

HISTORY SPEAKS

To Hard Questions Baptists Ask

The year 2009 is the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Baptist tradition. To help celebrate this big year, the Baptist History and Heritage Society has created a new 24-article series, HISTORY SPEAKS. Readers of these articles are urged to print copies for themselves and even to duplicate copies for distribution and study. Please include the following permission statement: “Used by permission of the Baptist History and Heritage Society and its website (www.baptisthistory.org), Atlanta, Georgia. Because the articles are produced by free-thinking Baptists, the BH&HS staff and board may or may not agree with the content of each article.”

Baptist Interaction with Popular Culture: Traps and Opportunities

C. Delane Tew

The 1960s television show “Lost in Space” pictured the plight of a family wandering through space looking for a way back home. In an early episode, the family landed on an inhospitable planet and had to cross a dangerous desert. Once on the other side, the family kneeled in prayer, thanking God for their safe crossing, a scene shown on national television for millions to see. Would we see a scene like that on today’s screens? Has popular culture left Christianity out of the picture?

What do we mean when we talk about pop culture? People experience pop culture through avenues such as movies, music, and art, areas in which standards change quickly. What is accepted today is thrown away tomorrow. In contrast, traditional culture comes to us as something that has functioned well for decades, if not centuries. How does the church, which is part of traditional culture, become involved in pop culture?

History points to Baptist efforts to engage pop culture. In 1941, Southern Baptists created the Radio Commission, later changed to the Radio and Television Commission, to use instruments of pop culture to share the gospel. Arguably, its most popular effort was the animated series “JOT,” whose dot-like character taught biblical truths to the audience.

Individuals in entertainment have worked to share their beliefs in God. In the 1970s, comedian Jerry Clower began making public appearances. The 1980s saw Grady Nutt bring his Christian humor to the stage, recordings, and even the television show “Hee Haw.”

Sports have been an arena in which one’s beliefs can be shared. Christians found an early foothold in the sport of NASCAR. The racing world reached out to its audience through opening prayers and onsite chaplains. Football regularly has players like Tim Tebow who take camera time to acknowledge their thanks to God.

Christians who would deny the need to be involved in pop culture risk losing any engagement with the world. These believers often envision a culture war waged between the church and pop

culture. A sense of us against them develops and everything involved in pop culture is demonized. This enhances the belief throughout pop culture that Christians are just boring nay-sayers.

Churches are increasingly faced with the fact that they exist in a post-Constantinian world.¹ The church as an institution is no longer the center of culture. There is no governmental mandate that forces the masses into churches. Culture moves on, and the church has the option to move with it or stay isolated in its familiar niche.

The church faces a danger through involving itself with pop culture: the watering down of its message. Churches that become too involved in the culture of consumerism end up offering a message that is easy to accept, giving customers what they want instead of providing members with what they need to grow as mature disciples. We run the risk of presenting Christianity-Lite. Believers must realize we “are called to be light of the world, not the lite of the world.”²

Christians must realize that pop culture at its heart is an effort to find fulfillment. Believers have something to offer that can bring ultimate fulfillment. Leaders point to the need to train believers to live out the Christian life in whatever fields they find themselves. Some argue that we need more Christian authors writing for television and the movies, more Christian actors and actresses making sure the Christian message is being shared in the avenues of pop culture. We don’t need Christian artists, but artists who are Christian and who live in a manner visible to all. The church should train them to be “roaring lambs.”³

Pop culture is not going away. It is influencing vast numbers of people. Can the church be open to working through avenues that are constantly changing? Can it afford not to?

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¹ Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1996).

² Dick Staub, *The Culturally Savvy Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 41.

³ Bob Briner, *Roaring Lambs: A Gentile Plan to Radically Change Your World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993).