



December 2006

Dear friend of MARS HILL AUDIO,

The celebration of the Nativity of Jesus Christ provides opportunities for all sorts of reflections. In my own anticipation of the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle this year, I have been musing on some of the paradoxes linked with the Incarnation. John Donne's sonnet "Annunciation," often recited (at least in our home) during Advent, captures a number of those paradoxes poignantly:

Salvation to all that will is nigh;  
 That All, which always is all everywhere,  
 Which cannot sin, and yet all sins must bear,  
 Which cannot die, yet cannot choose but die,  
 Lo, faithful virgin, yields Himself to lie  
 In prison, in thy womb; and though He there  
 Can take no sin, nor thou give, yet He will wear,  
 Taken from thence, flesh, which death's force may try.  
 Ere by the spheres time was created, thou  
 Wast in His mind, who is thy Son and Brother;  
 Whom thou conceivst, conceived; yea thou art now  
 Thy Maker's maker, and thy Father's mother;  
 Thou hast light in dark, and shutst in little room,  
 Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb.

These are, in a sense, metaphysical paradoxes, and they signal the uniqueness of this maternity as well as that of the anticipated Child. There's a wonderful line in the fifteenth-century English carol, "I Sing of a Maiden," which likewise observes "Mother and maiden was never none but she." Mary's unique experience foreshadows the unique experience of her son, God's Son. (By the way, Peter Warlock's twentieth-century musical setting of "I Sing of a Maiden," retitled "As dew in Aprylle," is a wonderful treat.)

But these paradoxes are only the beginning of a powerful reversal at work, by means of which the least becomes great, the last first, and the fallen elevated. The Prince of Peace gives peace, but not as the world gives. He calls his followers to move mountains by bearing crosses. The paradoxes and surprises in the life of the Savior are to characterize the lives of the saved as well. The wisdom they are called to embrace and convey is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age. Among those initially called to inaugurate his everlasting Kingdom, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But, as St. Paul reminded the Corinthians (hardly a model parish to have been immortalized in two great epistles),

God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are. Talk about metaphysical paradoxes!

In his book, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, Eugene Peterson reflects on this theme of the Church's paradoxical place in the world in a passage warning of the temptation to assume that we can accomplish the ends of the Gospel by becoming more popular, "that the Christian community, rightly and obediently lived, can somehow, if we just put our minds to it, be tarted up sufficiently to catch the admiring eye of the world." Peterson is bemused that people still seem to think this, in light of the historical record:

Eighteen hundred years or so of Hebrew history capped by a full exposition in Jesus Christ tell us that God's revelation of himself is rejected far more often than it is accepted, is dismissed by far more people than embrace it, and has been either attacked or ignored by every major culture or civilization in which it has given its witness: magnificent Egypt, fierce Assyria, beautiful Babylon, artistic Greece, political Rome, Enlightenment France, Nazi Germany, Renaissance Italy, Marxist Russia, Maoist China, and pursuit-of-happiness America.

Peterson goes on to offer a prophetic (and thus controversial) critique of a common mistake made by those who conceive of the mission of the Church in ways that forget those paradoxes:

Strategies are introduced from time to time to target "important" leaders, men and women in high places in government, business, or the media, for conversion. It is not a practice backed by biblical precedent. There are, of course, Christians in high places politically and prominent in the celebrity pantheon, but their position and standing doesn't seem to mean anything strategically significant in terms of God's kingdom.

Peterson doubts that getting "Christian men and women in prominent positions of leadership" will advance the mission of the Church, which, earlier in his book, he defined this way: "It is the task of the Christian community to give witness and guidance in the living of life in a culture that is relentless in reducing, constricting, and enervating life." Peterson is arguing that if we are preoccupied with changing "the culture" by working to be attractive *on its terms*, or by maneuvering and bargaining our way into positions of influence, we will be less likely to live lives capable of such countercultural witness and guidance. We can only be for the world by being against the world.

Peterson's words here may sound virtually heretical to many Christians committed to cultural engagement and "strategic" ministry. And reading this letter, there are no doubt more than a few who might wonder how an organization that borrows the symbolism of Paul's address in Athens (before all those Greco-Roman cultural gatekeepers) can endorse what seems to be a pathetic and defeatist point of view.

But, as far as we know, that lecture/sermon before the Council of the Areopagus didn't have much effect upon the trajectory of the Roman Empire, nor, I think we can assume, did Paul expect it to. He preached there as he preached everywhere else: because God is calling

his people together from all realms of society, from all personality types, from all callings.

During one of my interviews recently, a guest and I were musing about the temptation of churches and parachurch ministries striving to be too strategic. "Somehow," my guest mused, "I don't think that the leaders of the early Church sat around trying to figure out how to have a strategic influence in the Roman Empire." They were striving to be faithful, not influential. Faithfulness might prove to be influential (and as the Roman Empire became more and more dysfunctional, faithful Christians did make a difference), but that is a matter of providence, not tactical shrewdness. There are many shattered lives and many sick churches floundering in the wake of grand plans for effecting cultural change, plans which often result in distorted personalities who seem wise as doves and harmless as serpents.

