

# Television and Worship

*I urge you to thoughtfully read the following lengthy and worthwhile essay  
by Marva Dawn from her book A Royal "Waste" of Time.*

Most people think that watching television or surfing the Net is at worst just a harmless waste of time or at best a great gift for gathering useful information. But this issue is critical: Are our children — are we — able to concentrate, contemplate, meditate, marvel, be reverent, experience awe, cherish silence in the presence of God? Are we able to observe the wonders of God's creation in flavors and fragrances, see the beauties of the arts, hear the timbres and resonances and tones of the music of the spheres, touch the fibers of the universe and the fabrics of human ingenuity?

We are raising a generation of children who would rather look at famous paintings on a screen than see their immensity, the skill of the brush strokes, the glow of the colors in an art museum. Can it be that people actually prefer the tinny sounds of a CD-Rom with pictures on a screen to great music live in a concert hall where one can watch the melody travel from section to section of the orchestra or see the counterpoint contrasts between sides of the stage? Certainly now the sounds of a good music CD are cheaper and easier to use — and the performance has been made perfect by retakes and remasterings. What is lost to the hearer, however, is the strain and trials, the sacrifices and triumphs of human endeavor. Transferred to the Sunday worship service, the development of perfect sound tracks has caused many worshipers to be dissatisfied now with merely human musicians who make mistakes, with less than professional-sounding choirs, with preachers who stumble occasionally, with the nitty-gritty of genuine community life.

## What We Can Do?

When we look seriously at what is happening in our world, how can we help but be overwhelmed? The information superhighway is entering our homes; five hundred different television channels are an imminent possibility; high resolution television sets will be readily available by the time this book comes out; our churches' children are exposed to all kinds of new opportunities for media involvement; cyberspace promises them entirely new virtual realities. It is beyond the scope of this book to discuss here how Christians can influence the television and movie industries, though that is an important subject to pursue. It is also beyond the scope of this chapter to deal with the effects of cyberspace on worship, though that is a subject I have been studying extensively; it is, however, simply too vast a topic for me to begin to consider it in this book.<sup>1</sup>

**My main goal in this chapter is simply to urge that we in the Christian community ask better questions.** In order to do that, we need, first of all, to become more aware of the hidden and harmful consequences of our culture's media bombardment. Then we must, as a community, talk together about the issues and the problems, about how we can be more supportive of each other in taking some stands for the sake of the welfare of our children — and ourselves. We and our churches must understand the stakes of our technological times and what Christians must do in the present media revolution.<sup>2</sup>

Let's face the question squarely: **If television is causing people to be dissatisfied with the worship of our churches, should we change worship to be more**

**like television — or should the splendor of our worship cause people to ask better questions about television?**

### **Agents of Socialization**

Let us think about the catalysts that form our children, what gives them their ideas about how to live — besides their parents and the schools. Since 98.3 percent of U.S. homes have television sets, with an average of 2.2 sets per household,<sup>3</sup> **we have to ask whether TV has become *the* major agent of socialization.** Research reveals that in the average home the TV is turned on more than 7 hours per day; each individual watches approximately 4½ hours per day. When young people graduate from high school, they have spent more hours watching television than they have spent in school and will have viewed approximately 500,000 commercials; 80 percent of their discretionary time has been spent watching television.<sup>4</sup> When we remember that most investigations disclose that the amount of quality time parents spend daily with their children is usually tabulated in minutes or even seconds, we *must* consider the effects of television on their formation more seriously — or else we are seriously failing to be Church!

