

Bread and Circuses

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Sometime around A.D. 100, a Roman satirical poet known as Juvenal wrote, "the People...anxiously hopes for just two things: bread and circuses [Latin—*panem et circenses*]." His point was that the government was pacifying the Roman populace and distracting them from important issues by giving them free or cheap food and entertaining them with spectacles. It seems to be basic to human nature that if our bellies are full and we have entertainment put before our eyes, we will become distracted from anything important and fall into a stupor of apathy.



Comfort and Security

There seem to be at least two aspects to this condition. One is that, if you have become dependent upon a system, such as the government, to fulfill your needs—for example, free or subsidized food, health care, housing, pension, or social security—then you begin to lose your objectivity toward that on which you are dependent. That is, it becomes difficult to bite the hand that feeds you. It's hard to imagine that governments don't consider this benefit to themselves when they institute social systems.

Governments also play upon security concerns and often exaggerate dangers, and their ability to counter them, to gain more powers. While millions of people die from diseases that have insufficient funding to find cures, while tens of thousands die in traffic accidents, while millions go hungry around the world, while the roads and infrastructure in the United States begin to crumble, the United States government is spending trillions of dollars fighting terrorism. Yet, your odds of a terrorist killing you within the United States have been estimated to be about one in 20 million, and I suspect that these odds would be similarly minuscule in most nations. Compare this to the odds of drowning in a bathtub—1 in 800,000—and you see how governments have played up this risk for their benefit. ("Odds of Dying From") (http://i424.photobucket.com/albums/pp322/Telexer2/Stuff1z/OddsOfDying_zps43ad9694.png) and ("How Scared of Terrorism Should You Be?") (<http://reason.com/archives/2011/09/06/how-scared-of-terrorism-should>).

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breadandcircuses.pdf

But the price has been greater than money. We've paid in the loss of freedom. There is a dialog in the classic 1965 film, *The Sound of Music*, between Herr Zeller, the Nazi leader in Salzburg, Austria, and Captain von Trapp. "You were sent a telegram," Zeller states smugly, "which you did not answer. A telegram from Admiral von Schreiber of the Navy of the Third Reich."

Von Trapp's sabre-sharp response is instant. "I was under the impression, Herr Zeller, that the contents of telegrams in Austria are private. At least, the Austria I know."

What is stunning about this exchange of words is not that it speaks of the privacy of telegrams in the pre-Anschluss Austria of the 1930s, but that the writers of *The Sound of Music* took for granted that government snooping into private communications would be considered a shocking and evil thing to movie goers in the 1960s.

Today, the issue of privacy includes telephone conversations, emails, texts, letters, bank accounts, private business transactions, private conversations in one's home, and our whereabouts at any time of the day. These should be private information, but as we now know, the governments feel they have a right to all of it in the name of fighting terrorism. In fact, to get the information they want, governments have become unwitting partners with the terrorists in helping them achieve the very thing they want—fear. So, aside from doing a little quacking like disturbed ducks whenever a new revelation of government snooping hits the headlines, we do nothing about it.

Hedonism

The other aspect in the modern quest for *panem et circenses* is the distraction and tranquilizing of the populace caused by hedonism.



Today, most people in developed nations aren't looking to fill their bellies with a loaf of bread. They want a burger and fries or a cinnamon chai latte with carrot cake. And instead of occasional circuses, we want daily (in fact, nearly constant) television, movies, video games, and sports.

In Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, the nation is called Panem, a reference to Juvenal's *panem et circenses*. The people in the Capital live in isolated apathy concerned with their food, fashions, makeup, and entertainment while the rest of the nation lives in



fear, poverty, and hunger. Is our world more like this than we would like to admit? If so, what effect does this have upon the lives of those who profess faith in Jesus Christ?

In 1985, Neil Postman wrote a book about his television age that was nearly prophetic about our computer/texting/gaming age. It's called *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Postman explores the possibility that our society was more in danger of fulfilling the dystopian vision of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (published in 1932) than George Orwell's *1984* (published in 1950). I think you may find a few random quotes from that book startling for their prescience:

Contrary to common belief even among the educated, Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one.

As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny "failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions." In *1984*, Orwell added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we fear will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we desire will ruin us.

When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people become an audience, and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility.

To be unaware that a technology comes equipped with a program for social change, to maintain that technology is neutral, to make the assumption that technology is always a friend to culture is, at this late hour, stupidity plain and simple.

It is not necessary to conceal anything from a public insensible to contradiction and narcotized by technological diversions.

I believe I am not mistaken in saying that Christianity is a demanding and serious religion. When it is delivered as easy and amusing, it is another kind of religion altogether.

The reality of the early twenty-first century is that both Orwell's and Huxley's visions are coming true. We are throwing away our freedoms for security against terrorism and blinding ourselves to their loss by distracting ourselves with entertainment. My focus, of course, is biblical teaching and spiritual growth, not political action. But if the world around us is more concerned with securing their safety from blowing leaves (see the principle in Leviticus 26:36-37) and is so absorbed with pursuing the trivial that real thought is a rare commodity, how are we Christians affected?

The Cares of This World

In The Parable of the Sower (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/par1sower.htm>), Jesus tells of a man spreading seed in the world. The seed, Jesus explained, represents the Word of God. In the parable, some seed falls among thorns which choke the seed. In Mark 4:19, Jesus gives the meaning of this as, "the cares of this age, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful."

