

FORGOTTEN TEXTS AND DOCTRINES  
IN CURRENT EVANGELICAL RESPONSES TO CULTURE

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Introduction

As someone who has been monitoring evangelicalism in the United States, I've been impressed by several trends in our encounter with popular culture. Because of time restrictions I will limit my discussion to just two perspectives on culture, which have become so pervasive that they have developed into truisms, allergic to theological critique.

One of the reasons that they have resisted examination has to do with the meaning of the noun "culture" within popular evangelical discourse. *Mutatis mutandis*, "culture" takes on very benign overtones to the average evangelical. Very often visions of international foods, colorful clothing, and Shakespeare festivals bombinate in our imaginations. But this picture—deeply indebted to travel agency brochures and airline commercials—is dreadfully incomplete. A thoroughly Christian definition of culture must involve a great deal more. It must come to terms with practices that may be inimical to Christian conversation, although accepted and normalized within secular culture. If nothing else, most definitions of culture include religious beliefs, which most believers would hesitate to categorize as neutral. Even beyond the threat of alien religions, there may be other less obvious customs that also violate a biblical worldview.

With this very brief introduction, I will vet two of these truisms and suggest how biblical exegesis and systematic theology can contribute to them.

### Normative Principle

At some point in life the Christian is faced with moral choices that are not specifically addressed in Scripture. So the question is asked, “What do I do when the Bible is silent about the moral status of a certain activity?” Or, “How do I apply the Bible to everyday moral decisions?” The common answer seems to be, “What the Bible clearly forbids we must forbid; but where there is no clear command we are free to engage as long as our conscience allows.”

When applied to the current worship wars this position is known as the normative principle of worship, historically associated with Anglicanism and Lutheranism. Its antithesis is the regulative principle, whose ancestry is largely Reformed. The regulative principle essentially dictates that God should not be worshiped in a manner that is not positively prescribed in Scripture. Since, however, this paper is not about worship, and since my colleagues are more qualified to trace the genetics of both these viewpoints, I will limit my comments to the normative position on Christian liberty in contemporary evangelicalism.

In its most elementary formulation the normative approach essentially conceives of the Bible as a catalogue of sins or an encyclopedia of prohibitions. Therefore if a certain prohibition is not mentioned, Christians are considered free to engage if their conscience is not violated.

Although it certainly originated prior to Charles Swindoll, this view receives its classical expression in his highly popular monograph, *The Grace Awakening*:

Any specified list in Scripture is to be obeyed without hesitation or question. That’s an inspired list for all of us to follow, not someone’s personal list.... But when questionable things aren’t specified in Scripture, it then becomes a matter of one’s personal preference or convictions.<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere, in his loose paraphrase of Rom 14:13-18, we sense the same timbre, “Nothing that is not specifically designated as evil in Scripture is evil—but rather a matter of one’s personal preference or taste.”<sup>2</sup>

Rightly believing that the Scriptures are complete and relevant to every age, the exponents of the normative view, nevertheless, miscalculate the mechanism of these two truths (completion and relevance). For God to address every possible transgression of every culture specifically would require him to think in terms of gigabits and mammoth mainframes rather than pages and books, since any such document would be immense in size and complexity. Fortunately the Bible was not delivered to us as a comprehensive directory of taboos, but often guides behavior through a network of larger principles, worldviews, and theology as a whole. For example the Bible says nothing specifically about recurring vices in modern societies such as plagiarism, hijacking, or internet pornography, to name a few. These items are covered under broader categories such as honesty rather than stealing (plagiarism), submission, mercy, and love rather than cruelty and rebellion (hijacking), and chastity and modesty rather than lust and nakedness (pornography).

Even the meticulous Old Testament law was never designed to superintend every imaginable incident or infraction. Susan Niditch’s perspective is representative of Old Testament scholarship: “As elsewhere in the ancient Near East, the codes [of the Pentateuch] were not meant to be complete but only representative, a mere selection,....”<sup>3</sup>

The New Testament is even less hospitable to the normative principle, in the terms expressed earlier. Two passages are especially relevant to the topic: Gal 5:19-21 and Heb 5:11-14.

