

TAMING THE TASKMASTER:  
FAMILY COUNTERCULTURAL LIVING IN THE TELEVISION AGE

---

A Paper

Presented to

Dr. William Goff

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

---

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for ETHIC 4303 B

---

by

Randall Merrill

May 1, 2008

## TAMING THE TASKMASTER: FAMILY COUNTERCULTURAL LIVING IN THE TELEVISION AGE

Jesus taught that the greatest commandment is to love God with all of one's being.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the first of the Ten Commandments puts it in a negative way: "You shall have no other gods before me."<sup>2</sup> When the Israelites broke this primary command, consequences followed. Conversely, obedience brought blessing. This blessing was visited upon Daniel and his three companions, in the midst of an opposing culture.<sup>3</sup> An unbelieving society was moved by their obedience. Today in America, the reverse is often the case. If people from another culture were to come into most Christian homes in America today, they would say that Americans bow regularly at the shrine of entertainment. This is nowhere more noticeable than in our television viewing habits. Television has entered into the inner recesses of our homes, and it has proved to be a cruel taskmaster. It is the purpose of this paper to determine the cause of this development, to explore the nature of the problem, and to present solutions.

### **How We Got Here**

So, how did the Christian home devolve into its present state? A culture does not lapse into idolatry overnight. While this current generation of Christians has made poor choices, it is the first to do. In order to fully understand today's current issues, it is

---

<sup>1</sup>Mark 12:30.

<sup>2</sup>Exodus 20:3, New American Standard Updated Version. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations will be from this translation.

<sup>3</sup>See Daniel, chapter 1.

important to go back a few generations and take a look at earlier developments.

This first of these extends back to the industrial revolution. In the mid to late nineteenth century, the extended family was broken up, resulting in a sense of isolation.<sup>4</sup> In time, the television became a replacement for those in-house relationships. Thus, even today, “the activated set is used as a companion while viewers do other things at home.”<sup>5</sup>

A second factor emerged in the mid-twentieth century. Many appliances became popular at this time, making life simpler for the stay-at-home mother. Television fit nicely alongside these other conveniences, so the television became an appliance that kept the children busy while mothers went about their daily chores.<sup>6</sup>

A third factor followed closely behind. As televisions became common in American households, they began to regulate everyday life. Soon, mealtimes, homework and bedtimes were all being regulated according to what was on television, and when.<sup>7</sup>

All this has led to a fourth factor: Television watching became an ingrained habit. Even when there was nothing good to watch, the set remained on anyway. Believers gave in to the desire to be entertained, even if they didn’t like what they were seeing.<sup>8</sup> This is the situation that today’s believers have inherited.

---

<sup>4</sup>Marie Winn, *The Plug-In Drug* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), 186.

<sup>5</sup>James Lull, “Families’ Social Uses of Television as Extensions of the Household,” in *Television and the American Family*, ed. Jennings Bryant (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 1990), 61.

<sup>6</sup>Winn, *Plug-In Drug*, 141.

<sup>7</sup>Lull, “Families’ Social Uses of Television,” 61.

<sup>8</sup>Kevin Perrotta, *Taming the T.V. Habit* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1982), 16.

## Defining the Problem

Many believers know that television is a problem, but that knowledge is often limited to surface issues. For example, believers often decry the level of profanity, sex-related themes, and gratuitous violence in today's programming. Studies point to the social and educational effects of television on children. While these are valid concerns, much ink has already been spilled in making these points. These are all symptoms of deeper issues, and it is important that these underlying causes not escape notice.

The first point that must be made is that television is presently driven by an ideology that is contrary to the Christian faith. Though this ideology often comes subtly, "it is an ideology nonetheless, for it imposes a way of life, a set of relations among people and ideas, about which there has been no consensus, no discussion, and no opposition. Only compliance."<sup>9</sup> This ideology plays out in two primary relationships—man's relationship with God and man's relationship with his fellowman.

As for man's relationship to God, it will help to first look at how Paul dealt with the prevailing worldview at Mars Hill. In Acts 17:27b-30, he is recorded as saying,

He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like . . . an image formed by the art and thought of man. Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent.

Television falls short of this presentation of Christian theology in several ways: First, in contradiction to the truth that we "live and move and exist" in God, man is viewed as

---

<sup>9</sup>Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Viking Penguin, Inc, 1985), 157.

central to everything.<sup>10</sup> Second, in contrast to a God who is “not far from each one of us,” television presents a God who is distant, if He is present at all.<sup>11</sup> Third, denying Paul’s call to repent, the world of television knows no sense of sin, or of consequences because of sin.<sup>12</sup> Fourth, as a direct result, there is no need for redemption from sin for, why should man be redeemed if he has not sinned in the first place?<sup>13</sup> Thus, television knows nothing of the biblical view of God.