Bruce Forbes (professor of religious studies and co-chair of the “Religion and Popular Culture” program unit of the American Academy of Religion) writes that these statistics cannot be dismissed with elitist scorn; when he chronicled his own behavior, he discovered that he did indeed watch at least four hours of television each day — while he dressed, ate, relaxed, and “needed” the news (a presupposition that also ought to be questioned; see below).<sup>5</sup> However, as an adult, Forbes was probably for the most part already formed by other agencies before the onslaught of this much television watching. **We must face unflinchingly how television watching has become the new worship of our children.** A dozen years ago, William Fore warned, in *Television and Religion: The Shaping of Faith, Values, and Culture*, that “religion and television are the symbols and in many ways the concrete embodiments of the powers that are contending for our very souls? **Fore’s thesis was that television is beginning to usurp a role which until recently has been the role of the church in our society, namely, to shape our system of values, embody our faith, and express our cultural essence.** This shift, from a religious center to what I call a technological center, is ominous. It represents a shift from dealing with human questions to dealing instead with utilitarian questions, from asking, How will this affect people? to asking only, How will this make a profit? (11-12) We see that same shift, of course, in the questions that are often being asked about worship these days. Congregations are not asking about the long-term consequences for the development of Christ’s disciples; they are asking about what will appeal to people and therefore make an immediate profit in the congregational numbers and finances.

Certainly TV has its blessings. It helps people escape and relax. But, as we shall see below, such escape is hardly harmless if it fosters violence and sexual immorality, greed and permanent passivity. Television also provides “*psychological compensation* for [persons’] sense of alienation or frustration born of loneliness, poverty, illness, joblessness, loss of loved ones, divorce, and similar problems” (19), but again, we must wonder if there ought not to be much more healthy ways to offer this restoration. What would happen if we could instead recover deep friendships and caring neighborhoods, if the Church could enfold the lonely and unemployed and sick and destitute in the compassion and affection which Jesus says are indeed gifts to himself? (See Matthew

25:31-46.)

Fore also notes that TV furnishes people with a sense of security and stability and belonging, with information, with a rich fantasy world, and with the means of coping — by telling us what to wear, how to speak, and how to clean our toilets (19-20). As he summarizes the present situation,

What is happening is that the whole medium reflects and expresses the myths by which we live. These myths tell us who we are, what we have done, what power we have, who has power and who does not, what is right and what is not. It also tells us what has happened, and what has not. It takes our history and our present and interprets it to us. (21)

**In sum, TV gives us our worldview and the symbol system through which we continue to interpret the world each day.<sup>6</sup> It is this *orientation* and this *process* that are so dangerous, for most of the values of that shaping are inimical to the message of Christ and the priorities of the kingdom of God.<sup>7</sup>**

It is impossible for the worship of our churches (brief as it is in comparison with the 28 hours or so per week that the average person watches television) to imbue the participants completely with another worldview and symbol system for interpreting daily life. The difficulty is compounded if worship augments some of the values of TV. For that reason we need to pay closer attention to these particular dangers.

### **A Sampling of the Dangers to Worship<sup>8</sup>**

In the short space of this chapter I cannot thoroughly elaborate the ideas I want to introduce or report on all the research, but let me sketch (all too briefly) for your further consideration **ten dangers of media consumption** and the essence of how splendid worship is one antidote (of the many there must be) to these problems. (I will speak of these only in terms of television watching, but the same perils apply even more so to other forms of media consumption, like surfing the Net.) With greater awareness of the problems, Christians can strategize how to take advantage of media benefits without falling prey to the great perils.

**1. The most obvious problem with the proliferation of media options, most clearly demonstrated by television consumption, is that involvement with them wastes so much time.** Those of us who serve in the Church are doubtless weary of the tedious excuse, “But I don’t have any time,” when people are not willing to participate in various mission efforts of the congregation. Twenty years ago, in the amount of time spent watching television during one year, the average U.S. citizen could read the entire Bible at a normal pace fifteen times! What must it be now that television consumption has increased so dramatically? Reading has decreased by half since the 1960s. Other leisure activities, especially family interactions and congregational service, have declined comparably.

Certainly I recognize that there are plenty of other reasons why people don’t have enough time. (I don’t even own a television, and still I never have adequate time for all the projects related to God’s kingdom that I would like to undertake.) My point is simply that television trains us to waste time (not in the royal sense at all). And meanwhile, subtly, it is making the most of the time to nurture in us many other character traits — many of which, as we shall see in the following points, are destructive of our skills for worship.

