

## SHOULD CHRISTIANS JOIN THE CULTURAL ELITE?

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**T**here was a time when Christianity was the dominant force in Western culture (education, scholarship, the arts, literature, science, law, treatment of the poor, etc). That time included the medieval and Renaissance periods, the Reformation and the post-Reformation, until around 1750 (the death of J. S. Bach). Even during this period of dominance, other factors were also influential: Greek and Roman culture and Islam for examples. From 1750-1920, Christians were a significant, though not a dominant influence.

After 1920 (and I speak from an American perspective of course) that influence went through a rather drastic decline. The Scopes trial, in which the Christian critique of evolution became a laughing stock, was the symbolic, if not the actual point of that decline. For the next twenty years or so, much (though certainly not all) American evangelicalism became explicitly anti-intellectual, and that anti-intellectualism determined its reputation in the society at large. Many Christians thought that the contemporary academic world was what Paul called in Colossians 2:8 “hollow and deceptive philosophy,” a spiritual snare to be avoided. This view was shallow and harmful to the church’s witness. But one can still admire the fundamentalists for putting their loyalty to Christ ahead of cultural fashions, intellectual and otherwise.

From 1925 to 1945 there was little serious evangelical (sometimes called “fundamentalist”) participation in academics, the arts, or sciences. It is to this period that Mark Noll’s comments about “The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind” (he says that scandal is “that there is no evangelical mind”) actually apply. The development of Reformed theology at Princeton Seminary (Westminster after 1928) was one exception to this general rule. In that movement there was, if anything, an over-emphasis on intellectual rigor (see recent article, “Hurting People’s Feelings”).

After World War II, however, there was something of an evangelical renaissance. Younger Christian leaders like Carl F. H. Henry and Billy Graham, together with Harold J. Ockenga, Charles E. Fuller, and financier J. Howard Pew, joined to try to form an evangelicalism that was to be informed by sound scholarship, apologetically powerful, socially relevant. Fuller Seminary, *Christianity Today*, and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association were elements of the “new evangelical” movement as it was called. Westminster was the model for Fuller in the early days, and Westminster graduates like Edward J. Carnell and Paul K. Jewett joined the early Fuller faculty. Gordon Clark was also a

significant influence: Henry, Graham, Edmund Clowney and others were students of his at Wheaton. Clark's intellectualism played a major role in the self-image of the new evangelicalism.

The new evangelicalism was somewhat ashamed of its fundamentalist past. It repudiated the idea of an antithesis between Christianity and secular learning and determined to take a positive role in the affairs of society. Cornelius Van Til tried to inject a different note: we should be positive about intellect and science *per se*, but we should also be aware of the effects of sin upon the life of the mind. Van Til even spoke of antithesis between Christianity and secular learning. He did not mean to say that everything in secular philosophy and science was false, but that it was deeply flawed by an anti-Christian epistemology and could never be taken for granted. Van Til was no obscurantist. He had earned a Ph. D. in philosophy at Princeton and had knowledge of history, philosophy, and culture that few could equal. But the main body of evangelicalism saw his emphasis to be too much a reversion to the fundamentalist anti-intellectualism.

The new evangelical movement, committed as it was to mainstream scholarship, came to grief in the 1960s on the question of biblical inerrancy. On that issue, evangelicals had to choose between mainstream scholarship and Christian orthodoxy. The movement divided between those alternatives.

More recently, these two strains have drawn closer together. Non-inerrantists and limited inerrantists have taken fairly conservative stands on matters of biblical criticism, while inerrantists have become hermeneutically more sophisticated. Yet the two branches often diverge, especially on questions of feminism and homosexuality: in the end, doctrinal questions. Those who rejected inerrancy had said that they accepted the full authority of Scripture on doctrinal matters, but not on matters of history and science. But Paul Jewett, in *The Ordination of Women*, said that Paul's view of women in the church was wrong: certainly a matter of doctrine, not merely history or science.

From 1970 to the present, there has been a continual movement for evangelicals to get involved in mainstream academics, the arts, and in the debates of the public forum. Evangelicalism has become a large factor in social and political discussions. The previously secular academic domain of philosophy has been invaded by a great many Christians (including names like Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, Paul Helm). "Faith based" mercy ministries have again taken the initiative to alleviate social problems. Christian schools and Christian home schools have become an important element of American education. Even the Christian critique of evolution has become more respectable, in the hands of the "intelligent design" writers (Phillip Johnson, Michael Behe, William Zembrski, et al). *World Magazine* has become, according to some accounts, the fourth largest selling news magazine. Christian music ("CCM") and book publishing have become major industries, attracting the investment of

secular publishers and distributors. Every US president since Dwight Eisenhower has befriended Billy Graham and has given some lip service to evangelical faith. There is much talk (both by advocates and opponents) of the Republican Party being taken over by the Christian right.

