

Review: JAM825

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE

LOSING OUR VOICE IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

a book review of
A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture
by Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor
(Baker Academic, 2003)

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Christians have been summoned to be in the world but not of it (John 17:14–19) and to be both heavenly minded (Col. 3:1–2) and the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13). We are under a divine mandate to be good stewards of God’s creation (Gen. 1:26–28) and to disciple the nations according to the teachings of Jesus (Matt. 28:18–20). We are also exhorted, however, to resist worldliness in order to remain true to our calling and to keep ourselves “from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27).¹

In his seminal work *The City of God*, theologian and philosopher Saint Augustine (AD 354–430) wrote that history demonstrates the inescapable conflict between two irreconcilable forces — “the city of God” and “the city of man.” Augustine used this motif as the organizing principle for his reflections on the meaning of history, the role of the church in the world, and the purposes of God in human affairs. This sense of antagonism between the two cities, the two principles, the two kingdoms, is central and radiant in Holy Scripture. Jesus stated quite sharply in a dispute with the Pharisees over God and money, “What people value highly is detestable in God’s sight” (Luke 16:15 *tniv*). The apostle John drew clear lines as well when he wrote, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If you love the world, love for the Father is not in you. For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful people, the lust of their eyes and their boasting about what they have and do — comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:15–17 *tniv*). The apostle Paul similarly urged his readers: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). Theologian David Wells has rightly defined worldliness as “what makes sin look normal in any age and righteousness seem odd.”² This, of course, is part of Satan’s global plan to deceive and destroy (see John 8:44; 2 Cor. 4:4).

Many evangelicals have brushed aside the dangers of worldliness in their avid pursuit of relevance. Overreacting to the extreme cultural separatism of fundamentalism, these evangelicals often neglect the numerous biblical warnings concerning the wiles of the world system. “If the world has gone postmodern,” they think, “then so must we.”³ One sad example of this spreading error is *A Matrix of Meanings*. In their attempt to “find God in popular culture” (as the subtitle puts it), authors Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor end up letting the world set the agenda for the church — the very creed of theological modernism or liberalism — despite the fact that both of them are associated with evangelical schools. (Detweiler is associate professor of mass communication at Biola University and a filmmaker. Taylor is adjunct professor of popular culture at Fuller Theological Seminary and a professional musician and painter.)

Aside from a brief remark about “the sins of popular culture” (p. 9), one searches this rather large volume in vain for the slightest concern regarding worldliness; instead, the authors embrace and extol pop culture. They read into pop culture the very revelation of God’s character and the nature of God’s kingdom: “We celebrate the rise of pop culture as among the most profound, provocative, exciting expressions of legitimate spiritual yearnings in at least one hundred years. We turn to pop culture in our efforts to understand God and to recognize the twenty-first-century face of Jesus” (9). In their enthusiasm, they dispense with discernment: “For those hoping to find clear prescriptions for what Christians should or shouldn’t watch or listen to, *this is not your book*” (9, emphasis in original).

The central problem of the book, moreover, is summarized early on: “We aim to create a theology *out of* popular culture rather than a theology for popular culture. We want to join the theologizing already occurring *within* popular culture” (16, emphases in original). I kept reading in the hope that these kinds of statements would be qualified and that some sense of transcendent wisdom would be brought to bear in assessing the themes of popular culture, but this never occurred. Near the end of the book their defective method, instead, is reasserted: “The path we’ve chosen acknowledges the [cultural] changes, embraces the culture, and reconstructs life and practices accordingly” (293).

Christians should be willing to find and respond to spiritual themes in popular culture. These themes provide points of contact with non-Christians and openings for the presentation of the Christian message. The apostle Paul, for example, used his knowledge of the pagan philosophies of his day to proclaim the gospel on Mars Hill (Acts 17:16–34). From this book one can learn a great deal about popular culture in the areas of advertising, celebrities, music, movies, television, fashion, sports, and art (each of which receives a chapter). One will nonetheless be left in the dark on how to *evaluate* these cultural activities since the authors cannot bring themselves to criticize any of them in any depth. (Their only strong criticism concerns the vast sums of money made by sports figures; however, monetary criticisms never arise in connection with pop culture celebrities in music or the movies.)