I am also not saying that there should be no *leisure* time in the Christian life — but I am concerned that the time wasting not be inherently dangerous. In fact, worship that is truly immersed in the splendor of God is a *royal* waste of time (see Chapter 22), and Christians and Jews especially know the absolute necessity of a whole day set apart from our usual busy-ness. But the Sabbath day is an entire day of genuine ceasing and rest, not escapist time-wasting.<sup>9</sup>

**2. Watching television stifles the imagination.** I notice this especially while traveling on airplanes — people who are saturated with media in their homes cannot manage to entertain themselves. The children often don't know how to play without electronic toys, aren't ever interested in looking out the window at nature, cannot make up stories (without violence), won't read books. Adults must have the airplane movies or "short subjects"/television reruns going and get terribly grumpy when they malfunction. But the danger to worship is equally immense. If we always have to have everything presented to us visually, how can we pay attention to texts, or imagine Moses or the disciples, or contemplate the presence of God?

The increasing speed of TV is a great contributor to the loss of imagination since the mind has no time to recover from the constant bombardment. How does this affect our ability to meditate on God in the necessary silences of worship? Are we able to deal with the ambiguities of God that force our minds to go beyond what is readily apparent?

The loss of imagination is also related to some of the twaddle (Kierkegaard's word) that characterizes some churches' worship these days. As William Fore explains, "Trivialization is inevitable in the world of the technological era, with its emphasis upon utilitarian means rather than truthful ends" (32). If we simply want a God that "sells" to the masses, we will invariably reduce the truth of our multi-splendored God. If we want our faith to be developed as fast as problems are solved on sitcoms, we will not have the patience to imagine God's working in us to grow us when there are no immediate, visible results.

Worship that is filled with splendor, in contrast, will greatly stimulate the imagination — with symbols and other works of art, with a wide variety of musical sounds, with texts and preaching full of images and thought-provoking challenges, with silences that give inspiration free rein.

**3. Much more critical, Jane Healy's research demonstrates thoroughly that children who watch television extensively develop smaller brains.** Without output, constant input fails to bridge the hemispheres of the brain, and lack of involvement with the environment decreases the proliferation of dendrites. Only in conversation and by manipulating things — toys, a musical instrument, one's legs in running — does the brain build new pathways and the information received actually get learned. Thus, Healy emphasizes that the media's bombardment not only causes our children to be unable to think; it also prevents them from actually developing the brain space to think in.<sup>10</sup> This point is especially critical if we want to train our children to worship (for it is, indeed, a learned skill that will not happen automatically). Their ability to pay attention for longer periods of time depends on having the brain space to do so. **I cannot urge parents strongly enough to avoid exposing their children to much television when they are young and their minds are in the formative stages.**

The inverse is also true: if in worship we engage the children in singing, holding hymnbooks and finding pages in them, sitting and rising for various parts of the worship service, repeating memorized creeds and prayers and liturgical elements, putting their offerings in the basket and passing the peace of God, and other elements of the

worship service, we contribute to the development of their intellectual capacities.

**4. Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* accentuates also that television makes us *less motivated to think* — and this is true even of the supposedly “good” programs.** Those who created “Sesame Street,” for example, invented it to help children love school, but they learned instead to love school only if it is like Sesame Street — with nonsequential learning, fast-paced entertainment, and no consequences. **The very medium itself emphasizes feeling and amusement rather than linear, rational thought.**<sup>11</sup> This is especially destructive for a faith that is based on what we *know* about the God who transforms us through the renewal of our minds (see Romans 12:2).

All of the elements of worship listed above with regard to the imagination certainly are possible motivators for better thinking. However, the major reason why the splendor of worship ignites thought is that it is *God's* splendor with which we are concerned — and that gives us a radically different perspective from which to think, a slant on the world and on our life from outside ourselves.

