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A Christian Perspective on Watching Secular TV Programming

S. JOSEPH KIDDER & DAVID PENNO

The Text

“FINALLY, BROTHERS AND SISTERS, WHATEVER IS TRUE, WHATEVER IS NOBLE, WHATEVER IS RIGHT, WHATEVER IS PURE, WHATEVER IS LOVELY, WHATEVER IS ADMIRABLE--IF ANYTHING IS EXCELLENT OR PRAISEWORTHY--THINK ABOUT SUCH THINGS.”

PHILIPPIANS 4:8

influences how they view the world and shapes their perception of God. Although a few families have opted to eliminate the viewing of all TV programming, this is becoming more difficult with the proliferation of media. So Christian parents need to both manage TV program viewing in their homes, and teach their children how to manage their personal viewing habits. Parents can lead the way by modeling this in their own homes.

60

Introduction

This article is designed to help parents educate their children how to manage the viewing of television (TV) programming from a Christian perspective. We will address the viewing of TV programming through the various media available today. Although people use the traditional TV set less, research indicates that they watch more programming via a variety of sources (TV sets, iPads, internet, etc.). The principles addressed in this article also apply to movies in the theater, videos on YouTube, and other visual media.

Television programming has a powerful impact on the minds of children today. It

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Research on Viewing TV Programming

According to research conducted by the University of Michigan Health System in 2010¹, on average, children ages 2-5 spend 32 hours a week watching television broadcasts, DVDs, DVR recordings, videos, and using game consoles. Kids ages 6-11 spend about 28 hours a week in front of the TV. The researchers also reported that 71% of 8-18 year-olds have a TV in their bedroom. Media technology now offers more ways to access TV content via the Internet, cell phones, iPads and tablets; today 41% of TV viewing is through these alternative avenues. This has led to an increase in time spent viewing TV content, even though watching on a traditional TV set has declined. So there is an even greater need to manage the TV viewing of children.

The same study found that in “53% of households of 7th-12th graders there are no rules about TV watching.” Also, many parents encourage their toddlers to watch television as a pseudo baby

sitter. Yet TV viewing has been shown to hinder brain development, increase aggressive behavior, and lower school performance among children.

All of this would strongly suggest that Christian parents should manage TV watching in their homes, if they have young children. These children should not be exposed to such a powerful influence without responsible control and supervision. Parents who want to raise their children to walk with God will plan accordingly.

Biblical Principles

When dealing with Christian moral and social ethics, it is not enough to evaluate the scientific evidence for and against something; we must also understand those findings in view of the biblical principles and values. Christians must have a commitment to examine the scriptures to identify the basic spiritual values that should inform moral and ethical situations.

Since the Bible does not mention television and its programming, we must search for some guidelines relating to the Christian lifestyle that can be helpful in determining what should be the Christian's attitude and behavior toward television programs. The Christian should be guided by these principles as they decide whether to watch a particular television program or not.

The Bible exhorts Christians to be careful about what enters their minds and thoughts. Paul encourages us to focus our thinking in what is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, and of good reputation. (Philippians 4:8). So any TV programing we choose should bring into our minds that which is pure and uplifting, and will aid in our spiritual development. The apostle also states that what we allow to enter our minds changes us. "But we all... beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed in the same image." (2 Corinthians 3:18). Christians need to be careful about what influences their thinking because they will eventually emulate what they watch.

Ellen White describes how Christians should focus their thinking on Jesus: "God desires men and women to think soberly and candidly. They are to ascend to a higher and still higher grade,

commanding a wider and still wider horizon. Looking unto Jesus, they are to be changed into His image. They are to spend their time in searching for the deep, everlasting truths of heaven.... And as they learn of Him, their motives and sympathies become firm and unchanging."²

So how should Christian families relate to secular television programming in the home? We will first explore if the worldview of secular television conflicts with the Christian worldview, and then we will describe some principles and practices that can help believers manage the impact of secular programs on their families.

