Television – A Christian Response

Years ago I witnessed something that has been written indelibly in my memory. The occasion was a week-long summer conference for high school students on the campus of a major university. I was serving as the leader of one of the groups at this conference. In fact, I was given the elite students. They were described as the "Advanced School" because they had attended the conference previously, and they had leadership positions on their respective campuses.

Each of our teaching sessions, which were usually focused on matters of worldviews, theology, cultural criticism, and evangelism, began with music. Before one memorable session the music leader began to play the theme music from various television shows of the past. To my great surprise the students began to sing the lyrics to each of the tunes with great gusto. They were able to respond to each theme without hesitation; the songs were ingrained in their memories. Obviously they had heard the themes and watched the programs numerous times during their relatively young lives. Whether it was "Gilligan's Island," "The Beverly Hillbillies," "Green Acres," "Sesame Street," or a host of others, they knew all of them. Whereas many of these bright students could not relate a good grasp of biblical content, they had no problem recalling the content of frivolous television programs that were not even produced during their generation.

The Rise and Influence of TV

In a short period of time television has cemented itself in our cultural consciousness. As you read the following titles of television programs certain memories will probably come to mind: "The Milton Berle Show," "I Love Lucy," "The Steve Allen Show," "The $64,000 Question," "The Millionaire," "Leave It To

Beaver," "Gunsmoke," "The Andy Griffith Show," "Candid Camera," "As the World Turns," "The Twilight Zone," "Captain Kangaroo," "Dallas," "Happy Days," "Let's Make a Deal," "The Tonight Show," "Sesame Street," "M*A*S*H*," "All in the Family," "The Cosby Show," "Monday Night Football."

Perhaps you remember a particular episode, a certain phrase, an indelible scene, a unique character, or, as with my high school friends, the title tune. These television programs, and a litany of others, have permeated our lives. It is difficult, if not impossible, to find a more pervasive, influential conduit of ideas and images than television. For a large segment of the population "television has so refashioned and reshaped our lives that it is hard to imagine what life was like before it."(1)

This powerful medium began to gather the attention of the population soon after World War II. "By 1948, the number of stations in the United States had reached 48, the cities served 23, and sales of TV sets had passed sales of radios."(2) But it was not until "1952 . . . that TV as we know it first began to flow to all sections of the United States."(3) Interest was so intense that "by 1955 about two-thirds of the nation's households had a set; by the end of the 1950s there was hardly a home in the nation without one."(4) And by 1961 "there were more homes in the United States with TV than with indoor plumbing."(5) Such statistics have continued to increase to the point where "99 percent of all households possess at least one TV, and most have two or more."(6)

So the middle- to late-twentieth century has included the development of one of the most dramatic and powerful methods of communication in recorded history.

Can TV Be Redeemed?

But as with all media, the Christian should weigh carefully

the use and abuse of TV. Some are quick to call it an “idiot box” while continuing to watch it endlessly. Others, borrowing from a famous poem by T.S. Eliot, may disparagingly refer to TV as a “wasteland.” Still others, as with certain evangelists, may claim that TV is the most powerful tool yet devised for the spreading of the gospel.(7)

But whether your perception of TV is negative or positive, the Christian must understand that the medium is here to stay, and it will continue to have a significant influence on all of us, whether we like it or not. And whether we are discussing TV or any other media, it is the Christian’s responsibility “to maintain an informed, critical approach to all media while joyfully determining how best to use every medium for the glory of God.”(8)

There is no doubt this is a challenging endeavor, because at first glance it may be difficult to picture ways in which TV can be used legitimately for God’s glory. Perhaps many of us tend to have what may be called the “Michal Syndrome.” Michal, King David’s wife, rebuked David for dancing before the ark of God. She had concluded that the “medium” of dancing in this manner was shameful. But Scripture obviously demonstrates that she was the one to be rebuked in that she “had no child to the day of her death” (2 Samuel 6:12 23). We will do well to heed at least one of the lessons of this story and be cautious if we are tempted to reject TV outright as a potentially unredeemable avenue of expression.

This is an important thought in light of the fact that many highly esteemed thinkers have espoused pessimistic analyses of TV. For example, Malcolm Muggeridge, the great English sage, wrote: “Not only can the camera lie, it always lies.”(9) In fairness we must add that Muggeridge added balance in his critique and even agreed to be interviewed on William Buckley’s “Firing Line,” but his skepticism continues to be well-chronicled. Jacques Ellul has written in the same vein. Neil Postman, another respected critic, wrote an oft-quoted

book entitled *Amusing Ourselves To Death* in 1985. In his volume Postman argues that Aldous Huxley's belief that "what we love will ruin us" is a perfect description of TV.(10) More recently Kenneth Myers, an insightful cultural critic, also has concluded that it is highly doubtful that the medium can be redeemed(11) (that is, brought under the Lordship of Christ and conformed to His teachings). Such gloomy perspectives continue to be expressed by many of those who study media.

