

## Entertainment

We may think of entertainment as a modern phenomenon, but various forms of entertainment were deeply woven into the fabric of Roman life during the early years of the church. As you will see, the early church fathers were highly critical of Roman entertainment, while others apparently saw it as a matter of conscience. Christian attitudes toward entertainment had a lot to do with how the Romans viewed Christianity.

### Then

Roman emperors viewed entertainment as one of the most important ways of controlling their subjects. One author estimates that "Rome enjoyed at least one day of holiday for every working day." [1] Among these holidays, there were at least 93 dedicated to state-sponsored spectacles, and in many years, additional special days decreed by individual emperors. The population of Rome exceeded one million in the first century, and perhaps 25% of these were unemployed at any particular time. This represented both a substantial threat and a significant opportunity for the emperors. Unoccupied, the unemployed were a potential source of revolt. Satiated, they could be manipulated into demanding acts of vengeance the emperors sought but "preferred to execute under an appearance of popular duress." [2]

The greatest **spectacles** in Rome were the great races in the Circus Maximus, which seated as many as 225,000 spectators. In the middle of the first century, a day of racing involved 24 races—each seven laps totaling almost a mile, as well as novelty acts that would still draw accolades at a Barnum & Bailey performance. The chariot races themselves were two, three, four, or occasionally even more horses per team and despite the fact that only four teams raced at once, there were inevitable accidents at the tight corners. Like car and boat racing today, such accidents must have been the "highlight" of the event. Highly successful charioteers—Scorpus, Pontius Epaphroditus, Pompeius Musclosus, and Diocles—were the Michael Jordans, Barry Bonds, and Terrell Owens of their day, and those who survived sometimes retired with enormous fortunes. And the rampant gambling on the races could enrich or impoverish spectators, but a lavish banquet at the close of the day's festivities served to assuage the disappointment of the losers.

The **theater** offered another diversion, one that by the early days of the empire had lost most of the classical nature of Greek drama. The shows, held in massive theaters, were mostly either stark tragedies played out in pantomime or sensual productions designed to titillate. In Rome alone, three theaters offered about 50,000 seats. The largest, the theater of Pompey with a capacity of 27,000, dwarfs today's largest theatrical venue, the National People's Congress Building on Tiananmen Square in Beijing. The most famous of players were the heartthrobs of many a noble lady.

The most popular plays were tales of guilty loves, incest, and even bestiality. In *Procne and Tereus*, Tereus had raped his sister-in-law then cut out her tongue to ensure her silence. His wife Procne avenged her sister by serving up the body of Tereus' son Itys at the table. In *Pasiphae*, the woman heroine "offered herself to a bull in the Cretan labyrinth." [3] If tragedies were debauchery, comedies were pure

ribaldry, and actresses were permitted to perform in the nude. Rougher comedies actually led to real bloodshed. In fact, Emperor Domitian (81-96) substituted a condemned criminal for the actor at the end the popular *Laureolus* so that the execution of the protagonist became real.

The races and the theater offered nothing uplifting, but the ultimate Roman entertainment in the **amphitheater** demonstrates the thorough degradation of the citizenry—human sacrifice made sport. Mark Burnett may be credited with inventing reality television, but reality entertainment was refined by the Romans centuries earlier. The ubiquity of this form of entertainment in the Empire is clearly evidenced by the presence of an amphitheater among the ruins of every major Roman city. In the farther reaches, gladiators were managed by local contractors and hired out to city officials. Among the gladiatorial troupe might be slaves, poor freedmen, or even ne'er-do-well sons of good families lured by the prospect of glory and riches. But in Rome, the stable of gladiators was state-owned and operated, populated primarily by condemned criminals or prisoners of war.