Secular Worldview vs. Christian Worldview Television and Secular Thought

William Johnsson, in *Meeting the Secular Mind*, indicates that a secular mind-set is a polar opposite of the philosophy of a Christian. He states that millions of Americans go to church, but that is rarely displayed on television. "Millions of people pray—but rarely on television. Many people make decisions based on Christian principles—but television overlooks them. On television, people seem to go to church only for a wedding or a funeral. Sometimes church provides the setting for comic interlude. Clergymen tend to be portrayed as inept, blundering, or 'prissy'—sometimes as cheats and liars."³

God is rarely mentioned in a positive way on television, although in actual life many people follow him faithfully. In fact, most of the people in the United States believe in God and turn to Him in prayer either regularly or occasionally. "Many will honestly and genuinely voice desperate prayers in situations of fear or extremity. But movies censor out this reflection of real life more often than not."⁴

The worldview and secular environment portrayed on television is influencing Christians; it is virtually impossible to avoid it. Without knowing it or even feeling it, spiritual values may be discarded to embrace those of the secular mind. People may be faithful churchgoers and follow the patterns of the Christian life; but within themselves they have become secularists.

People of influence in the TV industry are attempting to change the worldview of viewers. Ken Matto cites the following:

“If we can start changing attitudes in this country, we can start changing behavior” Grant Tinker, Former Chairman of NBC TV.

“Objectivity is a fallacy...there are different opinions, but you don’t give them equal weight” Robert Bazell of NBC News.

The Lichtman Rothman survey of media leaders concluded that “of today’s leaders...90% favor abortion...91% favor homosexuality...and only 14% attend any kind of church.”⁵

Constant TV watching can shape the Christian to think in secular ways. So we must manage what we watch because it influences our thinking.

Television and God

Perhaps the biggest problem with television is not violence, profanity, or sex, but the absence of God. People on television seem to live, solve their problems, plan for the future, marry, and raise kids without reference to God.

One study published in 1994 assessed “the portrayal of religion on fictional prime time network television; they proceeded to determine the frequency and distribution of religious affiliation, the range of religious behaviors, and the valence (positive or negative), salience (importance), and context (humorous or serious) of the religious behaviors engaged in by speaking characters.”⁶ The researchers reviewed 100 episodes over five weeks. They found that “the religious side of characters’ lives is not typically presented on television”. Analyzing 1,462 characters, the researchers found that 5.6% had an identifiable religious affiliation. “Religious activity was infrequently presented. When it was portrayed, it was rarely a central theme in the story-line and it was most often framed as a personal and private activity. This study concludes that the infrequent presentation of religion and spirituality tends to symbolically convey the message that religion is not very important because it is rarely a factor in the lives of the people on TV or the social setting in which they are portrayed.”⁷ Though this study was

done in 1990, few would argue that today secular television offers a more positive or accurate view of religion. Indeed, it seems to be worse.

Others claim that TV alters how we perceive reality as Christians. Television facilitates a visual experience that is a highly reinterpreted experience from an artificial perspective. This simulation becomes our own new reality. We abandon the natural world created by God in favor of the one recreated by man. Negative emotions, violence, and carnage get the viewer’s attention faster and hold it longer than the positive, the peaceful, or the beautiful. Therefore, TV focuses on the former, making the latter appear as unusual and infrequent in real life.

Constant television viewing could contribute to Christians becoming people who are blown away by every wind of doctrine and unable to distinguish fact from fiction.⁸

Television and the Myths of the World

Television programming portrays a certain reality and a version of life contrary to the Christian way of life. Television often tells us that happiness can be obtained primarily by material possessions, popularity, or power.

Adults and children see people on television that are beautiful, drive fancy cars, live in magnificent homes, wear the best clothes, and live every imaginable life style in full autonomy, and frequently without accountability for any behavior.⁹

Television and its programming suggest that certain human characteristics, such as being wealthy, good-looking, or physically strong, are the only ways to be successful in society. The Bible, on the other hand, affirms that what matters in life is to know God and to walk with Him (see 1 John 1:6). The message of the Bible is loud and clear: once a person receives God’s gift of grace and salvation, God leads believers to focus on eternal spiritual matters above transitory worldly attachments. Consequently the imitation and mastery of television behavior become the standard by which we can assess success and failure of where we are on our spiritual journey.¹⁰

Parents frequently work long hard hours at jobs they dislike to acquire luxury while they

drown in massive consumer debt. This workaholic syndrome leads to strained family relationships and divorce. Failing to achieve the computerized and synthesized beauty found in the television world is viewed as a tragedy so profound that young and old alike drift to eating disorders, develop neurosis, and practice self-medication in order to cope.¹¹

