



May 2004

Dear **MARS HILL AUDIO** Listener,

Many subscribers to the **MARS HILL AUDIO** *Journal* are probably blissfully unaware of the mission statement of our organization. Familiarity with this single sentence isn't a prerequisite for benefitting from our work, but every now and then, when I get in a more didactic mood, I call attention to the rationale behind what we do:

“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.”

That deliberately concise statement was formulated a few years after the work of **MARS HILL AUDIO** was launched, but during the months (years, actually) that this organization was struggling to be born, I always had an intuitive sense of what I was trying to accomplish.

I had long been concerned with understanding the sorts of things in contemporary culture that create obstacles to accepting and living consistently with the claims of the gospel. What are the assumptions about God, about human well-being, about history, about truth, that stand in the way of Christian profession or that compromise Christian faithfulness? What sorts of cultural influences keep unbelievers from finding Christianity plausible, and what sorts of cultural influences keep Christians from living well-ordered lives consistent with the view of life established in Scripture and historically championed by the Church?

There are many Christian pundits and ministries dedicated to understanding contemporary culture solely for the sake of becoming better evangelists. And I imagine we have a number of subscribers who appreciate our work for that reason. But I believe that Christians make a great mistake if they separate proclamation, that is, the announcing of the basic truths of the Gospel, from faithfulness, that is, the living out of all of the consequences of the Gospel. As long as we believe that we can focus on making converts, and let discipleship work itself out, we are probably not making converts who truly turn away from the world's way of explaining itself and the world's way of living.

One doesn't have to look very closely to realize that the Great Commission is not a message about evangelism and conversions, but about discipleship and the continuity of obedience in all things. When we look at the whole of the message of the Bible, we see something much bigger than a message

only about personal renewal and piety. Jesus did not come to teach, suffer, die, and rise again so that we could have comforting insights for living; he comes to bring about a new creation, that is, a radically realigned pattern of life over the whole world and in the concrete experiences of all human endeavors.

It is possible to reduce the Gospel to a form of therapy. That is, it is possible to assume that the basic questions of life are well-asked and well-answered by the world, and then to order our careers, our relationships, our engagement with creation, even our prayers in accordance with a worldly worldview. It is possible then to allow little bursts of encouragement from the Bible to sprinkle refreshingly over our lives, pious and uplifting sentiments with the depth of a greeting card or a bumper-sticker, but just enough to help us through the rough times, to weather the storms, to bring light to our personal darkness. It is possible to assume that our culture's basic understanding of reality is essentially sound, that its institutions are essentially good and just and fitting, in need of only minor adjustment and a religious appendix, and then to order our lives in accordance with our culture's assumptions about things and to use the gospel as an incentive and a mood-brightener.

It is possible to do that, but it is not the message of the Bible. I'm not saying that the gospel is not a message of hope, nor am I suggesting that it's improper to look to Christ for comfort. What I am saying is that we are not faithful disciples if we assume that we can order our lives any way we want to, knowing that Jesus will be there to encourage and lift us up when we feel down. Jesus is not there just to help us with our projects; he is the one who tells us what projects we should be pursuing.

Christianity is more cosmology than therapy. It tells us things about the world of space and time, of history and power, of beauty and justice, of concrete love and embodied action. Christianity offers an account of human nature and of how human life is to be well-lived. And many of the things it tells us about the shape and nature of creation are directly at odds with the accepted wisdom of modern Western culture.

I believe that one of the reasons why Christianity makes less and less of a difference in the events of our society is that Christians have accepted a dualistic understanding of how Christianity is to be received. I've already contrasted the language of therapy with that of cosmology to suggest one dimension of that dualism. Another set of terms that has helped me to think about this is that we are tempted to embrace a merely "adverbial" Christianity. We assume that science and politics and economics and the unfolding of history will supply us with all the nouns and verbs of life, that is, with the basic categories of understanding who we are and what we should be doing, and that Christianity supplies a set of upbeat adverbs: "joyfully," "hopefully," "graciously," "sacrificially," "honestly," "winsomely,"

“justly,” “steadfastly,” “patiently,” “sincerely.” What I am insisting is that Christianity rightly understood has a great claim on the important nouns and the verbs as well.

