example of one who practiced incarnational ministry. He broke the traditions of his expatriate community when he began to dress and eat like the Chinese. Venturing to live in a manner that was at that time unthinkable to westerners, he succeeded in crossing the barriers that had prevented the English from convincing the Chinese that the gospel had merit. Whereas other missionaries had occasionally worn Chinese clothing for reasons of

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philosophy rather than the Scriptures. They understood philosophy, whereas they had no background for understanding the Scriptures. Incarnational ministry means not only speaking the language of the people but also using the basic educational principle of beginning one's teaching at a point already understood by the learner.

<sup>17</sup> 1 Cor. 9:19-23.

<sup>18</sup> Detweiler and Taylor, 298.

<sup>19</sup> Os Guinness, *Prophetic Untimeliness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 86. Compare what is said about the heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11.

safety and expediency, Taylor humbly chose to identify himself this way with the Chinese people in order to overcome the suspicions that existed at that time between the Chinese and the West.

He took the step he had been prayerfully considering—called in a barber, and had himself so transformed in appearance that his own mother could hardly have known him. To put on Chinese dress without shaving the head is comparatively a simple matter; but Hudson Taylor went all lengths, leaving only enough of the fair, curly hair to grow into the queue of the Chinaman. He had prepared a dye, moreover, with which he darkened this remaining hair, to match the long, black braid that at first must do duty for his own. Then in the morning he put on as best he might the loose, unaccustomed garments, and appeared for the first time in the gown and satin shoes of a “Teacher,” or man of the scholarly class.<sup>20</sup>

Note that he did not put on just any Chinese costume but that which symbolized the status that would be comparable to his own in western society, that of a teacher. The strategy worked.

Taylor’s strong point was his humility at a time when the English considered themselves superior to the Chinese. His radical move was deliberately calculated to break down cultural barriers for the sake of the gospel. His adaptation, however, did not turn Taylor into a Chinese. The practices that he adopted were outward, not inward. He neither compromised his integrity nor adopted the spiritual philosophy of the Chinese. He remained an Englishman dressed as a Chinese. His clothing sent the message, “I am a teacher, and I want to live among you.”

Taylor’s experience was positive, and many foreign missionaries have followed his example. However, adopting the dress and outward symbols of another culture may not always be wise. Culture is much more than ties or tattoos, braids or body piercing. Outward appearance often symbolizes a way of thinking that is associated only with a sub-group within the culture. It may send a message, “I belong to this sub-culture and its worldview,” much as certain colors and markings identify gang members. The Christian must ask, “Is it wise to be identified as a member of this sub-culture?” If the symbols communicate “I think as this non-Christian culture thinks,” then the perceived message will probably compromise the gospel message.

Incarnational ministry mingles willingly, but it does not give up its godly identity.

### *Establishing behavioral boundaries*

Immersing oneself in a foreign culture brings the risk of assimilation. In this case, one begins to think like the target group and embrace rather than just engage the culture. Foreign missionaries have at times opened themselves up to satanic disturbances and deceitful thinking by carelessly delving into pagan rituals, driven by the attractiveness of the unknown or the lure of exciting stories to tell the supporters back home. Others have let down their guard in an honest attempt to understand the inner workings of foreign worldviews and their spiritual implications,

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<sup>20</sup> Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor, *Hudson Taylor in Early Years: The Growth of a Soul*, Vol. 1 (London: China Inland Mission, 1911), Chap. 24.

even as some American pastors subscribe to “men’s magazines” under the guise of research for ministry. So also, those going into pop culture’s borders can be deceived into thinking that there is no danger in participating in pop culture’s habits or watching its endless offerings of movies. Whatever positive features pop culture may have, its primary characteristics are on the side of hedonism, compromised morality, disrespect, and irreverence.

Unfortunately, Christian culture has to some degree already succumbed to the same practices. Being entertained is a priority, even in worship. Morality is preached but ignored because values have become relative. Christians are almost as disrespectful as the world toward other human beings. And irreverence? Disrespect for God is seen in the flippant jokes about the Deity and the thoughtless “Oh my God!” that makes Christians no different from the rest of the population. “Evangelicals and fundamentalists have embraced the modern world with a passion unrivaled in history” says Os Guinness.<sup>21</sup> Without really being aware of it, they have become syncretistic, maintaining an outward allegiance to Christ but practicing on the side the rituals of the world.