**5. Very apparent to all of us are the effects of television viewing on the violence and sexual immorality in our culture.**<sup>12</sup> Various watch groups have made it clear that the amount, vividness, blatancy, and constant bombardment of television brutality and eroticism are escalating at an incredible rate — and that much of the rape, aggressiveness, destructiveness, and crime on our streets is directly related. **Even programming that is not sexually explicit or violent indirectly contributes to sexual problems and incivility because the very medium of television trains us in, and increases our demand for, instant gratification.** One might wonder why this should be important for us to note in a book about worship, but if the Subject/Object of our worship is the God of peace and faithfulness, then too much formation by violence-saturated media and sultry advertisements or lustful programs will make it much more difficult for us to understand the radical (that is, getting to the roots of things) alternatives of the way of life we follow to be God's people, to be Church. Furthermore, the demand for instant gratification is, of course, one of the driving forces in many of the conflicts over worship.

Worship that immerses us in the splendor of God's *shalom* and creation design, in contrast, will give us a vision of much better practices for living than those espoused by the media. Songs and texts and preaching and prayers will help to form us to be peacemakers and justice builders, chaste friends and faithful lovers. Worship that resists the cry for instant gratification, moreover, contributes to the building of these virtues.

**6. Much of the violence in our culture is perpetrated, of course, by persons who lack loving and supportive communities — but that, too, is indirectly related to media consumption.** And television's perpetration of our culture's lack of social intimacy and tenderness in affectionate communities also contributes to the society's mad enslavement to genital intimacy outside of God's design for it within the protective framework of a covenantally committed marriage.<sup>13</sup> Jacques Ellul, a prophetic French sociologist and Christian witness, made it clear in many of his books that the rise of the technological milieu is paralleled by a corresponding *decrease in skills (and time!) for intimacy*. According to a report by Fortino & Associates, U.S. citizens daily spend an average of only about four or five minutes conversing with their spouse and about thirty seconds talking with their children! Frequently in conversations with young people at

their convocations and in discussions after my lectures at colleges, I hear from them both their awareness that televisions and other technological toys and tools (like Walkmans) hinder their development of skills for intimacy and also their pain that they have been deprived of family communication.

One of the reasons why this danger is important for worship is that people often want the wrong kinds of intimacy in worship — the coziness of a God small enough to be merely cuddly, the subjective comfort of sentimentalized songs (that in an elitist way leave out those who don't "feel" close to God), the affectionate intimacy of friends in the congregation that ignores the stranger, or a form of private devotion that neglects to create public ritual into which anyone can enter.

Worship that immerses us in the splendor of our triune God, in contrast, will welcome us into the communion of saints, the community of those formed in the image of this relational God. God's is a genuine intimacy —open to the stranger and nourishing the virtues of compassionate caring. His Revelation is full of instructions for building intimacy and of models that invite us to take the necessary time to do so.<sup>14</sup>

**7. No one can doubt that television fosters *greed*, and not only in its advertisements.**<sup>5</sup> Shouldn't it be "strange, unreal" to us — as it is to old Jack, the main character of one of Wendell Berry's stories — "That a whole roomful of people should sit with their mouths open like a nest of young birds, peering into a picture box the invariable message of which is the desirability of Something Else or Someplace Else"?<sup>6</sup>

Certainly we all know that much of children's programming is driven by the toy and treats manufacturers whose products are flagrantly pushed. Because I do not own a television and rarely watch one, I'm very aware of content as I watch. I am astonished at the increasing number of advertisements, the acceleration of their hype, the psychological subtlety of their appeal, and yet — paradoxically — their inanity. Nevertheless, people find themselves humming the jingles, and the name recognition in their subconscious influences their purchasing decisions. Meanwhile, the values inculcated about what we should own and how we should dress have pulled us further from the way of life of the One who had no place to lay his head. (Don't worry: I'm *very* aware that I'm equally pulled away and tempted by other forms of indoctrination. Probably I'm in greater danger because other methods are not so blatantly inane.)

