

Can We Have Fun for the Glory of God?

Good Company, Good Art, and a Good Laugh

William Edgar

True entertainment is a profound reflection of the presence of God.

Early in his career, rock critic Greil Marcus found himself depressed about America's culture. The Grim Reaper had paid his call on Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix in drug-related deaths. The mock-Eden of Woodstock was followed by the hell of Altamont, where the Hell's Angels, hired for security, overstepped and killed several fans. Marcus felt 100 years old. But he thought he ought to know where Cream songs came from. This was the legendary though short-lived band led by Eric Clapton, who adored the black singer Robert Johnson. So he bought a Robert Johnson blues album, *King of the Delta Blues Singers*. He recounts not knowing much about either the blues or the South. "I brought virtually no context to the record. I simply took it home, put it on, and had my life changed." He compares the experience to falling in love, or picking a college course that makes you think for the first time. He names the experience, citing Herman Melville, the "shock of recognition."

I believe that Greil Marcus, in that memorable moment of listening to the great blues singer, was entertained.

For many people, Christian or not, entertainment is a dirty word. And no wonder. We live in a culture where entertainment has become an industry aimed at distracting us from anything significant or hard. Why should we not have contempt for MTV, decadent celebrity athletes, kitsch, and all the other accoutrements of mere amusement? In his day, Blaise Pascal complained that men and women were too busy being "diverted" to listen to the voice of sober questions. What would he say today?

Author Michael Novak tells the story of Ed, a friend who has carefully learned how to keep important questions at bay. His whole life plan is two-fold: "Keep yourself surrounded by sound, and always keep moving." The man drums his fingers on the windowpane, won't go into the country, avoids mountains, and likes to keep busy. This is so he'll never stop to ask, "Why?" Novak goes on to comment that the American way of life is particularly suited to blocking out questions about what we are doing here. In short, we are over-entertained.

Our entertainment industry is part of a larger cultural phenomenon: bargaining. Busyness—and other abuses of human purpose—keeps us from thinking about meaning, eternity, value, and, of course, God's plan. Partly created by it, partly a reaction to it, modern amusement is the stepchild of this busyness, this drive toward mindless activity, whether in work or in play. We bargain our souls against the power of fun.

The Problem is not Entertainment

In the 19th century, Monet was already commenting on this in his paintings. In his series on Argenteuil, the suburb of Paris, quiet sailboats are interrupted by aggressive locomotives and railroad bridges. Paris was noisy, he seemed to convey. You needed to get out into the country and soak in the tranquil river to find rest. But to leave Paris, you had to take the loud train. And so the bargain was lost.

Avivah Wittenberg-Cox describes her midlife crisis as a tragi-comedy. Enormously successful as co-head of an internet company, she felt good about her accomplishments. Yet her success was at the cost of her family life. She rarely saw her seven-year-old son or her daughter, nearly four years of age. When she came to herself, she found the need to accept self-imposed limits. Instead of clinching every deal, and taking every trans-Atlantic jet, she now tries to strike a balance. She does not want millions, nor does she want to live like a hermit. She admits, "I want time. Time to get down on the floor and make puzzles with my three-year-old without thinking simultaneously of the 43 things I should have added to my Palm Pilot's to-do list." When one day she picked up her son from school for the first time in a year, "Delight chased incredulity off his face. And that's when I knew that my stock had finally gone up."

So why don't we just bag entertainment, and find the substance-driven life? No, for the problem is not entertainment. It is the secularization of entertainment. And that, in turn, ironically, is the fruit of the secularization of work. At the Reformation in the 16th century, work was understood to be noble, a calling for everyone, yet flawed, never a panacea. Not only priests and monks had this vocation, but everyone in the universal priesthood of believers. Work is a divine call, going back to Genesis 1:28. It is certainly flawed, and no

one who works does so without feeling the pain of creation in its travail. Sweat and tears are the norm. So, biblically, work is good but flawed.

