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## *The Twenty-First Century Believer and Entertainment: Living Radically in the Age of Distraction*

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As new technology has developed and proliferated during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such progression has inevitably contributed to the expansion of entertainment. Though many non-technological forms of entertainment have existed historically, the twenty-first century is unique in that it is an age in which entertainment is predominantly technological in nature. If it is the case that technological advance and entertainment go hand in hand, then today there are more options for entertainment than at any other point in human history.<sup>1</sup>

The lure of entertainment is nearly inescapable, even to Christian believers. Indeed, unfortunately for believer and unbeliever alike, entertainment often dons the guise of an almost Faustian Mephistopheles, an attendant whose services man tends to believe he can easily employ in his narcissistic quest for fleeting moments of true happiness without ever fully considering the ultimate consequences thereof. Believers are not immune to such allure and can quickly find themselves ensnared in an endless cycle of worldly gratification if they are not vigilant to avoid it.

The aforementioned potential peril notwithstanding, a theological essay on entertainment might seem rather superfluous; after all, if entertainment can be dangerous, a case, in turn, might be made for believers to avoid it altogether, thereby affording this author the opportunity simply to declare all entertainment wrong for all believers and end this exercise forthwith. However, just as technological advances have severely complicated all manner of moral quandaries for modern believers,<sup>2</sup> the issue of entertainment for the

<sup>1</sup>This essay focuses on the more technological forms of entertainment; its observations and assertions apply to all forms of entertainment. I am not discounting non-technological forms of entertainment; however, even a cursory examination of our current milieu proves that technological forms of entertainment exceed non-technological forms in popularity by far. Therefore, I find it prudent to examine how technological progression presents challenges to the twenty-first century believer.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., abortion, bioethics, human cloning, etc.

believer is not hermetic; being hastily dismissive would be of little benefit to believers who find themselves with serious questions regarding it.

This essay is an attempt to examine seriously the role of entertainment in the life of the twenty-first century believer. It cannot be entirely prescriptive; ultimately, the issue of the believer's involvement in entertainment lies between him and the direction of the Holy Spirit. In addition, it cannot be a comprehensive study. Instead, what I propose to do in this essay is to demonstrate that the primary matter of concern involving believers and entertainment is not the morality of the content of entertainment, but rather the desire to be entertained and the consequent meaningfulness of entertainment. This is not to suggest that the morality of entertainment is unimportant. On the contrary, Scripture makes quite clear that certain things should not fill the minds of believers (Phil 4:8, Rom 12:2, et al.) and there exist many forms of entertainment whose contents could easily invite believers to sin. Nevertheless, as we will see, as dangerous as the content of entertainment may be, what is even more potentially deleterious to the believer is the degree to which he desires entertainment and the propensity to afford it inordinate significance.

To this end, we begin with a brief look at a biblical view of entertainment as presented in the book of Ecclesiastes. We then move to the early church's view of entertainment, suggesting that it has always been a concern for believers. Moving from the ancient to the modern, we examine the cultural context of the twenty-first century next and show how the prevalence and acceptance of entertainment creates a direct challenge the believer cannot ignore. We follow this discussion with some observations on the desire for entertainment and then conclude with a brief summary.

### **The Bible and Entertainment**

Scripture does not speak explicitly regarding entertainment with blanket passages that declare all forms of it inherently right or wrong or that declare how much of one's life should or should not be spent involved in it. Robert K. Johnston, in *The Christian at Play*, touches upon this reality when he notes that "[P]lay is an incidental concern of those [biblical] writers focusing upon redemption and covenant. . . ."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps more bluntly, Alan

<sup>3</sup>Robert K. Johnston, *The Christian at Play* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 6. The theology of play is an area in need of further study, especially in light of the exponential growth of entertainment options in the twenty-first century. In vogue during the 1970s with the publication of David L. Miller, *Gods and Games: Toward a Theology of Play* (New York: World Publishing, 1970) and Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, trans. Reinhard Ulrich (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), it since has received relatively little attention, Johnston's work being a welcome exception. See also Robert Greg Burk, "Representative Approaches to Theology of Play: Their Significance for Contemporary Christian Lifestyle" (Th.M. thesis, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1972); Gordon Dahl, *Work, Play, and Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972); Robert Lee, *Religion and Leisure in America* (New York: Abingdon, 1964); David L. Miller, "Theology and Play Studies: An Overview," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971): 349–54; Robert E. Neale, *In Praise of Play: Toward*

Richardson adds, “The general standpoint of the Bible is that it is ‘folly’ (i.e., sinful) to be idle between daybreak and sunset. A six- or an eight-hour day was not envisaged. Hence we must not expect to derive from the Bible any explicit guidance upon the right use of leisure.”<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, one does find in the biblical texts various passages that provide general guidance regarding entertainment.