A misunderstanding of being “all things to all men,” then, only increases the temptation to go along with the rest of the citizens of “Popland,” for discernment has already been compromised. One becomes comfortable with being in the midst of virtual evil even if not personally practicing it. Comfort gives way to enjoyment, and good taste gives in to the baser lusts because “it’s a good story with a redeeming message.” It is not without reason that the Scriptures warn us to actively pursue holiness: “...let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.”<sup>22</sup> Unless we actively pursue it, holiness quickly gives way to comfortable compromise.

To avoid compromise, the Christian who chooses to reach out to postmodern pop culture must hate evil as God hates it and not allow himself to get ensnared by its attractiveness.<sup>23</sup> We must never forget the power of evil to destroy.

## **Lesson #2: Practice storytelling**

Modern movies are merely a technological adaptation of the ancient art of storytelling, an art form that apparently exists in all cultures.

Those who stress the positive side of pop culture’s movies and songs point to their increasingly evident spirituality. They are like the parables that Jesus used, they say, using everyday themes to point out spiritual truths, or at least ask spiritual questions. Some would go as far as to say that God is actually speaking through these modern parables, trying to reveal himself and catch people’s attention. But is it really God who is speaking? Or does the quasi-spiritual language remind us of spiritual truths we already know so that it merely sounds as though heaven might be breaking through?

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<sup>21</sup> Guinness, 53. Guinness is using the term *modern* to mean *present*, not in contradistinction to *postmodern*.

<sup>22</sup> 2 Cor. 7:1.

<sup>23</sup> Prov. 8:13, Job 28:28.

First, it must be emphasized that God can use anything he wants to catch a person's attention, even if the catalyst is not in itself spiritual. An incident from an international student ministry in Portland, OR demonstrates this.

While waiting for a Christmas concert to start, I asked a new Chinese couple if they had experienced culture shock yet...I mentioned that sometimes it can be uncomfortable being in a different culture. [The wife, who was leafing through a Bible at the time,] said that they had seen a lot of American movies and TV shows and that helped them know about American culture. I replied, "Yes, but you don't really learn much about the Bible from American movies and TV shows. She said that they had seen many episodes of "Friends."

Now I was really confused. Before I could ask another question, she said, "All the time they are saying 'Oh, my God!' so I knew that Americans believed in God."<sup>24</sup>

Evangelism was not likely one of the goals of the writers of *Friends*, but God used the program to catch the attention of a visiting Chinese woman and interest her in understanding the Bible.

God can use anything he wants, but if he is *speaking*, he speaks the truth.<sup>25</sup> No such guarantee accompanies a Hollywood parable. Just because some biblical names or terminology show up in a movie does not make it a message from the God of Scriptures. Putting the supposed parables into the mouths of profane and blasphemous characters further lessens the credibility of the source. People can only believe that such messages come from God if their God is a man-made one.

Equating Hollywood parables with those of Jesus also shows a misunderstanding of Christ's purpose in using parables. Jesus began speaking in parables only after the Jewish leaders had openly rejected him and decided to kill him.<sup>26</sup> Even his disciples didn't understand at first why he was speaking in such mysterious language. Jesus explained,

The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand." In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Greg Steward, *Greg and Kathy Steward's ISM Newsletter* 4:3 (2004). Greg Steward is a staff member of Inter-Varsity.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. the story of Joseph, Gen. 37-50.

<sup>26</sup> Matt. 12.

<sup>27</sup> Matt. 13:11-15.

