SHOULD CHRISTIANS GO TO MOVIES?

by Prof. John M. Frame

Some Christians may wonder how a fellow believer can give any support to the film industry, notorious as it is for anti-Christian bias and moral relativism. I would note that there is also a view on the opposite extreme: some Christian critics of culture insist that all Christians have a responsibility to become culturally aware, to become knowledgeable about cultural trends in art, music, literature, film, drama and so on.

I reject both of these extremes. A more balanced position, I think, is to recognize that Scripture tells us to be "in" the world, but not "of" the world. That means that we not only may, but must, be willing to live amid secular (anti-Christian) influence without ourselves compromising the faith. In this respect, it doesn't matter whether that secular influence comes from film, or from involvement in business, labor, neighborhood, politics, or whatever. Nor, within the general realm of media entertainment, does it matter whether we are talking about Beethoven or modern rock, Jane Austen or William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway or Jackie Collins, news or business magazines, TV or film, Disney films or films by Martin Scorsese. To avoid non-Christian influence altogether, we would have to live as hermits (assuming that we could even find some place in the world beyond the reach of modern communications and government). In all modern experience there is a heavy component of anti-Biblical teaching and influence. But complete isolation is not an option for biblical Christians. Even the Christian hermits of the ancient and medieval periods justified their existence as a life of prayer, and thus a life that was spent in and for the world. How can we pray for a world we know nothing about? We must not seek to isolate ourselves from the world, but rather to be salt and light in our fallen culture, to carry out our Lord's Great Commission.

That balance of being in but not of the world is sometimes difficult to maintain. One's choices in this area should be based in part upon his or her own moral and spiritual maturity. Some people, especially children, or those young in the faith, or those with special problems like alcohol addiction or unusual susceptibility to sexual temptation, should limit their exposure to secular culture in appropriate ways. But at the same time they should be trained in Christian maturity, so that eventually they can enter more fully the secular arena, not fearing that they will be compromised by the culture, but expecting to influence the culture positively for Christ.

I do not believe, with the Christian "culturalists," that every Christian, or even every mature Christian, has an obligation to attend art exhibits, concerts, films, etc. Christians should seek to influence the world for Christ in some way: that is the Great Commission. But the precise way in which they reach out to the world may differ greatly from one believer to another. My brother-in-law is pastor of a church in the inner city of Philadelphia. He does not normally go to films, dramas, or art exhibits. But he is definitely "in" the world, the real world, and he ministers to it with all the strength God provides him. Knowledge
of entertainment media would be of little use to him in his ministry, and I would be the last person to urge him to become "culturally aware" of a culture that has little impact on his effectiveness.

Yet there are others (such as myself, I believe) who are called of God to devote some of their energy to Christian culture-criticism. Many pastors, as well as youth workers, scholars, teachers, writers, parents and others are in this category. For them it is not wrong, I believe, within sensible limits, to expose themselves to modern film or other media. The apostle Paul said that he was not ignorant of Satan's devices (2 Cor. 2:11). For that purpose, if for no other, we may be called to learn what filmmakers have to say to us.

Some arguments used by Christians opposed to moderate attendance at films are as follows:

(1) **Graphic acts of violence debase those who watch them, making the viewers more prone to violence.** On this proposition, there is mixed statistical evidence. Some people, especially children, do seem to resort more quickly to violence, or imitation-violent play, as the result of viewing simulated violence on TV or film. I do advocate that parents limit and monitor the use of these media by their children. But I find it hard to believe that everyone should for this reason drastically curtail his or her film attendance. I have never myself (even in childhood, as best I can recall) felt the least bit inclined toward violence as the result of watching it on film. For the most part, viewing such violence increases my resolve toward finding non-violent solutions to problems. I think that many other people are similar to me in this respect.

Further, if we maintain a proper critical distance from the films we watch (a distance that is necessary for many other reasons), we can see that film violence is essentially choreography. No one really gets hurt. And for the most part in films, even today, unjustly violent people are not rewarded or glorified. It is important to maintain perspective: lack of perspective is one of the most prevalent defects in Christian thought today, in my view. And the larger perspective is that violence is all around us, unavoidable. To avoid it entirely is to depart from the world. Indeed, Scripture itself contains descriptions of terrifying, even gory violence; just read the stories found in Judges. Since Scripture includes such descriptions, we must assume that there are good reasons for it — reasons conducive to edification (2 Tim. 3:16, 17). It is not hard to imagine what those reasons might be. The violence of the wicked shows us what the Fall has done to us and the violence of divine judgment summons us to repentance. On this basis we cannot deny that some exposure to depictions of violence can be edifying.

