

Drama and the SDA Church:

Appendix 10

The Joy of the Lord Versus Worldly Amusements

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The Theater

One of the most prevalent forms of commercialized amusement today is the theater. Through the invention of the moving-picture projection, theatrical performances have been made available to all the little towns as well as the large cities. The promoters of the silent drama boast of its being the fourth industry in America, and that nearly one fifth of all the people witness these performances every day. Well may educators and religious and welfare workers look with concern upon an institution which is wielding so wide an influence, especially when we think of what a large proportion of the patrons are children and youth.

What are the tests which a Christian must apply to any form of entertainment which challenges his patronage?

In the first place, it is a safe thing, always, for a Christian, never to engage in any form of amusement which links him with an evil institution. Take, for instance, the card table. It is a worldwide evil institution. I have seen it on the great highways of travel in "Christian" Europe, in the far-away island of Borneo, and in central China. It is the same everywhere. It is the gambler's instrument. It has the background of dishonesty, has been stained by many murderous brawls, and has left a trail of wrecked characters everywhere. A pack of cards is suggestive of a foul institution which has cursed mankind. Likewise the dance has become a worldwide institution of evil. The public dance hall is recognized by all proponents of race betterment as a degrading institution.

What of the theater? For over twenty-four centuries it has been in existence. What is its record? The testimony of history is that the theater has always been a menace to morals. "The great classic writers, Plato, and Aristotle, and Ovid, and Juvenal, and Tacitus, and others, wrote strongly against it,—not merely against its incidental evils and abuses, but against its influence and tendency as an institution." Solon, the great lawmaker of Greece, denounced the profession as "tending by its simulation of false character, and by its expression of sentiment not genuine or sincere, to corrupt the integrity of human dealings." The historian Schaff says that the Roman theater became the "nursery of vice," and Macaulay tells us that from the time the theaters were opened in England they became "seminaries of vice."

There may be some moral plays and some moral actors, but there isn't a moral theater in the world. Edwin Booth tried to establish a moral theater before whose footlights there should be no spectacular obscenity. It went into bankruptcy, paying only five cents on the dollar. Henry Irving tried the same thing, but the managers had to change its program to keep it from financial failure.

The movie is the modern theater for the masses, and it has all the faults of its predecessors, and more. A writer quoted in the *Literary Digest* of May 14, 1921, in an article on "The Nation-Wide Battle Over Movie Purification," said:

We do not know that the morals of the movies are any worse than the morals of the stage. But mischievous movies do more harm, for they reach more people, and

especially more children who are impressionable and imitative.

In the second place, the theater presents extreme and false ideas of life. Human life is presented in its very worst aspects, its most degrading experiences. The chief themes of the theater now, as ever, are the baser passions of men,—anger leading to madness, ambition, jealousy; hatred leading to murder; and lust leading to adultery and broken lives.

Such improper presentations of life cannot but have their baleful effect on the spectators. While an effort is sometimes made to show the retribution that comes from an evil course, it is more often that “a life of license is pictured as a life of liberty and joy.” Looseness in morals is made to seem “not so bad,” even permissible, “under certain conditions.” The awful remorse and lifelong suffering that comes to the individual and to others as a result of transgression, is usually hidden from view. The sacred truths about life, truths that noble men and women have died to maintain, are slyly slandered; and the people, especially young people, become confused in their thinking.

Mrs. Ellen O’Grady, formerly New York City deputy police commissioner, told the New York legislators in a hearing on a proposed motion-picture regulation law:

I know from my own experience that the greater part of juvenile delinquency is due to the evil influence of motion pictures. I could cite you case after case of boys and girls gone wrong because of films.

As another says:

By sly hints and cunning innuendoes the imagination is inflamed and evil thoughts are awakened. There is scarcely an incident, however debasing, that may not be learned at the theater, making it a university of vice and immorality for the youthful mind.

The universal appeal of the movie is the amorous relations of men and women. The actors realize the effectiveness of this appeal, and have taken pains to have the sex thrill prominent in their productions. This appeal is an impulse that needs no stimulation, an impulse, sad to say, which in many is not under the control of reason. The mind is inflamed by these vividly suggestive pictures, and an immoral life is often the result.