The greed nurtured by endless commercials takes unhealthy shapes in connection with worship. We become greedy for what makes us feel good, instead of for what will transform us. We become possessive about our particular ways of doing things, our own tastes in musical style, our special place to sit, our cozy coterie of friends.

Royally wasting time through immersion in the splendor of God, in contrast, generates generosity. We learn that we operate not out of scarcity (which makes us grab for ourselves) but out of abundance — which allows us to enjoy more thoroughly the richness of God's presence in all its flavors and forms and which frees us to share the gifts of the Church's heritage with the world.

**8. The greed fostered by media is just one aspect of the larger problem that television produces a *muddled perception of reality*.** Sitcoms pretend that major life problems can be solved in half an hour; advertisements stir us emotionally into feeling that the right purchases are the ticket to those quick solutions. Playing particularly on our fears and desires, commercials don't really give us many facts about a product so that we can make logical, cognitive decisions. Rather, they give us cozy scenes and

appeal to our hunger for intimacy — a hunger caused, in part, by the very medium that is offering such scenes. Jacques Ellul warned us forty years ago that one of the dangers of escalating technology and decreasing skills of intimacy is that we reverse the poles and technologize our intimacy (parents saying goodnight over the intercom instead of tucking children in, as one student reported) and intimidate our technology (as exemplified in such ads).

**One other major distortion of reality that we must consider here is the muddled perceptions created by television “news.”** Why has the wide availability of news programs made us think that we have to know every little thing reported? How much does it affect what we do about world situations for us to see the superficial reports about them offered in small bites every evening on “the tube”? Ellul frequently pointed out that **daily news on the media fosters a catastrophic, fragmentary, and inadequate view of the world.** One evening in a small city hotel I turned on the television news and heard a reporter describe half a dozen rapes and several resultant deaths in a row, after which this beautifully dressed, carefully coifed, lovely young woman smiled beguilingly at me and said sweetly, “See you tomorrow?” Why should I tune in tomorrow? I had just listened to enough murder and mayhem to last me the rest of my life! I certainly didn’t “need” that news, although I did pray for the victims’ families and those victims still living — but the news did make me much more nervous about sleeping there that night.

William Fore summarizes the distortions of reality by the media as follows:

Thus the mass-media worldview tells us that we are basically good, that happiness is the chief end of life, and that happiness consists in obtaining material goods. The media transform the value of sexuality into sex appeal, the value of self-respect into pride, the value of will-to-live into will-to-power. They exacerbate acquisitiveness into greed; they deal with insecurity by generating more insecurity, and anxiety by generating more anxiety. They change the value of recreation into competition and the value of rest into escape. And perhaps worst of all, the media constrict our experience and substitute media world for real world so that we become less and less able to make the fine value-judgments that living in such a complex world requires. (67)

All of this affects our worship in many ways, most prominently in the inability of many participants to listen to more than sound bites. Some people who come to worship expect that God should solve their problems immediately, that they should be able to have a quick spiritual fix. One of the greatest dangers is that the intimidating number of calamities and crises makes it difficult to believe that the One we worship is still Lord of the cosmos.

These muddled perceptions generated by television must be offset by a broad vision of the reality — the character and interventions — of our God, who is cosmically sovereign and compassionately saving.<sup>7</sup> Worship that continually adds to our perceptions of God’s splendors and our awareness of his commitment to us equips us with a worldview to resist the catastrophic notions and quick-fix techniques of our culture and with the prayerful concern and caring patience necessary to be of genuine service to those harmed by social and natural forces.

**9. Television is particularly dangerous to the worship of the triune God because *its view of religion is usually superficial and often prejudiced.*** Contemporary how religion is portrayed — or, as was primarily the case in the past, was not portrayed — in the media. Religion’s absence from general programming until recently delivered the subliminal message that religion is marginal.<sup>8</sup> Religious characters that did appear were usually weird, lightweight, arrogant, or pretentious. The excerpts of Princess Diana’s funeral that were replayed on the news did not include any of the traditional elements from the rites of the Church of England; the funeral of Mother Teresa was hardly covered.