But later generations have lost this. These days work is either looked at as pure duty, or, the opposite, a messianic hope. Our modern culture has often turned work into drudgery, a necessary evil. Again, ironically, we reinforce this notion by fast foods and labor-saving devices which claim to make work easier. The more we see how work can be avoided, the more we complain when it has to be done. An equal but opposite error is to exaggerate the value of work. On the left, Karl Marx believed industriousness would yield utopia. On the right, the National Socialists dared to blaspheme: Arbeit macht frei (work makes free), emblazoned over the entrance to Auschwitz. Thus, both the left and the right destroyed the biblical balance—noble-but-flawed.

As a result, something had to be done to bring relief. Leisure! Like Avivah Wittenberg-Cox, we need more time. But time without a purpose soon yields boredom.

The Better Way: to Recover True Entertainment

The Bible has much to say about this kind of cycle. Entertainment for its own sake is a plain distraction (Proverbs 20:1; 21:25). It shuts our ear to the cry of the poor (Proverbs 21:13). It is just plain decadent and noisy (Amos 6:1-7).

But is that all there is to it? Not at all. There is a better way. It is to recover true entertainment. And that is done, first, by recovering the lost notion of work as noble-yet-flawed. The fourth commandment gets the balance right: “Six days shall you labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God.” (Exodus 20:9-10). Notice the rhythm here. God wants us to work. But He gives us a day in which we remember Him in a special way. The Sabbath is a sign, placed right into the structure of our weekly schedule, a forecast of heaven. To enter into final rest is to be fully with our savior God (Hebrews 4:1). Work cannot save; only God can. But authentic rest is not pure leisure, it is a moment of grace!

We work and we rest, imitating creation’s divine pattern. And we do both in imitation of redemption’s divine pattern (Genesis 2:2; Exodus 31:15; Deuteronomy 5:15; Psalm 132:8). The apostle Paul tells the thief no longer to steal, but to work usefully with his hands, in order to have enough to share with the needy (Ephesians 4:28). It is good to work. But then it is good to share with those who can’t make it. This is because God has “worked” for our purchase, at the high cost of the crucifixion, so that He may have the gift of salvation to share with we who need redemption.

This principle extends far more widely than to the Sabbath. Indeed, the Sabbath is meant to highlight our worship, and the special tasks commensurate with a holy day. But all kinds of rest can be good. Why do we need to sleep about a third of our life? Think of it. God could have made us a lot more productive if we didn’t have to stop for so long. But the refreshment is more than functional. It’s a sign. Paul tells his readers he was “refreshed” by his friend Onesiphorus while suffering in prison (II Timothy 1:16). Even the lands in the Old Testament were meant to lie fallow for awhile. Sleep—nightly sleep—is legitimate rest. There is a time to “give it a rest.” Life is not utilitarian. It is about the grace of God. The flowers do not toil, we are told, yet they are clothed with greater beauty than Solomon (Matthew 6:28-9).

“Entertain” is quite an interesting word. It is from the French, *entretenir*, which means to maintain, or to converse. To be entertained is to maintain a conversation. With what? Negatively, it is mere babble, or chatter. But in the biblical sense, it is a conversation ... with eternity. Amazingly, while you are a sojourner here on earth, you may still keep a conversation going with heaven. C.S. Lewis reminds us of the hard journey of the Christian life. Like the man on horseback, we struggle along the rocky path. But then we come across an inn, and can take some rest. The inn reminds us that the journey is not the whole point, but the destination is. God has given us many inns along the way to our destination as so many reminders of His large purposes of grace. The duty of a good innkeeper is to entertain—provide a warm bed, a good meal, and some music. Entertainment need not be simply comfort and rest. It may be instructive as well. The inn should be well stocked with educational resources, like books.

C.S. Lewis’s great sermon, “The Weight of Glory,” speaks of a desire for a far-off country, a secret so intimate we feel awkward about it, yet we cannot hide from it. Lewis calls it *Seinsucht*, an inextinguishable longing. Books and music carry its beauty, but are only images of the thing itself, which is glory. Real entertainment,

then, is a profound reflection of the presence of God, which we now have (already recognized), and will have in full measure (not yet fully appropriated).

