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5-2-2016

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Recommended Citation

Gesch, S. (2016). Prince, Common Grace, and What is Within. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/student_work/20

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Prince, Common Grace, and What is Within Us

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Shelbi Gesch

The year was 1985, early February, your average middle-school-girl slumber party. The pizza had been consumed, the video was over, and we were sitting in Mindy's basement listening to music. Someone flipped through the stack of albums and pulled out a vinyl copy of Prince's *Purple Rain*, complete with lyrics printed on the dust jacket inside.

If you know Prince, and you know *Purple Rain*, you can predict where the rest of this story is going: eight twelve-year-old girls gathered around the first piece of lyrical pornography we'd ever experienced. I'll spare you the lyrics in question—the one song we were nervously giggling over was one of the more obscure songs from the album. We knew enough about the subject matter to be horrified and mystified all at once.

So, when I admit to enjoying Prince's music, what first comes to mind is that late night in Mindy's basement, sitting on our sleeping bags, listening to Prince's mind-blowingly amazing music and reading his hymns to sex. I don't freely admit to being a Prince fan, and those memories are why. I still kind of associate him with perversion. But my other memories of Prince's music involve cruising around a skating rink, wearing blisters on my heels in rented roller skates, fueled by Cyndi Lauper, Queen, Billy Joel, Michael Jackson, and the exhilaration of adolescent hormonal energy.

When I first read of Abraham Kuyper's concept of "common grace"—the idea that even people outside Christendom can be used in the furthering of His kingdom—it cast a new light on how I evaluated art and music. I had been taught to use [Philippians 4:8](#) ("whatever is pure...") as my litmus test in terms of music choices. However, most of the music I enjoyed failed at least one item in the list. Prince was only the most extreme example. What do you do when the music you love shares album space with songs that qualify as audible pornography? Is there room for any kind of grace here?

The answer given me as a teenager was to "avoid every appearance of evil," which I translated to mean, "avoid getting yourself judged by not admitting you like this stuff." For a time in my high school years, I avoided "secular music" completely, and a lot of what fueled that decision was fear. Fear that the darkness would take over and I'd lose my tenuous grip on righteousness, that the sin in what I heard would seep into my soul and change me like an osmosis of doubt.

I came of age in the height of the "[purity movement](#)" era. In my circles, the orthodox answer to Prince (and sex in general) was to "just say no." Until you're married, of course. So I said "no." And then I got married. As I grew into my marriage, I realized that I didn't suddenly start being a sexual being when I said, "I do." I had to come to terms with an entire facet of myself that I (and the culture in which I was raised) had completely ignored.

I started to understand that what Prince was trying to express was the power of sex—that it's worth talking about, even celebrating. He wanted to bring it in the light and glorify it. But the problem that pushes his songs over the line into pornography isn't just words, but the way in which he idolizes the act and removes it from its God-ordained context. He had the idea half right: sex is a powerful thing, but like an uninsulated electrical wire, any powerful thing out of its proper context is extremely dangerous.

I eventually reconsidered my "guilt by association" regarding music. There's a difference between experiencing a piece of art and dwelling on it (returning to [Philippians 4:8](#)). It's unnecessary to run the other direction every time something bearing the marks of a fallen culture comes along. *Everything* in this world bears the marks of a fallen culture. In place of my misinterpretation of "avoid every appearance of evil," I found that "Greater is He that is in me than he that is in the world."

I began to understand that art dealing with the dark and messy aspects of life was not only allowable, but a gift. Maybe using art to bring light to the darkness is something God had intended all along. Maybe sharing our own questions and doubts through creativity is a way to bridge ourselves into community, to feel a little less alone walking the earth.

I've spent the last couple weeks exploring a quote I heard in a lecture:

“If you bring forth what is within you,

what you bring forth will save you.

If you do not bring forth what is within you,

what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”¹

I interpret it this way: when someone knows all your dark corners and closets and chooses to love you anyway, this is the definition of love in its most powerful sense. And what is the Gospel, but the ultimate manifestation of that kind of love? Wrestling with the pain and darkness in ourselves should drive us to finding the salvation we need in the love of Christ. In the opposite manner, if we deny that which is within us, we deny ourselves the knowledge and awareness of our profound need for salvation.

As an artist and a writer, I hear a challenge in this statement. That which is within us is terrifying. Confronting that darkness-within incites a mortal fear that what is inside us will somehow rise up and extinguish the light. But what is within us is both light and darkness, and even David the psalmist acknowledged that both are worthy of words and music. It's a profound temptation to let fear convince us that we can hold in the darkness, but if we do, we forget that just as God promised that perfect love overcomes fear, the light will always, *always* push away the darkness; however small the candle, however moonless the night.

Footnotes

1. [Gospel of St. Thomas](#) ↩