The authors see everything with rose-colored glasses and therefore find hopeful and profound spiritual themes where none exist. In discussing the film *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*, for example, they describe a scene in which Powers responds to a charge that he is a cultural throwback. Powers says, “Now is a very groovy time. It’s freedom and responsibility, baby, yeaaaaah” (304). They take this inane utterance to be a profound resolution of two Pauline themes: the freedom he taught the Galatians and the restraint he urged on the Corinthians. They, on the other hand, conclude, “Austin Powers: International Theologian” (304). This kind of glibness is neither cute nor instructive. The film, an absurd and scatological farce, offers no such theological profundity. God is never mentioned; Powers is no theologian. Galatians, moreover, itself harmonizes freedom in Christ with moral restraint. In Christ, we are free to do what is good and holy (Gal. 5:1–15), but we can and must turn away from temptation and evil (Gal. 5:16–26). It is ludicrous and insulting to Holy Scripture to attribute this biblical wisdom to a juvenile and vulgar pop film character.

It is harmful enough that this book exercises little discernment in addressing popular culture. What is far worse — and more theologically and spiritually dangerous — is its repeated insistence that popular culture *reveals God and the gospel to us in new and beneficial ways*. It is one thing to properly identify a biblical theme or a quest for God in popular culture (something the authors seldom accomplish); it is quite another thing to make an extrabiblical source a standard for understanding and knowing God and his ways with humanity. Consider these statements:

People of faith need to become conversant with the new canon, the new literacy, and join the new conversation [of pop culture]. *Only in this way can we hear Jesus afresh*. (23, emphasis added)

These postmodern cultural shifts, studied in the context of the marketplace, manifested across pop cultural forms, *create a lived theology that reveals the very nature of Christ and his kingdom*. (32, emphasis added)

As theologian and friend John Drane says, “In order to stay the same, the gospel must be constantly changing.” *We must rethink, reform, reinvent, and reimagine the gospel for the times in which we live.* (296, emphasis added)

Through the prism of postmodernity and pop culture, we find a startling image. What is simultaneously diverse, experiential, mythological, mysterious, embodied, colorful, real, bloody, and humorous? *The face of God, which emerges from the matrix.* (317, emphasis added)

Many similar statements could be added, but the point is clear. In creating a theology “out of popular culture,” the authors make pop culture in some sense authoritative for Christian belief and practice. We presumably cannot “hear Jesus afresh” without being conversant with and obedient to pop culture. This is questionable for several reasons.

First, pop culture is far too pluralistic in its diverse expressions to speak with a unified voice. The authors summarize certain pop cultural trends in the final chapter, but they never suggest which aspects of pop culture should command our allegiance. How can we separate the wheat from the chaff simply on the basis of pop culture itself? Should we appeal merely to notoriety? If so, the lascivious and utterly tasteless Britney Spears becomes our model of female virtue, the foul-mouthed, misogynistic, and homophobic Eminem becomes our model of anger management, and the sex-stupefied and inane Austin Powers becomes our “international theologian.”

Second, to make pop culture the source for our theology and ethics is to shear the Bible of its intrinsic, unique, and final authority (see 2 Tim. 3:15–17; 2 Pet. 1:20–21). This error jeopardizes our faithfulness to the gospel itself. It is particularly alarming that the authors commend rethinking, reforming, reinventing, and reimagining the gospel for our day (296). Paul, on the other hand, thundered to the errant Galatians, there is only one gospel; all others are counterfeits from hell (Gal. 1:6–9). There is only one faith “once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3; see also 1 Cor. 15:1–8; Eph. 4:5). Perhaps the authors mean that we must discern how to communicate the one and only gospel given the context of our culture, but they do not explicitly state this. Moreover, given the general spirit of the book — the world sets the agenda for the church — this more charitable interpretation seems unlikely. Theology itself must bend with the times (see Eph. 4:14 to the contrary).