The purpose of this section is to show that though it is not of direct concern, Scripture does indirectly address entertainment through passages related to recreation and enjoyment. In this regard, one may look at several related themes in the Bible to arrive at a basic biblical understanding of entertainment, rather than simply pulling various passages out of context and running the risk of proof-texting. We will examine themes present in the book of Ecclesiastes as representative of a biblical view.

Although throughout Ecclesiastes, one finds several instances in which the Preacher (*Qobeleth*) warns the reader of the vanities of life (Eccl 1, 12:8, et al.), there are other instances in which he seems to encourage the reader to enjoy the good gifts that God bestows upon the faithful (Eccl 2:24–26, 3:12–13, 9:7–9, et al.). While the apparent disparity present between the “vanity” passages and “enjoyment” passages has long been one of the most significant hermeneutical issues of the book, it is beyond the scope of this essay to resolve fully such disparity.<sup>5</sup> These difficulties notwithstanding, Derek Kidner, in *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, comes close to summarizing my own position when he states concerning the Preacher’s view of work in Ecclesiastes 2: “The real issue for him was not between work and rest but, had he known it, between meaningless and meaningful activity.”<sup>6</sup> I contend that the vanity and enjoyment passages are each to be taken at face-value and are not necessarily contradictory; the Preacher is justified in enjoying God’s goodness as it is manifested in earthly pleasures, so long as he does so within the context of their ultimate meaningfulness in relation to the will of God.

With such an understanding of Ecclesiastes, one arrives near to what this essay argues regarding entertainment as a whole. If the Preacher is saying that the enjoyment of earthly things is vanity when enjoyed by an unbeliever who gives no acknowledgement to or consideration of God, then he is correct. But he is also correct if he is referring to the believer who pursues earthly enjoyment in such an unbelieving manner; and he is yet again correct if he is referring to the believer who does acknowledge that the enjoyment comes from God’s goodness, yet pays no attention as

*a Psychology of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); and Rudolph F. Norden, *The New Leisure* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1965).

<sup>4</sup>Alan Richardson, *The Biblical Doctrine of Work* (London: SCM, 1952), 53.

<sup>5</sup>For such discussion, see, among others, Robert Gordis, *Kobeleth—The Man and His World*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken, 1968); Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes: A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1976); Gerhard Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, trans. James D. Martin (New York: Abingdon, 1972); and R.N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1989).

<sup>6</sup>Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 35.

to whether it is a meaningful or meaningless pursuit. The strictly moral or ethical content of the enjoyment is of little concern to the Preacher, for he is not declaring some forms of enjoyment to be morally bankrupt while others are good. Rather, he is looking to the pursuit of said enjoyment and how much it really matters. The vanity lies not within the content of that activity, but within the potential meaninglessness of that activity in relation to the will of God.

The Preacher comprehends the recreational function of enjoyment, yet he does so within its proper context.<sup>7</sup> By recognizing that enjoyment comes only from God, he is not only giving God due credit, but he is also asserting that the very essence of enjoyment itself lies in its relationship to God. For the Preacher, there is no enjoyment to be had outside of God, and consequently, the meaningfulness of enjoyment derives from God exclusively. The believer's desire for enjoyment is good, but it is to be tempered with a firm understanding that its purpose is to glorify God through recreation.