On the other hand, such viewpoints have been questioned, if not rejected, by many other well-qualified critics. Their analyses of TV usually are based upon a more optimistic view of technology. Clifford Christians, a communications scholar, writes: "I defend television. Contrary to Postman and Ellul, I do not consider it the enemy of modern society, but a gift of God that must be transformed in harmony with the redeemed mind."(12) Quentin Schultze, another communications scholar, believes that many Christian intellectuals "are comfortable with printed words and deeply suspicious of images, especially mass-consumed images."(13) David Marc, an American Civilization professor, offers a provocative outlook by relating that the "distinction between taking television on one's own terms and taking it the way it presents itself is of critical importance. It is the difference between activity and passivity. It is what saves TV from becoming the homogenizing, monolithic, authoritarian tool that the doomsday critics claim it is."(14) We must view TV with an active mind that responds with a Christian worldview. We are responsible for what TV communicates to us.

How Should We Respond to TV?

So it is obvious there are great disparities of opinion among those who think about TV more than most of us. How can we humbly approach the subject while considering both positions? I propose that we reflect on an answer to this question by giving attention to several facets of a response.

TV and Communication

First, we should remember that as with many contemporary forms of communication and entertainment, the Bible does not include explicit insights about TV. We are left to investigate applicable passages and gather perspectives based upon our study. Let's consider some of those passages and see if we can discover needed insights.

Neil Postman relates an intriguing thought regarding the second of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth" (Exod. 20:4, NASB). Postman's response to this verse is that "it is a strange injunction to include as part of an ethical system unless its author assumed a connection between forms of human communication and the quality of a culture."(15) Postman's statement strongly suggests that the ways in which we communicate significantly influence our lives. He continues by stating that "iconography thus became blasphemy so that a new kind of God could enter a culture."(16)

There is much food for thought in such statements. First, it is true that the "author," in this case God via the personality of Moses, was emphasizing the importance of "forms of communication." But it is a misapplication of the text to conclude anything more than that it is not permissible for man to form visual images of God. Second, it is also true that "forms of communication" are connected to the "quality of a culture." But again it is a mis- application to conclude that visual images cannot be a positive or beneficial part of that quality. Third, it is not true that "iconography thus became blasphemy" for the people of God. If that were so it would make a mockery of the tabernacle and temple that were so important in the cultural and religious life of the Israelites (in particular, see Exod. 31 and 35-40). Both structures contained icons that were representative of God's revelation, and they were filled with images that were pleasing to the

eye. There was an aesthetic dimension. Of course the icons were not representative of God Himself, but they were representative of His actions and commands. They symbolized God's presence and power among His people.

The point of this dialogue with Postman and his analysis of the second commandment is that he has related one of the more prominent biases against TV. That is, TV is an image-bearer, and thus it is inferior to forms of communication that are word-bearers. Even if we were to concede that this is true, it does not follow that the inferiority of TV means that it cannot be a legitimate form of communication. It simply means that it may be inferior to other forms. Steak may be superior to hamburger, but that doesn't mean steak should be our only food.

Let's reverse the emphasis upon the superiority of written communication by considering a contrast between reading the letters of the apostle Paul and actually being in his presence and hearing him expound upon them. Most of us would probably say that actually hearing Paul is superior to reading him, but few of us would say that reading his letters is not a worthwhile enterprise. If we follow Postman's reasoning, and the reasoning of other critics, we may be tempted to conclude that the issue of inferiority/superiority could lead us to reject reading Paul because that does not provide the same level of communication as would his actual presence. Television may be inferior to other things in our lives, but that doesn't mean it must excluded.

The Cultural Mandate and TV

Second, we should analyze TV in light of the cultural mandate. Clifford Christians has related that Christians "often seem to be aliens in a strange land." That is, we are living in a secularized society that makes it increasingly difficult to assert biblical principles. But he goes on to draw a parallel between the ancient Israelites in their Babylonian captivity

to our present condition. He quotes the prophet Jeremiah: “Build houses and live in them; and plant gardens, and eat their produce…. And seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare…. For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope'” (Jeremiah 29:4,7,11).