If the pursuit of cultural influence for the sake of the Kingdom is often fruitless (or worse), it is no excuse for Christians to retreat to a sanctuary of private and internal spiritual safety. A call to faithfulness is not a warrant for churches to become smug Theology Clubs or Spiritual Rejuvenation Spas. Faithfulness to the Lord of all Creation is *cultural* faithfulness; it is faithfulness in every realm of human experience, from science to sports, from making movies to making babies— from how we build relationships to how we relate to buildings. Following Christ is a matter first of inner transformation, and then of living faithfully in accord with the order of Creation as he made and is redeeming it, in all of our cultural convictions and practices concerning a host of abstractions and concrete realities: food, sex, time, music, history, language, technology, family, justice, beauty, agriculture, and community.

In his stirring 1912 address on "Christianity and Culture," Princeton theological Seminary professor J. Gresham Machen spoke of Christian cultural activity in terms, not of influence or engagement, but of "consecration."

Instead of destroying the arts and sciences or being indifferent to them, let us cultivate them with all the enthusiasm of the veriest humanist, but at the same time consecrate them to the service of our God. Instead of stifling the pleasures afforded by the acquisition of knowledge or by the appreciation of what is beautiful, let us accept these pleasures as the gifts of a heavenly Father. Instead of obliterating the distinction between the Kingdom and the world, or on the other hand withdrawing from the world into a sort of modernized intellectual monasticism, let us go forth joyfully, enthusiastically to make the world subject to God.

Machen's vision is profoundly theocentric, which is after all the only stance from which we can properly participate in cultural life. From the beginning of our work, MARS HILL AUDIO's mission statement has been "to produce creative audio resources that encourage Christians to grow in obedient wisdom concerning the cultural consequences of our duty to love God and neighbor." We are not so much concerned with "reaching the culture" or "transforming the culture" as we are with encouraging believers to live consecrated cultural lives, since we are, all of us, too often are tempted to be of the world but not in the world. And someday, in God's providence, the lives of millions of Christians whose angle of approach to culture is unlike the world's may have enormous effects, but only (another of those die-to-live paradoxes) if we are seeking first the [cultural life in synch with the] Kingdom of Heaven.

"The culture" is the product of forces that we cannot direct or repair, but each of us makes decisions every day about the shape of our own cultural lives and the cultural lives within our families and local communities. We may not be able to undo the complex infrastructure of what Jacques Ellul calls "the technological society," with all of its external systems and internal mindsets. But we can be aware of its temptations and strive to live more wisely with the machines in our own household. We can't reverse what Philip Rieff calls the "triumph of the therapeutic" in postmodern Western society. But we can work to be more deliberate in recovering the properly restraining role of institutional authority in our families, schools, and churches. We may not be able to transform contemporary advertising into a vehicle of virtue and truthfulness. But we can resist the tendency to treat experiences and people as mere commodities, and we can avoid guile and flattery in our own conversations.

We're entering our fifteenth year of struggling with these paradoxes, and striving to enable those who likewise are seeking to be faithful in a very confused cultural moment. I know I've learned a lot in that time, thanks to the many wise men and women whom I am blessed to be able to interview. But the letters I receive from listeners are much more gratifying than any of the interviews I do, letters which speak of growth in obedient wisdom. I know we could probably raise a lot more money if I sent out letters telling you how together, we can change the world, or if I listed the influential people who were listening to MARS HILL AUDIO. I'm glad they're listening, just as Paul was glad to have a few sympathetic hearers at Mars Hill. But I recognize that cultural disorder is embedded in disordered institutions, and powerful people only keep power as long as they are generally in synch with the institutions they serve. They can chip away at the edges, they can make a difference in isolated cases, they can do essential damage-control. But the disorder of our culture has been generations in establishing itself, and those institutions will take generations of widespread faithfulness to be realigned or replaced. Such collective faithfulness requires (as it always has) people from every station and setting, so it turns out (paradoxically?) that unknown teachers and preachers and parents are remarkable sources of influence.

Of course, we can only be faithful in our work of encouraging cultural wisdom and faithfulness because of faithful supporters. While most of our budget is met by subscriptions and purchases, we could not survive without support from a large percentage of our listeners. Over the years, it's been a great encouragement that so many of our donors give because they share our sense of the need for more deliberateness in how Christians should live here and now. We know that the work we produce is challenging: it requires thoughtful attention and a willingness to think and act differently. It is very gratifying to know that so many people have joined us in making this project possible.

I hope that you can help us generously this year. While this has been a difficult year financially, we have high hopes for expanding our reach in the coming year, through some new products and (we hope) many new listeners. I'll be continuing a fairly busy travel and speaking schedule and look forward to meeting many of you in the coming months.

Thanks for your time, and may this season of wonderful paradoxes be rich in unambiguous blessings for you.

Sincerely,



Ken Myers  
Producer and Host