There are similarities to this understanding in the Sabbath passages. Throughout the Old Testament, one finds multiple references to the Sabbath that God instituted in Genesis by His example of resting on the seventh day following creation (Gen 2:2f). The Sabbath was clearly intended for rest (Exod 16:22ff., 20:8–11, 23:12, Mark 2:27, et al.). It is not enough, however, to stop there, for although the institution of the Sabbath does indeed require the cessation of labor after six days, it also introduces the question of what “rest” consists.<sup>8</sup>

There is perhaps a hint of this concern in the repetition of the Decalogue found in Deuteronomy 5, where Moses tells the Israelites regarding the Sabbath commandment, “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day” (Deut 5:15).<sup>9</sup> It is apparent here that the Sabbath is something more than simply a day in which one does not

<sup>7</sup>By “recreational,” we mean the original meaning of “recreation,” i.e., the meaning derived from its Latin etymological origin, *recreare*, “to restore, refresh.” Note that this extends beyond the most common current understanding of “recreation,” i.e., a mere pastime.

<sup>8</sup>I have elected not to pursue a comprehensive word study for “rest” in this essay due to space considerations and due to the relatively straightforward way in which שבת (Gen 2:2) is typically translated in a majority of English translations of Sabbath passages as “rest,” i.e. “the cessation of labor.” Such an understanding is not without its critics, however, as some claim that שבת does not have any connotation of “abstention from labor” in the pre-exilic writings. Gnana Robinson, “The Idea of Rest in the Old Testament and the Search for the Basic Character of Sabbath,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 92.1 (1980): 32–42 is representative of this position. The question of what actually constituted “labor” or “work” on the Sabbath was of significant concern to the Israelites, especially during Second Temple Judaism. For more on this discussion, see Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 307.

<sup>9</sup>Unless otherwise noted all Scripture references are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV).



perform labor, as a link is drawn between the Sabbath command for rest and the previous slavery Israel had experienced in Egypt.<sup>10</sup>

Akin to what was observed in Ecclesiastes, there is a recreational element present in the Sabbath, as the Israelites are to rest in God's goodness during this day, being refreshed and restored as they worship Him and spend the day focusing on Him rather than on the work and activities of daily life.<sup>11</sup> In terms of the link to their aforementioned deliverance from Egypt, the basis of the Sabbath commandment outside the Sabbath's direct creational context (Gen 2:2f) is the very deliverance on which the Israelites are to meditate subsequently. The rest they experience on this day is a literal rest that comes from the cessation of labor, but it is also a God-given spiritual rest that is recreational in a recreative or restorative sense.

In summary of the biblical understanding of enjoyment or entertainment (at least from the perspective of Ecclesiastes and related Sabbath passages), God intends for His people to delight in His goodness and find pleasure in the things He has created and provided. Nevertheless, care must be exercised by the believer in order that he does not inordinately desire enjoyment and that he adequately considers the meaningfulness of the enjoyable activities he undertakes.

### **The Early Church's View of Entertainment**

With the biblical view in place, the next logical step is to examine what the earliest believers thought about entertainment. With a newfound faith, the Christ-followers of the first few centuries AD faced tremendous challenges as they attempted to understand what it meant to put their faith into practice. Church history shows the struggles through which early believers persevered, especially in regard to waves of persecution and polemical battles against heresies and polytheism. But could the early church have struggled also with entertainment, albeit with less entertainment options than are present today? We will demonstrate below that entertainment was indeed a

<sup>10</sup>J.G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, *Apollos Old Testament Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 128. McConville sees "[a] strong association here between Sabbath observance and deliverance from Egypt into the promised land" as well as a connection to the Jubilee celebration, which he views as "a restoration of the whole society to its ideal condition as a community established by the saving act of God into justice and blessing."

<sup>11</sup>Johnston goes so far as to see the Sabbath as being "intended to be an instance of 'play,'" *The Christian at Play*, 89. While such an understanding is too prescriptive, he does seem to pick up somewhat on the recreational aspect intended by God's institution of the Sabbath. His definition of "play" is the following: "I would understand play as that activity which is freely and spontaneously entered into, but which, once begun, has its own design, its own rules or order, which must be followed so that the play activity may continue," 34. Johnston also views Israel's festivals, dances, feasting, and hospitality as similar instances intended for "play" (110–18), though it is worth noting that all such instances have direct theological connotations (some are even commanded) and are intended for specific theological purposes rather than general entertainment.

concern of the early church, as presented through the writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers.

