

Gray Matter:

Media, Movies and Miller Time

By Reid S. Monaghan

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Introduction

As believers who are called to walk into culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ, we will confront many issues 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 is sin to drink a beer; others think it is only a sin to drink light beer. To find an answer to these many issues, we must first consult the clear teaching of Scripture and evaluate our current views in 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 manner 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 who represent Jesus to others, not those who simply 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 Scripture. Many times these sub-cultural prohibitions keep Christians from walking in meaningful relationships with non-Christians. Not to mention that some of these rules steal the fun out of life in a way Scripture never commands. We can get bound up by what are actually our cultural preferences, and not the clear teaching of the Bible.

The issues we face every day will not be solved by creating extra-biblical rules or by closing our eyes and wishing the big, bad 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 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. We desire to learn to walk in a manner worthy of Christ *and* to engage friends in culture without non-biblical “Christian” cultural baggage.

The culture we live in is a complex mixture of things which are enjoyable, wicked, beautiful, ugly, and at times very perplexing. I’d like to ask how we might live in culture, share in 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 and 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. A few example assignments will be given at the end as well. We now turn to the issue of sin.



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 and one another. 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 one-fingered salute. Sometimes our rebellion is active and out in the open, other times it is subconscious and subtle. Yet sin is saying that I can live independently 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 towards 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. Some of it is clearly sinful: lying, murder, stealing, worshipping things which are not God, coveting other people’s stuff, lust, arrogant pride, 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 Christians must answer.

I recently listened to a message by Dr. Ed Stetzer, director of Research at LifeWay with the Southern Baptist Convention¹. His lectures about viewing culture as a follower of Jesus are very helpful. Quoting missiologist Robert McQuilkin, he highlighted 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 when applied in our context, 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. Culture can be thought of as the house people live in; it is not nice to throw rocks at someone's house just because it is *different* from your own. There are things in culture which can be received joyfully by the Christian. Examples would be foods, drink, and manners of dress (yet modest within that culture), musical styles, modes of transportation, use of technology and certain art forms. This list could go on, but I think you get the point.

- Additionally, some of culture should be **redeemed**. This would apply to something which may be very good, yet is currently being perverted in culture. These things can be rightly redeemed 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 consents...however you understand consent.” The same might be said for good, dark, beer—it needs the redemption of moderation not the sin of drunken excess.
- Finally, some things of culture must be absolutely **rejected**. There are some aspects of culture that are sinful and evil and cannot be adopted 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 oppose 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 clear issues of sin where Christians must 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 cannot applaud the lifestyle. We weep with you and love you—but we cannot go the distance to be welcoming and "affirming." We will welcome, love and encourage 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.

So with anything in culture we must ask—can I receive it? Can it be redeemed? Or is the Bible clear that it must be rejected and avoided. Again, our standard is the Scripture, not a certain historical view which may be found in a certain expression of church. Additionally, 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 acceptability of the practice. These we will call issues of conscience or personal conviction. 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 followers of Jesus. No, it was not drinking, watching rated R movies, or dancing at the club. The issue was whether a believer could buy meat for their family to eat, which may have been sacrificed in a religious ceremony to a false god/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” and then 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 be involved with something that was used in the worship of a false god. What to do? Paul speaks to this issue, once in 1 Corinthians 8 and again 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 one another. 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, or 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



Yet this also cuts both ways, so the instruction has another side as well:

- Someone may violate a brother by “partaking” in something while another may be judged and condemned simply because he “partakes.” In either case both parties

should seek to love one another. Judging and condemning one who eats, or eating while knowing you cause your brother to stumble are *both* paths which should be avoided. To be honest, some legalists use “don’t cause others to stumble” to infringe on the freedom of another’s conscience. In doing so he is actually creating a non-biblical rule and demanding of obedience from all so they do not “stumble him.” That guy needs a strong kick in the pants because he is immature, self-absorbed and stumbles too much.

- 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, or 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 for us: 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 for us: If you cannot participate in 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 for us: Can you participate in this “in the name of Jesus”—as if you are representing Him? Can you actively thank Him 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 for us: Does it cause me to be directed towards true, honorable, just,

pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and praiseworthy things? Remember, the world is full of ugly, false, dishonorable, unjust, defiled, unlovable, deplorable, base and blameworthy things. You will never be completely separated from them, yet they should not be the delight of our hearts. I have seen wicked things in the news which make me love the good more. Philippians 4:8 is not an injunction to place our heads in the sand, but rather to delight in what accords with God.

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 for us: 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, brings me joy in God, helps someone else, aids in bringing 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. A recovering alcoholic should avoid even a practice of moderation. Being around something that may have the effect of enslaving you is neither wise nor advisable.

