



The Enemy in Our Midst ***Popular Culture and the Battle for*** ***Hearts and Minds***

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**WARNING: THIS ARTICLE CONTAINS
OFFENSIVE MATERIAL**

“Who’s the character in *Seinfeld* with the funny hair?” A chorus of hands shot up excitedly. “Kramer!” came the almost universal reply.

“What time does *Friends* come on?” Again, there was no hesitation. “Eight!” “Thursday nights.” “NBC,” offered one young lady, nailing the coordinates in both space and time.

“Complete this line from *Spiderman*: ‘With great power comes....?’” “Great responsibility!” over seventy-five voices cried in unison.

“Now can someone tell me the difference between rap and hip-hop? Or emo and goth?” There was a brief silence as the audience cast about for the best spokesman to address the nuances of the question. But after a few initial observations were made, the response again became lively and democratic. Person after person shared either their thoughts on the distinctions or at least illustrated them by identifying their favorite artists in each category.

“OK,” the speaker said. “Let’s now take the advice of Colossians 3:2 and turn our minds from the things of man and consider the kingdom of heaven. Who was the man of God in the Old Testament who had no hair?”

Silence.

“What hour of the day did Jesus die on the cross?” Emboldened by the narrow range of possible answers, a few hands went up and numbers were offered. But it was obvious that nobody real knew.

“Complete this line from Proverbs 3: “Trust in the Lord with all you heart and...”

“...obey Him?” the NBC girl offered hopefully.

“Sorry, although obeying Him is certainly a good idea. OK, someone explain to me the difference between justification and sanctification.”

The silence among the church’s college group was now deafening.

In the last chapter of the book that bears his name, the great reformer Nehemiah addressed an evil that had grown up among the Jewish people. As they had intermarried with neighboring pagan tribes, their children were no longer able to read or speak the language of Scripture. Instead, the tongue of Ashdod (Hebrew for “destruction”) had become the prevalent dialect of the young. Nehemiah understood the implications of this sea-change: the City of Man was again on its way to conquering the newly restored City of God.

How did Nehemiah respond to this great danger?

*“And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair; and I made them take an oath in the name of God (to stop). **Nehemiah 13:25**”*

I can identify with Nehemiah’s passion – even if his methods would get me into a world of trouble! (How far we have fallen! Many Christians today would be offended if their pastor simply preached a sermon suggesting that we need to repent. Forget about beating them around the head and shoulders!) True Christians can no longer be silent – much less complicit – as we watch the salt losing its savor, compromised by its conformity to the image and the images of the fallen world. We can no longer stand idly by and watch the “meat” of culture progressively decay, nurturing an army of maggots that spread the disease of perversion, idolatry and violence throughout America and the rest of the world.

Michael Medved's *Hollywood vs. America* and the writings of Dr. Ted Baehr of the Christian Film and Television Commission, among others, have done an good job of documenting the blasphemous, relativistic, humanistic, sexually perverse, violent, occultic, and profane proclivities of a culture obsessed with – in the famous words of Neil Postman – “amusing itself to death.”¹ One would have to be waking up from a decades-long coma to not know that a walk down the aisle of a local video store or a scan through the internet, the channels on your TV or the magazines that leer up at you in the check-out aisle of the grocery store is to see the words of the poet William B. Yeats – no friend of Biblical morality – fulfilled:

*We had fed the heart on fantasies,
The heart's grown brutal from the fare.*²

Consider just one “snapshot” of the American psyche: the Super Bowl. It has been called our greatest game, pastime, and ritual; a super-sized and super-charged “public square” where advertisers wait in line to pay over \$80,000.00 a second to wave their product before the over one billion people watching around the world. Among its many flashing signs, warning us of our culture’s long descent into the abyss of nihilism and amorality:

- The 1999 game opened with dozens of dancers wearing S&M inspired outfits while writhing to the “music” of KISS. Just a few decades before the band had been condemned in polite society for their violent, occultic, and sexually charged lyrics and fantastically debauched lifestyles. *Now they open the Super Bowl.* And Holiday Inn, an all-American hotel chain founded by a Christian, chose a transsexual-theme for their entry into the sweepstakes of Super Bowl advertising.
- During the half-time show for the 2004 game, the world was treated to a rapper grabbing his crotch while asking his dance partner to take off all her clothes; a self-avowed “pimp” and “trailer-trash” porn connoisseur (whose hit album featured such pleasant sounding ditties as F**k That and F**k You Blind) performing a medley extolling the virtues of “crackheads,” “crooked cops,” “hookers,” and pornography; a self-described “bad boy” (with illegitimate children and a penchant for carrying guns and throwing parties where nude women cavort in the pool) bragging that he’s “half man, half drugs, ask the clubs - bad boy, that’s whassup;” and finally Janet Jackson singing about a man’s “package” (street slang for “sex organ”) and how she was “gonna have to ride it tonight.” The show climaxed as Justin Timberlake exposed her breast while singing about getting her naked.

- One of Budweiser's ads for the same game alluded to bestiality. Two other companies hawked drugs designed to help men with "erectile dysfunction."

Could there be more than a little irony in the fact that all this took place as roughly the same number of people around the world celebrated the most important feast of Islam: Eid-al-Adha, the day where Muslims commemorate Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his promised son (who they believe is Ishmael and not Isaac)? Even as our troops watched the Super Bowl in Iraq – there to defend "truth, justice and the American way" – we were displaying to the Arab world the ugly side of that way. Like-it-or-not, the conflict in Iraq is seen by the majority of Muslims as a religious war; a struggle between good and evil, Allah and Satan. And there stands our Super Bowl, giving ample evidence that our culture had indeed become demonic.

We have "evolved" from a time (1939) when Rhett Butler's use of the word "damn" (*Gone With the Wind*) was met with a collective gasp to a "dumb and dumber, numb and number" culture where:

- A popular comedy network broadcasted an uncensored, animated film that featured almost 500 hard-core obscenities and referred to God as both a "wimp," a "bitch" and "faggot." The movie, particularly popular with young people, took in over \$52 million at the box office.
- The highest-grossing "family movie" of all time (*E.T.*, 1982) had its eleven-year-old star refer to his brother with a grotesque homosexual term.
- Two of the most popular teen films of the 90's went for "laughs" by featuring a character who masturbated into a family desert (*American Pie*) and one who unwittingly styled her hair with male ejaculate (*There's Something About Mary*).
- The blockbuster *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) managed to make a psychopathic murderer and cannibal one of the surprise "sex symbols" of the year. A decade later, the sequel (*Hannibal*) depicted this same monster sedating a victim and slowly removing and cooking portions of his brain and then feeding it back to him.
- A number of TV shows and films – most notably the Oscar-winning film *Brokeback Mountain*, determinedly seek to normalize and even celebrate homosexuality.
- The average young person will have watched 200,000 violent acts –including 16,000 murders – by the time he or she graduates from high school. Almost two-thirds of the scenes in prime-time television include some reference to sex; 28% of

- these will put the primary emphasis on sex. And when intercourse takes place, it is four to eight times as likely to occur between unmarried people as between a husband and wife.
- Pornography is now a \$10 billion dollar business, larger than the NFL, the NBA and Major League Baseball combined. It is estimated that 60 percent of all web sites are sexual in nature. Now with just a click of a mouse button (often unwittingly), anyone (including children) can have ready access to hard-core sex acts, bestiality, bondage and domination, sadomasochism (including actual torture and mutilation of women for sexual pleasure), scatological acts (defecating and urinating on men or women for sexual pleasure), and child pornography.

I could easily fill page after page with these types of sobering examples and statistics. And they have become even scarier when we consider that there are now virtually thousands of studies proving beyond any shadow of a doubt that this media programming is accomplishing just that: "programming" an entire generation to think and act in ways that are "earthly, sensuous and demonic." (James 3:15)

What can be done to reverse this trend?