*Gal 5:19-21*

Gal 5:19-21 reads:

Now the works of the flesh are obvious, which are: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, contention, jealousy, rage, strife, dissensions, divisions, envying, drunkenness, revelry, and *things like these*, of which I am telling you beforehand, just as I did tell [you] beforehand, that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.<sup>4</sup>

In discussions of this passage the phrase “and things like these” seldom receives the attention it deserves. This is unfortunate because this often-overlooked phrase informs us that Paul intended this list to be representative rather than exhaustive.<sup>5</sup> Paul was announcing that there were works of the flesh that resembled these but were not included—perhaps due to limitations of space or time. According to Richard Longenecker, “The list of vices that follows is made up of fifteen items, with the expression... (“and the like”) indicating that this list is to be taken as only representative of what more might be said.”<sup>6</sup> It is evident that Paul expected his readers to exercise intelligence and discernment in determining additional attitudes, activities, and behaviors that were similar to these, in order to supply the lacuna in Gal 5:19-21. Paul surely did not mean that every vice absent from this series occurs elsewhere in Scripture, which would involve the unlikely assumption that he regarded Scripture as a container for every possible human transgression. That this is not the case is enhanced by the fact that Paul prefaced his list by stating that “the works of the flesh are obvious,” that is their sinfulness is evident, even without the luxury of special revelation such as the Mosaic law.<sup>7</sup> Therefore I would hazard that even if this already representative inventory of fifteen vices were omitted from Scripture, we would still be able to identify these behaviors as sinful, for they are “obvious.”

What is even more remarkable is that many of the sins are but slight variations of one another, such as fornication (πορνεία) impurity (ἀκαθαρσία) and licentiousness (ἀσέλγεια),<sup>8</sup> or

jealousy (ζήλος) and envying (φθόνοι); or contention (ἔρις) and strife (ἐριθειᾶ), or dissensions (διχοστασίαι) and divisions (αἰρέσεις). For Paul to maintain that there were iniquities similar to these implies that he was willing to make even further demarcations within these categories. In other words there were attitudes that were similar to jealousy and envy and yet also distinct in some way.

Longenecker points us to another Pauline text that presupposes the same principle: Rom 13:9, “For this, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”<sup>9</sup> According to Longenecker, “Whatever has been left untouched in the sphere of human relations by these divine principles is covered in the précis of Lev 19:18: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”<sup>10</sup>

Consequently, these Pauline examples seriously undermine the normative principle, which in its noble aspiration to maintain *Sola Scriptura*, almost extinguishes the role of general revelation in the hermeneutical process.

#### *Heb 5:11-14*

Another text that illuminates our discussion is Heb 5:11-14:

Concerning whom we have much to say, and it is hard to explain intelligibly, since you have become sluggish in hearing. For indeed, though you ought to be teachers because of time, again you have need for someone to teach you the basic principles of the oracles of God;<sup>11</sup> you have become as those who need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes of milk is inexperienced in the word of righteousness,<sup>12</sup> for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who by practice have their senses trained to discern between good and evil.<sup>13</sup>

In this passage the writer explains that he has much to teach his readers about Christ being a priest after the order of Melchizedek, but hesitates because of their spiritual

incompetence.<sup>14</sup> As he describes their pitiful condition, he illustrates spiritual maturity and immaturity via the metaphor of palatal development. Simply put, those who operate in the elementary instruction of Christianity are like infants who drink milk, because they lack experience and skill in gleaning moral guidance from Scripture. The spiritually mature, on the other hand, are like those who eat solid food (a reference to the teaching about Melchizedek), who by exercising their moral abilities are conditioned to distinguish between good and evil.<sup>15</sup> That is, they are skillful in the application of moral principles. Indeed, the mature advance beyond the basic teachings of the Christian faith—both doctrinal and moral—and are able to use them to make comparisons, weigh evidences, detect similarities, identify and apply principles, discern intentions, navigate through the complexities of culture-specific activities, and draw more sophisticated conclusions on the appropriateness of various behaviors and customs. But the immature are restricted to the basic teachings of right and wrong available in special revelation.

Therefore I would argue that the writer of Hebrews would consider the normative principle of popular evangelicalism, i.e., “nothing that is not specifically designated as evil in Scripture is evil—but rather a matter of one’s personal preference or taste,”<sup>16</sup> as a token of spiritual immaturity. Hebrews would regard the practitioners of this policy as babes, unskillful in the word of righteousness and ethical reasoning, because they are unable to distinguish between good and evil apart from the specific teachings of Scripture.

