

Articles and Sermons :: Christian Recreation and Unchristian Amusement-Cuyler

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by T. L. Cuyler, October 24, 1858, New York.

"Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot." Eccles. 5:18

"For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry." 1 Peter 4:3

"Laughter can conceal a heavy heart; when the laughter ends, the grief remains." Proverbs 14:13

My fellow-travelers to eternity, I want to discuss tonight, the great subject of Christian recreation and unchristian amusement. I wish to find out as far as I possibly can, what is healthful, and what is right; what is hurtful, and what is wrong; what every Christian may do, and what even a lost sinner ought not to do. It is a very delicate and a very difficult subject to treat; and I trust we may be guided wisely and safely through it. In order to throw 'light from heaven' upon our theme, I have grouped before you tonight three appropriate passages of Scripture.

"Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot." In this first text, you will observe the principle that all men have a clear and undoubted right to every healthful and innocent enjoyment. God never created us to be wretched. Do you imagine it for a moment? He gave us possibilities of enjoyment, and ten thousand good things to enjoy. He gave us a taste for pleasant food, and pleasant food and fruit to taste. He gave us a desire for the luscious grape and sunny peach; and the grape hangs on the trellis, and the peach ripens for us in the sun-beam. He gave us a thirst for refreshing drinks. He gave us healthful drinks with which to refresh ourselves. Never, however, did he make this world a distillery for alcoholic poisons. He gave us a desire to be happy, and then put within our reach means, abundant means, for all pure and healthy happiness.

While there is a "time to weep"—O my friends! these times to weep; how often they come and how long they last! There is also a "time to laugh;" so God tells us in his book. There is a time to be cheerful, there is a time to be full of sunshine, a time to be fully exuberant in the outflow of all emotional joys, in the liftings up of high mental delight, in the out-goings of pure and lofty spiritual enjoyment. This is right; this is commendable; and we shall see in the course of this discussion that it is necessary for our bodily, mental, and spiritual health to have just such enjoyments.

"For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry." This second text is from Peter's letter to Christians of his day. He reminds them that they ought to follow Christ, which is the great idea of Christianity. He wished to remind them that they used to walk in revelings, banquetings, and excess—these things were the bitter fruits of their former ungodly tastes and appetites. They did not know any better. But now, he says, you are redeemed ones of Jesus Christ. Now I warn you, that you do know better, and you must put off the evil deeds, and live spiritually and righteously in this present evil world. You are no longer heathen, but Christians—the pledged, banded and bonded followers of the holy Savior, the professors of a pure faith, a "peculiar people," to keep your garments even unspotted from the world.

"Laughter can conceal a heavy heart; when the laughter ends, the grief remains." This third text is from royal Solomon. Poor old man! poor man! He ought to know (what he had found out to his sorrow) that reveling is the mother of all wretchedness, and that the end of mirth is heaviness. A heavy head, a heavy heart, a heavy load on the conscience, a heavy stupified moral sense, a heavy weight of remorse, a heavy account with God, an oppressive, crushing weight of final and everlasting retribution—these are mirth's bitter catastrophe.

Now these three texts unite in giving us a double truth for discussion. First, that Christian recreations are right, proper, commendable, and beneficial—but that sinful pleasures are dangerous to the body and damning to the soul. Let us enlarge upon this proposition, beginning with the first truth that Christian recreations are right the world over. We have already

It is seen that God's word does not forbid rightful enjoyments. This book is not a teacher of Popish penances, it was not written by monks, or to turn the world into a stupendous convent. The religion of the Bible is radiant with the light and the joys of heaven; there is a world of sun-shine in God's book. O troubled heart! the spirit that book inspires is never a gloomy one, nor morose. It is a libel on our holy faith to represent it as productive in itself of melancholy, or denying men any really innocent pleasures. It is not against innocent enjoyments, but sinful ones, that God makes his protest.

The libel is an old one. The skeptic who wants to caricature that bible before a young man, and the frivolous trifler who would turn life into a long frolic and one unending carouse—repeats the stale scoff in the face of that young man, in order to seduce him into profligacy and ruin. But the Gospel is a system of life, deliverance, hope, joy in the Holy Spirit. It came to make guilty men happy by making them good, and by bringing them into peace with their God. Now, in the very outset, I suppose that this assembly agree that we all need—that men and women, old and young—need recreation. Not only rest from toil (and the people of this country are the most overworking people on earth) but we need the occasional restorative of recreation. I use that word in its etymological sense—to re-create, to make a man over again as good as new.

