

Winks, Blinks, and Praising the Lord
... a society's great madness
seems normal to itself.

Allan Bloom

Years ago Neil Postman pointed out that sociological data are not like scientific data. Postman observed that a blink is a physical process studied by physiologists, while a wink is a human practice studied by sociologists. That the average human eye blinks x number of times a minute is a scientific fact, and it establishes a norm for blinking. By contrast, the fact that x percent of men wink y number of times a week is a statistic, but it is not a norm. Winking may be a habit for some men, but that does not establish it as a norm.

Surveys indicate that modern Americans eat higher-fat diets and read fewer books than previous generations. Surveys also indicate out of ten Americans gambled at least once last year. These are statistics provided by sociological studies, but they are not equivalent to scientific data and do not tell us what is "right." They merely record human preferences and habits.

By mental carelessness we turn winks into blinks—statistics into scientific facts. When we refer to sociological data about American "reading styles" or "gambling styles," we are merely speaking about matters of taste reflected in the surrounding culture. We hear references to modern "worship styles" with the implication that we must pay attention to these when we plan our worship services. Does it not occur to us that advertising, peer pressure, and the entertainment industry are shaping and determining these "styles?" When we read statistics regarding teenage worship styles, why do we regard them as data we must attend to, when we would never yield to a teenager claiming his "study style" requires a TV nearby, his "eating style" requires french fries at every meal, or "driving style" requires sudden lane changes and excessive speeds?

Statistics collected on various aspects of human behavior clearly identify dominant tastes and attitudes of the surrounding culture. Modern American entertainment culture is saturated with loud music accompanied by shallow and repetitious words. This culture is also heavily influenced by an entertainment industry with heavy marketing interests invested in promoting styles and shaping tastes.

If churches are trying to enable Christians to be faithful and to equip youth to be aware of and alert to increasingly coarsened forms of entertainment, should we be adopting and mirroring whatever is current in modern culture and bringing it into our worship? Or should we be equipping ourselves and enabling our youth to view modern American culture—and perhaps especially the entertainment culture—with observant eyes and with renewed minds (Rom. 12.2)?

William Willimon suggests that Christians must be self-consciously and intentionally countercultural. We should not be in the habit of constantly raising wet fingers in the cultural winds to find which way they are blowing, or constantly monitoring surveys in order to accommodate the latest trends in modern fads and tastes.

We should be challenging fads, changing tastes, and exercising the rule of the renewed mind, rather than trying to crowd as close to the cultural fashions as we can. Accommodating the culture may provide momentary popularity, but it ultimately strengthens the culture's hold over us.

Our difficulty may be a fundamental misconception of what worship is. Though we may hear the claim that "God is not interested in worship styles," this statement is a thought cliché—repeated often, unexamined, and thus widely accepted. We cannot read Amos 5 and not understand that God is keenly interested in "worship styles"—and in a far different manner from those who find it necessary to keep repeating that He is not!

It is important to remember, especially in present times, that biblical faith challenges not only the worship of false gods but also the false worship of the true God. To worship "for what I can get out of it" or "to make me feel good" is a common misunderstanding of Christian worship that is causing confusion among believers in nearly all churches today—Protestant and Roman Catholic.

A recent Barna report stated that many churchgoers who find difficulty "connecting with God" have "never been taught much about worship." When we use statistical surveys of the tastes of people whose attitudes reflect our modern entertainment-saturated culture in order to plan our worship, we must ask whether—however unintentionally—the Creator is being displaced by the gods of the age.

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