One of the earliest instances in which an early church Father addresses ancient forms of entertainment occurs c. 160 in *Oratio ad Graecos*. Tatian writes:

I saw other men who had trained to become heavyweights, and carried round a load of superfluous flesh, to whom prizes and garlands are offered. The judges summon them not to a display of manliness but to a contest of violent brawling, and the garland goes to the hardest hitter. . . . The spectators take their seats and the gladiators engage in single combat about nothing, and no one goes down to their aid. Are your celebrations of this kind really a good thing?<sup>12</sup>

Admittedly, Tatian is writing to pagans rather than to believers. However, one can easily extend the disdain he holds for pagans who view gladiatorial spectacles to believers who view them also.

Other early church fathers were concerned about believers attending ancient entertainment events as well. Lactantius writes, regarding gladiatorial events, “For he who reckons it a pleasure, that a man, though justly condemned, should be slain in his sight, pollutes his conscience as much as if he should become a spectator and a sharer of a homicide which is secretly committed. And yet they call these sports in which human blood is shed.”<sup>13</sup>

Of additional concern to the fathers were the theaters. Theophilus says of them, “And we are not allowed to witness the other spectacles [at the theaters], lest our eyes and ears should be defiled by taking part in the songs which are sung there.”<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Clement of Alexandria admonishes believers who frequent the theaters by declaring, “The Instructor will not then bring us to public spectacles; nor inappropriately might one call the race-course and the theatre ‘the seat of plagues.’ . . . Let spectacles, therefore, and plays that are full of scurrility and of abundant gossip, be forbidden. For what base action is it that is not exhibited in the theatres?”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Tatian *Oratio ad Graecos* 23.1, in *Oratio ad Graecos and Fragments*, ed. and trans. Molly Whittaker, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 44–47.

<sup>13</sup>Lactantius *Divinarum Institutionum* 6.20.10–11, in *Lactance: Institutions Divines, Livre 6*, ed. and trans. Christiane Ingreneau, Sources chrétiennes [SC], no. 509 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2007), 314. English translation taken from *The Divine Institutes* 6.20, trans. William Fletcher, Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF], American ed., vol. 7 (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1885; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 186.

<sup>14</sup>Theophilus *Ad Autolyicum* 3.15, ed. and trans. Robert M. Grant, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 119–21.

<sup>15</sup>Clement of Alexandria *Paidagogos* 3.11, in *Clément d’Alexandrie: Le Pédagogue, Livre 3*, ed. Henri-Irénée Marrou, trans. C. Mondésert and C. Matray, SC, no. 158 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1970), 148–51. English translation taken from *The Instructor* 3.11, trans. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, ANF 2 (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1885; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 289–90.

On the surface it might seem as though the fathers are only concerned with the immoral content of these forms of entertainment rather than the act of pursuing entertainment itself. Clement, however, continues, “For if people shall say that they betake themselves to the spectacles as a pastime for recreation, I should say that the cities which make a serious business of pastime are not wise. . . . And ease of mind is not to be purchased by zealous pursuit of frivolities, for no one who has his senses will ever prefer what is pleasant to what is good.”<sup>16</sup> For Clement, the constant pursuit of entertainment for recreational purposes is unwise and the cities that have thrived upon that human desire have exhibited their folly accordingly. “Ease of mind,” as he states, is attained not through leisurely activities, but, by implication, through one’s relationship with God through Christ.

Tatian, Lactantius, Theophilus, and Clement are not the only Ante-Nicene Fathers who expressed thoughts regarding the believer and entertainment. Tertullian, the preeminent theologian of the late second century, likely wrote more regarding entertainment than any of the other Ante-Nicene Fathers simply by dedicating an entire treatise to the subject: *De Spectaculis*. The work is addressed specifically to catechumens and other believers, and in its opening chapter, Tertullian acknowledges the power that entertainment can hold over a believer when he states, “[A]nd you too I would have rethink it all, who have witnessed and borne your testimony that you have already made that approach; lest by ignorance, real or pretended, any of you fall into sin. For such is the force of pleasure, that it can prolong ignorance to give it its chance, and pervert knowledge to cloak itself.”<sup>17</sup>

Here Tertullian asserts that worldly pleasures can affect believers in two negative ways. First, believers can become ensnared by them due to ignorance (i.e., not knowing that they are sinful). Secondly, they can become ensnared by them due to intentional self-deception (i.e., knowing that worldly pleasures are sinful, yet trying to convince themselves otherwise). But what exactly makes the amusements, which are based on pleasure, sinful?