Jesus' purpose was to hide truth, not to reveal it. Only his disciples received the full interpretations, and that was done in private.<sup>28</sup>

Christians get excited about the “parables” that they see in movies, but what are they really seeing? They identify the fantasy scenes of *The Polar Express* as an invisible but real world and make it correspond to the invisible world of faith taught in the Scriptures. Max Lucado endorsed a DVD for churches, encouraging them to use the film as a teaching tool, even to having “family night at the movies” in order to build on the conductor’s statement that what we see is not all that’s real.<sup>29</sup>

But what is the overt message actually proclaimed in the movie? The engineer on the Polar Express says that it doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you have faith in “something.” This kind of message does not compare to Jesus’ parables. He made the entrance into the Kingdom of God very narrow. An engineer who speaks a half-truth speaks a lie. Children have enough of a challenge to distinguish between Santa Claus and God. Taking a trip on *The Polar Express* is not going to help that confusion.

Does this mean we should boycott fantasy films such as *The Polar Express*? By no means. Fantasy has a legitimate place in the world of literature. However, it should remain fantasy and not get confused with truth, and adults must make sure that children know the difference.

At the other extreme are movies like *The Matrix* and *Bruce Almighty*. Like *Star Wars* of an earlier generation, these movies were quickly assumed to have Christian themes: *The Matrix* because of its allusions to a new birth and the borrowing of Christian terminology, and *Bruce Almighty* because it shows what a difficult job being God really is.

However, who is it that recognizes these themes? They are not the biblically illiterate but those who already know enough of the Bible to identify the source. The proposition that God is trying to reveal himself through films such as these is tenuous at best. Just because a movie has a spiritual theme does not mean that God is speaking. Those who are well schooled in the Bible recognize that Hollywood has stolen another plot and put its own spin on it.

The story we have to tell must remain constant, neither expanded nor abbreviated. Like Paul, we must deliver “that which we have received.”<sup>30</sup> Our stories are not just entertainment but a message that demands a response. We are ambassadors, not editors.

### **Lesson #3: Engage the culture in such a way that the culture embraces the story**

“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless,” says James, “is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”<sup>31</sup> To live among morally corrupt people is to live in pollution. It is extremely difficult to

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<sup>28</sup> Mk. 4:34.

<sup>29</sup> Tom Hanks, Max Lucado and Jim Burns. *The Polar Express*. Preaching & Teaching Resource DVD. 2004.

<sup>30</sup> 1 Cor. 11:23.

<sup>31</sup> Jas. 1:27.

live in pollution every day and not be contaminated by it. It is impossible if one deliberately chooses to imbibe of it, changing both black and white into gray.<sup>32</sup>

To live a holy life requires that we remain faithful to God's commandments, not appointing ourselves as a supreme court that, in an attempt to be relevant to the popular culture of the age, actually changes the commands into new precepts. "Never have Christians pursued relevance more strenuously," claims Os Guinness, but "never have Christians been more irrelevant."<sup>33</sup> The gospel, he explains, is always relevant. The problem is that Christians have mistakenly courted relevance without holding on to faithfulness.

*By our uncritical pursuit of relevance we have actually courted irrelevance; by our breathless chase after relevance without a matching commitment to faithfulness, we have become not only unfaithful but irrelevant; by our determined efforts to redefine ourselves in ways that are more compelling to the modern world than are faithful to Christ, we have lost not only our identity but our authority and our relevance. Our crying need is to be faithful as well as relevant.*<sup>34</sup>

Guinness calls us to challenge what he calls the "idol of relevance" lest we become "trendy, trivial, and unfaithful."<sup>35</sup> In so rejecting "the spurious models of the modern [i.e., present] world," we need to turn "to the real moment and the real hour seen only under God." He warns, however, that "relevance with faithfulness has a steep cost," for [faithful Christians] will seem to be out of step with their times; but those prepared to pay it win the prize of true relevance."<sup>36</sup>

Note that he hasn't rejected relevance but only relevance compromised by unfaithfulness. Pop culture needs faithful men and women to reach out in humble, genuine friendship to Popland's adherents. Guinness affirms that evangelicals have taken seriously the need to be culturally relevant in bringing the gospel to all cultures. Nevertheless, when Paul's "all things to all men" is taken to the extreme, the end result is surrender to the culture, "therefore becoming unfaithful to Christ."<sup>37</sup> The temptation is a common one. The Church has been taught that "everything Christian from worship to evangelism must be fresh, new, up-to-date, attuned, appealing, seeker-sensitive, audience-friendly, and relentlessly relevant, relevant, relevant."<sup>38</sup> Because the

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. Isa. 5:20.

