

The Christian and Television

Television has become an integral part of modern life. It has become the place where we keep up to date with the news and weather. It has become the place where we learn about and see the political leaders of our countries. It is the place where clothing and accessory fashions are shown and popularised. It is often the place where people find their education about nature, science, the arts and the economy. Television is no doubt the primary form of entertainment in modern culture, given the amount of hours people spend watching it. It has become a central figure in our social lives, much of our conversation revolves around a programme, advertisements or other things we saw on television.

With the rise of various technologies, when we speak of television, we are no longer only speaking of watching television broadcasts. We can now include watching videos and DVDs, and much of the Internet. When we put these together, large portions of our lives are given to television.

What should a Christian's attitude be toward television? Some Christians have no television at all in their homes. Others seem to have it on all the time. What are some biblical principles to deal with the issue of television?

To begin with, it goes without saying that there is nothing wrong with the actual device used to view things on. That is simply an object and it is not moral or immoral to possess one, or for that matter to reject one. But having said that, there are a number of concerns related to television that we ought to raise.

When Paul was dealing with so-called non-moral issues in his epistles, he listed some principles by which Christians can judge if something is pleasing to God and edifying to their Christian lives. The first principle is:

Is it helpful and edifying? *"All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not." (1 Corinthians 10:23).*

Paul was countering the libertarian tendencies of the Corinthians, whom he was probably quoting. He replies that yes, he regards all non-moral or morally neutral things as lawful – they are 'legal' for him. But they are not all helpful. They will not all be to his advantage spiritually, they are not all helpful in the sense that they will aid him in his transformation to be Christlike. Any neutral object which proves to be spiritually disadvantageous becomes immoral when used. Applying this to television we must ask, 'Is this television to my advantage? Does it build me up?'

TV is not always helpful **practically**. When we think about the hours of our lives that we spend watching TV, it is truly amazing. Some statistics state that the average South African watches more than 3 hours of TV each day (or 21 hours/week, or 1,5 months of nonstop TV-watching per year). In a 72-year life, that person will have spent 9 years glued to the tube. It does not take much discernment to answer the question – is this a good use of time? With one life to live, soon past, only what's done for Christ will last, does it make sense to spend up to 9 years of our lives staring at moving pictures? When we stand before God to give an account of our lives, what

will we say of the opportunities, abilities and ministries that we neglected because of staring at a screen? John Piper writes the following in *Pierced by the Word*: “Just think how new TV is. In the 2000 years since Christ, TV has shaped only the last 2,5 percent of that history. For 97,5 percent of the time since Jesus, there was no TV. And for 95 percent of this time there was no radio. It arrived on the scene in the early 1900’s. So for 1900 years of Christian history, people spent their leisure time doing other things. We wonder what could they possibly have done? They may have read more. For certain they were not bombarded with soul-shrinking, round-the-clock trivialities”.

Do you ever ask, “What could I accomplish that is truly worthwhile if I did not watch TV?” You see, it isn’t just what TV does to us with its rivers of emptiness; it is also what TV keeps us from doing. Why not try something? Make a list of what you might accomplish if you took the time you spent watching TV and devoted it to something else. For example:

You might be inspired to some great venture by learning about the life of a noble saint like Amy Carmichael and how she found courage to go alone to serve the children of India. Where do such radical dreams come from? Not from watching TV. Open your soul to be blown away by some unspeakable life of dedication to a great cause.

You might be inspired by a biography of a businessman or doctor or nurse to work hard for the skills to bless others with the excellence of your profession devoted to a higher end than anything you will see commended on TV, which never includes Jesus Christ.

You might memorize the eighth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans, and penetrate to the depth of his vision of God, and discover the precious power of memorized Scripture in your life and ministry to others. No one could estimate the power that would come to a church if we all turned the TV off for one month and devoted that same amount of time to memorizing Scripture.

You might write a simple poem or a letter to a parent, or a child, or a friend, or a colleague expressing deep gratitude for their life or a longing for their soul.

You might make a cake or a casserole for new neighbours and take it to them with a smile and an invitation to visit some time and get to know each other.

Those are just some of John Piper’s ideas. If the time spent in front of the TV was devoted to the Word of God, to prayer, to our marriages, to our families, to discipling others, to evangelism, we would have very different lives as individuals and as churches. We are instructed in Ephesians 5:

“See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil. (Eph 5:15-16)

Television more often than not, encourages escapism rather than engagement. Television has become a form of entertainment not designed to enhance, grow or develop a person. It is used to help them *escape*. It is a form of fantasy, of vicariously living in another world as presented by the music, the TV, or the film. In other words, much modern culture encourages people to simply make their money in this world, so

they can escape from it through entertainment. There probably never was a culture with so much available news about the world, whose people, however, do not wholly live in it.