American evangelicalism, therefore, is today a cultural force to be reckoned with. Yet many still perceive evangelicalism as it was perceived from 1925 to 1945, as an anti-intellectual cultural backwater. These critics (like Noll, David Wells, Michael Horton, Os Guinness, Ken Myers, Franky Schaeffer, Darryl Hart) think that CCM is poor quality music, that evangelical art is largely kitsch, that evangelical literature is aesthetically inferior, that evangelical social action is a hopeless attempt to Christianize fallen society, that evangelical thinking is relativist and subjectivist, inadequately focused on objective truth.

In the remainder of this short paper, let me address one question emerging from such discussions: should Christians be patrons of “high art?” That is, should Christians renounce popular culture and embrace what our culture recommends as the highest forms of art and literature? This question is linked with questions dealing with other areas of interaction between Christ and culture, but I must focus on the narrower question here.

In responding to this question, I adopt my customary *sola Scriptura* principle. In my judgment, these discussions have been governed far too much by autonomous analysis of historical trends and routine acceptance of secular standards (see my articles on “Biblicism” and “Traditionalism”). I think that the postwar new evangelicals should have paid more attention to Van Til, less to Clark. Thus they would have sensed more the ambiguity of Christian involvement in scholarship and society.

To the question of whether we should embrace high art, my answer is yes and no. High art is an admirable tradition, nurtured in the past by great Christians like Bach, Rembrandt, and Durer. But it has always been subject to non-Christian influences and has been dominated by them since 1750 or so. In Beethoven, Wagner, Cage, and others, “classical” music has been an instrument of anti-Christian ideology. The same is true of much art, literature, drama, film. Ken Myers (*All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes*) admits that all is not right with high art, but he thinks the problem is that high art has been corrupted by popular art, by the profit motive and so on. As I see it the problem is not the influence of popular culture; the problem is original sin.

Myers distinguishes between high art, folk art, and popular art. He rather likes the first two, despises the third. Folk art, like high art, he thinks, has been corrupted by popular art. With William Edgar (his review of *All God’s Children*, WTJ) and others, I think Myers’ thesis is greatly exaggerated.<sup>1</sup> There is much

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<sup>1</sup> Editors Note: *All God’s Children* was published in the early 90s. Myers’ position seems to have shifted in directions that cannot be fully explained here. See <http://www.marshillaudio.org>.

good in popular art (though we tend not to recognize it until it becomes old fashioned: ragtime, blues, big bands, Elvis, the Beatles, and so on). The problem is not with one genre or another, but, as Van Til emphasized, the sin that corrupts everything.

Myers' assessments of quality are not unquestionable, but this is a legitimate subject for discussion. A second area, however, is power of communication. Even if high art is objectively "better than," say, folk art, there is a vast difference between the two as to communication. Some people can appreciate one of them far more than the other. That question is especially important when we consider the use of art in worship. A Latin Mass may be objectively better musically than a southern gospel hymn, but if in a particular church the former is incomprehensible and the latter conveys the biblical Gospel, then certainly the choice must be made in favor of the folk art rather than the high art. There are those who say that eventually we should teach our churches to appreciate high art. But is it really the job of the church to give to its members an aesthetic education? Perhaps even in the aesthetic realm, the academic prejudice comes to bear. Perhaps evangelicals in this area are still trying to overcome their shame at their fundamentalist heritage. I consider this a distraction from the work of the church. Where high art is appreciated and understood, we should use it. Where we can make it appreciated and understood by a bit of intellectual stretching, let's do that. But where the people speak an entirely different aesthetic language and have little inclination to change their tastes let us not seek to change them. Let us not fight battles over aesthetics.

Francis Schaeffer used to chide fellow-evangelicals for their failure to attend art exhibits and the like. I would encourage fellow-Christians with gifts and interests in high art to become acquainted with it and to tell the rest of us as Schaeffer did what challenges and opportunities the art world presents to us. But I don't think the Bible requires every Christian to be an expert in high culture, or even to appreciate it. The fundamentalists were wrong to think that the Bible forbade such cultural involvements. But it would be equally wrong to argue that evangelicals must be zealous advocates of art. We need to recognize more the diversity of the church, the differences in culture, gifts, and interests. These differences are not necessarily sinful. They simply indicate the richness of God's image and of the Spirit's endowments.

It is not wrong to try to push ourselves to higher achievement and appreciation of higher excellences. But it is wrong to criticize one another for failing to meet those levels of achievement and excellence. We should encourage one another to higher standards, but we should also be willing to start where people are in order to help them go higher. And our definition of "higher" must not be borrowed from fallen culture, but must recognize the dimensions of worldview and communication.