"And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found none. Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them. I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath. I have returned their way upon their heads, declares the Lord God."

Ezekiel 22: 30, 31

First and foremost, the Church needs to repent. In large part all of the above has happened because "while the enemy came and sowed tares, men slept." (Matt. 13:25) Most self-professed Christians have not built up the wall of covenantal obedience to the standards that God has called us to obey, model and defend. And without this wall of separation between the City of God and the City of Man, there is no clear distinction between the two and hence nothing to call people out of and to. We can't say, at least with any true anointing, "Come out from among them and be separate" (2 Cor. 6:17; Rev. 20:4; Isa. 52:11) because so little separation exists between us and the fallen world order. To put it another way: Without this wall, there is no gap. And without the gap or breach there is nowhere for us to effectively stand and cry out to the Lord for our land. Our prayers become "a

beating of the air.” Not being rooted in an effectual righteousness, they don’t have the power to prevail. (James 5:16)

With love in my heart for God’s people and zeal for the purity of His house, I want the Holy Spirit to “contend with us” as we look at the enemy in our midst – hearts and minds that know more about the flickering shadows of a world at war with God than they do of the “language of heaven.”

Allow me to begin with story. In 1936, Spain was ravaged by a great civil war. Emilio Mola, one of the leaders of the Nationalist Army under the command of Francisco Franco, surrounded the capital city of Madrid with columns to the north, south, east and west. When asked from which direction he expected the city to be taken, Mola replied “*la quinta columna*.” This “fifth column” was made up of the spies and propaganda he had managed to plant within the city of Madrid itself.

Can I tell you that there is a civil war going on for the destiny of this nation and the planet – one that this generation will lose if the “fifth column” of worldliness continues to flourish in our hearts? Like it or not, God himself has set enmity between the “seed of the woman” (the Church) and “the seed of the serpent.” (Genesis 3:15) And when left unchecked, the spiritual “entropy” that characterizes the fallen world of man will always move towards great disorder and chaos – towards a place where the “imagination of men’s hearts will be on evil continually.” (Genesis 6:5) And out of these imaginations, the “culture” will inevitably arise.

Now culture is a difficult thing to describe because it involves so many things. Taken from the Latin root “cultus,” it originally meant a system of religious belief and rituals. And while today it is commonly used to describe a lot more than this – things like aesthetics, ethics, language, etiquette, etc. – at bottom the Latin definition still serves us well. Why? Because each of these other aspects of culture flow from the religious presuppositions that form the majority report of a particular society. To use the phrase made famous by Henry van Til: “culture is religion externalized.”

Another thing we need to understand about culture today is just how powerful and almost omnipresent it has become. By faith and through the revealed Word we understand that it is in God that we “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). But from a strictly temporal perspective, modern technology has been able to create a culture of

entertainment that could easily cop this verse and use it as a sales pitch for potential advertisers:

In pop culture we live and move and have our being.

I'm reminded here of the famous quote by Bob Pittman, co-founder of MTV: "We don't shoot for the fourteen-year-olds. We own them!" Then there is the recurring section in US magazine that features picture of celebrities shopping, bicycling, opening car doors, and picking their noses under the headline: JUST LIKE US! As ubiquitous as the air we breathe, digitized and increasingly insipid and idolatrous information is constantly bombarding us from every side – clamoring, cajoling, mesmerizing, titillating, propagandizing – threatening and very often succeeding in molding us into its image. (see Rom. 12:2: "And don't be conformed to this world but be transformed...")

And it is not just the obvious things like violence, blasphemy and pornography that have seduced us. Perhaps even more destructive is something a great Russian writer predicted would happen. Fyodor Dostoyevsky once observed that when untethered from the Christian worldview, the arts would find their initial inspiration from mirroring life. But gradually, inexorably, life would then begin to emulate art... and then would finally increasing find its very meaning in reflecting the arts.

Survey a typical high-school class about what they want to be when they grow up and you will see just how prescient Dostoyevsky was. Fifty percent or more will list "actor, singer, director, musician" or some other vocation associated with the popular arts.