As children watch television they become products of an image factory that tells them how to behave toward their parents and peers. They are also told what to want, what to ask for, what to expect, and even what to demand from others. It is no wonder that some young people have such a profound sense of entitlement. They come to believe the world should give them many luxuries as a birthright; that parents should pay for cars, clothes, and college; that the latest fashion is what is acceptable; that the beautiful people are more valuable than the average, that good Christians can look and act like Beyoncé, Miley Cyrus, Justin Timberlake, or “gangsta” rappers with no moral dilemma; that junk food is the primary food group for most people, or that a happy meal will make you happy.¹²

Gerbner and Gross, from the University of Pennsylvania, have discovered that heavy television viewers have opinions about the world that differ from factual reality. They see the world as having more professionals, athletes, entertainers and detectives than it really has. They think society is more affluent than it is. They see the world as more dangerous than it is and, as a result, are more fearful than light viewers or non-viewers.¹³ This causes young people to desire the lifestyle of the rich and famous, while creating fear that controls important aspects of their lives.

Television and Christian Moral Values

Jerry Mander, a former president of CBS television, in his controversial book *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, states that television does not lie sometimes, but all of the time. It lies in its portrayal of life, in its reporting of the news, in its solution to complex problems, and in its debasement of accepted moral values. On the one hand, television legitimizes prejudice, dishonesty, and selfishness; on the other hand, it glorifies perversion of sex, drugs, drinking, and smoking.¹⁴ This constant

corruption of the truth will ultimately influence all and will have a profound effect on morality, way of life, and relationship with God.

Paul affirms that Christians are transformed by the renewing of their minds (Romans 12:1-2). Reinforcement is important in the process of developing attitudes toward right and wrong. Parents must know how to make competent ethical decisions based on Christian values and principles, and then teach their children to do the same. Parents must be aware that television is another authority figure that can work against this process.

Christians Management of TV Viewing

Is there any place for television in the Christian home? Many see the potential for good in spite of the problems, yet for some Christians the answer is no. There is no simplistic and clear-cut answer to the problem. Moreover, many of those who object to the presence of television do it theoretically, while in practice they watch television programming and allow their children to do the same. So there is a need for guidelines to help families practice a Christian approach to watching secular TV programming.

The Control of Television

Most Christians will continue to view TV programming in their home and elsewhere, and allow their children to watch it. Children must be taught to manage properly what they are exposed to. Television is no exception. It is important that when families choose to have a television, they show and teach children how to manage its viewing. When parents are involved in helping their children understand the nature of television and how to view it with a critical mind, children seem better able to differentiate between real people, realistic characters, and fantasy characters.

Here are some suggestions for those that keep a television in their home.

Limit Viewing Time

An effective means of reducing television consumption among children is to limit its use. This can be done in two ways. One way is to

forbid all television viewing on school days. This removes the pressure on children to rush through homework to watch their favorite programs. Another option is to permit the children to watch television during the week, but restrict its use to a maximum of an hour or two a day. Parents can implement such a plan, provided they present their children with wholesome activities to fill the hours formerly devoted to television. In fact, for most children, a rich social life is more fulfilling and rewarding than television consumption.

Evaluate the Television Content

Unless we want to leave TV as a medium that applies to our emotions, we must find ways to interact intellectually with what TV delivers. It is the Christian's responsibility "to maintain an informed, critical approach to all media while determining how best to use every medium for the glory of God."¹⁵

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 critical. 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."¹⁶ We must view TV with an active mind that responds with a Christian worldview. We are responsible for what TV communicates to us.

Here is a list of questions to help the Christian evaluate perceptions of the mass media. It would be helpful to all who wish to leave a television in their home to give some serious consideration to these questions.

1. Does the presentation contribute to the understanding of worthwhile ideas?
2. Does the presentation help to clarify issues of the times?
3. Does the presentation attempt to put the richest thoughts into the clearest language?
4. Does the presentation maintain a balance between emotional and intellectual appeals?
5. Does the presentation accurately portray normal life expectations?
6. Does the presentation draw upon elements of violence, substandard language, or sexual implications to make its point?