<sup>33</sup> Guinness, *Prophetic Untimeliness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 12.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 15. Italics in the original.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>37</sup> Guinness, 57. Guinness traces this surrender through four steps: (1) assumption, in which some idea of the present age is adopted as superior to a belief of the past, an enlightened philosophy or practice that is uncritically accepted; (2) abandonment, in which anything not consistent with the new assumption is discarded as outmoded, an albatross that would prevent the Church from keeping up with the times; (3) adaptation, in which what remains of the old way of thought is adapted to fit the new without critical examination; and (4) assimilation, in which what remains is absorbed into the new assumptions. "The result is worldliness, or Christian capitulation to some aspect of the culture of its day. No longer a missionary, the church 'goes native' in some foreign culture or among some foreign ideas." It has become a false prophet much like the false prophets of old Israel, relying upon the word of those who conveniently use the name of God to give authority to their proclamations but lack the power that comes from the true Word of God. (Guinness, 57-62)

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

Church gives in and mimics pop culture, “the end result is not only a betrayal of the faith but a hapless impotence before the very audience the church was out to impress.”<sup>39</sup> Christianity that has embraced syncretism has lost its effectiveness. It is no longer in a position to have a culture embrace the story because the story has embraced the culture.

The cross-cultural missionary, in his or her effort to find a bridge into the new culture, is forced to analyze that culture in order to discover not only what is good and evil but also that which is neutral. Identifying with the people is normally considered good. The concept can only be taken so far, however. Missionaries cannot set aside God’s pronouncement that he has made his people a peculiar people, a holy nation set aside for him. As a holy nation, Christians aim to become more like Christ, adopting the characteristics of the perfect God-Man, while still actively participating in the everyday life of this world.

Becoming like Christ, however, means accepting the identity of a “peculiar people.” Jude warns that while we are trying to reach out to the world to rescue people from an eternal fate, we should do so fearfully lest we ourselves become involved in their sin. We are therefore to hate “even the clothing that is stained by corrupted flesh.”<sup>40</sup> A holy and “peculiar” people by definition will not carry the identity of the world.

Missionaries are always at risk of becoming so sympathetic with the culture in which they live that they get careless about maintaining holiness. One can become enthralled with the romanticism of that which is different, indulging curiosity under the guise of exploring the culture for the sake of ministry. Certainly it is necessary to study and understand the culture. Personal involvement in all of its aspects, however, is not wise.

Pop culture also, with its heavy emphasis upon visual media, has its dangers. It is already difficult to maintain personal purity in American society when we are bombarded with uninvited and ungodly visual stimuli targeted at natural lusts gone amok. Both sex and violence are addictive.<sup>41</sup> Indulging in such fare under the guise of “being all things to all men” is self-deceiving and self-destructive. A doctor cannot offer healing to a sick culture if he has embraced the patient’s disease.

The faithful, godly Christian stands out in any culture as a peculiar person with a message that is relevant to any age. This is how it should be. To adapt himself to a sinful culture is to be like the crow who pretended to be a raven. He only makes himself look ridiculous, and his message is ignored.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>40</sup> Jude 1:23.

<sup>41</sup> Much has been written about sex additions and the devastation it causes. Violence should be of concern as well. Christians and others are troubled about the effect of violence on children and have thus urged ratings on video games and other media of a violent nature. However, there seems to be less awareness of the addictive nature of violence in adults. It nevertheless exists. One Christian young man who was addicted to violent video games for seven years testified, “It twisted my mind and numbed my conscience.” He experienced a “rush” when viewing violent films—including *The Matrix*, especially when the blood flowed. (Anonymous, interview, Oct. 21, 2005, Portland, OR.)

## Appendix A

### The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 (The Hays Code)

(Abridged)

If motion pictures present stories that will affect lives for the better, they can become the most powerful force for the improvement of mankind

A Code to Govern the Making of Talking, Synchronized and Silent Motion Pictures. Formulated and formally adopted by The Association of Motion Picture Producers, Inc. and The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc. in March 1930.