### Neo-Pelagianism

The second issue of concern has to do with our philosophy of the arts. Through the guidance of Francis Schaeffer, evangelicals have graduated from the ghetto of cultural chauvinism to evaluating all things, including art, from a God’s-eye perspective or Christian

worldview. Nevertheless, improvement in one sector has been accompanied by decay in another. Our evangelical anthropology has suffered greatly at the hands of trendy aesthetic formulas and clichés that have been inducted into our movement and accurately represent our sentiments in these areas. Adopting the popular wisdom, evangelicals are likely to say, “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” or “there’s just no disputing my tastes,” or “stylistically speaking there is no such thing as good or bad music.” Accordingly, higher education guru Paul Dressel observes, “Today new conceptions of artistic and literary worth, coupled with respect for the views of individuals, make beauty a relative rather than absolute concept. Indeed, we have moved far toward the acceptance of the view that beauty is in the mind of the beholder.”<sup>17</sup> Curt Ducasse, a secular aesthetic philosopher, endorses this very orientation: “But, like the fact or dislike it, there is a realm where each individual is absolute monarch though of himself alone, and that is in the realm of aesthetic values.”<sup>18</sup> And, “Neither I nor anyone can refute anyone else’s judgments of immediate value,—here, of beauty and ugliness; nor can anyone refute mine.”<sup>19</sup> It would be no exaggeration to claim that this also represents the prevailing doctrine of aesthetic criticism within evangelicalism.

Simply paralleling secularism is not in itself pernicious, although in this case there is genuine reason for concern. Let me explain. In reference to the doctrines of grace, Charles Hodge once remarked that he was more troubled by the ghost of semi-Pelagius than the ghost of Pelagius. If Hodge were alive today, perhaps he would retract that statement, inasmuch as the specter of Pelagianism once again haunts the corridors of evangelical theology. By way of brief review, the fifth century monk Pelagius espoused a very high anthropology. Man, to Pelagius, was free at birth from the congenital defect of sin. Beginning with a clean slate and good

disposition, Pelagius believed that human beings had the potential to live their entire lives without sin. So then Pelagianism is a heresy that denies that man is by nature sinful.

In the debates surrounding the aesthetic merit of current art forms—especially musical forms—many evangelicals, I fear, have cornered themselves into a form of Pelagianism. Remember the slogan, “there’s just no disputing my tastes.” The upshot of this tenet is that man’s aesthetic endowment has escaped the contamination of original sin—rank Pelagianism.

If we as evangelicals intend to do justice to the doctrine of human depravity, then we must also apply it to the domain of aesthetics, which enlists the use of man’s emotions, affections, and intellect. With all three suffering from depravity, we sometimes fail to recognize the beautiful and call the perverse good and delightful. Therefore a sound evangelical understanding of depravity would insist that man’s ability to judge what is aesthetically good and pleasing is as crippled as our ability to reason properly. This does not merely refer to imperfection, which is evident to some degree in every human endeavor, including the writing of this paper, but to the existence of sinfully distorted tastes and concepts of what is good, pleasing, and beautiful.

John Murray demonstrates the soundness of this position by describing the extent of human depravity, which includes the resources for aesthetic judgment:

*Pollution.* This refers to the depravity of disposition and character. Man is totally unholy. All his functions and exercises are unholy because they lack conformity to the will of God; they come short of the perfection which his holiness demands. Man’s understanding is darkened, his will enslaved, his conscience perverted, his affections depraved, his heart corrupted, his mind [at] enmity against God.<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, Millard Erickson adds:

First, sin is a matter of the entire person. The seat of sin is not merely one aspect of the person, such as the body or reason.... That the emotions also are involved is amply attested (e.g., Rom. 1:26-27; Gal. 5:24; 2 Tim. 3:2-4, where the ungodly are described as being lovers of self and pleasure rather than lovers of God).<sup>21</sup>



Herman Bavinck inserts: “This taint or pollution not only spreads itself out over all men but it also saturates the whole of the individual being.”<sup>22</sup>

Lastly, the prince of Reformed theologians John Calvin himself: “We teach that all human desires are evil, and charge them with sin—not in that they are natural, but because they are inordinate” (*Institutes* 3.3.12); and “Original sin, therefore, seems to be a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul, which first makes us liable to God’s wrath, then also brings forth in us those works which Scripture calls “works of the flesh” (*Institutes* 2.1.8); and “...that whatever is in man, from the understanding to the will, from the soul even to the flesh, has been defiled and crammed with this concupiscence” (*Institutes* 2.1.8).