7. Does the presentation give evidence of being produced tastefully, thoughtfully, and with some finesse?
8. Does the presentation foster a greater understanding of others and encourage the viewer to treat them with kindness?
9. Does the presentation advance or perpetuate the spiritual values for which one stands?
10. Could the viewer recommend the presentation to a fellow Christian?

Set an Example

No matter what restrictions parents put on their children regarding to television, they do little good unless the parents have learned to control their own desire to watch television. Children learn from example. "It serves no purpose for a parent to forbid his child from viewing television while he continues to watch without remorse. Such hypocrisy teaches the child to disregard other parental commands."¹⁷ Parents must model for their children proper TV viewing habits.

Many of us need to decide prior to spending time with the medium. This should be done not only for ourselves, but also 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. This means that we will have to spend a few minutes to read about what is available. This will prove beneficial. Instead of automatically activating the power switch as part of a daily routine, regardless of what may be "on", selectivity should be routine.¹⁸

Here are some suggestions for managing TV viewing:

1. If you do watch, insist on good shows that cultivate good character and moral values.
2. If possible, have only one television set in the house. Do not keep it in a prominent place. When not being used, cover the set or put it away if it's portable.
3. Carefully select programs that will be interesting and informative to the whole family. Do this ahead of time to eliminate random, spontaneous selection. Don't rely on the set as a diversion too often as it will become habitual. Don't let younger children turn on the television without permission.
4. After watching a program, discuss what was

seen with the family. Encourage Christian discernment by asking whether or not the show would have been pleasing to God. Show your children that they have a right and duty to evaluate, not just passively accept, what the TV program offers them. Their standards are those of Jesus Christ and His church in all aspects of their lives.¹⁹

Conclusion

We have examined some of the biblical principles and challenges as they relate to the effects of television viewing. Since most Christians will continue to have a television and allow their children to watch it, we propose that parents should control and manage the viewing of television programming by their children. This can be done by limiting time, evaluating the television content, and setting an example.

A good place to end is with the advice of the apostle Paul to the Philippians, “And now, my friends, all that is true, all that is noble, all that is just and pure, all that is lovable and gracious, whatever is excellent and admirable—fill all your thoughts with these things.” (Philippians 4:7-8).

How to Use This Article

Below are some suggestions how parents can use this article:

1. Ask the child to discuss the pros and cons to watching TV programming.
2. Have children describe possible alternatives to TV that they would enjoy.
3. Discuss with children how what we allow into our minds will influence us for good and for bad.
4. Parents can discuss biblical principles presented in this article with their children.
5. Review the content of this article with their children.
6. For older children, have them write a review of this article.
7. Show benefit of controlling TV programming viewing.

Notes

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- ⁴ Ibid. p. 17-18.
- ⁵ Matto, K. (n.d.) *The Dangers of Television*. Retrieved from http://www.inplainsite.org/html/dangers_of_television.html. Accessed 05/29/2014
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- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Warholak, G. (1996). Adapted from a pamphlet written by Kevin Perrotta, and published by the Department of Religious Education of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America. Taken from the *OCA Resource Handbook for Lay Ministries*®, by Orthodox Family Life and the original author(s). Retrieved from <http://www.theologic.com/offweb/curreven/tv02.htm>. Accessed 05/30/2014.
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Signs of TV Addiction	
1	You record TV shows that are on the same time the one you are watching.
2	You watch a program with the anticipation of seeing a sinful act, and enjoy it when it comes.
3	You eat your dinner in front of the TV.
4	You neglect your spouse or family time for a TV show.
5	You look forward to a TV show, but you easily neglect spiritual activities.
6	Your conversation is replete with TV reviews and anecdotes.
7	TV replaces your Bible reading, devotion time, or family worship.
8	No one is allowed to speak while the TV is on.
9	You rush home so you will not miss a program.
10	You watch TV late into the night consistently.
11	When company visits, the TV remains on, and you wish they would leave.
12	You let TV do your thinking for you.
13	You turn the TV on the moment you enter a room, or when you awaken in the morning.
14	The TV is on when you are doing your chores.
15	You laugh at the very sin that sent Christ to the cross.
16	You begin to adopt ideas and attitudes contrary to Scripture.
17	You go nowhere but have become a couch potato.