Historian Daniel Boorstin sounded a similar alarm when he warned that Americans increasingly live in a world where fantasy is more real than reality. "We risk," he said, "being the first people in history to have been able to make their illusions so vivid, so persuasive, so 'realistic' that they can live in them."³

I call this parallel universe in which our culture has come to live the "Great Substitution." And the fallout from this substitution is among the most profound challenges facing America – and the Church – today.

- *I* has taken the place of *We*. One need only consider the Army's new recruiting motto: *An Army of One*. What an insane concession to the spirit of the age!

- *Art* – which in the Christian tradition was to provide *ekstasis*; the opportunity to “stand outside ourselves” and gain insight into the wonder of life – has been replaced by *entertainment* (from *inter* (among); *tenere* (to hold) – something that draws us into ourselves; denying us new perspectives and the opportunity to grow.
- The *Image* has been substituted for the *Logos* (Word). In the beginning was the Word, which was God and then became flesh and dwelt among us through the Incarnation. (John 1:1&14) It is no accident that we do not know what Jesus looked like or that the Ten Commandments forbid creating images of the invisible God. When it comes to the real business of knowing and worshipping the Trinity, the keys are the Word read and meditated upon, the Word sung (worship), and the Word signified in the sacraments. As images have more and more pushed the written word aside, the logos/logic centers of our minds have grown dull from disuse.⁴ The results of this substitution have been disastrous. Even the *capacity* for Truth (an enterprise that requires logic) has fallen in the post-modern public square. (Isa. 59:15) And within the Church, the hard work of diligently training our senses to discern good and evil (Heb. 5:15) has been replaced by mushy sentimentality.
- *Character* has been trumped by *celebrity*. Why are so many people more likely to spend time meditating on the dating habits of some Hollywood profligate than on the scriptural principles that will help them make sure that their own marriages will succeed?
- *Fun* (a word with a very recent origin) has taken the place of *happiness*.⁵ It is no longer just teens who are willing to jettison the hard work and delayed gratification necessary to enjoy the truly “good life.” More and more adults are willing to sell their divine birthright for a mess of “ready-in-a-minute” porridge.
- *Sound-bytes* have replaced *discourse*. MTV-style “bumpers” and jump-cuts can now be seen in everything from sports coverage to news broadcasts and children’s programming. We are fast becoming a nation of “watchers” with the attention span of a circus of fleas. What ill-wind blows through the *body politic* when the average network sound-byte from presidential campaigns dropped from 40 seconds in 1968 to under 7 seconds today?
- *Covetousness* has been substituted for *profitable stewardship with contentment*. Think about it: millions actually pay extra money to buy name-brand clothing for no other reason than to advertise that they wear name-brand clothing!

- *Agape love* (love reflecting the character of God and rooted in covenant commitment) has been pushed aside by *eros* – an obsession with our own erotic or emotional satisfaction. The late, great prophet to the 20th century, Malcolm Muggeridge perhaps said it best: “The orgasm has replaced the Cross as the focus of longing and the image of fulfillment.”

These substitutions did not “just happen.” They were manufactured with the same satanic genius that gave us Babel’s Tower and Aaron’s calf. The serpent took what were good, God-given desires (we are, after all, called to help build a Holy City whose capstone (Christ) reaches into the throne room of heaven; we are supposed to have a “feast to the Lord”) and – like in the Garden of Eden – tilted those desires ever so slightly on their axis. Once the center of God’s will is compromised, the trajectory of the individual or the culture will move slowly but progressively away from the Sun of Righteousness. As with the proverbial frog in the kettle, the fires of spiritual deception have been turned up gradually so as not to catch our attention. And that’s how we find ourselves today, facing desires that have all but undergone the complete transformation into their satanic substitutes.

I’m here to tell you that the water is boiling! It’s time to crawl out of the acid bath of popular culture and once again be about our Father’s business; discipling nations rather than being disciplined by them!