You and I work ourselves down. Then we must be built up again. We need to unbend. We should not keep the bow always strung, else it loses its elasticity. Men were not created to be always drudges. They were to play once in a while as well as toil. All work makes a man a sorry slave. All play makes him a sorrier fool. The wise person avoids both extremes. God has not only given all powers of enjoyment, but recreation is an absolute need. I must have it, so must you. The best men have always found it so. Biographies of the most healthful Christians reveal them as unwinding in an innocent sportiveness. Their grave faces relax sometimes into what the old Puritan used to call "the Christian liberty of laughing." The overactive brains are regaled with a healthy holiday. When at work, they work like men and Christians. When at play, they unbend and sport like little children. That is human nature; that is wise; that is beautiful.

Martin Luther bends over that German translation of the book of God. Martin Luther elaborates his treatises against the great Romish delusion; and refreshes himself by hearing his beautiful wife, Catherine, sing sweet songs, and by decorating Christmas trees for his children. Granville Sharp never played more sweetly on human sympathies when he was arousing the world for the emancipation of the slaves, than when he used to retire from his philanthropies to play upon his flute in his terrace overhanging the Thames. Buxton is good at hunting abuses in Parliament. He is equally good in hunting with dog and gun over the English forest. Wilberforce battles all day for God and humanity; labors for Bible circulation; labors for genuine reform; labors for Christian missions, and for India; and then goes home to amuse his children with delightful stories, and trundles a hoop with them all around his garden at Clapham. He is as happy as a swallow. Blessed, blessed man! he had a right to be happy, for he labored like his Master. Who had a better right than he, to let his soul flow out in its innocent joy?

Now, then, we come to the practical point of this discourse—What kind of recreation do men need? For whatever a man needs, according to his God-given nature, is right. Fix that first in your minds. Taking this as a clue in your hands, my young friends, you will be guided into the path of right and safety.

The daily laborer who toils twelve out of the twenty-four hours, probably finds no recreation like simple rest. Lying down upon his bed is recreation. The Sabbath comes to him with rest; social joys in his humble home are a part of his recreation; an occasional hour in some library, or listening to discourses of truth, is healthful recreation. The great idea with him is Rest! Rest!

The student needs change of occupation—physical exercise. That weakened form of his, which bends over the book until his face becomes as bloodless as the page he scans, should go out into God's free air, and all the better for him if the hand that is idle should swing the axe, or pull the oar upon the stream. I never shall forget a walk with that greatest of modern poets—the now departed Wordsworth—over the hills which he has made immortal; and as I saw the hearty and healthful countenance of the great poet, I understood what his servant meant when he said—"My master's study is always out of doors." One of the acutest minds in all England, Carlyle once vented itself in this way to me—"My greatest pleasure is to mount my horse and ride out in the teeth of the wind away from these smoky streets of London."

We have many methods of recreation open to the most conscientious and godly minded—Books! books which lift the soul up to the mountain-top; books which take me to Pisgah's heights, and permit me to survey the realm of God's universe; books which enliven me and lead me to the recesses of the heart; books which bring me nearer to God in all his works; books which I can make fireside companions; each one of them, as it were a vial, containing the extract and essence of a great heart. Books make the first and purest of our recreations!

But, methinks, some one starts up in this house and says—"May I read books of fiction?" Yes, sir, on two conditions only—first, that you never read any but those which are pure and soul-elevating; and next that you only read those as the occasional recreation of a mind fatigued by severer duties. It is as if you ask me, while sitting at a table—"May I eat that sweet dessert?" "Yes, after you have dined on healthy food." But woe to him who feeds his body on sweets alone! Woe to the young men or maidens, who have no good books in their heads or hearts! I believe there is more demoralization of the young, more loss of character and incipient infidelity, resulting from the vile pages of certain pestilential literature, which swarms in this country, than from any other source which Satan employs to ruin our youth. But a good book—a good book is one of God's best gifts to us.

