TV: It's Worse Than We Think

Popular television is subversive to Christianity. This statement might not surprise you, but my reasons for making it might -- reasons which have been taking shape since I read the book <u>Amusing Ourselves to Death</u>, by the late Neil Postman.

I certainly had grave concerns about television before that time, but they were primarily regarding the *content* of its programming. Along with many social conservatives in our day, Christian or otherwise, I focused on the dismal statistics regarding violence and sex, and made the obvious conclusion that repeated exposure to these things would have a degrading influence on us and our children. I was alarmed about the *polluting* influence of "what's on TV these days," and my concern was to "clean up" the content.

Today, however, I am not so naïve. Jesus once said that "the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light," and I am indebted to the worldly wisdom of Neil Postman, himself not a Christian, for revealing a more basic way in which television is subversive to Christianity. Postman's great insight was that television's place in our culture is dangerous, not only for its *content*, but also for its influence as a particular *medium* of communication. The thesis of his book is that "the problem with TV is not that it presents entertaining subject matter, but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining." Postman demonstrates how television as a medium is unfriendly to sustained intellectual discourse or analysis -- for example, how the very concept of "news" is less substantial than in previous generations. Postman's concern goes beyond the *polluting* influence of the *content* of television, to the *stupefying* influence of the *medium* of television.

With this nudge from an unlikely source, I have since developed a far deeper critique of television. Without minimizing the rightful outrage Christians should feel about the immoral content of much TV, I now recognize the negative effects of substantial exposure to television of *any* kind. I'm inclined to think that there is a vital connection between the immersion of Christians today in popular television and many of the spiritual maladies afflicting the Church.

For example, can there be any doubt that the increasingly entertainment-oriented worship in our churches is related to the conditioning influence of television? Television has provided us with 24-hour entertainment, in home, office and eatery, and has immeasurably fed and cultivated our desire *to be entertained*. Consequently, to worshippers reared on a diet of television, little of plain, Biblical worship will hold the attention and interest. Increasingly I'm convinced that TV's emphasis upon brevity, variety, and frivolity works against historic Protestant worship with its encouragements to serious meditation, repetition of liturgical elements, and intellectual substance.

Likewise, could it be that the total absorption of the television culture with acquiring the latest model or innovation at the earliest possible moment has contributed to naïve expectations of many evangelicals regarding the Christian life? I once thought that commercials were the most benign part of what television offers, and they certainly are among the most witty and creative. But they are also powerful influences on our attitudes and assumptions: influences largely unfriendly to spiritual maturity. While a typical ad exalts that which is new and improved, Christ directs us toward the old, un-improvable "faith of our fathers." While a typical car commercial promises satisfaction and fulfillment "today," the apostles spoke of those things as acquired through a life of patience and persevering diligence.

Perhaps the most basic threat to vital Christianity lies in television's tendency to create an intellectually lazy disposition toward word-based knowledge and communication. The axioms of TV are that "a picture is worth a thousand words," and "seeing is believing," yet ours is a religion in which the wisdom of God has been revealed in a book, not a video, and Jesus said, "blessed are those who do not see, and yet believe." Consequently, TV-in-every-room-Christianity is fundamentally visually oriented, with a low view of mere "text" and "teachers"; whereas historic Christianity is rooted in an inspired book (a rather wordy one), and propagated by preachers of that Word.

Should television have no part in the Christian's life? I'm personally persuaded that the smaller a part it plays, the better. However, my real burden is to call for multiple layers of concern among Christians. "Cleaning up" one's viewing habits, but leaving them essentially unchanged in terms of sheer exposure, addresses only the matter of content, and not the subtle effects of the medium. Read Postman's book, Amusing Ourselves to Death. Ask yourself if, as a Christian, you shouldn't be even more concerned than Postman himself is. And protect yourself and your children not only from the *polluting* effect of popular television, but also its *stupefying* effect.