

Fifty Years of Television

In 1950 most British homes did not have a television. Anyone who does not possess a TV today is looked on as having some deep-seated mental illness that can only be cured by an immediate trip to the nearest electrical superstore. Even some Christians are more familiar with the events of Albert Square than the events surrounding the life and death of the Saviour they claim to represent.

It is interesting to look back 50 years to the warnings about the effect that the TV would have. This is well illustrated by a letter that appeared in *The Times* on Wednesday 20 December 1950:

Sir, in your issue of 17 December you announce that the BBC proposes to spend over £4 million during the next three years on the development of television. I have just returned from a visit to the United States, where television has become an habitual form of entertainment. I find only anxiety and apprehension about the social effects of this past time and especially about its effect (mentally, morally and physically) upon small children. The fears expressed by my American friends were not such as could be allayed by the provision of only superior and harmless programmes. They were concerned with the television habit, whatever the programme might be.

The author was the writer and poet T.S. Elliot. His words were prophetic in almost every way.

From Print to Image

Over the last 50 years Western society has very rapidly changed from a print based to an image based culture centring largely on the TV. A society based on print is forced to think. All writing, unlike television, has a context. Reading is a rational activity. Television is anything but rational. It discourages thought. It hits us with thousands of images with no real context and with no overall point. As Postman says in his book *The Disappearance of Childhood - how television is changing our children's lives*, television requires 'perception not conception, it makes the rigours of a literate education irrelevant'. The average single camera shot is 3-4 seconds while in television advertising it is 2-3 seconds. It is little wonder our schools are full of children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

I Just Watch the Nature Programmes?

An older generation often criticises young people for going to the cinema and quite happily watch a full evening of soap operas with every vice imaginable. We have all heard the 'but there are great nature programmes' argument many times before (usually the same documentaries that claim animals have evolved over millions of years). People say that television is informative and for the selective watcher it may be, but what the television churns out is in fact dis-information. Professor Neil Postman defines this as 'information that is misleading, fragmented, irrelevant and superficial'. The television is now a giant

game of trivial pursuits with no one really caring about standards, quality, morality or the enhancement of knowledge.

In studies it has been found that 51% of viewers could not recall a single item of news from a news programme viewed minutes earlier (Stern). Another study by Salomon found that the average television viewer only retained about 20% of the information contained in a televised fictional news story. The claim that television is informative is nonsense. As Marshall McLuhan once said 'the medium is the message'. If the medium is shallow and superficial don't be surprised if this is reflected in the message.

Information Overload

The problem is not that the television tells us things that are always deliberately wrong but it packages everything in such a way that everything is reduced to the level of entertainment. The nightly news tells us about famines, wars, sport, crime, abuse and the lottery numbers as if they were all of the same importance. As in Aldous Huxley's book 'Brave New World' we live in a society with so much information we have been reduced to passivity and egoism, the truth drowned in a sea of irrelevance. With the combination of the Internet we are now a society that knows about everything but we seem to understand less and less. A television presenter in the USA summed it up well when he said that 'Americans seem to know everything about the last 24 hours and very little of the last sixty centuries or the last sixty years'. I think we could say the same of our own nation.

A Typological Heritage

When we think about preachers such as John Calvin or Jonathan Edwards and compare them with preachers such as Billy Graham, why do the former men have such an enduring effect on Christendom? The Rev Billy Graham once boasted that 300 TV stations carried his preaching and that he had been heard by more people than Christ had while he was on earth. We have serious doubts if Billy Graham will be studied 500 years from now never mind in 2000 years. The difference is that Edwards and Calvin wrote and contended through the printed page. Their books live on while the tele-evangelists are like a forgotten soap opera. Ultimately all television boils down to image and when something new grabs people's attention, we either have to compromise the Gospel or be sidelined.

The Effect on Children

A recent cartoon in a political magazine depicted a nursery where the children had been asked to draw their mother or father. The cartoon shows a child proudly holding his picture of a TV with the word 'mummy' underneath. While the cartoon seeks to poke fun at the view that young people are being parented by television, many of us increasingly see that this is in fact more of a reality than a joke. One expert in speech development, Dr Ruth Ward, has seen a growing trend among young children to have delayed speech. Some children at

age 2-3 have almost no concept of language and can only make animal, gulping noises.

Parents think their children are learning by watching endless hours of TV. The problem is that it is all one way communication. The children become what Peter Hitchens calls 'passive receptors' rather than 'active participators'. Certain psychologists report how some children actually have a bond with their TV or video and can go berserk when it is switched off or taken away. The percentage of under 5s who actually have a TV and/or video in their bedrooms is frightening.

How Should we Respond?

It is easy to react by brandishing the TV as evil and corrupt. Ultimately a television set is only a collection of electric wires. Certain denominations in Holland and America stipulate that no member of their church can own a TV, but the Bible gives us no grounds for this. Not owning a television is not a mark of grace. Those of us who have chosen not to have a TV can be just as guilty of worldliness as the vast majority of Christians who do. Sinful man can make a god out of books or the radio just as easily as television. The television is entertainment and in its proper place, to a limited degree, relaxation and entertainment are important and necessary. There are many excellent videos that have been produced in recent years that are surely to be commended. We have recently used a number of creation videos that are of an excellent standard and a much better alternative than so much children's television.

What we cannot deny is that the television is a very subtle and dangerous tool. It can lull us into sin before we are aware it's happening. It can fill up hours that should be spent on more important things. Have we become immune to swearing and adultery? Does the homosexuality on our favourite soap opera still shock us? Do we regularly switch off in disgust at the language and content of programmes? How discerning are we about what our children watch? Are we content to let them watch children's television with adverts flashing between programmes with images and themes that should make us all blush?

For many of us, we have made the decision to do without a television. We are told if our eye causes us to offend we should pluck it out (Matthew 5 v 29). If the television causes you or your family to constantly offend your Saviour has the time come to part company with it? Others seem to be able to control what is watched and they are to be congratulated for it is no easy task. Other families have television breaks. How would your family react to putting the TV in the cupboard for a month? Maybe this would give you an idea of the extent to which the TV has invaded your life. If the TV is to remain in your house try not to give it a central place in the living room. Our houses should be places of fellowship and worship not places where we bow the knee to the box in the corner.

As with everything in life we must choose what we watch with through the 'gospel filter'. Getting rid of our televisions is not a shortcut to spirituality, but

given 'mans almost infinite capacity for distractions' (Huxley) is this one distraction we could do without?