These are questions we all must bring before God as we evaluate the things in life we will be about. If you get anything from this, please see that these issues are to be lived out in community. This, of course, brings about difficulty, accountability, and 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. We hold each other accountable to the truth of God but we know there is a maturing process that takes time. Additionally, many people 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 must also be evaluated, for we may just be bowing

a knee to a certain Christian sub-culture and not necessarily to the Word of God. Shall we visit a couple of examples together?

A Few Examples

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 is quite literally 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 shalt 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 everyday life. Is that easy? By no means! We can mess up by 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: consumption of alcohol, gambling and interaction with media and film. The first issue of drinking I will address directly putting forth some positions with some relevant biblical passages...the final



two issues I will simply define and ask a bunch of questions and allow you to use them as exercises of discernment.

Consumption of Alcohol

At this issue the Presbyterians and Roman Catholics are shrugging their shoulders; some Baptist and Holiness folk are red in the face that we even discuss this as an issue of

conscience. The consumption of alcohol is a huge matter in Western culture and has quite a history. European Christians for millennia have consumed alcohol as did the first settlers to the new world. One of the first things off of the Mayflower was a keg. Yet during some of the excess of the late 19th and early 20th century many American Christians led a temperance movement which brought about the rapid passing and ratification of the 18th amendment. This

amendment brought a national “prohibition” of the production, sale and consumption of beverage alcohol. The 21st amendment, which passed with some momentum as well,



repealed prohibition in the United States in 1933. So this issue has been divisive among Christians for some time. I do not intend to settle it completely, but only to present some positions believers hold and practice today in relation to alcoholic beverages.

1. **Libertinism** – This position takes no prohibition about drinking and you are free to drink as much as you like. This position is untenable in light of the clear teaching of Scripture. The Bible is univocal in its condemnation of being drunk with alcohol (Deut. 21:20; 1 Cor. 6:10; Eph. 5:18; Gal. 5:21) and is clear about the results of drunkenness. Mark Driscoll lists several of these in his book *The Radical Reformation*. Incest, violence, adultery, mockery/brawling, poverty, hallucinations, antics, murder, gluttony, vomiting, staggering, madness, nakedness, sloth and depression, just to name a few.² Additionally God prohibits the participation in strong drink, a highly concentrated form of alcohol which was diluted to make drinkable. Today, this would be similar to drinking grain alcohol straight. Always a bad idea.
2. **Prohibitionism** – This position states that alcohol is prohibited for Christians without exception. A follower of Jesus shall never place the devil's drink in his mouth as some might put it. Usually the references to drunkenness listed above are cited as positive support for the position. There are periodic prohibitions given in Scripture

for certain people in certain occasions. Leviticus 10 teaches that the priest was not to drink during his ministry in the tabernacle. Proverbs 31 tells us that a king should not drink while adjudicating law and there are specific religious vows which call for abstinence (see the Nazirite vow in Numbers 6; Judges 13; Luke 1). Finally, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego choose abstinence for a time of service in the book of Daniel. However, this position does not deal with the following biblical realities. First, Jesus Himself drank wine, was accused of being a glutton and drunkard, and He acknowledged that He came to earth eating and drinking (Matt.11:19). Second, Paul exhorts Timothy to use a little wine to help his stomach instead of simply drinking water (1 Tim. 5:23). Third, the Last Supper has the disciples drinking wine (Luke 22:14-23). Fourth, the Bible actually teaches that wine is a gift from God (Ps. 104:15; 15). Fifth, the lack of wine or fruitful vineyards is a motif of God's judgment in Scripture (Is. 16; 24; Jer. 48; Lam. 2; Hab. 3:17-20) while wine is a sign of blessing (Gen. 27; Deut. 7). So when looking at Scripture, the prohibitionist position is a difficult one to defend on biblical grounds. It seems this position speaks beyond Scripture and exalts a tradition of men above the Word of God.

3. **Abstentionism** – This position is a bit more balanced in that it sees no blanket

prohibition against consumption but urges the believer to choose abstinence based on the possibility of the harmful effects of alcohol or being a more exemplary witness to the gospel in culture. All the biblical commands about drunkenness and the risks of addiction are used. Additionally, arguments against aiding an industry which exalts a non-biblical lifestyle and offending certain church cultures are offered as support.³ This view sees drinking as something too risky, too dangerous to participate with and the prudent Christian will just say no. The one weakness I see is that it cannot accept a glass of wine as a good gift from God and purveyors of this view may slide towards legalistic prohibitionism in practice though not holding to this as biblical conviction. However, I do feel this is a valid biblical position which steers clear of sin and I commend it to those who have a history of alcoholism and exhibit addictive life patterns. Warning—this position gives no leeway to pass judgment on those who hold the final position.