Here it needs to be emphasized that one does not have to subscribe to the Reformed position of total depravity in order for this argument to succeed. Calvinists and conservative Arminians agree on the doctrine of depravity, with the exception of the human will. Calvinists hold that the will, being corrupted by sin, is unable to respond to the offer of grace in Christ, while conservative Arminians assert that although the will was at one time unable to respond, through what is known as prevenient grace or common grace, the ability to choose was restored by God, enabling man to receive or reject the free offer of salvation. Even John Wesley himself affirmed the turpitude of *every* component of man’s being:

“God saw all the imaginations of the thoughts of his heart”—of his soul, his inward man, the spirit within him, the principle of all his inward and outward motions. He “saw all the imaginations”—it is not possible to find a word of a more extensive signification. It includes whatever is formed, made, fabricated within; all that is or passes in the soul; every inclination, affection, passion, appetite; every temper, design, thought. (*Original Sin*, I.2, 1759)

Whatever one’s soteriological position, if it is evangelical in any meaningful sense of the term, it should be quite satisfied with the understanding of depravity presented above. Can

we indeed, within our varying evangelical traditions, affirm with the Scriptures that man's affections and desires can be so demented that they can long for intimate relations with members of the *same* sex (Rom 1:26), sometimes even of the animal kingdom, and in the same breath claim that our aesthetic endowment has not become even half as abominable and distorted? Nevertheless, the popular evangelical aesthetic ends up in exactly that position, by assuming that man's sense of taste is beyond criticism, perversion, and censure.

I submit that this conviction, with all its good intentions, is nevertheless heterodox. It treats man's creativity as it would have been prior to the Fall, hence it may be labeled "prelapsarian," as well as the more punishing, "Pelagian." Consequently, it is impossible, in my judgment, to claim orthodoxy and yet maintain that artwork, art forms, and art appreciation cannot be inferior, cheap, and grossly perverted in that the very powers of the human consciousness that combine to form our aesthetic impulse are cursed with sin and alloyed with impurity.

It is incredible that this fundamental and critical doctrine of evangelical faith, which crosses denominational lines, has been so consistently overlooked by the believing community. The evangelical commitment to orthodoxy in other important doctrines and lapse in aesthetics did not escape the attention of Dale Jorgenson, who several years ago registered this complaint in

*Christianity Today*:

Curiously, evangelical attitudes today toward value systems are objective when it comes to ethics, but unabashedly subjective when dealing with the arts. Such a view can lead to mediocrity, superficiality, cliché formulas, and a pragmatic "Do people like it?" basis for sacred music, architecture, and literature.<sup>23</sup>

He also demurs, "The current rash of 'Christian music,' 'Christian art,' and 'Christian literature' underlies the sharp contrast between classic evangelical emphasis upon Christian ethical standards and utilitarian Christian aesthetics."<sup>24</sup>

It has been my observation that contemporary Christian artists and musicians are more prepared to face the accusation of aesthetic relativism than Pelagianism, probably because many are oblivious to this aberration in the first place. The handful of rejoinders to the charge of Pelagianism, that I am aware of, involve affirming depravity in alternative ways related to form, while denying that the affections can actually be defiled: art can be sinfully used, mismatched to the occasion, or more often, be aesthetically poor in relation to its own genre. But this is woefully inadequate, since it has nothing to do directly with the corruption of the affections. There is still no concession that artistic forms and artistic tastes can be perverted or even impaired. To do so would jeopardize many modes of artistic expression already popularized and would demand, it would seem, objective criteria for determining aesthetic merit. If indeed we can hate the genuinely beautiful and love the authentically ugly, we must somewhere presuppose that there are principles of objective beauty, which raises even more difficult questions. Who or what determines the aesthetic quality of any artistic offering? What evidence could settle the issue between two individuals who disagree on the pulchritude of a work of art?

Ducasse fleshes out this type of positivism:

That a given railroad bridge is a good bridge can be proved or disproved by running over it such trains as we wished to carry, and observing whether or not it does carry them. But there is no similar test by which the beauty of a landscape could be proved or disproved. Judgments of beauty (which is an immediate value) have to do with the relation of the object judged to the individual's own pleasure experience of which he himself is the sole possible observer and judge. Judgments of beauty are therefore in this respect exactly on a par with judgments of the pleasantness of foods, wines, climates, amusements, companions, etc. Like these they are ultimately matters of the individual's own taste.<sup>25</sup>

Since no reasonable individual has been willing to claim aesthetic infallibility or offer conclusive criteria, the vast majority of evangelicals have opted for what they consider the safer waters of relativism and historicism. Torn between what they believe to be the only two

alternatives, aesthetic relativism or an absolutism that is neither possible nor desirable, many evangelicals have embraced the former, without realizing the implications of their choice.