Next to books comes music; music from the cradle—hymns which the sweet-voiced mother sings in our infancy—to the plaintive dirge that floats over the green sward, where we are laid to our rest. Music when it comes in the swelling oratorio, swelling and rolling in surges on the soul like the sound of many waters on the beach—or the martial air stirring the soul like the sound of a trumpet on the tented field; or the charming evening hymns sung by our beloved ones at the altar of our homes; or the anthems sung by the great congregations, rolling up to mingle with the oratorios of heaven—the ceaseless song of the ransomed and redeemed!

I care not that Satan has stolen music and perverted it to sensual and infernal uses. That is no more reason why I should not make my heart praise my Maker, than that the vile abuse of anything is an argument against its uses, unless as in the case of alcohol, where the use be an abuse of the user. The great dangers connected with the opera do not lie in the music, but in the usual accompaniments of the play-house; a subject of which we shall speak hereafter. Galleries of art, scientific lectures—are all means of recreation within the reach of the young; and I do thank those public benefactors, who are bringing to our shores so many masterpieces of genius; and were I possessed of a princely fortune (like him who was the princely constructor of this edifice,) one of the best gifts I would give to the young men of New-York would be some great hall, in which, turning their feet from every wicked place, they might come in and enlighten their reason and purify their hearts in the long evenings of this season of the year.

Without dwelling farther on specific recreations, we come to this principle—that whatever makes your body healthier, your mind happier, and your immortal soul purer, is Christian recreation. If you never depart from these good sayings, you will never bring down the maledictions of God, who pronounced such fearful curses upon the reveler and those who are given to banquetings and excess.

In treating of recreations, I have gone upon the principle that they are sought for useful and lawful purposes. "Whatever you do, do all for the glory of God." Every Christian ought to take his religion into his pleasures, just as much as into his business or his church. No Christian ought ever to spend an evening in any place, from which he could not return with the most devout and graceful approach to his Savior, as he bends on his knee in his closet to spend the last hour of the day, as it flies up to God with its account.

Secondly, when most people when seek amusement, there is something very different in their minds, than a desire for healthy and wholesome recreation. In this part of my discourse, I wish to treat of this different thing. It is not recreation; it is not for the sake of being better fitted for life's cares and toils and heroic duties—but it is pleasure for its own sake and ultimate end—and the gay, frivolous, and pleasure-loving are generally in pursuit of that. They do not merely seek refreshment; they desire stimulation and high excitement. A wise man, for instance, drinks for refreshment. Of course he drinks pure water, or something that will not stimulate. On the other hand, the sensualist drinks for stimulation. He goes to the bottle which maddens and intoxicates. The love of excitement is what fills our taverns. The great mass of men go to immoral places for what? for recreation? Not at all—but for excitement; and the more fiery, the more stimulating, the better.

Here is the supreme attraction of the theater, the gaming-house, the drinking-saloon, the billiard-room. Within those brilliantly lighted places, the chief attractions are the high excitements to the lusts of the youth, as well as the worn-out debauchee. The only reasons why young men seek such places, are the very reasons why they should not seek them. Instead of rest to the body and delightful entertainment to the mind, they are indisputably destructive and poisonous. Such writers as those in this city who, during the last few months or the last year, have advocated dramatic entertainments, mistake the main position, when they confound innocent recreation with sinful pleasures. One is right and the other is ruinous. Everything that rests my body or mind, improves my health and elevates my soul, is commendable. Everything that stimulates my lustful propensities, until I become a walking maniac; everything that debauches my body, weakens my conscience, excites impure thoughts, and makes my soul a horrendous house of imagery; everything that makes me forget God and eternity; is dangerous, and in the last damnable.

To this test we must bring the theater, the midnight carouse, and the ball-room. Do they provide refreshment of strength and mind? Does the drinking-house provide such refreshment? Do they improve or profit, or do they demoralize and destroy for time and eternity? That is the question. I do not suppose any 'ideal' or 'imaginary' theater, any ideal ale-house. I am not discussing an imaginary state of the drama, where the audience are all saints, the actors are all apostles; where the curtain would rise to the sound of prayer instead of an overture, and the performance would close with the Doxology instead of a song sung by a buffoon; where no possible farce on the stage could be so ridiculous a farce as the audience. Such a state of things is imaginary.

Introduce such a thing into a New York theater, and it would be deserted in one day! Introduce a theater in which such plays as Hannah More's sacred dramas were to be performed by conscientious performers, and the whole class of theater-goers would desert it in a week. As the preacher entered at one door, the profligate would go out of the other. As the deacon entered, the beer drinker would retire. As the gracious mother came with her pure daughters, the painted harlot would take flight to some more congenial environment.