(2) **Sexual scenes in movies excite impure lusts.** Again, I think this is true of some viewers, but not others. If sex scenes in films have that effect on you, then don't go to films until God gives you a greater mastery over temptation. But I don't think this is a problem for every Christian.

But some might go further and insist that, even for those who are not tempted toward sin by screen sex, it is wrong to view actors in the process of doing things that are sinful in themselves. (The same point has been made with regard to the use of unwholesome or blasphemous language in movie scripts.) I grant that some love scenes in the movies cross over that line of being "sinful in themselves." True, screen sex is usually, for the actors and actresses involved, not very "sexy." The filming of such scenes is done bit by bit, with all sorts of technical intrusions, and usually without actual genital contact. Still, if I were married to an actress who chose to engage publicly in deep kissing and simulated intercourse with a third party, I would consider myself to have been violated. In my view that is a scriptural view of the matter.
So some movie sex is certainly sinful in itself. And one cannot, certainly, justify watching sin for its own sake. I would not go to a film for the purpose of watching an actor and actress in a nude sex scene (thus I avoid "XXX" flicks and those like them), any more than I would take a walk in the park to spy on kids making out behind the bushes. On the other hand, I would not stay away from the park out of fear that I might happen to observe some illicit sex. Similarly, if film actors wish to commit sin before the camera, that is their responsibility. I don't believe I commit sin when I, in the normal course of my cultural pursuits, observe what they, without consulting me, have chosen to do in public.

(3) Modern films promote, very effectively, a non-Christian philosophy of life. This is true, and it is the most profound of all arguments against Christian attendance at films. Sex, foul language, and violence are incidental elements in film, but the non-Christian world- and life-view is often at its core. That worldview does more damage in society than any cinematic portrayals of sex, violence, and ungodly speech. Indeed, that worldview is what makes the sex, violence, and language in movies unwholesome, in contrast with biblical depictions of such things.

But again, perspective is in order. Non-Christian philosophy has dominated the arts and general culture for the last three centuries. To avoid exposure to non-Christian worldviews and values, we would have to avoid exposure to Mozart and Beethoven, Emerson and Thoreau, Hume and Kant, Paine and Jefferson, D. W. Griffith and Charlie Chaplin, and so on, not to mention Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, Euripides, Cicero, and other ancients. We tend to discount older exponents of non-Christian values, viewing them with the halo that comes with long cultural acceptance. For that reason, these older thinkers are often more dangerous than those which are more contemporary and more obviously anti-Christian. Indeed, for similar reasons, we must beware of G-rated films as much as of R- and worse-rated films. Yes, let us limit our exposure to all of these influences; but not to the extent of leaving the world, or to the extent of becoming ignorant of Satan's devices.

(4) We should not give our money to an industry that encourages immorality and unbelief. While we are free to spend (or not spend) our money with whomever we please, Scripture does not require believers to support only industries and institutions that are morally and religiously pure. Jesus taught his disciples to pay taxes to Caesar, taxes that supported the emperor cult (Mark 12:13-17), among other things. Paul taught the Corinthians to buy food in the market place without asking whether or not it had been offered to idols (1 Cor. 10:14-26). Scripture is realistic enough to know that if we had to inquire about the religion or morals of every merchant before doing business with him, we could not do commerce.

I do not think it is wrong for Christians to boycott industries that they believe are doing social and/or religious harm in the world. They are certainly free to withhold their economic support from those industries. On the other hand, I do not believe that Scripture requires us to boycott such organizations. We really could not do that in every case without completely isolating ourselves from the world.

I would conclude, therefore, that a moderate amount of movie-going is legitimate for most Christians. I don't think we should be ashamed of that or even ashamed of enjoying it. Moderation, of course, requires careful thought about priorities. Even activities which are good in themselves can become wrong if they crowd out of our lives things which are more important. Each of us needs to do some self-examination in this area. Choices about exposure to entertainment and culture are not religiously neutral. But those who are conscientious about pleasing God and keeping his commandments need not feel guilty about moderate movie attendance.