Legitimate Entertainment for Hard-Working Christians

If this is our principle, what is our practice? What are some legitimate forms of entertainment for the serious, hard-working believer of today? Well, to begin with, God has “richly furnished us with everything to enjoy,” (1 Timothy 6:17) but still we must choose. Though there are others, four forms stand out for me.

The first is laughter. What is it that gives us the desire—uniquely human—to laugh? Partly, as Peter Berger reminds us, it’s a way of saying that the present world isn’t altogether right-side-up. Why do we laugh when Charlie Chaplin gets caught in the eating machine? Because modernity, with its silly claims to save our labor, often adds to it instead. Why do we laugh when the dandy slips on a banana peel? Because he is supercilious and needs to be put down. Of course, laughter can be cruel, or cynical, and certainly perverted. But it doesn’t have to be. Large parts of the creation are just funny, or, better, delightful. We get a sense of this from Psalm 104. Birds sing. Wine and oil lift our spirits. Leviathan frolics. All in God’s wisdom. Of course, part of what makes us laugh in delight is the element of surprise. Sadly, we Christians are sometimes dreadfully predictable. What if we learned to laugh a lot at laughable things? It might make us more believable.

The second example is sports. Considering the abuses in our culture, why not avoid athletics altogether? Because, for one thing, we would be disregarding a wise saying in the New Testament. Paul notes to Timothy that physical exercise is of some value (1 Timothy 4:8). He often used the analogy of the athlete for the Christian life. The boxer, the runner, the gladiator. These are proofs that sports, however limited, are good in themselves. Like laughter, sports and other games remind us that there is more to life than horizontal, functional purpose. Otherwise, why on earth would we so enjoy moving an odd-shaped pigskin across a line, or cornering a king on a chess board after scores of moves, or knocking down duck pins at the end of an alley? Jesus sat down with his friends at a wedding in Cana. Hard to imagine he preached sermons to them!

A third type of legitimate entertainment is the meal. My wife and I enjoy sitting down for a good meal, regularly. It’s not just the food, although that is certainly a gift (God could have given us pills!). But it is the fellowship, the conversation, the simple enjoyment of a moment away from the stresses of work. We have a friend in France who is not particularly fond of coffee, but she always has a small cup of espresso after the meal, saying, “c’est le moment du café qui compte” (it’s the occasion of the coffee that matters). Many of us don’t eat slowly. Meals are a bother. No wonder we don’t know how to enjoy le moment du café! In her delightful book, *French Women Don’t Get Fat*, Mireille Guiliano argues that you can eat well and stay thin. Diets and weight-loss programs don’t work for her, but simple, elegant meals with no snacking and lots of walking and just plain humanity are the most efficacious.

Fourthly, the arts are wonderful entertainment. Much art today is bad. But that should not blind us to the marvelous exceptions. Many Christians would limit the use of the arts to ones that have an evangelistic function. Nothing wrong with the right kind of message-driven art. But there is far more to the purpose of art than mere message. I have invested a good deal of my life in the art of music. I find there is nothing quite like the succession of sounds, “well-ordered to the glory of God,” as Bach used to say, for entertainment. Nietzsche once said, “If there were no music life would be a mistake.” Amen. There is something about the way melody carries the soul, or how rhythm makes you want to dance, which is profoundly connected to God’s ways. The blues of Robert Johnson can indeed change your life. They delight and they educate.

We have the tools and the money to “amuse ourselves to death.” Shall we? Temptations to “keep yourself surrounded by sound, and always keep moving” abound. But this is just meaningless (it is “vanity,” to use the words of the ancient writer). Or shall we be entertained, appropriately, restfully, because God is there for us, and work can’t save us anyway? My favorite name in the Bible is Noah, which means “comfort,” or “rest.” It’s like good entertainment. Genesis 5:29 tells us that after all the toil and death God will give us a person, a sign of his good intentions toward us: “[Lamech] named his son Noah and said, ‘He will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the Lord had cursed.’” Noah is but a type, of which Jesus Christ is the fulfillment. He is the great comforter, who gives rest. If we want a life in imitation of the divine pattern, we will choose to follow Christ, “for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from His” (Hebrews 4:10). As we do, we converse with eternity, as we wait to enter fully into His joy.