

Ideas Toward a Theology of Entertainment

I received an email from an insightful and articulate student. There is much that could be said in answer to her questions but I thought our exchange might stimulate your thinking as well. Here it is.

Amber wrote:

From studying God's Word I think we can gain a pretty good idea of what God desires in corporate worship. However, my struggle is determining what kind of music is acceptable to listen to outside of church services. What is the scriptural basis for listening to classical music? Should all music be a reflection of God? Is it taking His name in vain when we sing songs half-heartedly, or mindlessly singing hymns under our breath as we are doing something else?

What about entertainment? I haven't found anywhere in the Bible where it says "Just have fun" (which seems to be a common mindset today), but is listening to "fun" music (Disney, Irish tenors, movie soundtracks) wrong? If not, when is it appropriate?

Where is the line drawn between our own taste and preferences and what God desires, and how do we know that?

I wrote back:

Your questions are very good and if there were easy answers I am sure we would all have them by now. I am unsettled myself on some the applications that need to be made. I am going after these questions in some detail in my book. But I'd love to give you some of my ideas about them now to get a discussion started. Permit me a couple of talking points.

- I believe the word “worship” is much like the word love. We can come away from the scriptures with an understanding or definition of what worship that might look like this: worship is an act of adoration before a God we love and fear. Certainly this is what we see in many of the worship narrative in the Word. This is perhaps what you have in mind when you are talking about your corporate worship ideas. There is also a sense in which worship can be defined in a 1 Cor. 10:31 sort of way. Just as love is both an act of intimacy and a lifestyle choice worship is both an act and a reflection of the way we choose to live. In this sense everything we listen to ought to "make God look good." The heart of 1 Cor. 10:31 and Rom. 12:1-2. Individual acts of worship, especially corporate worship take on special significance in the context of our lives.
- All of our choices should be, or really are, a reflection of what we think about God. Certainly this applies to the music choices we make.
- I'm all over your concern that we often sing so mindlessly (or sometimes just plain silly) that we take the Lord's name in vain. Let's commit to keeping our specific acts of worship as purposeful, authentic or real, and consistent with God's character as possible!
- What about entertainment? Now that's a loaded question. As far as I can tell there is no place in the NT that addresses the question in the same way an American would think about entertainment. I think mainly because our entertainment crazed culture is so different than the climate of persecution that Christ and His disciples faced. Life is never described in the NT as a party but rather a battle, a journey, a pilgrimage, a stewardship. I suppose this is why I have yet to see a "theology of entertainment." About as close as we can get to this would be an understanding of the passages in Ecclesiastes that encourage the reader to "enjoy" the many good things about

life while realizing that all true and lasting fulfillment comes from God alone. Song of Solomon (a "secular" song by definition, the name of God is not mentioned directly) is an example of the enjoyment of married love. There is also the verse in James 1:17 that explains that every good gift comes from the Father. And, in the middle of Paul's warnings about riches he says God "gives us richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim 6:17-19). Most of the verses we might think of come in the form of warnings or cautions about amusements instead of encouragement to them. Now, don't get me wrong. I believe there is time for retreats and rest. Christ Himself retreated from the ever present "to do" list of ministry. But to say He encouraged us to seek entertainment would be a real stretch. Hang on to that thought and let me get back to it after I remind you of another truth that weighs in on your question.

- Americans today think about music as *primarily* a form of entertainment. Check out any search engine, music appears under entertainment. But the ancients saw it more generally as a powerful form of communication. Consider two passages. When God made His covenant with the nation of Israel before they entered the Promised Land He put it in the form of a song (Deut 31-33). Can't quite imagine that happening today. "Now President Bush will sing America's treaty with Mexico!" Also remember that King Saul's servants knew, as did all the ancients, that purely instrumental music would affect the listener (1 Sam 16:16-23).
- So back to your question, I am OK with saying that some music is "for fun" or "entertaining" in the same sense Bach considered one of the purposes of music to be "the refreshment of the spirit." It just seems to me we need to always keep in mind the spiritual battle we are in and that everything we let into our eyes and ears lands in our hearts and out of it are the issues of life.
- Your last question gives me chance to tell you something near and dear to my heart. Amber, there is no "decoder ring" with all the answers to our everyday questions. My pastor once told me that the blessing of all this is that we have a chance to show Christ how dependent we are on Him and the Spirit to make such choices. Any system that bypasses our dependence on the Lord is a flawed system. Second, these choices give us a chance to show how well we know Christ and want to make choices motivated by our love for Him. We can only "tell the difference" in that secret place of fellowship with our Bridegroom where we try to make choices to show that we are growing in our knowledge of, and love for, Him.

God bless you for your heart to know and obey the Lord in this important area. Let me leave you with the promise that if you seek, you will find. Praise God for the promise of His wisdom!