

Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*: Response Paper

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Amusing Ourselves to Death is an essential historical perspective and contemporary critique of mass media and American culture as it has transitioned from a typographic to a television-based epistemology. One of the more controversial aspects of the book is Postman's critical look at television media and Christianity. He makes astute observations about American Evangelicals and their use of television in the mid-1980s. Yet, it may be all too easy for today's reader to disregard Postman's critique as a reaction to the "televangelism" of that era. Upon closer investigation, current church evangelism trends suggest that his insights about media and religion revealed in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* are just as relevant as they were when the book was first published.

In the chapter entitled "The Typographic Mind" Postman touches on the issue explored more fully later in "Shuffle Off to Bethlehem." He draws a stark contrast between the great preachers and theologians of the typo-centric 18th and 19th centuries, citing the intellects of Jonathan Edwards and Charles Finney, and the televangelists he knew of at the time (Postman, 1985, p. 54).

Without holding Postman accountable for knowledge of today's religious media, his argument may be conditioned by his own experience of religious television and possible lack of experience with contemporary pastors and theologians outside of the broadcast media world. Indeed, televangelists were in the spotlight in the decade of Postman's writing. The Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart scandals both erupted in this era, becoming the preoccupation of national television news and popular culture. Yet, the work of serious pastors, theologians and authors continued. Postman almost seems to assume there were, or are, no leaders of the intellectual caliber of Edwards and Finney in the Church today. This is not the case, even though their work

garners less celebrity in an age of televangelists. Names like Joel Osteen, Pat Robertson and Robert Schuler gain notoriety due to the use of television and TV-friendly approaches to ministry. To them, books become product extensions intended to generate more income and awareness for their ministries. At the same time, there are significant thinkers who are preaching, writing and blogging the church forward.

Establishing colleges and universities has been somewhat of a fad for televangelists, which would likely frustrate Postman even more. Ironically, Postman observes that the typographic orientation of religious people in America led to the rise of our system of higher education in the past centuries, while recently Jerry Falwell has resorted to utilizing his former televangelistic broadcasts to advertise and promote his once foundering Liberty University, an institution created in the age of television (Postman, p. 55). One also will find media communication studies high on the list of majors at institutions such as Liberty and Pat Robertson's Regent University. Not surprisingly, perpetuating religious use of the media is a top priority for these schools.

While televangelism is not the pinnacle of religious media that it once was, more recently individual churches have firmly embraced entertainment and marketing approaches to evangelize and draw more people to their weekly services. Perry Noble, senior pastor of NewSpring Church in Anderson, South Carolina, believes the weekly church service should be the most entertaining "experience" of the week: "It is our desire not to merely have a church service, but to create an experience through song, video, messages, and any other tools the Holy Spirit might place in front of us. Sure, we've been accused of entertaining people, but I would much rather entertain people than bore them" (Noble, 2006).

Postman, writing “Shuffle Off to Bethlehem” from the vantage point of the 80s, may have drawn a more Orwellian conclusion from televangelism, with celebrity preachers using broadcast television to expand personality cults instead of churches. Pastors like Noble seem to indicate that some current-day mega-churches have gravitated toward a Huxleyan approach, with weekly worship service and sacrament recast as TV-styled entertainment experiences designed to compete effectively with secular entertainment media options that face consumers.

Many church leaders justify their free use of media in evangelism and church marketing by reciting the Apostle Paul: “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22 Today’s New International Version). Some use this text to prove the end justifies the means when it comes to the great commission. It is beyond the scope of this paper to question how they arrive at such an interpretation. However, with such a zeitgeist driving Christian evangelism, few have paused to understand the built-in biases of the media they are employing. Most practitioners of media in a church setting fail to recognize that the “means” have the potential to alter the “end” message: “If the delivery is not the same, then the message, quite likely, is not the same. And if the context in which the message is experienced is altogether different from what it was in Jesus’ time, we may assume that its social and psychological meaning is different, as well” (Postman, p. 118).

Shane Hipps, former advertising account executive and present day church pastor, describes the issue well: “...within the forms of media and technology, regardless of their content, are extremely powerful forces that cause changes in our faith, theology, culture, and ultimately the church” (Hipps, 2006, p. 17). These powerful changes are active both outside of the church in the surrounding media environment of society, and inside the church in its own use

of media to further its evangelistic mission. Media bias the message itself and the receiver of the message.

Producing a church service experience that emulates commercial television may turn a Holy Spirit-driven transformational conversion into a consumer-driven transactional experience. Subsequently, converts may treat churches like purveyors of a commoditized civic religion. Efreem Smith, pastor of Sanctuary Covenant Church in Minneapolis, observes the “influence of consumerism” emanating from forms of Christian media: “Christian television (even with its good side) seems to push consumerism, capitalism and individualism. It’s not that these traits are sinful, as much as [they] limit the Gospel message and keep us from kingdom community and reconciliation” (Smith, 2006, p. 75).

Postman was prescient in this regard, writing that the myriad screens of television media are “so deeply associated with the commercial and entertainment worlds that it is difficult for it to be recreated as a frame for sacred events” (Postman, 1985, p. 119). Put another way, it is a church of the consumer instead of the church of Christ. “Christianity is a demanding and serious religion. When it is delivered as easy and amusing, it is another kind of religion altogether” (p. 121).

Postman also points out a key difference between religious spectacle involving acts of worship, and the use electronic entertainment media: “True religion has as its purpose enchantment, not entertainment” (p.122). Perhaps enchantment, with its mystical overtones, is not the best word choice for a rationalist Christian reading of Postman. Worship or reverence may be more apt. He continues, “...enchantment is the means through which we may gain access to sacredness. Entertainment is the means through which we distance ourselves from it.”

Postman leads the reader to ask the question, can a message of engagement and repentance be presented as entertainment in a visual media context that promotes detachment and indifference?

The attraction of the Church to visual entertainment media, like a moth drawn to a flame, is, perhaps, driven by deeper communication deficiencies than simply trying to compete with secular entertainment media alternatives to win souls. Postman, writing on faith and technology in a 1997 essay, said, “Our old ways of explaining ourselves to ourselves are not large enough to accommodate a world made paradoxically small by our technologies, yet larger than we can grasp” (Postman, 1997). The Church today unavoidably finds itself in this “paradoxically small” world and struggles to tell the same story of God. Postman concludes, “...the challenge of retelling our tale for new and changing times is a test not of our wisdom, but of our faith” (1997). Media technology can indeed be of use in this endeavor, but not without the serious considerations that Postman and others, such as MacLuhan, Ellul, and Hipps, advocate.

Works like *Amusing Ourselves to Death* are greatly needed by today’s church leaders to help understand the impact of media on contemporary culture. Ultimately such insights lead Christians to pose new questions about media placed in the service of evangelism and worship:

“As long as we view our methods and media as neutral conduits, we will be in a perpetual state of asking ‘can we?’ However, if we train our eyes to perceive the subtle secrets and hidden powers of our media regardless of content, the ‘should we?’ question becomes inevitable. With this perspective one can’t help but wonder what new environment we are accidentally creating with our new media and technology. And it is this orientation that the church desperately needs to foster” (Hipps as cited in Berkhimer, 2006).

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