



## **Gray Matter: Media, Movies and Miller Time**

An Intersection of Truth and Life

September 28<sup>th</sup> 2006

As believers who are called to walk into culture with the gospel of the Jesus Christ, we will confront many issues together which, for lack of a better term, may be called gray areas. Many times these will surface in the form of questions: How much should a Christian participate in certain cultural forms, art, entertainment, social scene, etc? People vary in convictions, yet the Bible is not silent on these things. However, it can be confusing with many issues coming down to matters of conscience where all may not agree. Some think it sin to drink a beer; others think it only a sin to drink a light beer. To live an answer to these many issues, we must first consult the clear teaching of Scripture and evaluate our current views by that light. Yet many times Christians just launch into debates on gray matters without knowing the real reasons we should care about such things. I will give two reasons why we should care. First, how we live our lives matters to God. He has called us to live in a matter worthy of the gospel, to walk in holiness, to stay close to Jesus. In doing so Christ is seen and savored in and through our lives. To summarize the first reason: we do not want to live in sin offending our God. If we love him, it will be our heart's desire to obey him (John 14:21-24). Second, we care about these issues because we desire to be good missionaries in our culture; ambassadors who represent Jesus to others, not those who represent an American Christian subculture. We forget that many people will live by rules given to them by their church culture, yet never examine them to see if they have their basis in the Word of God. Many times these subcultural prohibitions keep Christians from walking in meaningful relationships with non Christians. We are simply bound because of our cultural preferences not because the activity is actually sinful. The issues we face every day will not be solved by creating extra-Biblical rules or by closing our eyes and wishing the world would go away. Many of us constrain ourselves far too much in order to stay away from "the world," while others jump headlong into just about anything in the name of relevance and cool, sinning it up big time in the process. Both paths are not to be desired; what we need is wisdom and biblical discernment.

Here we will discuss how we might live together around some specific issues in culture with wisdom, love, and understanding, to walk both in a manner worthy of Christ and to engage friends in culture without non-Biblical "Christian" cultural baggage. The cultures we live in are a complex mixture of things which are enjoyable, wicked, beautiful, ugly, and many times very perplexing. In this brief paper we will ask how we live in culture to share the gospel with people while also loving one another in a community where we may have different views on issues of conscience. To do this we will first look at the nature of sin, why we should reject parts of culture which are clearly sinful. Second, we will look at issues that may be called issues of conscience, where we need to show love and toleration for our differences. Finally, we will discuss how we live in these complexities as a community, exhorting one another towards holiness and allowing grace in areas where we disagree. To the issue of sin we now turn – well, hopefully we will not turn to sin, but only discuss it.

### ***On Sin and Culture***

The Scriptures are clear that the major problem of the human race is sin. Sin is a condition of the heart by which we are bent towards rebellion and alienation from God. Sin is not simply our actions, but the condition of the heart where we say "I'll do it my way" in effect giving God the rebellious salute. Sin is saying that I can live independent from God, neglecting his commandments, being my own god. It is a sickness which soaks us to the core of our being. We are not all as bad as we could be, but we certainly are comprehensively sinful; so

much that God sent his own Son to die to absorb his wrath against our rebellion. Sin is not just “out there” in the world, it is “in here” in my own heart. Sin is a heart condition which requires grace, mercy and forgiveness from God. Yet sin also manifests itself in our behavior and actions, the things we actually do in our lives. Some of it is clearly sinful: lying, murder, stealing, worshipping things which are not God, coveting other people’s stuff, lusts, arrogant pride, etc. etc. we know the list can go on. Yet how do we view things in our culture, how do we know what activities in contemporary culture are sinful and which are not? This is a very important question each and every generation of Christian must answer.