The culture-driven theology of *A Matrix of Meanings* is especially evident in its rejection of Reformed theology in favor of an image-based “practical theology.” The authors repeatedly appeal to Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox sensibilities as an alternative to the word-based and iconoclastic nature of Reformed theology. The “new literacy” — meaning *illiteracy* with respect to reading — is visual and sensual, not word-based. “We insist that Reformed theology is intrinsically ill-equipped to confront a largely visual culture, drawn to symbolism and imagery and not as rationally focused as the modern age” (338). (They make no reference to the balanced Reformed theology of art offered by Francis Schaeffer in *Art and the Bible* and elsewhere, or to that of Hans Rookmaaker in *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*.) We, therefore, must adjust our theology and practice accordingly. The authors diminish the importance of propositions and abstract ideas; since the postmodern world revels in irrationality and contradictions, we should cater to this propensity. “For now, big, hairy ridiculous myths trump slippery facts — every time” (305). Like postmodern pop culture, we must become “post-rational — experiential” (301–2).

The authors never make a biblical argument against the Protestant heritage of iconoclasm, the emphasis on the written Word of God, and the centrality of communicating biblical truths in words through teaching and preaching. The reason for this is twofold. First, there simply is no biblical argument to this effect. Second, when an image-oriented and image-intoxicated culture sets the agenda for theology, theology must bow to the image. From the second commandment (Exod. 20:4) onward, however, God has warned His people against the seduction of images. God is an invisible and infinite being who cannot be cast into an image, so we should not try. God does not condemn visual beauty, whether natural or cultural, but the second commandment admonishes us that images cannot fully communicate certain truths.

Worse yet, they easily deceive. The ancient Near Eastern cultures surrounding God’s people throughout biblical history were excessively visually oriented, just like ours (but without the electricity). Author

Camile Paglia rejoices in the decline of the word and the exaltation of the image precisely because this indicates a shift away from biblical and word-based sensibilities and toward a more sensual paganism. Arthur Hunt amply documents and comments on this distressing slide into the pagan abyss in his laudable work, *The Vanishing Word: The Veneration of Visual Imagery in the Postmodern World*.⁴ Yet within the “matrix” of ancient pagan cultures, God *challenged* and *judged* the dominant and pervading image orientation. Non-Christian critic Neil Postman (d. 2003) understood this far better than many Christians. He commented on the second commandment:

It is a strange injunction to include as part of an ethical system *unless its author assumed a connection between forms of human communication and the quality of a culture*. We may hazard a guess that a people who are being asked to embrace an abstract, universal deity would be rendered unfit to do so by the habit of drawing pictures or making statues or depicting their ideas in any concrete, iconographic forms. The God of the Jews was to exist in the Word and through the Word, an unprecedented conception requiring the highest order of abstract thinking.⁵ (emphasis in original)

Space forbids a thorough criticism of *A Matrix of Meaning's* many faults — such as bashing apologetics (22) and claiming that we should “celebrate our sinfulness” (313) — but they all spring from the single problem already addressed: when the world sets the agenda for the church, the “salt of the earth” loses its savor (Matt. 5:13). In order to engage fallen popular culture with biblical integrity, believers must refuse to be seduced by its siren songs and instead march to the beat of a different drummer; otherwise, in our mad pursuit for relevance, we may lose our voice entirely in the contemporary world.⁶ God forbid.

— reviewed by Douglas Groothuis

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the New International Version.
2. David Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 29.
3. On postmodernism, see Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).
4. See Arthur W. Hunt, III, *The Vanishing Word: The Veneration of Visual Imagery in the Postmodern World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), particularly 155–84.
5. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 9.
6. See Os Guinness, *Prophetic Untimeliness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003).

Our gospel work, however, will take the distinct shape of the cross. Wherever Christ's church exists, in whatever circumstance it finds itself, its members discover that being "kingdom-announcers," means also being "cross-bearers" the living sign of Christ's suffering and redemptive love in a bent and broken world. Church has a host of meanings. In this paper, we use it in at least three ways

Genesis 3:17 "And to Adam he said, "Because you listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it," cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you "Don't say that," our father said, shaking his forefinger. "Mr. Malamud is all alone in the world. His children, his family, everyone went before him. It's a curse I don't wish on no one." I said yes immediately, afraid that if I thought about it first, I would lose the courage. The idea of sharing an entire night with someone straddling two worlds seemed awesome to me. 11 Comments. I Am a Soul.