A day at the amphitheater offered considerable variety—from inventive animal circus acts such as elephants kneeling before the Emperor to outright slaughter. The stench of spilled blood must have been constant in the amphitheater. The Roman historian Suetonius recorded that 5,000 animals were killed on the day the Flavian Amphitheater (the Colosseum) was inaugurated in 80 A.D. The most "noble" of the contests was *hoplomachia*, genuine gladiatorial combat in which the loser might even be spared if he fought bravely, although this was always at the whim of the crowd or the Emperor. Some contests were matched combatants (e.g., swordsman vs. swordsman) but others might be ludicrous pairings such as the dwarf versus woman recorded in 90 A.D.

While there were vague glimpses of humanity in some contests, others were nothing less than state-sponsored murder. The "morning massacre" was particularly heinous—the defenseless condemned hauled into the arena at dawn to be savaged by ravenous animals. Early Christian literature attests to numerous instances of believers suffering this torture, such as Blandina at Lyons, Perpetua and Felicitia in Carthage, and Nero's scapegoats after the Great Fire of 64 A.D. The mid-day program was described (and condemned) by the Roman philosopher Seneca as sequential murder. An unarmed man was paired with an armed man, whose sole job was to kill the former. After performing this duty, he was then disarmed to face a new prisoner armed for the kill, and so on. And these gladiatorial contests sometimes extended for weeks. In the 117 days of Trajan's games in 108 A.D., 10,000 gladiators fought and 11,000 animals were killed. [4]

While the historical antecedents of spectacles, theater, and contests may have had artistic or athletic value, by the imperial period their primary purpose was to placate and subdue the teeming citizenry of Roman cities. While it is certainly true that few people would have attended these events on a regular basis, they nevertheless dominated and profoundly influenced the culture. That they were viewed as a vital part of being a good citizen is demonstrated by the fact that one of the accusations against Christians is that they were "anti-social" because they often failed to partake of Roman entertainment. In his famous passage about Nero's persecution of Christians, the Roman historian Tacitus alluded to this accusation: "*an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind.*" [Annals 15:44]

When my wife and I became Christians, we spent most of our time with the neighborhood couple who had baptized us. We would all usually go to the

neighborhood parties, but we left early when the liquor began to degenerate the festivities. No doubt there were those among our neighbors who considered us anti-social.

Numerous early Christian writers indeed discouraged or forbade Christian participation in Roman forms of entertainment for several reasons:

- They represented idolatry  
*"For the celebrations of the games are festivals in honour of the gods, inasmuch as they were instituted on account of their birthdays, or the dedication of new temples... Therefore, if any one is present at the spectacles to which men assemble for the sake of religion, he has departed from the worship of God, and has betaken himself to those deities whose birthdays and festivals he has celebrated."* [Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, 6.20]
- They taught immorality  
*"They utter ribaldry in affected tones, and go through indecent movements; your daughters and your sons behold them giving lessons in adultery on the stage."* [Titian, *Address to the Greeks*]  
the father who carefully protects and guards his virgin daughter's ears from every polluting word, takes her to the theatre himself, exposing her to all its vile words and attitudes
- They renounced Christ  
*"He is shameless who in the church exorcises demons while he praises their delights in public shows; and although, once for all renouncing him, he has put away everything in baptism, when he goes to the devil's exhibition after (receiving) Christ, he renounces Christ as much as (he had done) the devil."* [Novatian, *On Public Shows*]
- They elicited the fruits of the sinful nature (cf Galatians 5:19-21)  
*"...we are debarred from every kind of spectacle, and especially from the circus, where such excitement presides as in its proper element. See the people coming to it already under strong emotion, already tumultuous, already passion-blind, already agitated about their bets... And the result accordingly is, that they fly into rages, and passions, and discords, and all that they who are consecrated to peace ought never to indulge in."* [Tertullian, *Apology* 3.16]  
*"The Instructor will not then bring us to public spectacles; nor inappropriately might one call the racecourse and the theatre "the seat of plagues"... These assemblies, indeed, are full of confusion and iniquity; and these pretexts for assembling are the cause of disorder—men and women assembling promiscuously for the sight of one another. In this respect the assembly has already shown itself bad: for when the eye is lascivious, the desires grow warm; and the eyes that are accustomed to look impudently at one's neighbours during the leisure granted to them, inflame the amatory desires. Let spectacles, therefore, and plays that are full of scurrility and of abundant gossip, be forbidden."* [Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*]
- They celebrated immorality  
*"...we are forbidden so much as to witness shows of gladiators, lest we become partakers and abettors of murders. But neither may we see the other spectacles [theater], lest our eyes and ears be defiled, participating in the utterances there sung. For if one should speak of cannibalism, in these spectacles the children of Thyestes and Tereus [a popular play] are eaten; and as for adultery, both in the case of men and of gods, whom they celebrate in elegant language for honours and prizes, this is made the subject of their dramas."* [Theophilus of Antioch, *To Autolycus*]