All who are attracted and stimulated by the lustful drama, by the indelicate innuendo, by the ballet dancers, by the wine-saloon, never, depend upon it, would waste a dollar upon a puritanic theater! It would be tasteless and insipid to them—it would be deserted in mass—and who would fill their places? Would you? Would I? Would my congregation like to know that I filled one of the vacant places in that theater? For myself, I can say that I have succeeded in obtaining all the recreation I have felt necessary, and an exuberant flow of spirit, without ever having entered the theater, witnessed an opera, played a game of cards, attended a ball, or indulged in the excitement of the wine-cup.

Millions tonight are empty in purse, character, and godliness, and empty of hope, from having tried each or all of them! Why, do you not know that the real attraction of such places is the temporary excitement? All that is passion-exciting in tragedy, and mirth-exciting in comedy, is brought in. In one thrilling scene, a mother shrieks out her agony for her lost boy; in another, a betrayed mistress wreaks revenge on her paramour; and in another, a ribald scoffer burlesques the most sacred passages of the blessed book of God. It feeds the passion; the eye is not forgotten by the scene-painter, nor the actress in the dress that captivates and inflames the lust.

Those that cannot be drawn by the stage are drawn by the exciting accompaniments—by the music, the wine-saloon, the presence of tempters to midnight debauchery.

"Skilled in doing evil!" would I write over the entrance of every theater that ever stood in this metropolis. "He that is wise, let him not enter in there."

"By their fruits you shall know them," is the test the world applies to us, my beloved fellow-professor of Christ's gospel. It is a good test. I wish Christians would not forget it. "By their fruits you shall know them;" and I in turn say to the lover of pleasure—will you let me apply that to your own amusements? By your fruits I would know you. And now I come to the theater, (saying nothing about cards, the wine-cup, or the ball-room,) and ask—Does it improve the morals of those who deliberately attend it? Would a sensible merchant hire a young man into his business, make him his bookkeeper, confident, or cashier, on the strength of the knowledge that that young man regularly attended the theater? The theater has led more to the workhouse and to ruin, than probably any other source of temptation to the young, ever known in the history of our metropolis.

Secondly—if the theater is a good school of morals, why do not the teachers learn and practice their own lessons? It is a poor gospel that does not convert its own advocates. Now, far be it from me to impugn the character of all performers; but in the best days of the dramas, Dr. Johnson used to say, he avoided their company, because of their tempting him to lust. Ought a lady to attend any place where she will see her own sex unclothed? That simple fact, a part and parcel of theatricals, is one of its most bitter and burning condemnations.

Again, if the drama is conducive to piety and morality, if it is productive of purity, why does it attract the debauched, the drunkard, and the profligate? While I do not say that no man of good morals has ever attended it, I do say that the loathsome people of this city have a most striking passion for theater-going; and where the immoral all love to go, the Christian ought never to go. Would any young lady in this house like to hear that her pastor had been in the playhouse? If she saw me preaching Christ after seeing me there, would she not probably have a far more vivid recollection of the playhouse than appreciation of the truth I tried to teach? But God's test is the best—"when the laughter ends, the grief remains." Proverbs 14:13

When Dr. Harvey heard a lady speak of the pleasures of the theater in reply to the question as to what they were—"Fir

st," she said, "the pleasure of anticipation before I go; secondly, the pleasure of participation while I am there; and thirdly, the pleasure of recollection in recalling the play after I am gone." "Madam!" said that Christian gentleman, "madam! you forget one pleasure." "What is it, sir?" "It is the pleasure of retrospection, when on the dying-bed you look back on a life immersed in such frivolities as that." That was her last "pleasure of recollection" of a night in a theater.

Do you say that many dramatic productions are masterpieces of intellect? I do not deny it. I do not deny that Shakespeare's plays are the best of all plays, and yet across that resplendent sun of his imperial intellect, how many a dark spot of obscenity and profanation, almost blasphemy. So much so, that when a female master of the art undertook to read those plays before a promiscuous audience, she was obliged to leap from point to point, from passage to passage, as one crossing a stream would leap from stone to stone, in order to keep a dry foot.

