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"To Hear Daddy Singing Again" (Work Station Two)

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Gary B. Swanson

Country and Western singer Anita Cochran made history in 2004 by releasing a brand new song, “(I Wanna Hear) a Cheatin’ Song” from her album *God Created Woman*. This recording was unique for its time because in it Cochran fulfilled a lifelong dream—in a way—of singing with Country and Western legend Conway Twitty, who died of an abdominal aneurysm 11 years before.

Yet Twitty never recorded the song—and he has not returned from the grave.

Actually the Cochran recording itself is a kind of “cheatin’ song” in that during his lifetime Conway Twitty unknowingly provided his part in the piece in more than 50 of his songs. With the help of his wife, who co-produced most of his music, producers used sophisticated computer equipment to stitch together Twitty’s part in the new song from words, phrases, and even single syllables of his previously recorded music. The result is a seamless piece in which

“TO HEAR DADDY SINGING AGAIN”

today and yesterday virtually become one.

“We are thrilled,” gushed Twitty’s daughter Joni Jenkins in an interview. “When we heard this was happening, we couldn’t wait to hear it and to hear Daddy singing again.”

Virtually, of course!

Using technology for a somewhat similar project, several years ago a soft drink company cobbled together vintage video footage of jazz icon Louis Armstrong, who died in 1971, to make a TV commercial look as if he were singing with today’s flamboyant rock star Elton John. If ever there were a prime example of postmodernism’s juxtaposition of disparate images, this would have to be it.

Technology can be great fun. It can make illusion increasingly entertaining—as long as we are in on the joke, as long as we can *voluntarily* suspend disbelief.

Yet some current thinkers are beginning to assert that we are facing “the end of the real.” Christian writer Os Guinness puts it this way:

“Images now dominate words—the visual over the verbal, entertainment over exposition, and the artificial (including virtual reality) over the real and the natural.”¹

Obviously the Louis Armstrong-Elton John commercial was a clever and arresting digital manipulation in the relatively harmless interest of marketing a brand of soft drink. Any semi-sophisticated TV viewer could easily recognize that. But the concept raises a troubling question about what technology will enable communicators to do next. If such skills were in the wrong hands, someone could possibly be able to deceive many into making decisions they wouldn't otherwise make. And it could have potential consequences far more significant than the choice of soft drink. David Dockery points out that “for modernism, there is still a universe to be known, truth to be found. The project of the mind is to go about its discovery. For post-modernism, truth is not to be found but, rather, to be created. What is true is what one believes to be true. Reality is not to be perceived so much as to be conceived or constructed.”²

If Hollywood today can frighten millions of viewers with the stories of Stephen King—even when they know the whole thing is fictional—surely the devil has access to communication skills and media that could be used to influence con-

sumers of the media to do things they would not otherwise. Let's face it: anyone who ever tries to match wits with the devil—on one's own—is hopelessly outclassed.

And now it's become evident that documentaries, once produced only from a journalistic basis in objectivity, have changed their style and approach to the subjective and highly personalized. Even those who resonate completely with the message of such “documentaries” as *Bowling for Columbine* and *Super Size Me* must recognize that they are produced as a genre that is not completely objective, that they undertake their production with intentional, subjective premises.

Because of these new approaches in mass communication, there are those who advocate isolation from popular culture—a monastic answer to the problem. But in media-saturated society, this is *virtually* impossible. Even if one were to consider complete insulation from popular culture, there are times when it becomes intrusive. Like it or not, popular culture is the current that humanity is swimming in. Do fish know they are wet?

The media are a gift from God. But the devil can use them in the same way he can counterfeit or hybridize any of God's other good gifts. This means that we must be ever more careful of the effects of the media on our lives. Can any of us

truly claim that the media have absolutely no influence on us? To what extent does our thinking and behavior derive, consciously or unconsciously, from what is going on in radio and television and motion pictures, magazines and newspapers, blogs and podcasts?

These are the kinds of questions Christians should be asking themselves as they face the millions of messages that the media produce every day. At first glance, some may wonder how the Bible—written thousands of years before television and radio and motion pictures and the Internet—could be of any help in withstanding the insidious influence that these media can have. But the timeless principles of God's Word will never be obsolete.

In his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul lists very practical ways to evaluate the messages in the media: "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on

these things" (4:8, KJV).

It's important not to overlook the underlying basis for this list. It admonishes Christians to analyze and evaluate everything they see and hear and think about. "The story of God's action in Jesus Christ," says Millard Erickson, "is the criterion by which all interpretations of reality are to be measured."³ The explicit and implicit messages that emanate from today's media must be evaluated for their value—or lack of it. A thinking Christian must never become a clueless "couch potato."

With reality becoming such a slippery concept in today's discourse, Jesus' talk of the deception of "even the elect" (Mark 13:22, KJV) takes on ever new dimensions.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies Fat Minds* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1994), p. 95.
- ² David S. Dockery, ed., *The Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), p. 109.
- ³ Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), pp. 90, 91.