- They represented murder  
*"...you purchase men to supply a cannibal banquet for the soul, nourishing it by the most impious bloodshedding. The robber commits murder for the sake of plunder, but the rich man purchases gladiators for the sake of their being killed."* [Titian, Address to the Greeks]  
*"For he who reckons it a pleasure, that a man, though justly condemned, should be slain in his sight, pollutes his conscience as much as if he should become a spectator and a sharer of a homicide which is secretly committed."*  
 [Lactantius, The Divine Institutes, 6.20]

Such profound and uncompromising pronouncements, however, were obviously not without their opponents within the church. That there were those who continued to justify attending spectacles is proven by several early writings:

*"...let us ... turn to the unworthy reasonings of our own people; for the faith of some, either too simple or too scrupulous, demands direct authority from Scripture for giving up the shows, and holds out that the matter is a doubtful one, because such abstinence is not clearly and in words imposed upon God's servants."*  
 [Tertullian, Apology 3.3]

*"...he hastens to the spectacle when dismissed from the Lord's table, and still bearing within him, as often occurs, the Eucharist, that unfaithful man has carried about the holy body of Christ among the filthy bodies of harlots, and has deserved a deeper condemnation for the way by which he has gone thither, than for the pleasure he has received from the exhibition."* [Novatian, On Public Shows]

*"Thou art going to vain shows with the crowd of the evil one, where Satan is at work in the circus with din. Thou persuadest thyself that everything that shall please thee is lawful. Thou art the offspring of the Highest, mingled with the sons of the devil."*  
 [Commodianus, The Instructions, Ch 57]

One wonders what Roman television would have been like had it been available to the Emperors, but we don't really have to completely wonder since there are examples of state-run media in totalitarian states today. Surely, it would have been full of the great accomplishments and victories of the current Emperor, but it probably also would have included televised dramas, chariot races, and gladiatorial contests to serve as the opiate of the masses. (Note: Karl Marx was wrong—religion is not the opiate of the masses, entertainment is.)

[1] Carcopino, Jérôme. Daily Life in Ancient Rome, Yale University Press, 1940, 1968, p. 206.

[2] Ibid. p. 210

[3] Ibid. p. 228

[4] Shelton, Jo-Ann. As the Romans Did, Second Edition, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 351

## Now

Today we have no lack of enticing and anesthetizing entertainment choices in America, and it is striking how similarly they influence culture, particularly when you consider the wild popularity of such shows as *Sex in the City*, *The Sopranos*, and the Fox Network's nightly offerings. The Roman theater would undoubtedly appear quite tame. There are more uplifting shows, of course—*Touched by an Angel* and *Seventh Heaven* come to mind—along with the innocuous TV Guide listings. Lest I sound like a total prude here, I'll admit that I am a hopeless *Survivor* junkie along with a few other reality shows (*The Amazing Race* is my next favorite), but I do draw the line at such trash as *Temptation Island*, *Big Brother*, and *Forever Eden*. There is nothing inherently wrong with entertainment and certainly it can sometimes serve a higher

purpose, as demonstrated by *The Passion of the Christ* (even with its flaws). We all knew *The Passion* would fall out of the #1 movie spot sometime, but how ironic that it was supplanted by *Dawn of the Dead* last weekend.