For Tertullian, the basis on which the “spectacles” are sinful is not just their content, though he certainly views such content as unequivocally wicked.<sup>18</sup> The spectacles are also sinful because of the desire for pleasure that leads people to them: “For, just as there is a lust for money, a lust for dignity, for greed, for impurity, for vainglory, so there is a lust for pleasure. The shows are a sort of pleasure. Lusts, named as a class, include, I would suppose, pleasures

<sup>16</sup>Clem. *Paid.* 3.11 (ed. H. Marrou, SC 158 [1970]:150–51). English translation taken from *The Instructor* 3.11(ANF 2:290).

<sup>17</sup>Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, 1, trans. T.R. Glover, Loeb Classical Library [LCL] 250 (London: William Heinemann, 1931), 231.

<sup>18</sup>Tertullian makes numerous references to the depravity of their content in *De Spectaculis*. See 5, 9–12, 17–19, and 23. In fact, he is so opposed to the bloodlust he sees evident in believers who attend violent amusements that he ends his treatise by sarcastically intimating that such believers should long for the greatest “spectacle” of all, which is yet to come: the return of Christ, at which time they will watch as unbelievers are condemned to hell, 30.



also; similarly pleasures, understood as a class, include the special case of the shows.”<sup>19</sup> The progression that Tertullian demonstrates is easily followed. The very essence of any amusement is pleasure; after all, were the amusement not pleasurable, people would not pursue it. Because people lust after pleasure, they must also lust after the amusements which fulfill the desire for pleasure, and such lust, by extension, is wrong.

Tertullian does not stop with that realization, however. He takes his argument against the lust for pleasure a step further by describing how such pleasure can affect the spiritual life of the believer. He writes,

What concord can the Holy Spirit have with the spectacles? There is no public spectacle without violence to the spirit. For where there is pleasure, there is eagerness, which gives pleasure its flavour. Where there is eagerness, there is rivalry, which gives its flavour to eagerness. Yes, and then, where there is rivalry, there also are madness, bile, anger, pain, and all the things that follow from them, and (like them) are incompatible with moral discipline.<sup>20</sup>

Tertullian understood that the conflict that arises within the believer regarding entertainment is a spiritual conflict. The desire itself for entertainment can progressively lead to any number of sinful thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. Though the activity that the believer might view at the theater or in the arena may be sinful, an inner spiritual battle rages even before the believer experiences such entertainment, as the real battle is over the desire for entertainment. The application for the purposes of this essay should be clear: the primary issue is the desire to be entertained in the first place.

What can we say in summary concerning the early church’s view of entertainment? It would be dishonest to claim that the foremost concern of the early church fathers regarding entertainment was the desire for it. Clearly, when they spoke about entertainment, they typically spoke about its content. However, as Tertullian’s statements illustrate, behind every discussion of the content of entertainment is the presupposition that the entertainment is being desired. We now turn to a discussion of that desire within the context of our current milieu.

### A “Radical” View of Entertainment?

On 4 May 2010, David Platt’s *Radical* was published and quickly began an influential push in evangelical circles back to a more biblical Christianity. In his book, Platt argues that American Christianity has fallen prey to the mentality of the “American dream,” a mentality that

<sup>19</sup>Tert. *Spect.* 14 (LCL 250 [1931]: 268–69).

<sup>20</sup>Tert. *Spect.* 15 (LCL 250 [1931]: 270–71). Glover notes that *disciplinae* could be more specifically translated as, “Christian standards,” 270.

favors “self-advancement, self-esteem, and self-sufficiency, by individualism, materialism, and universalism” to the detriment of the gospel.<sup>21</sup> Platt sees a significant difference between the Christianity many evangelicals claim and biblical Christianity as found in the New Testament, and as such, he seeks to help the reader return to a faith that minimizes selfish and worldly pursuits and emphasizes the furtherance of the gospel to the glory of God. While not directly about entertainment, *Radical* nevertheless has practical considerations regarding the desire for it.