On the other hand, the medium itself has replaced religion in giving people their sense of ultimate meaning and in justifying their behaviors and way of life.<sup>19</sup> These implicitly theological themes have been presented differently by television; that is, ultimate meaning has come from a source of redemption unrelated to God,<sup>20</sup> and behaviors have been justified by mores arising from the rebellions of the sixties rather than from God’s purposes for human beings revealed in the biblical commandments. Religion has often been depicted as the legalistic spoiler of everyone’s fun, rather than the conveyor of a way of life that is the most satisfying because it conforms to the created nature of our true humanity.

Moreover, by means of various factors listed in this chapter, television has robbed “genuine religious vocabularies of their power. The symbols, rites, images, and references of religion no longer move people” (28). As William Fore asserts, the solution is not “to make worship just like television — with its constant hype and glitz — but to invite people to recognize the phoniness of that medium, to cherish instead reflection and genuine thought instead of brainwashing” (29).

Worship of our triune God in all his splendor contradicts television’s false notions of both God and his people by enfolding us in the ultimate meaning of loving him and enjoying him forever in that royal waste of time. We discover the beauty of the Creator’s designs and moral foundations, the freedom of Christ’s thorough redemption, the Joy of the Spirit’s empowerment to live an obedient life.

**10. The problem with the media revolution that bothers me most is what Neil Postman calls the “*Low Information-Action Ratio*” (note the acronym).** Television offers its viewers enormous amounts of data about which they cannot do a thing; consequently, it trains them to receive and discard information without acting on it. Television makes us L.I.A.R.s because we do not do what we could with the truths we learn. We watch news reports about poverty, but we don’t lessen our consumption in order to give more away to feed the hungry and to build economic possibilities for others. We learn about wars and crime, but we contribute to violence ourselves because we don’t have enough time to listen to our children or to help provide post-incarceration guidance to a former prisoner. Think what this L.I.A.R. training does to sermons and Christian education, as it turns us into L.I.A.R.s who know God’s will but don’t live according to his purposes, who know the needs of the world but don’t change our lifestyles to ameliorate them.

The severity of the low information-action ratio will escalate rapidly as more and more people get hooked into the Internet. Already scores of people have told me that they waste too much time surfing and chatting. I always ask them what they do with the information they gain — and, with the exception of some scholars gathering specific information for research, very few achieve anything with it. This is the theological problem with which I wrestle most: How will we train worshipers to act on their Christian

beliefs if they have been trained by television not to act on what they know and, consequently, view the narratives of the faith as simply more information?

Immersion in the full splendor of God is one antidote to this L.I.A.R. syndrome, for the nature of God is to engage us in response. Praying “Thy will be done” commissions us as agents for the fulfillment of God’s purposes. Hearing the instructions of the New Testament letters challenges us to be Church in practical, tangible ways. Singing together knits us into a community of activists, supporting each other and finding strength in the larger whole of the Church.

This list of media hazards is lamentably brief, but I hope that its highlighting often infectious dangers will lead to further conversation and study (preferably together with members of your Christian community). I pray that this brief sketch is enough to make us deeply concerned — and that we won’t be L.I.A.R.s in response! I believe this is a key time for churches and individual Christians to be at the forefront in setting limits to media consumption, in deepening family bonds and faith roots for children so that they have moral values by which to weigh the media they observe, and in offering to the world both prophetic wisdom and workable solutions to the problems that the media inherently engender.

