Introduction

Some years ago, a Christian mother and father I knew had a dispute – over whether or not they should let their 8 year-old son play organized baseball. The father said, "yes" because of the fun he'd have. The mother said "no" because it would interfere with church. The father won out and he played but the mother was right. It interfered with church.

That introduces us to the single greatest challenge facing American Christians today. That challenge is "What in the world?" Turn to the text I read earlier, 1 John 2:12-17, and let's see what this is about.

Popular Culture

I begin with those to whom John is writing, in verses 12-14. It's "little children," "young men," and "fathers." That probably refers to disciples of Jesus in different stages of spiritual maturity. So, if you've been a Christian 1 year or 50, what follows, in verses 15-17, is for you.

Those verses are about "the world." The Greek word translated that is a technical term that refers to secular society in general. By "secular society," I mean cultural contexts that either exclude or ignore God.

Each generation of Christians has its own unique cultural context and so does ours. Ours is called "popular culture." Popular culture, like culture in general, is an abstraction and thus hard to define. We can best understand what it is by looking at its expressions and offerings. Here is a sampling of those: (1) the pervasive use of filthy language; (2) the loud and driving beat of hard rock music; (3) new clothing with holes and wear and tear; and (4) the public disclosure of bodily functions in movies and television shows. Countless expressions and offerings like those go together to comprise what we call popular culture.

Anyway, thinking of popular culture in terms of verses 15-17 raises a vital question. Is it "the world" as the New Testament defines it? More specifically, is it secular? The answer is, "Yes, it is." It doesn't exclude God but it does ignore Him. It fails to take Him into account.

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Let's go back to those four cultural expressions I mentioned a few moments ago. Question: What is it that they have in common? Answer: They're expressions of vulgarity. Popular culture believes that primitive forms of attitude and behavior are superior forms. So, it vigorously values and promotes what is noisy, irrational, and crude. Vulgarity, in other words, is actually a philosophical underpinning of popular culture.

Vulgarity, which is anti-Biblical, is just one of countless examples that illustrate my point. Popular culture is "the world" of verses 15-17. It's secular. It doesn't exclude God but does ignore Him.

Is Lovable

But it isn't just secular. John uses a word twice with regard to it in verse 15. It's the word "love." Do you get what he's saying? Popular culture isn't just secular. It is, to fallen human beings, lovable as well.

It is that for various reasons, the primary of which is probably this. It's so accommodating. Part of its appeal is that so much can be ours so immediately. Author Richard Swenson says that two words, more than any others, characterize our cultural context: more and fast. It gives us more and more of what we want, faster and faster. Want pornography? No problem. Just click on websites at home and you've got it. Want new furniture but don't have the money to buy it? No problem. Just charge it and don't start paying till 2010. Need lunch? No problem. Just go to the Burger King drive-thru and you'll have a Whopper in your hands in 10 minutes or less. It's true. Popular culture is incredibly accommodating to us. It gives us more and more of what we want, faster and faster.

That's why it is, in my view, more lovable than any other culture in any other time and place of history. It's so lovable in fact that it's the strongest socializing force in the world today. Social observer Kenneth Myers writes in that regard that it **"has the power to set the pace, the agenda, and the priorities for much of our social and spiritual existence, without our explicit consent."** The implications of that quotation are far reaching. But I'd go even further and say this. Many if

not most people are puppets on its string. They love it so much that they're slaves to it. They think, feel, and act as it conditions them to.

Several years ago, a little boy told me how excited he was to go to his brother's basketball game at church. I commented in return how nice it was that he wanted to see his brother play. But that wasn't why he was excited, he said, and began doing this with his hands. I asked him what that meant and he told me, **"The church has a room full of video games that they let us play so we won't get bored."**

I'd like to make an observation about that by asking you a question? Is it wise (beneficial) or foolish (harmful) for a church to offer video games to children? Whatever the answer is, my observation is this. No one in the church, I'm sure, even considered that question before putting the games in. Why? It's because popular culture conditions the way Christians think - so thoroughly in fact that most would think even questioning the wisdom of video games in a church absurd.

There's no doubt about it. American popular culture is lovable, so much so that it profoundly conditions the way people think, feel, and act.

Our Greatest Challenge

But we mustn't let it condition us. John commands in verse 15, **"Do not love the world."** Paul says it differently in Romans 12:2 but the meaning is the same, **"Do not be conformed to this world,"** or as J.B. Phillips translates it, **"Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold."**

Those commands reveal the single greatest challenge facing American Christians today. It's living with the popular culture. Some of you probably think I'm over dramatizing but I'm not. Kenneth Myers says it well, **"The challenge of living with popular culture may well be as serious for modern Christians as persecution and plagues were for the saints of earlier generations."** He's right. Living with the popular culture is the single greatest challenge facing Christians today.

To meet that challenge of course, we must first understand it. So, let's do that. Let's understand specifically what our challenge is.