On 18 February 2010, Carnegie Mellon University professor and video game designer, Jesse Schell, at the 2010 D.I.C.E. Summit, discussed how video games are invading real life. During his presentation, which quickly became the most talked about presentation at D.I.C.E., he described a future in which everyday activities, from the mundane (e.g., brushing one’s teeth) to the more significant (e.g., doing well in school), are monitored by an array of sensors and become more and more game-like as individuals make concentrated efforts to perform certain activities in order to be tangibly or intangibly rewarded by the companies who are monitoring them. After providing numerous examples of how this might play out, he stated near the end of his presentation, “And so, it could be that these systems are just all crass commercialization and it’s terrible, but it’s possible that they’ll inspire us to be better people, if the game systems are designed right.” He then made the harrowing prognostication, “Anyway, I’m not sure about all that, but I do know this stuff is coming. Man, it’s got to come. What’s gonna stop it?”<sup>22</sup>

On 31 December 2010, when he appeared on NPR’s *On the Media*, Schell made what is perhaps an even more disturbing prediction. Asked by the host, Brooke Gladstone, concerning his D.I.C.E. presentation, “Is this a future that you look forward to, where there is a potential distraction around every corner, a lot of which are just ads?” he replied:

I certainly don’t look forward to all of it. There’s going to be a lot of parts of this that are going to seem quite devilish, because so many people are going to be competing for our attention. I often think of it this way: The twenty-first century is going to be a war on the attention of humanity. Where civilization focuses its attention, I mean, that’s what defines what the civilization cares about.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup>David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2010), 19.

<sup>22</sup>Jesse Schell, “When Games Invade Real Life,” video recording of presentation given at the annual meeting of the D.I.C.E. Summit, Las Vegas, NV, 18 February 2010, [http://www.ted.com/talks/jesse\\_schell\\_when\\_games\\_invade\\_real\\_life.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/jesse_schell_when_games_invade_real_life.html) (Accessed 5 November 2010).

<sup>23</sup>Jesse Schell, interview by Brooke Gladstone, *On the Media*, “The Future of Gaming,” NPR, 31 December 2010, <http://www.onthemediamedia.org/stream/ram?file=/otm/otm123110pod.mp3> (Accessed 1 January 2011).

If one puts these views in perspective, he is presented with a rather bleak outlook regarding the current state of affairs. If American Christianity has largely bought into the American dream of selfish pursuit and if a “war on the attention of humanity” is coming (if it has not already begun), then one can see the dangerous cocktail that is being served to twenty-first century believers, who are all too eager to entertain themselves to no end. To be certain, Platt focuses primarily on materialism in his argument and Schell is primarily concerned with the implications of “gamification”<sup>24</sup> on mankind’s attention, but the applicability of their assertions to entertainment and the current discussion in this essay is easily observed and not overstated.

Platt indicates that American believers have succumbed to selfish pursuits and Schell observes that the competition for the attention of mankind will soon be at its fiercest point in human history. These problems have everything to do with the desire for entertainment. For the undisciplined or injudicious believer, the combination of unbridled desire and multiple entertainment options vying for attention could prove disastrous, as he quite willingly drowns himself in a morass of infinite distraction concocted from the admixture of his own selfishness and negligence.

Can this be prevented? If Platt can call for a return to a more biblical faith, an intentionally “radical” way of living amid a Christianity that has fallen short of its biblical counterpart, why not extend that call to taking a “radical” view of entertainment? It certainly can be done, but the call for believers to pay careful attention to the extent to which entertainment permeates their lives and to make necessary changes accordingly raises a number of subsidiary issues that must first be acknowledged.

First, one must acknowledge that the twenty-first century is unquestionably dominated by entertainment. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average American family spent approximately \$2,693 on entertainment in 2009, which represented roughly 4.2% of its annual income.<sup>25</sup> By comparison, the average American family spent approximately \$3,126 on healthcare in 2009, which represented roughly 5% of its annual income, and it spent approximately \$2,619 on food eaten away from home, which represented roughly 4.2% of its annual income.<sup>26</sup> If Americans are willing to

<sup>24</sup>“Gamification” has become the *de facto*, yet still debatable, term used to describe the process of making real life more game-like by applying game mechanics to non-ludic activities. See “The Great Gamification Debate!” Video recording of a panel discussion given at the annual meeting of the Game Developer’s Conference, San Francisco, CA, 1 March 2011, <http://www.gdcvault.com/free/gdc-11> (Accessed 13 March 2011). I intend to examine the implications of gamification for theology in a future project.