Motion picture producers recognize the high trust and confidence which have been placed in them by the people of the world and which have made motion pictures a universal form of entertainment.

They recognize their responsibility to the public because of this trust and because entertainment and art are important influences in the life of a nation.

Hence, though regarding motion pictures primarily as entertainment without any explicit purpose of teaching or propaganda, they know that the motion picture within its own field of entertainment may be directly responsible for spiritual or moral progress, for higher types of social life, and for much correct thinking.

During the rapid transition from silent to talking pictures they have realized the necessity and the opportunity of subscribing to a Code to govern the production of talking pictures and of re-acknowledging this responsibility.

On their part, they ask from the public and from public leaders a sympathetic understanding of their purposes and problems and a spirit of cooperation that will allow them the freedom and opportunity necessary to bring the motion picture to a still higher level of wholesome entertainment for all the people.

#### General Principles

1. No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.
2. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
3. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

*[Particular applications of these principles follow which shall not be delineated here. These outline crimes against the law, sex, vulgarity, obscenity, profanity, costume (nudity), dances, religion, locations (i.e., bedrooms), national feelings, titles, and treatment of repellent subjects]*

#### Reasons Underlying the General Principles

- I. **No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it.** Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin.

This is done:

1. When evil is made to appear attractive and alluring, and good is made to appear unattractive.

2. When the sympathy of the audience is thrown on the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil, sin. The same is true of a film that would throw sympathy against goodness, honor, innocence, purity or honesty.

Note: Sympathy with a person who sins is not the same as sympathy with the sin or crime of which he is guilty. We may feel sorry for the plight of the murderer or even understand the circumstances which led him to his crime: we may not feel sympathy with the wrong which he has done. The presentation of evil is often essential for art or fiction or drama. This in itself is not wrong provided:

- a. That evil is not presented alluringly. Even if later in the film the evil is condemned or punished, it must not be allowed to appear so attractive that the audience's emotions are drawn to desire or approve so strongly that later the condemnation is forgotten and only the apparent joy of sin is remembered.
- b. That throughout, the audience feels sure that evil is wrong and good is right.

## **II. Correct standards of life shall, as far as possible, be presented.**

A wide knowledge of life and of living is made possible through the film. When right standards are consistently presented, the motion picture exercises the most powerful influences. It builds character, develops right ideals, inculcates correct principles, and all this in attractive story form.

If motion pictures consistently hold up for admiration high types of characters and present stories that will affect lives for the better, they can become the most powerful force for the improvement of mankind.

## **III. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.**

By natural law is understood the law which is written in the hearts of all mankind, the greater underlying principles of right and justice dictated by conscience.

By human law is understood the law written by civilized nations.

1. The presentation of crimes against the law is often necessary for the carrying out of the plot. But the presentation must not throw sympathy with the crime as against the law nor with the criminal as against those who punish him.
2. The courts of the land should not be presented as unjust. This does not mean that a single court may not be presented as unjust, much less that a single court official must not be presented this way. But the court system of the country must not suffer as a result of this presentation.

### **Reasons Underlying the Particular Applications**

- I. Sin and evil enter into the story of human beings and hence in themselves are valid dramatic material.**
- II. In the use of this material, it must be distinguished between sin which repels by its very nature, and sins which often attract.**

*[Further explanations follow.]*

- III. A careful distinction can be made between films intended for general distribution, and films intended for use in theatres restricted to a limited audience.** Themes and plots quite appropriate for the latter would be altogether out of place and dangerous in the former.

Note: The practice of using a general theatre and limiting its patronage to "Adults Only" is not completely satisfactory and is only partially effective.

However, maturer minds may easily understand and accept without harm subject matter in plots which do younger people positive harm.

Hence: If there should be created a special type of theatre, catering exclusively to an adult audience, for plays of this character (plays with problem themes, difficult discussions and maturer treatment) it would seem to afford an outlet, which does not now exist, for pictures unsuitable for general distribution but permissible for exhibitions to a restricted audience.

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