### **Who Will Hold the Media Responsible?**

It should be horrifying to us to realize that though television is a (if not *the*) major source of socialization in our culture, it has absolutely no controls on its content. Our society elects school board members and invests in national programs of testing and standardization in order to hold schools accountable for their processes of socializing our children — with mixed results, of course. But **what means do we have in our culture for holding television responsible for its socialization of the violence, immorality, incivility, and greed noted above?**<sup>21</sup> As William Fore summarizes the problem, the media reflect the values in the culture, and they legitimate, circulate, and amplify them and thus, in reality, “create” them as potent values, through the process of resonance. By choosing to repeat and amplify some of the myriad of possible values, attitudes, and worldviews, and not to repeat or amplify others, the media become a powerful process that helps to create, maintain, and change our culture, and those who become expert at finding and amplifying these messages feel no moral responsibility for *what* is resonated, but only that it is done well. (44)

My concern in this chapter is not to fight for some means of restricting television’s promulgation of values destructive to society (though that would be a worthy use of Christians’ time and abilities). Instead, **my purpose is to urge those of you who are concerned enough about worship to read this book to take decisive steps in your home and churches to limit the influence of the media.** Let me name some of those steps and urge you to consider with other people how we can implement them for the sake of enabling members of our families and Christian communities to worship.<sup>22</sup>

**1. We can and must set limits on our families’ use of media. Quentin Schultze suggests a three to one ratio of family interaction/relational activities and media consumption.** Without imposing such limits, he warns, we reverse the worldwide, ageless habit of parents teaching their children the wisdom of their faith and

heritage, and we allow the children instead to float aimlessly — without a sense of who they are or what life is really for.<sup>23</sup>

Bill McKibben urges us to participate in the “TV Free America” campaign held every year, sponsored by the American Medical Association, the Children’s Defense Fund, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Congress of National Black Churches, the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, and the Family Research Council. In these disciplines, McKibben insists, the emphasis is not “on renunciation,” but on **the great pleasure that comes when you turn off the television and rejoin the living world, and on the opportunity to reflect, to think, in the stillness of the unplugged world.** Solitude and silence and darkness have always been key parts of the religious life, but they have been banished by television. We need to reclaim them, and in so doing to break the materialist enchantment that now holds us in its thrall, to shrug off some of the witchcraft that makes us long constantly for things that will not satisfy us.<sup>24</sup>

**2. We can and must root ourselves and our children in the Christian worldview, its morals and values, so that we are more able to assess the media we explore.** We certainly cannot be totally without the media, since our schools and offices and peers engage in their use, but we must maintain a critical distance, become equipped with skills for making wise choices about their use, and keep our consciences finely honed to reject what is inimical to God’s way of life and his purposes and meaning for us.

**3. We can and must continue to learn the dangers of media as well as the benefits and take the lead in helping others to see these dangers, which are usually hidden.** Our faith communities can work together to develop workable limits for families and authentic solutions to the generational dashes that arise when parents care enough to limit their children’s involvement. Many nonbelievers genuinely want to join Christians in preventing the emotional, social, intellectual, and spiritual damage their children are exposed to in the proliferation of hazardous media materials.

4. We can and must stop letting television divert a major portion of Christians’ interests, motivations, satisfactions, and energies away from our religious center in the triune God.<sup>25</sup> I don’t think I overstate the case. Worship is not of interest to our unchurched neighbors, not so much because of its style or substance, but because they don’t see that those who regularly participate in it are any different from anybody else. Television, of course, is not the only source of that problem, but through the dangers listed above and others it certainly contributes voluminously to our lack of Christian character and conduct. Though I have met dozens of families throughout the country who have chosen not to use TV none of them has ever regretted it. Instead they report — or I have witnessed — that their children were more filled with wonder and imagination, more often involved in the arts and physical activities, more occupied in reading, more engaged in conversations, more interested in other people, and more concerned about spiritual matters. Though I have never in my adult life owned a television set, and neither has my husband, we have never regretted that choice either. We didn’t want to train our minds and souls in violence, sexual immorality, greed, and a low information-action ratio. I am NOT saying that all Christians should make the same choice. I AM saying that I hope and pray all Christian single adults and families will seriously consider the dangers listed above and think prayerfully about their own