This passage can serve to remind us that we are to “convert cultural forms, not…eliminate them wholesale.”(17) The Israelites were forced to live in a culture not their own, but they were still enjoined to “cultivate” it. In the same sense we should be cultivating the medium of television.

TV Is Still In Its Infancy

Third, we should give thought to the fact that TV is still in its childhood. As a result, it is possible that it has not yet realized its potential beyond the banalities that we tend to associate with it at the present time. A study of the history of various media indicates that all of them have proceeded through stages of development, and that is still true. For example, even though drama was born in ancient Greece, its development had to wait to a great extent until Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Era. During this period, the theater began to acquire its present form, and many were outraged. It was a suspicious and inferior form of communication in the opinion of the learned and pious. And with this development came the idea of a “spectator” who observed the action and dialogue on the stage. This manner of communication or entertainment led the London city fathers to eradicate it from the city into the suburbs. Thus the famous Globe theater was built on the south side of the Thames and not in the walled city.(18)

So it could be that many of us, like the London city fathers, are too impatient, or we are biased toward certain media. We often cry that there is reason to be impatient or biased

because of the TV content that has become so much a part of our lives. Yes, there is too much violence, sex, secularism, and there are too many vapid plots and insipid dialogue. But our concerns about content should not automatically lead us to assume that the medium is irredeemable. Perhaps we have not allowed TV the time it may need to attract its most creative and redeeming champions. And again, this is where the Christian should enter armed with the cultural mandate. The Christian who seeks to communicate through TV should understand its peculiarities and surpass the unimaginative, superficial, narcissistic productions offered by too many contemporary Christians.

TV and Visual Literacy

Fourth, we should give consideration to the possibility that many of us are visually illiterate. Just as the disciples of Jesus were frequently "parable illiterate," we may have need for more insights as to how to react to TV. This may sound strange since such a great percentage of the population spends so much time with TV. Unfortunately, most of us don't "view" TV. Instead, we "watch" TV. That is, we don't often engage in a mental, much less verbal, discussion with the images and dialogue.

The critical viewer of television has the difficult job of translating the tube's images into words. Then the words can be processed by the viewer's mind, evaluated and discussed with other viewers. This is a crucial process that all Christians must engage in if they hope to be discerning users of the tube.(19)

Much of current television is designed to appeal to the emotions, as opposed to the intellect. The frenetic style of MTV, for example, is increasingly used for everything from commercials to news programs. Unless we want to leave TV as a medium that only applies to our emotions, we must find ways to interact intellectually with what TV delivers. And perhaps

more importantly, we need to encourage a new generation to become visually literate to the point that they will begin to affect the use of the medium.

Good Decisions About TV

Fifth, many of us need to make decisions prior to spending time with the medium. This should be done not only for ourselves, but for our children and grandchildren. Perhaps a good rule for turning on the tube is to "map out" what may be worthy of our attention each day. Of course this means that we will have to spend a few minutes to read about what is available. But surely this will prove to be beneficial. Instead of automatically activating the power switch as part of a daily routine, regardless of what may be "on" at the time, selectivity should be routine.

Television is with us and will continue to exert its influence in ways that are difficult to predict at the present time. The proliferation of cable TV, the increasing interest in satellite systems, the unfolding of futuristic technology, virtual reality, and a host of other developments will probably force us to give even more attention to TV than we have to this point in its history.

So as Christians it appears that we will continue to have the same dilemma: do we reject the medium, or do we redeem it? Since we are called to glorify God in all we do, it appears we should not leave TV out of this mandate. Let us commit ourselves to the redemption of television.

Notes

1. Douglas Gomery, "As the Dial Turns," *Wilson Quarterly* (Autumn 1993), 41.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. John W. Kennedy, "Redeeming the Wasteland," *Christianity*

Today (2 October 1995), 92-102.
6. Quentin J. Schultze, *Redeeming Television* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992), 28.
7. Malcolm Muggeridge, *Christ and the Media* (Grand Rapids, Mich.:
8. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), viii.
9. Kenneth A. Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians & Popular Culture* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1989), 157-77.
10. Clifford G. Christians, "Television: Medium Rare," *Pro Rege* (March 1990), 2.
11. Schultze, 28.
12. David Marc, "Understanding Television," *The Atlantic Monthly* (August 1984), 35-36.
13. Postman, 9.
14. Ibid.
15. Christians, 5.
16. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Creators* (New York: Random House, 1992), 308 9.
17. Schultze, 94-95.

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