4. **Moderationism** – The final position would be that of moderation. Though God prohibits drunkenness and the drinking of strong drink, He by no means prohibits the moderate enjoyment of alcohol. The verses above in favor of alcohol and those warning against excess should both be embraced. This position requires maturity and accountability in community, yet in my view, balances both sides of teaching found in Scripture.⁴

One final note is in order. The Scriptures are also clear that we are to obey the laws of the land from the authorities instituted by God (Romans 13). So if you are underage in your state/country, you do not drink. Period. This is an example of how one might look at an issue of conscience and consider the full teaching of the Bible with application to life decisions. The last two issues I will let you do most of the work.

Gambling

Our culture has become progressively more consumed with games of chance and betting on them. Poker, slot machines, betting on football games and ultimate fighting are everywhere in American culture. You cannot go too far in this culture and not hear of Vegas, Tunica, Atlantic City and their infamous casinos. If not on land, river boats and cruise ships promote the promise of fun, festivities and the opportunity to win. More accurately, they provide an opportunity for them to relieve you of some cash and fund the coffers of others. Additionally, states have progressively passed lottery legislation with the grand promise of making students smarter by investing the money in public schools. This mainstreaming of gaming requires followers of Jesus to evaluate it carefully. Should you gamble? Why? Why not? What about NCAA basketball or fantasy football pools for money? What about friendly wagers at the golf tee?

A few biblical principles and cultural issues as you wrestle with this one.

- The 10th Commandment prohibits *coveting* – desiring that which does not belong to you
- The biblical definition of *greed/covetousness as idolatry* (Col. 3:5) —You cannot worship God and money (Matt. 6:24)
- Money is to be stewarded; not wasted
- Lotteries can amount to regressive taxation in that a large percentage of people playing them are poor
- The connection between the gaming industry and organized crime is long standing
- Gambling is highly addictive and many suffer financial ruin and personal harm as a result
- Church history has been pretty united against gambling...John Calvin certainly did not like it
- Gaming is becoming mainstream in America with removal of past cultural stigmas against it

So, do you want to make a bet? I don't, but I might pay an entry fee for some fellowship and fun with friends...but I won't do it *for the money*. What do you think? Revisit the biblical passages and questions above and think it through.

Media/Movies

The movie theater multiplex, the television, the Internet and the music scene are the storytelling venues of our culture. Whereas books, newspapers and academia were once



the purveyors of culture, they have now been joined by new pathways into hearts and minds. Ideas are exchanged, emotions felt, passions communicated and messages are preached from voices radiating out from iTunes, bully pulpits on blogs and on massive screens full of digitally projected images. What should a believer today watch on TV? What sorts of movies are offensive? Are MPAA ratings helpful or worthless? Is it wise to separate from culture so much

that you do not know its stories and longings? Should you be entertained by sinful acts? What are the inherent blessings and dangers with various types of media and mediums of communication? What if they cause me to neglect the ancient gifts of reading and meditation? How do you balance these things? What biblical commands, prohibitions, and principles are involved with these issues? I will leave this one to you to wrestle with, search

the Scriptures, apply the above principles and discuss in community with your friends.

These are the issues which arise around *gray matters*. I have progressively said less about each of these examples because I want you to wrestle with them together. You may come to slightly different conclusions on some of them, yet are still called to walk together as the church on mission. The manner in which we walk in these things is important, for we desire to live in holiness and in culture to reach out to our friends...this must be our path. It requires of us humility, grace, a teachable attitude and a noble willingness to search the Scriptures. We must then obey to its teachings, the wise counsel of leaders, and make decisions and walk by faith. Remember the biblical principles above: Can you do this in faith? Can you do this with and to the glory of Jesus? Can you drink one beer to the glory of Jesus? Then do so, if you cannot, do not. The apostle Peter will give us the last word: *Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.*

Yours wrestling forward in grace,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Reid S. Monaghan', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Reid S. Monaghan

Endnotes

- ¹ Dr. Stetzer's lectures *Breaking the Missional Code* and *Understanding Culture* can be heard at www.theresurgence.com.
- ² Mark Driscoll, *The Radical Reformation – Reaching Out Without Selling Out*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 148.
- ³ See the lecture by Mohler and Moore, *Alcohol and Ministry*, <http://www.sbts.edu/MP3/Mohler/Alcohol&Ministry.mp3> for an example of this.
- ⁴ For a more thorough treatment see Kenneth Gentry Jr., *God Gave Wine* (Lincoln, CA: Oakdown: 2001).

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Note

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