Man’s relationship to man is distorted by television, as well. Again, Scripture helps to frame the issue. In Luke 8:14, as Jesus related the parable of the four soils, he said that some of the seed was choked out by the “worries and riches and pleasures of this life.” This could serve as the guiding philosophy behind many a television plot, for similar themes are common, namely: (1) we are on a constant, anxious search for meaningful relationships (worries), (2) the best people are young, affluent, and urban (riches), and (3) sex underlies everything (pleasures).<sup>14</sup> In short, nothing could be more antithetical to the Christian worldview than the ideology of television, yet Christians continue to watch.

This is especially dangerous, because television is a powerful medium. While the printed page invites contemplation and the spoken word elicits the imagination, the combined visual and aural nature of television immerses the viewer into the world of the

---

<sup>10</sup>Perrotta, *Taming the T.V. Habit*, 115.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 118-19.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 119.

producer. For it was “not until motion pictures and television that people could communicate the experience of seeing the moving world *as they were seeing it*. . . . This is evident from the way we talk. We say we saw the president on TV last night, not that we saw pictures of him. . . . A more intimate and questionable form of submission could not be imagined.”<sup>15</sup> What a tragedy that this sort of submission is practiced day after day by people who are expressly told not to “copy the behavior and customs of this world.”<sup>16</sup>

It does not end here. Many believers have not only received the ideology of the age, but the spirit of the age as well, which mocks at holy things and laughs at sin. Genuinely funny lines are regularly mingled with adulterous scenes and lewd innuendoes. Believers have been caught off guard, for “who is prepared to take arms against a sea of amusements? To whom do we complain . . . when serious discourse dissolves into giggles?”<sup>17</sup> Solomon would counsel us: “Even in laughter the heart may ache, and joy may end in grief.”<sup>18</sup> Pity the person, the family, or the culture that is laughing itself to death. It is interesting to note that, after Jesus wept over Jerusalem, the people of that city handed Him over to be crucified—as they mocked and laughed.

Still, this does not cover the whole of it. On top of all this, television displaces better things in a believer’s schedule. The average American views television more than

---

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 106-09.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 65-66, 72, emphasis his.

<sup>16</sup>Romans 12:2, New Living Translation.

<sup>17</sup>Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Viking Penguin, Inc, 1985), 156.

<sup>18</sup>Proverbs 14:13, New International Version.

two and a half hours a day.<sup>19</sup> If a believer needs motivation to change his viewing habits, he need only imagine a daily schedule that suddenly has two and a half hours added to it.

To this, Kevin Perrotta raises a piercing question:

What if all the programs on television were innocuous or even, in our judgment, good? Would we be comfortable spending as much time with the medium as we do? Would it be healthy to spend two to three or more hours a day . . . watching television, even if the programs were harmless or even good? Surely the expenditure of [so much time] deserves closer attention.<sup>20</sup>

### **Toward a Solution**

Thus far, much has been said about the problem of television. This is by design, for television is such an ingrained habit that changes will not occur without a sense of urgency. Assuming that that has been accomplished, it will be helpful to now look at changes that must be made in the lifestyle of the believer who is intent on being a responsible disciple. Emphasis will be placed especially on the Christian home, as that is the most crucial battleground of all, for every primary relationship is affected there.

Before parents map out a strategy for home viewing, they must first look at their own hearts, for sin always affects the heart, from which actions flow. Constant, indiscriminant viewing leads to double-mindedness. It entails the seeing of unholy things and the hearing of unholy words. Worse, it entails the embracing of values and a world system that is contrary to God's Kingdom. It necessitates an attempt to worship both Baal and Jehovah, to serve both God and Mammon. It means that the greatest commandment

---

<sup>19</sup>John P. Robinson, "Television's Effects on Families' Use of Time," in *Television and the American Family*, ed. Jennings Bryant (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 1990) 197.

<sup>20</sup>Perrotta, *Taming the T.V. Habit*, 11-12.

has been broken. The solution starts with the heart. It begins with repentance.

From there, it moves to a confession of the mouth. Adrian Rogers and his son, Steve, rightly point out that the biblical word for confess means to “say the same thing as.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, instead of taking the side of sin and defending it, the believer is to take the side of God and say, with him, that the sin is wrong.

Once this has been done, the Christian parent must then clean up his or her outward life. That means the cancellation of all subscriptions to HBO, Cinemax, and Showtime, which are the worst offenders to Christian living, and the removal or blocking of any remaining offensive channels, such as MTV.<sup>22</sup> While this may mean the loss of some treasured viewing, it is critical to keep in mind Jesus’ words: “If your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you, for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.”<sup>23</sup> Is it not painfully obvious that many families are already living in their own private hell? Is it worth it?

Assuming that matters of the heart have been addressed, and that safeguards have been put into place, attention can then be focused on the television itself. Although it is an inanimate object, it must be treated like an enemy, for it has too long been an enemy of the Christian home. Questions must be asked of this enemy—questions like, “What have I gotten in return for all the time I have invested in you? What have you done for me or for my family? Name one good thing that you have done for us!” Such

---

<sup>21</sup>Adrian Rogers and Steve Rogers, *Family Survival in an X-Rated World* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishing, 2005), 60.