How can we fulfill this call?

I don’t have the space or even all the wisdom necessary to present an exhaustive game plan; but what follows should get us well on our way. First, we must begin with the great admonition and promise found 2 Chronicles 7:14:

If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

Humble yourself. Reread the opening vignette. It’s easy to “sit in the seat of the scornful” (Psalm 1:1) and roll our eyes at other people’s foibles. But how would you have done? (And please feel free to substitute *ESPN’s Sportscenter for Friends*.) Are you able to explain the difference between justification and sanctification? How would you fair in writing six essays on the foundational doctrines of the Christian

faith as outlined in Hebrews 6:1-2? Don't shrug it off as just theology. This is boilerplate stuff every Christian should know.

In an attempt to trap Him, Jesus was questioned by the Pharisees on the issue of paying taxes to Caesar. The Master asked for a coin and then raised a very profound question: "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They replied, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matt. 22: 20-21)

Pray and ask God a similar question. Whose likeness and inscription has been pressed into the clay of your heart? The world's? Or God's? If the former is even an issue – if you see that the stain of popular media has done more to color your world than the Word – do what God expects of all who "fall short of the glory."

Repent.

Stop lifting up your soul to what is false. (Ps. 24:4) Purpose to set no unclean thing before your eyes; to hate the work of those who fall away. (Ps. 101: 3) Commit Philippians 4:8 to memory and use it as a yardstick to measure everything before you allow it into the sanctuary of your mind, heart and home.

*Fix your thoughts on what is true and honorable and right.
Think about things that are pure and lovely and admirable.
Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.*

Next, purpose to obey the Apostle Paul's admonition to not take part in the unfruitful works of darkness but instead expose them. (Eph. 5:11) Hate that which is evil but cling to and encourage what is good. (Rom. 12: 9) Cultivate an atmosphere of "reading" and "listening" rather than "watching" in your life and home. Fill them with good books and music. Tame the television, which for many people may mean getting rid of it for a season (see Matt. 5:30). The technology now exists to block certain channels. There are also devices that filter out bad language. Use them. **Remove the TV from your child's bedroom.** Have a family movie night. Go online to research the content of a film before seeing it and then "vote" with your pocketbook by only buying tickets for those that meet the standard of Philippians 4:8. If a good movie is produced, go see it, and encourage others to do the same. Buy it when it comes out on DVD. Make sure that your internet access is filtered or that you install software that keeps track of the web sites that are visited. Create an accountability group within your church.

Help your teens understand the nature of the battle and the reasons for your standards by watching and discussing a good teaching video on the subject and then absolutely forbid any music that celebrates sin from being played in your home.⁶

These are just a few ideas. The Holy Spirit will no doubt give you more as you purpose to engage the enemy on what may well be **the** front in the warfare for our families and our nation. There is simply no way to exaggerate the importance of this battle for the hearts and imaginations of our children and our nation's citizens.

Let me now close by briefly recounting two great stories from our past; stories that can not only instruct but also inspire us to persevere in what may look at times like a lost cause.

Did you know that this is not the first time the motion picture industry has debased both itself and this country? Amid the profligacy of the "roaring twenties" and the growing influence of an increasingly nihilistic European film industry, studios began to experiment with everything from nudity to occult themes in the years leading up to the Great Depression. The Church in those days, however, was not willing to simply "swallow and follow." As a result, millions of people stopped going to the movies. Faced with financial ruin, the studios asked some Christian leaders to step in and help make sure that their films passed muster. And so was born the Roman Catholic Legion of Decency and the Protestant Film Office.

For over three decades (1933-1966), these offices reviewed almost every screenplay and unfinished film to ensure that Biblical standards of morality were respected. And thus began the "Golden Age of Hollywood," when, as Dr. Ted Baehr likes to say, "Mr. Smith (went) to Washington, It (was) a Wonderful Life and The Bells of St. Mary's rang out across the land."