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We've already seen that popular culture is secular. We can infer, therefore, that many of its expressions and offerings will be immoral. What we can infer, John comes right out and says in verse 16. Notice what comprises the world in general and popular culture in particular: the lust of the flesh (hedonism); the lust of the eyes (materialism); and the boastful pride of life (egotism). It's a simple fact of life in our cultural context. Many if not most of its expressions and offerings are downright sinful, contrary to the word and will of God.

I apologize to Joe Markota and Frank Lisi, avid Yankee fans, for what I'm about to say. Here are a few of the Yankee Stadium ticket prices, ranging from bleacher seats to what are called Suite Seats. Based on Biblical principles, paying some of these ticket prices to see the Yankees play is sinful. Raise your hand after each price you think is sinful. Indian fans, be objective. It is more than 50 cents. Is paying $14, $55, $90, $225, $500, $850, $1250, and $2,500 sinful.

That illustrates what John teaches in verse 16. Many of popular culture's offerings are downright sinful.

But not all are. Let's be clear about that. Many of its offerings are permissible. It isn't sinful to participate in them. But at the same time, not everything that is permissible is also constructive. The harm a permissible offering causes may outweigh the benefit it gives. Thus, we're not wrong to participate in it. We're just unwise. Our persons and lives are diminished when we do.

Now, all of that together makes clear what our challenge is. **We must conduct ourselves morally and wisely in the presence of popular culture**. That's our challenge. Conduct ourselves morally and wisely in the presence of popular culture. We participate in its offerings that are two things: (1) consistent with God's word and will, verse 17; and (2) more beneficial than harmful.

How to Meet the Challenge

That's our greatest challenge and here's how we meet it – by doing

two things.

First, think clearly. The book of *Proverbs* calls us to do just that. Commentator Derek Kidner explains that well. *Proverbs* **"summons us to think hard as well as humbly; to keep our eyes open, to use our conscience and our common sense, and not to shirk the most disturbing questions."** That is good stuff. Think hard and humbly. Keep our eyes open. Use our conscience and common sense. And address the most disturbing questions. Those are the actions that thinking clearly involves. So, doing those things, we prayerfully and carefully ask and answer two questions before participating in a cultural offering.

First, **is it *permissible?*** Does it conform to or violate the word or will of God? To answer that, of course, we have to know what the word or will of God is. And if we don't, we have to search it out.

Take tattooing for instance. Is it permissible? There is a verse that seems to addresses the issue, Leviticus 19:28. God says, **"You shall not make any tattoo marks on yourselves; I am the LORD."** Are the tattoo marks this verse refers to the same kind of tattoo marks people get today? Is this a ceremonial law that the New Testament does away with or is it a moral law that is still binding on us today? So, if I want to get a tattoo, I'll determine the answers to those questions before I do.

If a cultural offering is permissible, we then ask and answer a second question. **Is it *constructive?*** Do its benefits outweigh its harms? To answer that, we have to examine what participating in it does to us outwardly and inwardly. We seriously consider how it affects our circumstances and our dispositions, meaning, our mental, emotional, and volitional processes.

Nintendo DS, a hand held game system, is an example of what I mean. Obviously, it's permissible. But is it constructive? Do its benefits outweigh its harms? To answer that, I have to examine how it affects my child's circumstances and dispositions. On the positive side, it entertains him, gives him joy, and sometimes keeps him out of trouble. On the

negative side, it's addictive and sometimes rude, diminishes his powers of imagination and concentration, keeps him from exercising, and is costly. So, if my child wants a Nintendo DS, I'll seriously consider all of those things before I get him one and if I do, after.

That then is the first thing we do to conduct ourselves morally and wisely in the presence of popular culture - think clearly.

The second thing we do is act committedly. Since we're disciples of Jesus, we devote ourselves to acting morally and wisely in the presence of popular culture. That means two things. First, we only participate in cultural offerings that are permissible and constructive. And second, we only participate in those offerings in moral and wise ways. We don't ruin them by participating in them immorally or unwisely.

I like oldies music, for instance. I've tried to think clearly about that and have concluded it's permissible and constructive. So, I participate in it and do so in a way, I believe, that is moral and wise. First, I limit the number of CD's I have, five: Spanky and Our Gang, The Fifth Dimension, Frank Sinatra, Tommy James and the Shondells, and a collection of 70's hits. Second, I limit how much I listen to them. It isn't a steady diet. It's a snack here and there, fifteen or twenty minutes a week total.

Conclusion

So there you have it – the single greatest challenge facing followers of Jesus today. It's living with our popular culture. Or as I like to say it, it's "What in the world?" Cell phones, tattoos, T-ball, Nintendo DS, makeup, Abercrombie and Fitch clothing, *American Idol*, professional sports, fast foods, lawn treatments, medications, credit cards, rap and rock music, and on it goes. What in the world? That is, in which of its offerings will we participate, and how? That's the single greatest challenge facing followers of Jesus today. Think clearly and act committedly in that regard. You'll successfully meet it if you do.