During the World War there was a young woman from a neighboring State who roomed at our home, having patriotically come to Washington to do her bit. She thought, of course, that she should visit some of the theaters of the nation’s capital while here. But she expressed her disgust to my wife that practically every play she had witnessed, had bedroom scenes. She had not seemed to realize before the low standards of this popular form of entertainment. Some time ago a Jewish rabbi and a Christian preacher cried out against the “products of moral leprosy” being exhibited on the stages of New York, against plays which were “the vulgar incarnation of impurity, spun about a display of hosiery and underwear.” A defender of the theater who took up the challenge, said:

We have no great sympathy with the cry for a clean stage. For our part we would rather see a little more dirt and grime and sweat in our palsy of today. If a choice must be made between license in the theater and Puritan repression, we say bring on the beds in battalions.

Let me ask you, dear Christian friends, is it ever right to laugh at sin? Is it right to go to a

place dedicated to folly, and sit and be amused at the portrayal of that evil principle which turned this world into the valley and shadow of death, brought the Son of God from the skies, and sent Him to Gethsemane and the cross? Did you ever go to the movies and not laugh at sin?

But I hear some one saying, "There are good movies." Are you sure? There may be some good mixed with the bad. It is the devil's plan to mix some good with the evil to catch the unwary feet of those to whom the impulse for good still has an appeal. But my investigations lead me to agree with Dr. Hall, that in every moving-picture performance there is some ignoble suggestion. I have asked many who go if this is true, and have never received a negative answer.

The *Sunday School Times* told of a minister who was deeply troubled about the low spiritual condition of his church. He suspected the theater as one cause. One stormy night (a night which would have spelt disaster to a prayer meeting) he ventured out to investigate. He went to a theater where "Salome" was being shown,— "a gruesome, degenerate, ghastly, obscene portrayal of the Bible story of Herod and John the Baptist." He found the house crowded, and two hundred of his most prominent people there. He stayed through the entire horrible presentation of that travesty of the Bible story. When he went out at midnight, he met many of his members in the gorgeous lobby, who looked astounded to see their pastor there. He had found one difficulty. As he paced his study the remainder of the night, it was borne in upon him that so long as professed Christians supported by their money and their presence such presentations as "Salome," the Holy Spirit could not reach the hearts and lives of a people who stultified all their finer feelings, and deadened their spiritual nerves by beholding such things. Was he right?

But I have had Seventh-day Adventists tell me that "The Ten Commandments" is a fine play, and that I ought to see it. And yet they admitted that the scene of revelry around the golden calf was depicted in all its vivid reality. God called upon His people to execute the perpetrators of that horrible orgy, yet we pay men and women to re-enact it for our pleasure.

In Psalm 5:4 we read: "Thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness: evil shall not sojourn with Thee." In Proverbs 14:9 we read that "fools make a mock at sin;" and in Ecclesiastes 5:4 it says that God "hath no pleasure in fools." Then those who go to the theater, enjoy that in which God takes no pleasure. In the 33rd chapter of Isaiah the question is asked, Who shall be saved? The answer in verse 15 is: He that "stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood." That eliminates the spoken drama, for tragedy is the common theme. Also, he that "shutteth his eyes from looking upon evil." That eliminates the silent drama, does it not? When you go to the movie house, do you shut your eyes from looking upon evil?

It seems to me, dear friends, that our only safe course is to "enter not into the path of the wicked, and walk not in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it; turn from it, and pass on." Prov. 4:14, 15. And we should pray, "Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity." Ps. 119:37.

Last of all, allow me to call your attention to the fact that the actor's profession is unnatural and radically wrong. It is an unworthy profession. Solon's condemnation was right:

The very terms "hypocrisy" and "playing a part on the stage" are identical in their earlier significance. "Hypocrite" is, in both its Greek and Latin forms, a designation of an actor in the theater.

There is something about this whole business of the presentation of the unreal that leads to wrong.

While there are, perhaps, exceptions to all rules, it is a well-known fact that theatrical actors as a class are unworthy characters. It cannot be otherwise. As a theatrical critic of the London *Press*

said several years ago:

Stage life, according to my experience, has a tendency to deaden the finer feelings, to crush the inner nature of men and women, and to substitute artificiality and hollowness for sincerity and truth; and, mind you, I speak from an intimate experience of the stage, extending over thirty-seven years.