Now note something very important here. What happened? What brought this Golden Age to an end? Simple: the salt lost is savor! Influenced by the cancers of modernism and liberal theology, the National Council of Churches shut down the PFO. And how long did it take for the meat to begin to rot? Well, in 1965 the Oscar for Best Picture went to *The Sound of Music*. The next year, the one that saw the withdrawal of Christians from Hollywood, *A Man for All Seasons* – a film teeming with biblical themes – won the award. But within just three years (1969) an X-rated excursion into nihilism, despair and homosexuality (*Midnight Cowboy*) came out on top. And this film was

far from being an anomaly. The same period also saw Oscar nods for *Bonnie and Clyde* (antihero, violence, sex), *The Wild Bunch* (violence) and *Rosemary's Baby* (sex, occult).

As Pogo famously declared: "We have met the enemy...and he is us."

A similar lesson – one with a more noble ending – can be learned from the testimony of a brave monk who around 400 AD chose martyrdom over compromise with the spirit of popular entertainment. Throughout the previous century-and-a-half, the Roman Empire had begun to embrace the Christian religion it had once persecuted. But as the Church became socially acceptable, many people became members who were either not born again or were not prepared to embrace the disciplines of the Christian life. And so a great deal of compromise began to creep into the Church. By the end of the fourth century, many church-goers thought nothing of attending the gladiatorial games, celebrating the shedding of blood in the same arenas where Christians were once martyred for their faith.

Enter Telemachus (also known as Almachius), an ascetic from the eastern region of the empire. Arriving in Rome, he decided to visit a stadium to see what had so captured the hearts and imaginations of the Roman citizenry. Confronted by the specter of two combatants battling to the death while the blood-drunk crowd roared their approval, Telemachus jumped into arena and sought to stop the contest, chastising the audience for their lust and violation of the Sixth Commandment. The spectators turned on him, surging into the arena and collecting stones as they went. Soon the brave monk laid dead, another blood-washed martyr for the cause of Christ.

The story does not end here, however. When the Emperor Honorius learned of Telemachus' sacrifice, he hailed him as a hero and a true soldier of the cross. In 404 AD, Honorius issued an imperial decree outlawing the gladiatorial games throughout the empire. The monk's intercession had carried the day and transformed the culture.

May God raise up from within the ranks of His Church today an army of Telemachuses.

We cannot afford to be either complicit or silent no more.

¹ *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (Neil Postman, Penguin Books, 1986.) This is a wonderful book every thinking Christian should digest. It is also

worth noting here a distinction Postman makes in it: "amuse" (a-muse) means literally to stop thinking or reflecting.

² W.B. Yeats "Meditations in time of Civil War"

³ Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (Vintage; September 1, 1992)

⁴ According to numbers crunched by Veronis Suhler Stevenson, a New York-based investment bank that specializes in media companies, Americans spent 120 hours a person a year reading consumer books in 1998; by 2003, the number of hours had fallen to 106. By 2006, the projected number of hours we spend reading will be 103. In contrast, television-watching took up 1,551 hours of our time in 1998, and is expected to rise to 1,679 hours two years from now. Internet use is also skyrocketing, from 54 hours in 1998 to a projected 213 hours in 2006.

"Reading at Risk," a new survey released in July of 2004 by the National Endowment for the Arts using data collected by the Census Bureau, shows that the percentage of Americans who read novels, short stories, plays or poetry -- and, in fact, any sort of book -- has steadily declined in the past two decades. The drop-off was especially noticeable among young adults, with literary reading among 18-to-24-year-olds dropping from almost 60 percent in 1982 to about 43 percent in 2002.

⁵ "The Dutch philosopher-historian Johan Huizinga, in his epochal book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, discovered that the word "fun" was of recent origin and that no other language had an exact equivalent to the English meaning, leading him to speculate that fun was neither readily understood nor fully accepted until the twentieth century." (from *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality* (Neal Gabler, Vintage Books USA; February 29, 2000)

⁶ Though the content is PG-13, I would highly recommend our DVD series, *Hell's Bells 2 – The Power and Spirit of Popular Music*