Another way of describing this dualism is that it assumes that Christianity addresses the subjective aspects of life, while the objective matters are matters of neutral or natural value. One of the mistakes at the heart of this dualism, however we describe it, is the assumption that we are free to define Creation and human nature (e.g. the structure of marriage, the significance of community, the nature of justice, etc.) any way we wish (or any way the cultural institutions around us dictate), and that we only need the Gospel to address our (wholly inward) need for redemption. It’s almost as if we believed that God just happened along one day, discovered a pretty blue planet populated by a rather sorry but well-meaning species stumbling along in the dark, and offered to help them, rather like an omnipotent Good Samaritan. But as I read the message of the Gospel, we only understand the meaning of our salvation properly by beginning with the affirmation of Genesis 1:1, not John 3:16. That is, God’s redeeming work is a recapitulation of his work of Creation, and therefore how we think about and engage the world of space and time and matter is as significant before God as how we think about “spiritual things.”

I am as guilty of forgetting this as anyone. When I set out on this project of analyzing the relationship between Christianity and contemporary culture, I tended to define the matter in terms of Christian *belief* and cultural *forms*. At some level I think I assumed that the really important task was to smuggle Christian ideas into pre-existing cultural institutions. It somehow didn’t occur to me that in many instances, Christianity offers a radical critique of the institutions themselves, because they fail to do justice to the kind of creatures we are and the kind of Creation God has made and loves.

The causes of such dualism are multiple, but one of them is the pressure believers are under in an increasingly post-Christian society to privatize their convictions. It’s a lot easier to get on with one’s life (with fitting in at work or school, with being a good citizen/consumer) if one keeps all things “Christian” in the secret chambers of one’s heart. Many people prefer to live this way, as it eliminates cognitive dissonance and requires a lot less deliberateness. This dualism is not understood as a compromise of Christian faithfulness, since it is presupposed that Christianity is all about the heart, not the head and body.

It is a guiding editorial assumption of **MARS HILL AUDIO** that there is something deeply wrong with such dualism, that it misrepresents the Biblical account of God’s relationship with Creation and with human beings. Further, we believe that, apart from some hard thought and courageous acts, this dualism is likely to intensify. It should be obvious that Christian assumptions about reality are less influential in Western culture than they

were 50, 100, or 200 years ago, and the trend line seems to be getting steeper. In such a time, there is a greater need for deliberateness about our cultural lives; those who are capable of thinking more seriously about such things are failing in their service of the Body of Christ (and in loving God and their neighbors) if they neglect such matters in favor of a “Why can’t we all just get along?” theology and practice.

Now in our eleventh year, we are grateful to the many generous supporters (most of whom we do not know personally) who have continued to assist us in this important work. I wish that all of our supporters could see the mail we receive every week from grateful subscribers to our *Journal*, people who have been encouraged toward a greater level of cultural obedience in their own lives by an insight of one of our guests. I can’t tell you how many times people have said or written to me that such-and-such a book really helped them understand some aspect of current cultural life, and that they probably never would have heard about it save through the **MARS HILL AUDIO** *Journal*. That’s exactly why we’re here.

Please help us continue this important work for the Church by making a contribution to our Spring fund-raising drive. We have traditionally only sent two letters a year requesting funds, a very modest number by the standards of many non-profits. But because you have all been so generous in the past, we’re able to restrict the frequency of such communication. Please help us continue that tradition (and carve out a mid-year tax deduction for yourself).

And, as always, let me also ask you to let us know about friends who may be interested in our work, to whom we will send a free sample tape or CD. This is our most cost-effective way of finding new subscribers. Better yet, why not give a gift subscription to someone you know?

Finally, let me encourage you to talk to friends about the ideas you have discovered through our work. I’m especially eager to know that there are conversations going on in local churches about how our shared lives need to be appropriately counter-cultural. Judging from the Christian best-sellers, the number of believers who thoughtfully resist the spirit of the age is not very large, and if such things can’t be addressed in local congregations and parishes, we are most to be pitied.

Thank you again for your interest in **MARS HILL AUDIO**.

Sincerely,



Ken Myers  
Producer