The word Jesus used for "cares" is *merimna*. *Merimna* literally means "that which draws in different directions and, thus, distracts." "Deceitfulness" is *apatē*. It means "a delusion; that which causes an inability to distinguish what is real from what is not." Trusting in riches is a delusion because they don't deliver the happiness that we expect. "Lusts" is from *epithumia*. It's a craving or longing for, but it never satisfies. Jesus isn't talking about only the pursuit of our basic needs as potentially distracting us. He's talking about the attractions of this world. In other words, what chokes out the Word of God is the pursuit of bread and circuses. Just as Jesus explains in the parable that the

fowl that eat the seed on the wayside represent the wicked one, Satan, you can be sure that the wicked one is happy to use the weeds that distract, delude, and cause lust to turn people from biblical truth.

In Matthew 6:31-34, Jesus says,

Therefore don't be anxious [*merimnaō*—the verb form of *merimna*], saying, "What will we eat?", "What will we drink?" or, "With what will we be clothed?" For the Gentiles seek after all these things, for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first God's Kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore don't be anxious for tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Each day's own evil is sufficient.

We tend to see this admonition as focusing on not worrying about our basic needs. Certainly, that's the emphasis, yet we can at least sympathize with the poor who are anxious over where they will get some bread, find clean water¹, and clothe themselves to keep warm. But what about more affluent professing Christians whose minds are occupied with what new taste sensation they will find tonight or how sexy they'll look in their latest frock?

There Are Ditches on Both Sides of the Road

Don't get me wrong. The Bible never says to live like monks. Neither does it support the Amish solution to avoiding worldliness. The Amish essentially froze their clothing styles in the seventeenth century and use technology that predates the industrial revolution. This has made them little more than curiosities and unwilling subjects of romance novels living on the outskirts of society. They cannot relate to the people around them; and to the world, they have become irrelevant, leaving them with small impact in the modern age.

Jesus said that His followers would not be of the world, even as He was not of the world (John 17:14). Yet Jesus interacted with the world, spoke with the world, wore good clothes (a coat "without seam, woven from the top throughout" [John 19:23] was apparently a desirable piece of clothing), and was not considered different from others except

¹ It's estimated that 750 million people lack access to clean water and more than 840,000 people die each year from water-related disease (<http://water.org/water-crisis/water-facts/water/>).

that He ate with sinners (Matthew 9:11) and preached a shocking message.

Jesus prayed to the Father, "I pray not that you would take them from the world, but that you would keep them from the evil one" (John 17:15). Even though we are not of the world, Jesus left us in it (John 17:11). We are as sheep among wolves. Thus, we must be "wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16).

We do not gain wisdom by watching television five hours per day and spending another hour and seven minutes on a smartphone and two hours, 46 minutes listening to the radio ("Average American watches 5 hours of TV per day, report shows") (<http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/average-american-watches-5-hours-tv-day-article-1.1711954>). We are not gaining the mind of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:5) by playing Minecraft ("Gamers have spent 1 billion hours playing Minecraft Xbox 360") (<http://www.gamespot.com/articles/gamers-have-spent-1-billion-hours-playing-minecraft-xbox-360/1100-6406841/>). We gain Christ's mind by reading—studying—the Bible.

The things valued by this world do not give us the mind of Christ. Only the expression of His mind—His Word—can do that. That mind is a mind of self-control (2 Timothy 1:7—*sōphronismos* is translated "sound mind" in the King James Version) and a mind of "compassion, pity, graciousness, humility, gentleness, long-suffering" (Colossians 3:12, *Apostolic Bible Polyglot*). Can we believers be like the citizens of the *Hunger Games*' Capital and turn a blind eye to the world around us as long as we can twiddle our game controllers in peace? Unlike the world of Charles Dickens, we in the developed world may not have urchins dying in our streets, but they are dying in streets thousands of miles away. Can we sip our \$3.65 cappuccinos and ignore them?

My argument is not that there is something wrong with playing a video game or drinking an expensive coffee. I am expressing my concern that, like the world around us, we Christians are losing our self-controlled minds and our compassion to the distractions, delusions, and lusts of our age. There is nothing inherently wrong with relaxing with a movie or a game and occasionally indulging ourselves with an expensive meal. But we must remember that such things are incidental treats, not the focus of our lives. Our focus, our reason for living, must be Christ, and we must value Him above all else. We must not sell our heavenly birthright for the delights of the earth (Hebrews 12:16).

Remember that "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). If our treasure is in what is earthly, it will corrupt and pass away with the world (Matthew 6:19-20; 1 John 2:16-17). Neil Postman wrote, "There is nothing wrong with entertainment. As some psychiatrist once put it, we all build castles in the air. The problems come when we try to live in them." The world is living in air castles that will some day come crashing down. The people are exchanging their freedoms and their very minds for bread and circuses. We Christians must not make the same bargain.

Jesus asked, "the Son of Man having come, shall he find the faith upon the earth?" (Luke 18:8b—*Young's Literal Translation* used because it properly translates "the" before "faith"). It's a question He doesn't answer. Let's make it a resounding, Yes!

Don't love the world, neither the things that are in the world. If anyone loves the world, the Father's love isn't in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, isn't the Father's, but is the world's. The world is passing away with its lusts, but he who does God's will remains forever.

1 John 2:15-17