<sup>25</sup>Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor, “Consumer Expenditures Survey (Annual) News Release,” <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/cesan.htm> (Accessed 13 December 2010). By “American family,” I am referring to what the Bureau of Labor Statistics terms “consumer unit,” which it defines as “families, single persons living alone or sharing a household with others but who are financially independent, or two or more persons living together who share expenses.”

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

spend nearly as much money on entertainment as on healthcare and more money on entertainment than on food eaten away from home, then it should be readily apparent how important entertainment is to them.

The domination of entertainment does not end with financial expenditure, however. The average American spends 35 hours per week watching television,<sup>27</sup> American gamers ages two and older spend 13 hours per week playing video games,<sup>28</sup> and Americans spend 22.7% of their time on the Internet on social networks, which is more time than on any other Internet activity.<sup>29</sup> Clearly, from all indications, the American desire for entertainment is all but preeminent and this trend sees no signs of abatement anytime soon. The danger for the believer to adopt an entertainment-focused mindset, much like how he has adopted the mindset of the American dream, is real.

Secondly, one must acknowledge that not all entertainment is bad and that some can actually be of some spiritual benefit outside of the basic rest and relaxation it provides. Although the relationship between the church and forms of entertainment has long been contentious,<sup>30</sup> there remain some forms of entertainment, particularly those that have the ability to foster Christian fellowship or that have prominent narratological elements, that are especially worthy of the believer's time.<sup>31</sup> For example, under the first

<sup>27</sup>The Nielsen Company, "Three Screen Report, Volume 8, 1st Quarter 2010," 3, [http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/3%20Screen/2010/Three%20Screen%20Report%20\(Q1%202010\).pdf](http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/3%20Screen/2010/Three%20Screen%20Report%20(Q1%202010).pdf) (Accessed 8 September 2010).

<sup>28</sup>The NPD Group, "Extreme Gamers Spend Two Full Days per Week Playing Video Games," [http://www.npd.com/press/releases/press\\_100527b.html](http://www.npd.com/press/releases/press_100527b.html) (Accessed 8 September 2010).

<sup>29</sup>The Nielsen Company, "What Americans Do Online: Social Media And Games Dominate Activity," [http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online\\_mobile/what-americans-do-online-social-media-and-games-dominate-activity/](http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/what-americans-do-online-social-media-and-games-dominate-activity/) (Accessed 8 September 2010).

<sup>30</sup>For non-technological forms, see the preceding section of this essay. For technological forms, see Edward M. Berckman, "The Changing Attitudes of Protestant Churches to Movies and Television," *Encounter* 41.3 (1980): 293–306; Kyle Haselden, *Morality and the Mass Media* (Nashville: Broadman, 1968), 153–70; and William D. Romanowski, *Pop Culture Wars: Religion and the Role of Entertainment in American Life* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 34–57.

<sup>31</sup>The reason I find forms of entertainment that are narratological in nature to be of particular benefit is that they are the most conducive to the communication of truth. This is evidenced by the fact that God has eternally chosen and instituted a divine soteriological metanarrative in which He communicates and redeems through the second person of the Trinity, the Son, through whom God has perfectly revealed Himself. By way of example, whereas playing a game of flag football might produce physical enjoyment, fellowship, and could promote positive concepts such as healthy exercise, teamwork, unity, etc., it is not narratological: no clearly defined narrative is being expressed by playing the game. Conversely, reading a novel is entirely narratological in nature; a narrative is being expressed to the reader, and this narrative contains a plot with characters who perform specific actions, by virtue communicating particular meaning to the reader. This is not to suggest that similar meaning could not be expressed by players to each other during a recreational activity like flag football, but I would find the metaphysical discussions in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, to be more apropos to a novel than to a football field.

category could fall informal gatherings of believers for leisurely purposes rather than for formal corporate worship, while the second category could hold such entertainment media as literature, film, or even some video games that can convey meaningful narratives containing spiritual truths.<sup>32</sup>

Thirdly, one must acknowledge that the desire for entertainment is inherent to all humans and that Scripture affirms this desire when exercised appropriately. In the previous section regarding the Bible and entertainment, we attempted to show briefly that the biblical view of entertainment is one of affirmation so long as recreation glorifies God and stays in its proper place in relation to its ultimate meaningfulness. In terms of applying this to the current context, the twenty-first century believer must understand that the meaningfulness of his entertainment choices ultimately derives from their conformity to the will of God for his life.