I recently listened to a message by Dr. Ed Stetzer of the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist convention<sup>1</sup>. His lectures about viewing culture as a follower of Jesus are very helpful. Quoting missiologist Robert McQuilkin, he highlights three paths which I will paraphrase:

- Much of culture we can **receive** – there is a good thing to the old saying “when in Rome” do as the Romans do – not the sinful stuff of Rome, but living in that world. The apostle Paul said he wanted to “become all things to all men so by all possible means we might save some...I do this for the sake of the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:19-27). For the sake of the gospel missionaries in China eat with Chinese people in a Chinese way. This is not controversial, but it makes some a bit nervous. Thinking if you have an electric guitar in church, or don’t wear a Western European inspired suit and tie in church, you are somehow slouching towards worldliness. We must realize that some cultural customs are not evil at all, they are just the way people do life together. These can be received joyfully by the Christian. Examples would be some foods, manners of dress (yet modest within that culture), musical styles, modes of transportation, use of technology, etc.
- Additionally, some of culture should be **redeemed**. Something which may be very good, is currently being perverted in culture and can be redeemed rightly for the glory of God. For example, our culture may be a perverted culture in relationship to sexuality. But that does not mean sex is bad – sex in our culture needs redemption, not rejection. It needs the context of a marriage covenant, a committed God ordained union, not simply “with whoever or whatever consents...however you understand consent” The same might be said for good, dark, beer – it needs the redemption of moderation not the excess of drunkenness.
- Finally, some things of culture must be absolutely **rejected**. There are some aspects of culture that are sinful and evil and cannot be adapted or redeemed. We repent of these things and change in light of the Word of God. This is true in cross cultural missions, where missionaries rightly opposed such cultural practices as sati, a Hindu practice of burning widows on their dead husband’s funeral pyre. In other cultures such practices as child sacrifice and cannibalism must be forsaken. It is also true for the church in culture today. We simply do not have “active hookers reaching hookers for Jesus” or “Misogynist Wife Beaters for Christ” or “Crack dealers dealing so they can witness to drug addicts” – it is on issues of sin where Christians have to hold the lines of biblical truth and not waver – even where there is extreme cultural pressure to punt. “We’re queer, we’re here, get used to it?” No, we love you, but we can not applaud the lifestyle. We weep with you and love you – but we cannot go the distance to be welcoming and “affirming”. We will welcome, but we cannot celebrate. Certain elements in culture are challenged, rebuked, and must be changed in the light of the gospel. We all need to repent of our cultural junk...including Christian cultural junk that is neither Christian, nor in the Scriptures.

With anything in culture we must ask – Can I receive it? Can it be redeemed? Or is the Bible so clear that it must be rejected completely. Again, our standard is the Scripture, not a certain historical view which may be found in a certain church. Some issues may be rightly understood as debatable matters, where there are Biblical principles which should be brought to bear, but believers may have different conclusions as to the

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Stetzer’s lectures *Breaking the Missional Code* and *Understanding Culture* can be heard at [www.theresurgence.com](http://www.theresurgence.com).

acceptability of the practice. Let us look at an example as to how the early church addressed issues of conscience when they arose in their day.

### ***On Sins of Conscience***

In two New Testament letters a controversial issue arose between early follows of Jesus. No, it was not drinking or watching rated R movies, it was whether a believer could buy meat for their family to eat, which may have been sacrificed to an idol/demon. Now for us, meat and demons do not seem too related...unless of course you are a vegetarian, then meat may seem a bit demonic ☺. Yet in the early church Christians were living in a culture which had a practice that brought disagreement in some churches. Many times animals would be sacrificed to some "god", where the meat from these animals was often sold at a discount in the marketplace. Some Christians thought, hey, great deal, blue light special meat, we can feed our families for a lot less money. Others thought it an evil thing to participate with something that was used in the worship of a false god. What to do? Paul wrote two times to speak to this issue: 1 Corinthians 8 and in Romans 14. Some of the principles which emerge from the discussion are as follows:

- Christians are free to eat if they can do so in faith – these are issues of **conscience**. Not universally sinful for all people.
- We are not individualistic islands and our behavior affects others. So we may be permitted Biblically to do something, but that does not mean it is the loving thing to do.
- If our participation in eating causes others to stumble, causes them to feel violated, not loved, even sinned against, then it is our duty to love them and "not destroy the work of God for the sake of food"
- Paul summarizes his argument well: *Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.* (1 Corinthians 8:12, 13)
- This cuts both ways. Someone may violate a brother by "partaking" another may be judged and condemned because he "partakes" – both parties should seek to love one another. Condemning one who eats, or eating while knowing you cause your brother to stumble are both paths which should be avoided.
- The point is this – love each other, communicate with each other, see if the activity is actually sinful biblically, or is it a sin of conscience where one may abstain, one may eat.