Nevertheless, the reason that only two options seem to be available is because we have conflated two fields of study, that of epistemology and ontology. We have come to believe that if something cannot be known, it cannot be true or exist. Ergo, if we cannot definitively judge the aesthetic value of a work, beauty in an objective sense does not exist. One can easily identify that this line of reasoning is *non sequitur* inasmuch as the nature of objective truth is that it is true whether anyone acknowledges it or not. Objective truth never submits to a head count. Therefore the claim that there is an objective kind of beauty cannot be dismissed simply because it will not submit to testing or falsification. Even so evangelicals demonstrate that they are more at ease with relativism, accompanied by Pelagianism, than with objectivism and a measure of agnosticism. As one may have already gathered, I find this decision to be regrettable and contrary to sound doctrine.

### Conclusion

As I conclude, I will apply elements from the title of this paper to the positions under scrutiny. The normative approach to Christian liberty needs to be informed by forgotten New Testament texts like Gal 5:19-21 and Heb 5:11-14. By incorporating these passages into our doctrine of culture, we supply a needful qualification to the normative principle: Christians are not only responsible to avoid sinful behaviors and activities that are explicitly published in Scripture but also those that violate *principles* taught in Scripture, inasmuch as Scripture is not an exhaustive menu of sins.

When it comes to aesthetics, evangelicals have overlooked the doctrine of depravity, whether the vintage is Reformed or Arminian. If every component of our humanity is infected

with sin and error, it must be the case that our aesthetic sensibilities have also suffered injury. If that much can be agreed on, then blanket statements to the effect that “there’s just no disputing my tastes,” or “all art and music forms are good” must be rejected and deemed incompatible with evangelical theology. To refuse to do so would be to court the Pelagian heresy, a position no Christian intentionally wishes to embrace.

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<sup>1</sup>Charles R. Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990), 132.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>3</sup>Susan Niditch, *Ancient Israelite Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 70-71. Cf. John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 323-324, 462-463; Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 2d. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 98-99.

<sup>4</sup>Translation, author’s.

<sup>5</sup>Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 260.

<sup>6</sup>Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, *Word Biblical Commentary*, no. 41 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1990), 253.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>8</sup>All three terms here have reference to sexual impurity. Fung, *Galatians*, 255-56.

<sup>9</sup>Translation, author’s.

<sup>10</sup>Longenecker, *Galatians*, 99.

<sup>11</sup>“Oracles of God,” either a reference to the Old Testament or to biblical revelation in general. Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New*

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*Testament*, 4th, rev. ed. (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1993), 663; R. McL. Wilson, *Hebrews*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 103; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary, no. 47<sub>A</sub> (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1991), 133, 137; Canon Leon Morris, "Hebrews," in *Hebrews-Revelation*, vol. 12 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 51-52.

<sup>12</sup>“Word of righteousness,” has been understood in various ways, but perhaps the sense of “teaching about righteous behavior in the Bible,” is the most satisfactory since the expression appears to be related to “oracles of God,” and since the contrasting situation in v. 14 is unmistakably moral, “good and evil”. Cf. Wilson, *Hebrews*, 104; Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 138; Morris, "Hebrews," 52; Zerwick and Grosvenor, *Grammatical Analysis*, 663.

<sup>13</sup>Translation, author's.

<sup>14</sup>William Lane argues that the charge of incompetence is not actual but rhetorical, a device to embarrass the readers into using the knowledge they possess but have neglected to this point. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 135.

<sup>15</sup>So *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>16</sup>Swindoll, *Grace Awakening*, 167.

<sup>17</sup>Cited in Dale A. Jorgenson, "Axiological Schizophrenia: Inconsistency in Evangelical Values," *Christianity Today*, 4 March 1983, 95.

<sup>18</sup>Curt J. Ducasse, "The Subjectivity of Aesthetic Value," in *Introductory Readings in Aesthetics*, ed. John Hospers (New York: The Free Press, 1969), 296.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 307.

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<sup>20</sup>John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Select Lectures in Systematic Theology, 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 80.

<sup>21</sup>Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 628.

<sup>22</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine*, translated by Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1956), 243.

<sup>23</sup>Jorgenson, "Axiological Schizophrenia," 95.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ducasse, "The Subjectivity of Aesthetic Value," 295.