<sup>22</sup>Rogers and Rogers, *Family Survival*, 88.

<sup>23</sup>Matthew 5:30.

questions will always lead to the truth, and “the truth will set you free.”<sup>24</sup> In the words of Neil Postman, “To ask is to break the spell.”<sup>25</sup>

Having applied the principle of repentance and the power of sound reasoning, the next step to be taken is to dishonor the false god. This was the practice in the Old Testament. Elijah mocked the prophets of Baal when they could not deliver.<sup>26</sup> Isaiah prophesied a day when the inhabitants of Jerusalem would repent of their idolatry and “defile [their] graven images.”<sup>27</sup> False gods must be treated with dishonor.

How is this done? First, the size of the television must literally be reduced. The mammoth-size sets of today speak for themselves. They look ominously reminiscent of the large statue Nebuchadnezzar made of himself. Surely the size itself is enough to cause the initiate stand transfixed before it. Reducing it to a manageable size immediately gives the parent more of a sense of control. For example, a smaller set could be put in a closet when not in use.<sup>28</sup> Doing so makes a powerful statement: the television no longer holds a central place in family life. Another suggestion might be to turn the volume down so that, even when the set is on, it does not dominate the lives of everyone present.<sup>29</sup> Surely a different atmosphere reigns in the home once the roar of the former taskmaster is reduced to the whimper of supplication!

---

<sup>24</sup>John 8:32.

<sup>25</sup>Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 161.

<sup>26</sup>1 Kings 18:27-29.

<sup>27</sup>Isaiah 30:22.

<sup>28</sup>Winn, *The Plug-In Drug*, 184.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 183.

Assuming that the television set itself has been dealt with, the next step follows: adjusting the family schedule. This will involve the whole family, so it is important at this point to make a distinction. The righteous indignation that likely accompanied the previous steps should in no way be communicated to the children. Note that, when Paul was at Mars Hill, none of the anger he felt as a result of their idolatry was communicated when he addressed the Athenians personally.<sup>30</sup>

So, in a spirit of grace, initial steps should begin with making a log of viewing time for each member of the family.<sup>31</sup> This gives everyone a chance to objectively observe his or her own viewing habits. The next step is to establish a realistic television “diet.”<sup>32</sup> A responsible diet has both limitations and balance, so the family must decide both how much time is allotted and what percentage of time should go to sports, news, comedy, educational viewing, etc.

Once the family has decided upon their new television diet, several more safeguards must be put in place. The first of these changes will be difficult, but it is critical. There must be no television set in any child’s room.<sup>33</sup> Before a set is moved, however, it is important to explain that its removal is not punishment. It should be stressed that the parents are making changes, too, and that the television will be replaced with something better.

---

<sup>30</sup>Acts 17:16, 22-31.

<sup>31</sup>Perrotta, *Taming the T.V. Habit*, 139.

<sup>32</sup>James P. Steyer, *The Other Parent*, (New York: Atria Books, 2002), 181.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 186.

Perhaps one of the most important reversals that must take place is that parents must intentionally be involved in their children's viewing. Finding the time to do this should not be difficult if everyone's viewing time has already been reduced considerably. This has the potential to greatly enrich the child and it greatly limits the possibility of damage while viewing.

Assuming that this has all been accomplished, one more step remains to be taken: deciding on the types of activities that will fill the free time that is now available. Rogers and Rogers rightly suggest reading the Bible together as one healthy alternative.<sup>34</sup> Another good option is reading good books together.<sup>35</sup> Both classic books and good children's books abound. Kevin Perrotta forwards the idea of "holy conversation," in which "God's word is spoken and discussed [and] un-Christian ideas are actively identified and countered with the truth."<sup>36</sup>

So, in summary, despite the current state of the Christian home, it is clear that it does not have to be this way. While progress may seem difficult to achieve, once a thorough plan is implemented, no external motivation will be needed. After just a few months of freedom from the vanquished taskmaster, no one will miss it, and no child will plead for the return of his own personal television. Like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, who revised their diet, the resultant change will be obvious to all.<sup>37</sup> Believers

---

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Steyer, *The Other Parent*, 197.

<sup>36</sup>Perrotta, *Taming the T.V. Habit*, 146.

<sup>37</sup>Daniel, chapter 1.

were designed to love God unreservedly. When Christians live in obedience according to their original intention, how can they not be happy?

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Perrotta, Kevin. *Taming the T.V. Habit*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1982.
- Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. New York: Viking Penguin, Inc, 1985.
- Rogers, Adrian and Steve Rogers. *Family Survival in an X-Rated World*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishing, 2005.
- Schultze, Quentin J. *Redeeming Television*. Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992.
- Steyer, James P. *The Other Parent*. New York: Atria Book Publishers, 2002.
- Winn, Marie. *The Plug-In Drug*. New York: The Viking Press, 1977.