These guidelines are a great guide for all of us as we live in culture. There will be issues like this in our fellowship, maybe not about demonic meatloaf, but perhaps about watching a certain film. Finally, there are some additional passages of Scripture which are very helpful in evaluating things which are issues of conscience.

**Passage:** So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10: 31.

**Questions:** Can I do this to "God's glory?" Will doing this reflect rightly on who God is and what he values?

**Passage:** The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. Romans 14:22, 23

**Questions:** If you cannot do this thing "in faith," in the full view of God, without question in your conscience, then you ought not to do it.

**Passage:** And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 3:17

**Questions:** Can you participate in this “in the name of Jesus” – as if you are representing him? Can you actively thank God for this specific thing, right in the midst of it?

**Passage:** Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Philippians 4:8

**Questions:** Does it cause me to be directed towards true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, praiseworthy things?

**Passage:** “All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be enslaved by anything. 1 Corinthians 6:12

**Questions:** Whether it is sinful or not is the first question. The second question is whether this is helpful to me in my walk with Jesus, the mission of our church, to help someone else, to bring the gospel to someone. Additionally, if one has a tendency to sin in certain areas of life, it would be wise to stay away from those types of situations. A recovering drug addict should not be in a crack house a week after they have come clean...it would not be helpful. Being around something that may have the effect of enslaving you is neither wise nor advisable.

These are questions we must all ask before God as we evaluate the things in life we will or will not be about. If you get anything from this, please see that these issues are to be lived out in community. This of course which brings difficulty and accountability, issues to work through as well as the loving blessing of friends who care about holiness and mission.

### ***Living Together***

How is this practical? First, as a community we want to help one another progress in the faith and walk in holiness. Many of us have varying levels of acquaintance with the Bible and need to be told that certain stuff is sin and must be forsaken. A new Christian may not know that fornication/sexual immorality is forbidden by Scripture. A loving community will affirm and encourage commitments to purity and God’s vision for sex while extending grace to those in the process of discipleship, and holding one another accountable to the truth of God. Additionally, many have hang-ups which are not biblical that hinder a Christian’s witness in the world. Why can’t I go to that concert with my Non Christian friend? Why can’t I grab a beer at the pub with him? Should I go to the casino? Can I get a tattoo with a non Christian buddy? Ahhh, now we are arriving at the gray matter we are ready to discuss. In our day the things which separate Christians are many times issues of conscience and custom. These things too must be evaluated for we may just be bowing a knee to a certain Christian subculture and not necessarily to the Word of God. Now for a few final thoughts.

### ***Final Thoughts***

In applying the Scriptures to our lives our goal is to love Jesus, walk in holiness, and reach out to people with the gospel in culture. This task is never finished and quite literally is happening every day. We must make choices in light of God’s Word and our mission every day. This takes diligence, humility, and grace. It means confessing and repenting of our sins when we find out that we are into some sinful junk. It means living together in a way that neither stoops into legalism, nor into libertinism (big word for doing whatever the heck you want). Finally, it is not enough to say “The Bible does not teach that I should not watch porno movies” or, “There is no ‘thou shall not do embryonic stem cell research’ in the Bible.” Each generation must look at the *principles* of Scripture and apply this to the complexities of every day life. Is that easy? By no means! We can mess up participating too much or too little in culture. So let us enter into a real discussion of a few gray matters in our day. By doing so we may learn how to do this well in community. We’ll take just three.

- Alcohol – What are the issues involved here?
- Gambling – Poker, slots, betting on the football games...should you do this for money? Why? Why Not?
- Media/Movies – There is a bunch of stuff out there for the consumption of our eyeballs? What do you hear, watch, don't hear, don't watch? Why? Why Not?

How far is too far? What do you think? What biblical commands, prohibitions, and principles are involved with these issues? The manner in which we walk in these things together is important, for we desire to walk in holiness, in culture to reach out to our friends...this must be our path.

Soli Deo Gloria

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Reid S. Monaghan', with a stylized, cursive script.

Reid S. Monaghan