There can be no hard and fast rule by which one can measure how meaningful any recreational activity is. The reality is that such measurement relies upon the individual's relationship with God and is communicated through the direction of the Spirit. Prayerful consideration of entertainment options extends beyond the content of those options to the options themselves. Playing a video game in lack of sophisticated narrative might initially appear to be rather meaningless, but is it being used recreationally, refreshing the spirit of the player? Watching a televised college football game might appear to be pointless in the grand scheme of things, but what if it is restorative to the exhausted pastor who has ministerially labored the rest of the week? Again, as stated earlier, the meaningfulness of recreational activity is derived exclusively from God. How such is manifested in the life of the believer is particularized.

To be clear, man may be free to choose his entertainment options, but he is also free to choose them unwisely. Robert Lee puts it well when he states, "Leisure offers a marvelous opportunity for freedom to be exercised, but where there is no commitment that freedom becomes aimlessness or apathy."<sup>33</sup> Certain entertainment choices may be devoid of any objectionable content whatsoever, yet still be contrary to the will of God for a particular believer because he is aimlessly amusing himself with them instead of committing his leisure time to the will of God, which can perhaps lead to the potential undertaking of some other activity that God has directed him to pursue, such as personal evangelism, leading a Bible study, or serving in a homeless shelter. In some instances, it might be God's will for a believer to spend free time refreshing himself with some sort of entertainment or

<sup>32</sup>Since the rise of theological film criticism in the 1970s, numerous books have been written on the evaluation of film from a theological perspective, but one of the most recent (and best) is Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006). Craig Detweiler, ed., *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games with God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) has been published regarding video games, but it consists of various essays, a number of which are considerably lacking.

<sup>33</sup>Robert Lee, *Religion and Leisure in America*, 254.



leisure. In other instances, God may be leading him to spend that time in an activity that is related to a specific area of work for the kingdom.

Relatedly, the fourth and final issue one must acknowledge is that the desire for entertainment always has as its corollary the extent of that desire. Although Tertullian's statements illustrated this issue above, let us envision for a moment a world in which God has directed things to be so that every form of entertainment in existence has no sinful content whatsoever. Even in such a scenario, it would still be possible for a believer to sin regarding entertainment in ways such as inordinately desiring to be entertained or spending too much time being entertained to the neglect of life responsibilities or God's will. Anything that is not inherently wrong can be abused or misappropriated, and entertainment is no exception.

Only after the believer has acknowledged and addressed these issues should he make any necessary changes to his lifestyle or attitudes in order to move away from a self-fulfilling, entertainment-focused mindset. Without giving these issues due consideration, one runs the risk of potentially eschewing all forms of entertainment altogether or making changes that never address the heart of the matter. The call to live radically in regard to entertainment is indubitably needed, but it must be issued circumspectly.

### **Conclusion**

In Ephesians 5:15–17, Paul admonishes believers with words that apply to all aspects of the Christian life, but also befit this discussion: “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.” Walking wisely and making the best use of time with the understanding of the Lord's will summarizes how living radically (in regard to entertainment or otherwise) should appear. Though it may be discouraging to admit that a great number of believers today give no thought whatsoever to the implications living this way holds for entertainment, it also reveals the need for a return, à la Platt's appeal, to being guided by biblical principles rather than by selfish desires.

For the twenty-first century believer, such a return necessitates acknowledgment and action. Living radically in this age of distraction requires a conscious effort to examine continually the extent to which one desires to be entertained and pursues it. Entertainment is a gift from God, and He intends His people to use it recreatively for His glory. Nevertheless, attention must be paid to motivation and desire, thus liberating entertainment from the selfish pursuit of it, and transforming it from an end in itself to the means to a better end: glorifying God.