## choices.

1. A few resources that I highly recommend are the following: Stanley Aronowitz, Barbara Martinsons, and Michael Menser, eds., *Technoscience and Cyberculture* (New York: Routledge, 1996); James Brook and Iain A. Boal, eds., *Resisting the Virtual Life: The Culture and Politics of Information* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1995); Ta] Brooke, gen. ed., *Virtual Gods* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1997); Douglas Groothuis, *The Soul in Cyberspace* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997); Stephanie Mills, ed., *Turning Away from Technology: A New Vision for the Twenty-first Century* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1997); Jeff Zaleski, *The Soul of Cyberspace: How New Technology Is Changing Our Spiritual Lives* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).
2. This topic is more thoroughly developed in chapter 10, "Amusing Ourselves to Death," in Marva J. Dawn, *Is It a Lost Cause? Having the Heart of God for the Church's Children* (Grand Rapids: Win. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), pp. 164-80. That chapter contains study questions that a congregational Bible study class or parents' support group could discuss together.
3. This information is from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1996* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996), p. 561, cited in Bruce David Forbes, "Why Clergy Should Not Ignore Television," *Word and World* 18, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 34.
4. William F. Fore, *Television and Religion: The Shaping of Faith, Values, and Culture* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987), pp. 16-17. Page references to this book in the rest of this chapter are given parenthetically in the text.
5. Forbes, p. 36.
6. Forbes, p. 43.
7. See also Bruce Forbes and Jeffrey Mahan, eds., *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
8. This final portion of the chapter previously appeared in greatly abbreviated form as "Setting Limits on the Media," *Lutheran Libraries* 39, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 5-8. My thanks to editor Felicity Hanson for permission to expand that version extensively here.
9. See Marva I. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids: Win. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989).
10. See Jane Healy, *Endangered Minds: Why Our Children Don't Think* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990). A fuller description of her work is offered in the first chapter of my *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Win. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995).
11. See Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985).
12. See, for example, Patrick D. Miller's comments on the latter in his editorial "Good-bye Seinfeld," *Theology Today* 55, no. 2 (July 1998): 147-51.
13. See Marva J. Dawn, *Sexual Character: Beyond Technique to Intimacy* (Grand Rapids: Win. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993).
14. See Marva J. Dawn, *Truly the Community: Romans 12 and How to Be the Church* (Grand Rapids: Win. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992; reissued 1997), for a consideration of this loss of intimacy in our culture and for instructions and discussion questions on how we can build genuine community in our churches.
15. See a deeper discussion of this danger in Chapter 7 of this book and in chapter 9, "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town," of *Is It a Lost Cause?* pp. 145-63.
16. Wendell Berry, *The Memory of Old Jack* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), p. 188.
17. See especially chapters 10-12, 15-17, and 21-26 of Marva I. Dawn, *To Walk and Not Faint: A Month of Meditations on Isaiah 40*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Win. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997).
18. Forbes, p. 39.
19. William Fore (p. 62) suggests that this new religion has its own "liturgical year," including the Rose Bowl parade, Super Sunday baseball, the U.S. Open in tennis, and the Super Bowl.
20. Forbes, pp. 40-41.
21. I am indebted to my brother, Glen Gersmehl, for pointing out to me that of the three major sources of socialization in our society — schools, parents, and television — the latter is the only one with virtually no societal controls. As national coordinator for the Lutheran Peace Fellowship, Glen is especially concerned for the socialization of children by television into passivity, greed, and violence. For more information, contact LPF at 1710 11th Ave., Seattle, WA 98122, phone (206) 720-0313, or lp1~ecunet.org.
22. My book *Is It a Lost Cause?* elaborates these points and offers discussion questions (for parents, church leaders, and congregations) in terms of raising children.
23. See Quentin I. Schultze, *Winning Your Kids Back from the Media* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), for an excellent tool for better familial thinking about the issues.
24. Bill McKibben, "Returning God to the Center: Consumerism and the Environmental Threat," in *The Consuming Passion: Christianity and the Consumer Culture*, ed. Rodney Clapp (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 48.
25. This sentence includes some modified phrases from Fore, p. 28.