

*D. G. Hart*

## Mars Hill Audio Turns Ten

*The following remarks were given by Dr. Darryl Hart at a dinner in honor of Ken Myers, and celebrating 10 years of Mars Hill Audio. This event was held on October 12, 2003 at the Lafayette Hotel in Stanardsville, Virginia.*

Before Ken Myers there was Francis Schaeffer. That is to say that before Mars Hill Audio one of the only places to go to hear a conservative Protestant reflect on cultural expressions (outside the classroom setting where you weren't guaranteed you'd be hearing a conservative) was the little village in the Swiss Alps where a funny short man who wore knickers and a goatee consoled confused young adults that their questions about meaning were valuable.

Schaeffer was not a bad thing. A year or so before I met Ken I made the pilgrimage to Huemoz in southwestern Switzerland and took the ceremonial walk with the evangelical answer to Russell Kirk. The good thing was that Schaeffer was talking about ideas, paintings, music, and movies that young born-again Protestants were encountering in college or university. The bad thing was that his analysis could be downright wooden. Just to give one example, from *A Christian View of the West*, Schaeffer here discusses the films of Bergman and Antonioni and concludes in this way:

These philosophic films have spoken clearly about where people have come. Modern people are in trouble indeed. These things are not shut up within the art museums, the concert halls and rock festivals, the stage and movies, or the theological seminaries. People function on the basis of their world-view. Therefore, society has changed radically. This is the reason – not a less basic one – that it is unsafe to walk at night through the streets of many of today's cities. As a man thinketh, so he is.

To his credit, Schaeffer was talking about art and ideas that our parents weren't. But like our parents (or at least mine), Schaeffer's analysis too often headed off in logical sequences not unlike the domino-theory that passed for anti-communism; if we don't answer Bergman at the local cinema, the Soviets will use our wives and daughters for domestic help.

Schaeffer's utilitarian cultural apologetic partly justifies Robert Webber's recent differentiation between tradition and new evangelicals. Traditionalists like Schaeffer, according to Webber, relied heavily on reason, propositional truth, and epistemology to trace the bad fruit of cultural expression to the bad root of humanity in rebellion against God. The new evangelicals, who are communitarian, internet-savvy, and

“incarnational” don’t cotton to such didactic forms of analysis.

So where does that leave Ken Myers and Mars Hill Audio? Let’s be clear that Ken is not an evangelical (not over my dead body). Nor is Mars Hill Audio representative of the so-called new evangelicals. When historians write the history of American evangelicalism after Carl Henry and Francis Schaeffer, they may not claim Ken for their project, even though they will certainly try to use Mars Hill Audio to demonstrate the cultural sophistication of the new evangelicals. Ken is a Presbyterian-in-exile and his work as a cultural critic and journalist needs to be seen as a restoration of an older Protestant outlook.

A good example of Ken’s theological orientation comes from *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes*. Here is a different approach to Christ and culture from Schaeffer’s. It is no less theological; actually it is more. And because of the added theology, specifically the doctrine of creation, Ken is able to go where no twentieth-century Presbyterian had gone before:

... saying that human culture is not holy is not to say that it is worthless. It is still part of the image of God in us for men and women to pursue cultural activities. The experience of human culture in all its diversity is the way we enjoy being human. And enjoy it we must. Being human is the most profound aspect of the creation for which we ought to give thanks. If we can enjoy the beauty of all else in creation, how foolish to resent or ignore the image of the Creator, the pinnacle of creation. It is being human, not being saved – it is the image of God in us, not regeneration – that establishes the capacity to recognize the distinctions between the beautiful and the ugly, between order and chaos, between the creative and the multiplying.

We were created beings before we were redeemed beings. God’s benediction on creation has not been entirely erased by the Fall. Jesus Himself is not only divine, He is human. Does He enjoy it, or simply endure it? Until our bodies are made new, like the body Jesus now enjoys,

our calling is not to escape fleshly existence, nor to sanctify culture (since it is “common,” shared by believer and unbeliever, and cannot be made holy), but to so influence our culture as to make it more consistent with the created nature of man, and to sanctify our own lives, because we are also living in the Spirit, which our minds set on the things that are above.

We acknowledge this distinction between the holy and the common each time we partake of the Lord’s Supper. Every meal I eat, I eat to the glory of God, under the Lordship of Christ. But not every meal I eat has the significance and the power to transform that Lord’s Supper has. It is a holy meal in a way last week’s visit to Burger King is not. Not everyone is allowed to eat this holy meal, but everyone is allowed to eat at Burger King. If there are deficiencies within the culture that have produced Burger King, the deficiencies are not due to the fact that it is not a holy place, but because it violates or compromises aspects of our experience as human beings. If we believe that to be the case, our goal as Christians would not be to sanctify the Whopper, to make it into a sacrament, but to attempt to influence our culture to make it more fitting for human beings bearing the image of God.

By remembering the doctrine of creation and distinguishing it from either a Reformed epistemology, or the five points of Calvinism, Ken has been freer to move about in the cultural arena. His goal has not been to tally up winners and losers, saints and villains, but to reflect on the degree to which any cultural expression or arrangement, from Christians or pagans, conforms to the pattern of God’s created order.

When I think about Ken’s work, then, both personally and historically, I come away impressed by and grateful for his achievement. Before Ken I only had Schaeffer to guide me. Now thanks to Ken, the work of Mars Hill, and our conversations, I have not simply Ken and the tapes but Leon Kass, Wendell Berry, Richard Neuhaus, Stanley Hauerwas, Gilbert Meilaender and others to lean on for insight and wisdom. But Ken’s work has been important not only for me and my appreciation of the

world around me. It has also functioned as a breakthrough in Reformed circles (whether Ken acknowledges it or not). He has figured out a way around the somewhat stale and Neo-Calvinist categories of antithesis and common grace. In their place he has recovered the paleo-Protestant teachings of creation, providence and redemption. I know Ken is sometimes frustrated that more people, even listeners, don't seem to get it. But it has only been ten years of Mars Hill Audio and only fifteen since the publication of *All God's Children*. And Ken knows it takes a while for seeds planted in cultivated soil to bear good fruit.

So I conclude with a toast: Ken often says, with great effect, that evangelicals finally arrived at the banquet of western culture (under the guidance of Schaeffer I might add) just when the food fight was breaking out. Here's to Ken Myers, who is the best maitre-de for finding a table at the banquet close enough to observe the fight without getting splattered and gives the best advice for sampling the banquet's choicest food and drink.