

And Now a Word from Our Sponsor

1 Timothy 6:2-3; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 2:1

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The saturation in today's world of television, movies, and other forms of visual media has had an adverse effect on our ability to listen, think, and reason. It's as if the entire society is suffering from attention deficit disorder. Sadly, many preachers decided to make major accommodations to the appetites of a generation weaned on media and entertainment; but they left biblical preaching behind.

Have you ever noticed how many television commercials say nothing about the products they advertise? The typical jeans commercial shows a painful drama about the woes of adolescence but never mentions jeans. A perfume ad is a collage of sensuous images with no reference to the product. Beer commercials contain some of the funniest material on television but say very little about beer.

Those commercials are designed to create a mood, to entertain, to appeal to our emotions—not to give us information. They are often the most effective commercials because they make the best use of television. They are the natural product of a medium that offers a surreal view of the world.

On television, reality mingles imperceptibly with illusion. Truth is irrelevant; what really matters is whether we're entertained. Substance is nothing; style is everything. In the words of Marshall McLuhan, the medium has become the message.

Amusing Ourselves to Death is the name of a perceptive but disquieting book by Neil Postman, a professor at New York University. The book argues powerfully that television has crippled our ability to think and reduced our aptitude for real communication.

Postman says television has *not* made us the best informed and most literate generation in history. Instead it has flooded our minds with irrelevant and meaningless information. Television has conditioned us only to be entertained and has therefore rendered other critical forms of human interaction obsolete.

Even the news, Postman points out, is a performance. Suave anchormen coolly present brief segments about war, murder, crime, and natural disaster. Those are punctuated by commercials that trivialize the news stories and isolate them from any context. Postman recounts a news broadcast in which a Marine Corps general declared that global nuclear war is inevitable. The next segment was a commercial for Burger King.

We are not expected to respond rationally. In Postman's words, "The viewers will not be caught contaminating their responses with a sense of reality, any more than an audience at a play would go scurrying to call home because a character on stage has said that a murderer is loose in the

neighborhood.”[1]

Television cannot demand a sensible response. People tune in to be entertained, not to be challenged to think. If a program requires contemplation or demands too much use of the intellectual faculties, it will die from lack of an audience.

Television has shortened our attention span. Would anyone in our society, for example, stand for seven hours in a sweltering crowd listening to the Lincoln-Douglas debates? It’s frankly hard for us to imagine that our great-great-grandparents had that kind of stamina. We have allowed television to convince us we know more while actually lowering our tolerance for thinking and learning.

By far the book’s most trenchant message is in a chapter on modern religion. Postman, no evangelical, nevertheless writes with piercing insight about the decline of preaching. He contrasts the ministries of Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and Charles Finney with the preaching of today. Those men relied on depth of content, profundity, logic, and knowledge of Scripture. Preaching today is superficial by comparison, with the emphasis on style and emotion. “Good” preaching by the modern definition must above all be brief and amusing. It is entertainment—not exhortation, reproof, rebuke, or instruction (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16; 4:2).

The epitome of modern preaching is the slick evangelist who overstates every emotion, struts around the platform with a microphone wired to his ear, and gets the audience clapping, stomping, and shouting while he incites them into an emotional frenzy. There’s no meat to the message, but who cares as long as the response is enthusiastic?

Of course, preaching in most conservative evangelical churches is not that exaggerated. But sadly, even some of the best of today’s preaching is more entertainment than teaching. Most churches typically feature a half-hour sermon with lots of amusing anecdotes but little doctrine.

In fact, many preachers think of doctrine as undesirable and impractical. A major Christian magazine once published an article by a well-known charismatic speaker. He mused for a full page about the futility of both preaching and listening to sermons that go beyond mere entertainment. His conclusion? People don’t remember what you say anyway, so most preaching is a waste of time. “I’m going to try to do better next year,” he wrote; “that means wasting less time listening to long sermons and spending much more time preparing short ones. People, I’ve discovered, will forgive even poor theology as long as they get out before noon.”[2]

That perfectly sums up the attitude that dominates most modern preaching. There is an obvious parallel between that kind of preaching and those trendy jeans-perfume-beer commercials. Like the commercials, it aims to set a mood, to evoke an emotional response, to entertain—but not necessarily to communicate anything of substance.

Such preaching is sheer accommodation to a society bred by television. It follows what is fashionable but reveals little concern for what is true. It is not the kind of preaching Scripture mandates. We are to “preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:2), “speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1), and “teach and preach...the doctrine conforming to godliness” (1 Tim. 6:2-3). It is impossible to do those things and always be entertaining.

If the tragic course of modern preaching is to be changed, Christians must insist on biblical preaching and be supportive of pastors who are committed to it. How does a pastor of integrity reach people

who may be unwilling or even unable to listen to carefully reasoned expositions of God's truth? That may be the greatest challenge for today's Christian leaders. We cannot yield to the pressure to be superficial. We must find ways to make the truth of God known to a generation that not only doesn't want to hear, but may not even know how to listen.

[1] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 104.

[2] James Buckingham, "Wasted Time," *Charisma* (Dec. 1988): 98.

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