Dr. Charles Blanchard, president of Wheaton College, asks these pertinent questions:

Is it possible for a man to play, for five years in twenty-five dramas, that he is the husband of twenty-five or thirty different women, without suffering spiritual harm? Is it possible for a woman to play that she has been seduced and become an outcast, without being morally injured? Is it possible for a woman who is married to play that she is married to other persons than her husband, and to act the situation as vividly as possible, so as to awaken the interest and applause of the audience, without harm? Is it possible for a man to play that he is a murderer or a thief, without being injured in character? And is it possible for people to look on while men and women are playing these things, without themselves being injured?

Any one who knows human nature can answer these questions but one way, "It is not possible." A man who followed the theatrical business for several years before he became an Adventist, told me that it is next to impossible for one who follows this profession to keep himself pure. The theatrical business seems to degrade its promoters; and remember that "what cannot be *done* without a tendency to moral harm, cannot be *seen* without a tendency to moral harm.

Exhortation

My sympathy goes out to any, especially the young, who have become infatuated with the movies. I know too, that in many cases it will be impossible to break the habit without divine aid. But you, dear friend, stop and think! You were drawn into the movies without thinking, perhaps. But now, think the thing through in the light of the facts given and the principles laid down. Intellectual vagueness is one of the chief dangers in any form of temptation.

When you return from the movie, do you feel like having a time of sweet communion with God? A little boy, returning home from his first show, was not so far wrong when he told his mother that if she would go to one show, she would never want to go to another prayer meeting. Has attendance at the theater made you more or less zealous in missionary endeavor? Would you care to be found in a theater when Jesus comes?

There was a theater in Jerusalem in the days of Jesus. Do you think Jesus or His disciples attended it? When Herod introduced this theater, it was denounced by Josephus, a Jewish writer, as a corrupter of morals. You cannot imagine Jesus patronizing it, can you? Can you imagine Him attending movies if He were on earth today? If Jesus would not, should you? Let me call your attention to that wonderful statement of the union with Christ which is possible, found in "The Desire of Ages," page 668:

If we consent, He will so identify Himself with our thoughts and aims, so blend our hearts and minds into conformity to His will, that when obeying Him we shall be but carrying out our own impulses.

Surely the chief pleasures of people of the advent movement will be in contemplation of their eternal home, in association together for the advancement of His work, and in soul-winning activities. The *Sunday School Times* was right when it said:

Let this be remembered: the more wholly yielded to the mastery of the Lord Jesus Christ the members of any church are, and the more they find in prayer their chief method, and in evangelism their chief mission, the less they will need to provide or even think about “entertainments.” This has been proved over and over again, among young people as well as among older. In regard to the theater, my conclusion, in the words of the spirit of prophecy, is this:

Among the most dangerous resorts for pleasure is the theater. Instead of being a school for morality and virtue, as is so often claimed, it is the very hotbed of immorality. Vicious habits and sinful propensities are strengthened and confirmed by these entertainments. Low songs, lewd gestures, expressions, and attitudes, deprave the imagination and debase the morals. Every youth who habitually attends such exhibitions will be corrupted in principle. There is no influence in our land more powerful to poison the imagination, to destroy religious impressions, and to blunt the relish for the tranquil pleasures and sober realities of life, than theatrical amusements. The love for these scenes increases with every indulgence, as the desires for intoxicating drink strengthens with its use. The only safe course is to shun the theater, the circus, and every other questionable place of amusement. —*Counsels to Teachers*, pp. 334, 335.

I close as I began, with this thought,—that the joy of the Lord is the true antidote for all worldly amusements. We read in the old myths that there were sirens who sang men to death, but died themselves if they failed. It is said that when the Argonauts passed them, Jason ordered Orpheus to strike his lyre. The enchantment of his singing and music was superior to theirs, and the Argonauts sailed safely by. Then the sirens cast themselves into the sea, and were transformed into rocks.

We cannot make the sirens of worldly pleasure fail, unless we carry with us a charm greater than theirs. Joy must conquer joy, and music must conquer music. The child of God must have a music in his own soul far sweeter than any siren song of this delusive world.