The Bible never condones the practice of escaping life to live in a fantasy world. It encourages appropriate rest and relaxation (Mark 6:31), but not escapism. Entertainment of this kind does not restore your soul, renew your mind or revive your heart. In fact it makes you restless when living in the real world, anxious to return to the netherworld of make-believe. People who perpetually live like this postpone decisions about God and eternity because they always have the 'refuge' of their entertainment. Whatever pains they experience in real life are soothed and lulled by delving into the dream-world of pop culture's many entertainment offerings. They almost inevitably become shallow, self-protective and selfish. They are out of touch with reality. Fantasy becomes the world they can create and participate in without the real-world situations of frustration, change and adaptation. In this way, TV is not helpful practically – it does not help you actually accomplish your God-given calling in life.

Television is not always helpful **mentally**. Many people defend their hours and hours behind the TV with the excuse that they watch very educational and informational television. The problem with that is that television is not the best way to be informed – politically, scientifically or otherwise. Neil Postman's book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* shows at length why television cannot always be an effective means of public discourse. TV is slanted toward entertainment – toward quick and colourful sound-bites. Presidential candidates who are funnier and better dressed get more votes after a televised debate than the one with a better-reasoned argument. TV news most often does not provide you with information like a written article to provoke your thinking, instead, with its combination of images and sound, it frames a story in a way so as to tell you what to think. Discussions of issues that require much technical information cannot be tolerated on TV which wants sound-byte, quick and colourful images to prevent people from flipping channels. The advent of the remote has made people intolerant of any program which is not superficially thrilling, amusing, shocking, surprising or entertaining. Even documentaries must fill their time with fascinating images and trivia to keep the audience glued. The end result is that TV is not a medium where serious thought, discussion, debate or discourse takes place. It is an entertainment medium and everything on TV, even the news, even political commentary, even journalistic and current affairs programmes must be entertaining to survive on TV. So TV is not the best way to be informed or educated.

Reading is always better for the mind than television. Reading encourages thinking. Television does it for you. Reading encourages critical thinking. TV encourages being opinionated. Reading encourages research, TV encourages contentment with ignorance. Television is the place where you are least capable of critical thinking – it is a deadly place to rest your mind if you are truly seeking to be educated or informed. These might be generalisations, but they are nevertheless generally **true**.

TV is not always helpful spiritually. There are two reasons why TV is unhelpful spiritually – the one has to do with defilement, the other has to do with being dulled. We are all aware of how defiling the images on television are. Nudity, sex, acts of violence, murder, rebellion, brawling and vandalism are common-place. The Bible is

clear on what our attitude should be toward such things: *"I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes"* (Psa 101:3)

"Flee youthful lusts" "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell." (Mat 5:29)

It's estimated that, by the time an American youth has reached the age of 18, he has seen 200 000 murders on television. I don't believe South Africa is far behind, in some respects, I believe we are getting worse. Not only are the images often evil, but so are the themes - sexual innuendo, materialism, greed, lust, jealousy and envy of the lives in the soap opera, the false romance, the false view of marriage, divorce, sex and living together before marriage, the false view of God and Jesus Christ.

Many programmes are overtly anti-god, humanistic, promoting unbiblical ideas of man's origins and man's problems. Even the ads sow seeds of lust, greed, envy, pride and covetousness. In fact, some of the most dangerous themes are those that seem to be moralistic on the surface, but leave out Jesus Christ. Morality without Christ is not a good thing, or a positive thing. It instead encourages the idea that man can become good by his actions, or is in fact inherently good and requires no salvation in Christ.

Listening to the coarse language, the blasphemy, the profane use of the Lord's name – this is defiling. To say nothing of the music – a whole category in itself, the kind of music played on television is by and large, anything but edifying. While the defiling nature of the images, sounds and themes is very obvious, what is often missed by people is television's dulling effect. TV does not encourage depth and devotion. It encourages banality, shallowness and triviality. A mind fed daily on TV diminishes. Your mind was made to know and think about and love God. Its facility for this great calling is ruined by excessive TV. The content is so trivial and so shallow that the capacity of the mind to think high, noble and majestic thoughts withers, and the even the capacity of the heart to feel deeply, to know the passion that is fitting for a believer shrivels. When this is the state of your heart, worshipping God becomes all but impossible. Again John Piper writes: If all other variables are equal, your capacity to know God deeply will probably diminish in direct proportion to how much television you watch. There are several reasons for this. One is that television reflects American culture at its most trivial. And a steady diet of triviality shrinks the soul. You get used to it. It starts to seem normal. Silly becomes funny. And funny becomes pleasing. And pleasing becomes soul-satisfaction. And in the end the soul that is made for God had shrunk to fit snugly around triteness.

This may be unnoticed, because if all you've known is American culture, you can't tell there is anything wrong. If you have only read comic books, it won't be strange that there are no novels in your house. If you live where there are no seasons, you won't miss the colours of fall. If you watch fifty TV ads each night, you may forget there is such a thing as wisdom. TV is mostly trivial. It seldom inspires great thoughts or great feelings with glimpses of great Truth. God is the great, absolute, all-shaping Reality. If He gets any air time, He is treated as an opinion. There is no reverence. No trembling. God and all that He thinks about the world is missing. Cut loose from God, everything goes down.