My friends, it is not necessary to enter a theater to receive intellectual pleasure, from Shakespeare or any other dramatist. You can have it by the fireside without the contaminating vices of the play-house. But if the grandest dramatic pieces that ever leaped full-grown from the brains of the great master of English poetry and philosophy, are only to be learned by my son and daughter at the expense of their virtue, I would lay them in their graves, ignorant of the first line that Shakespeare ever penned! There are higher walks of knowledge still—walks that I can tread in company with the angels—walks that I can take with my Divine Master—walks from mountain-top to mountain-top, out into the great landscape in which I study God, and see my Father in all his works.

Now look upon this question in whatever light you choose, these places of excitement, not recreation, cannot bear scrutiny any more than any of the sinful excitements I have barely alluded to. I have dwelt upon the theater as a 'representative amusement', knowing that much we have said in regard to it would apply to kindred places of pernicious excitement.

My last argument against it is, oh! how many a heart that has been touched by the Holy Spirit during the last revival year; how many a young man who has melted in the prayer-meeting, thrilled under the sermon, been aroused by the Spirit to the grandeur of a Christian life and the claims of God and the glory of heaven—how many such a young man dates his first relapse, and first steps of apostasy, to one or more of the ten thousand scenes of 'fashionable amusement', which surround him in New York! That noble man, Mr. Noel of London, allied by birth to the nobility of earth—and by the new birth to the nobility of heaven, says that a youth came to London and gave himself up to teaching and Christian service. By and by he missed him from the church—(that is the first step, my young friends)—then he heard that he was the frequenter of a play-house; from the play-house he traced him to the tavern; from the tavern to the skeptic's club; and then down he went rapidly with the necessary gravitation of sin, to the very depths of sin and debauchery. That young man, whose mother would not have recognized him had he been brought to her door, lay stranded upon life's shore, wrecked in body and wrecked in character. Mr. Noel was summoned to his dying-bed, and as he entered the room he saw that the young man was within a step of eternity. He took him by the hand—(oh! that pastors of the present day would take young men by the hand! you, my young friends, need men's hands, but God's hand most of all)—he took him by the hand and talked with him of Christ and hope in the dying hour. The young man lay under it all in total and terrible despair, as if he had quenched the Spirit forever—the last light seemed to have gone out. Noel bade him farewell and left him in indescribable agony of soul; but as he lifted the latch, the young man started up with a convulsive movement and begged him to return. The pastor went back to his bed. The young man mustering all his strength, drew his face down and whispered in his ear, "I am damned! I am damned!" and then fell back upon his pillow, and in a few moments was before his God!

If the play-house and the skeptic-club bring such retributions as that, what Christian father or mother will ever consent that their loved ones should tread such fearfully slippery places?

I will now present several simple tests, and I shall have completed this discussion.

1. Every recreation which makes me stronger in body, happier in mind, and purer in heart, is beneficial.
2. Every amusement which is not an excitement, but the means of healthful recreation and improvement, is allowable for a Christian. I stand upon my Christian right in reference to them all—a healthy conscience enlightened of God, is to be the best judge.
3. No Christian should ever take part in any entertainments from which he cannot conscientiously turn to his Bible and his closet.

4. No Christian should frequent any place which Jesus Christ would forbid if he were personally on earth; nor should he be seen in places so questionable that irreligious people would be startled in finding him there. "Abstain," my friends, "from all appearance of evil."

5. Let me remind you of the best rule of all—God's rule. Here it is, "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do," in work or pleasure, "do all to the glory of God." Then, when all your activities are in full play for God, and your brain at work in blessed schemes for studying and honoring him, your hands occupied in leading men in paths of purity and truth, your whole self happy in your work, your principles, your recreations—that is life, oh! That is life!

You and I have heard sometimes a military band approaching from the distance. We first catch the notes of the horn, then the rich swell of the bugle; then, as the band comes nearer, the finer, gentler, and more delicate instruments mingle in with their harmony, until at length they come upon us with full burst! The ear feeds on the exquisite harmony, as the bee feeds on the honey of the flower. So a man who says, "Whatever I do, I will do for the glory of God," finds in one act a beautiful melody; in the next act a sweet harmony; in the next a delicious joy; and so he goes on in full play and full work, nobly blending power with power, affection with affection, and all with God; and making life a joyous procession to the sound of horn, timbrel, and trumpet, he sweeps in at last through the heavenly gates to the raptures of Paradise. O blessed Savior! let your service be my unending recreation—your presence my everlasting delight!