We've (d)evolved to simulated and digital slaughter, and with sophisticated video games, now we can not only watch people get shot, we can do the shooting. Given the popularity of Russell Crowe's *Gladiator*, it was inevitable that the legacy of the Colosseum would make its way to Xbox, PlayStation, and PC's. *Gladiator: Sword of Vengeance*, *Gladiators: Galactic Circus Games*, and *Gladiators of Rome* are all available to vicariously relive the glory of the past. Again, I'll admit to loving the computer "God-games" like *Civilization* and *Risk*, and the only way to win such games seems to be through unbridled aggression, but I have no inclination (and even less skill) for the shoot-em-up games. Harmless fun? Perhaps, but if so, why are video game wizards so highly prized by the military? Orson Scott Card's classic science fiction tale, *Ender's Game*, describes the logical conclusion of video war gaming—children recruited to play an enormous game only to find that they've committed galactic genocide.

Thanks to the SPCA and PETA, no movie featuring injury to animals could be made without the obligatory "no animals have been harmed in the filming of this movie" notice. It's curious that a similar notice about humans doesn't appear after *Friday the 13th* movies. Our societal proclivity toward the bizarre and the violent are apparent when people like Mike Tyson, Dennis Rodman, and Marilyn Manson are celebrities and movies like *Silence of the Lambs* and *American Beauty* win Academy Awards.

When it comes to our athletic contests, we have hardly become more enlightened. I've never been to a car race, but I suspect the scene is much like that of the Circus Maximus. The vicious attack of Vancouver Cannuck Todd Bertuzzi on Steve Moore of the Colorado Avalanche may have been widely condemned in the press and earned Bertuzzi an indefinite suspension, but it was still replayed over and over on ESPN and network sports shows. And many lay personal blame on Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake for the skin show at the Superbowl halftime show, but one has to wonder just what the NFL expected when it let MTV produce the show. And what does it say that Janet Jackson became the number one internet search item for the following week?

Jackson and Manson illustrate perhaps the most pervasive form of entertainment in our culture, at least among youth. Aristotle and Plato commented on music's capacity to influence, so this is hardly new but it seems doubtful that music was as common or as provocative as today's shock lyrics and violent acts. Dr. Frank Palumbo, testifying before Congress on behalf of the American Academy of Pediatrics cited one study that found teens listen to music an average of 40 hours per week. "During the past four decades," Palumbo said. "Rock music lyrics have become increasingly explicit - particularly with reference to drugs, sex, violence and even of greater concern, sexual violence. Heavy metal and rap lyrics have elicited the greatest concern, as they compound the environment in which some adolescents increasingly are confronted with pregnancy, drug use, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome and other sexually transmitted diseases, injuries, homicide and suicide."

The computer industry may take credit, but the Bible first advanced the GIGO (Garbage In-Garbage Out) principle: "*Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.*" [Philippians 4:8]

But Jesus taught that "*It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.*" [Matthew 15:11] While He was referring specifically to washing hands before eating, the principle remains...we are defiled by what we say and do, not by what we hear or watch. At the same time, it's hard to see how the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue*, much less any of the almost countless skin magazines can fail to inspire thoughts that are something less than honorable and pure. Surely, our entertainment choices reveal something about our hearts.

The early writers make it clear that the church strongly advocated a no-compromise position that forces me to re-evaluate my own choices. Happily, the early church gave us a template for evaluating our entertainment choices:

Do they represent idolatry? Do they teach immorality? Do they renounce Christ? Do they elicit the fruits of the sinful nature? Do they celebrate immorality? Do they amount to murder (or other crimes)?

[Note: the phenomenon of the Christian entertainment industry (music, movies, video games) is, I believe, something without real precedence but that may be a subject for a future issue.]



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

## **NEXT ISSUE: Easter (April 13)**

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