Paul stated another principle in *I Cor 6:12*: *"All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any."*

That is **Does it bring me under its power?** Even if lawfully used in terms of what you watch, it ought never to become something necessary for a pleasant life. Truth be

told, the television has replaced conversation in more than one Christian household. As soon as responsibilities are completed, TV becomes the only point of interest, joy or meaning. Remove television, and the emptiness of people's souls becomes apparent as they cry out, "I'm bored". Contrary to popular opinion, boredom is not a state of poor entertainment around you, it is a state of sin inside you. Boredom is actually rebellion against circumstances that you resent but feel you cannot change – a type of internalised anger. When families, parents, children cannot exist as normal families without the television on at some point, we have come under its power. We are dependent on it. When that happens, it is time to fast from TV altogether to find out what God meant for us.

Many Christians would not admit it, but TV is their anti-depressant. They feel so hopeless, so empty, their walk with God is so cold that they live for a certain comedy or soapie or doccie or sports program to pep them up and make them feel half alive again.

A third principle Paul used was: does this activity fall within the bounds of Christian liberty? In other words, does this activity cause onlooking Christians to grow or not?

This is a subject badly in need of biblical, balanced teaching. So many have misinterpreted I Corinthians 8, 10 and Romans 14 to teach a form of Christian liberty that is not biblical. Christian liberty deals with deference toward other believers on non-moral issues. Basically – the principles of Christian liberty are:

Don't despise others. (Romans 14:3). Do not despise another believer who does not share your conviction on television. Those who do not choose to do what you do should not be despised in your eyes.

Don't cause others to stumble (Romans 14:15). 'Stumble', in this context, does not mean another believer will be annoyed or dislike your conviction, it means they will fall into sin because of it. If you embolden the conscience of one with a differing conviction from yours, you have caused them to sin, because whatever is not of faith is sin (I Corinthians 8:10, Romans 14:23). In the area of television, if what you watch is not pleasing to God, and how much you watch TV is not pleasing to God, and a weaker believer sees your actions it may give them the courage to return to an unlawful use of TV which corrupted them before they were saved. You might say, "But I can't live for others all the time!" Romans 14:7 is the Bible's reply: *"For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself."*

We truly affect others. Personal liberty in Christ is to live out my convictions before God in a way which will never cause other believers to stumble; otherwise we are not walking charitably.

Have your conviction before God (Romans 14:22). Let your devotion to God honestly guide all your convictions. Our convictions are to be convictions of faith, not of convenience. This is to be especially true in the selection of what you watch. Don't choose what your flesh is attracted to and then say, "This is for you, God!" That's self-deception. Ask God what is acceptable to Him, and then as His slave, decide how you will approach TV watching. Ask, is God glorified by this thing I am watching or planning to watch? Simply ask yourself, could God sit with you in front of that television and be pleased? Is Christ lifted up, and does an illuminated heart rejoice in it? Does the amount of TV watching demonstrate a life that finds its satisfaction in

God, or does it reveal a heart not glad in God that requires the shallow substitute of TV?

The TV is not necessary to be in touch with reality. Some people think if you do not watch TV you will be irrelevant. This is of course nonsense, for there is nothing about TV watching that would make you more in touch with God – the author and sustainer of Reality.

Now, what is the conclusion to all this? I leave that to you, your conscience and your walk with God. I do not condemn the device. I do not say there is nothing you can watch that will edify you. I do not say it is sinful to watch TV news or sport or whatever. But you be the judge as to the part that TV should play in your life. You be the judge as to what proportion of your time it should take up. You be the judge as to whether you or your family are dependent on it. You be the judge as to whether you are learning to think deep and majestic thoughts about God because of it or without it. You be the judge as to whether most TV defiles you or edifies you, dulls you or deepens you.

Perhaps I might suggest a TV fast. Try going without it for thirty days. Get your news some other way. Fill the time with reading the Word or godly books. Fill the time getting to know your family, serving others. You may be surprised at what a grip it has on you. You might be surprised how much you can grow and learn and love without it.

One thing hard to get away from is this: God chose to reveal Himself primarily to the ear through the spoken Word, and to the eye through the written Word. God could have used pictures to communicate His Word, but He chose to use writing. If God always selects the best method for all He does, that speaks volumes about what is the best method for communicating. I have no personal axe to grind against TV. I do have a problem with Christians devoting hours to the TV and then complaining of no time to read the Word, pray, or communicate. I do have a problem with Christians losing a sense of majesty and awe because their hearts are shrinking into the plastic, tiny shapes that the average trivial TV show demands of them. God has more for us. Let us then be wise, not unwise. Let us redeem the time, and as the old Sunday school song says – be careful little eye what you see.