



CURRENTLY IN TELEVISION

Would Menno Simons watch TV?

MARK D. BAKER

I begin my "Discipleship and Ethics" class at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary by telling students that the course is an Anabaptist course—not because we will study the ethics taught and practised by 16th-century Anabaptists, but because we will seek to think from an Anabaptist perspective about what it means to follow Jesus in the 21st century. In other words, if Menno Simons and those he fellowshiped with brought their same theological perspectives and commitments to our time and place, how might they live differently than others in society do?

At the heart of my course is the conviction that salvation through Jesus Christ restores relationships. We have followed Adam and Eve by not trusting God and by grasping to be something more than God has created us to be. This causes us to experience estrangement from God, ourselves, others and creation. Yet, as Christian communities experiencing Jesus' salvation, we have the potential to resist the forces that alienate us from others and hinder us from living as God created us to live. Two central questions for us are: What are the alienating forces? and How can we resist them and thrive as God intended?

While I was constructing the ethics course, television did not immediately come to my mind as one of the four or five main forces of evil in our society today. Yet, it kept coming up in reading I did on issues that did spring to mind—consumerism and violence, for instance. Consumerism repeats the same lie as the serpent: What we are is not good enough, and obtaining more possessions will bring "salvation". We could list many ways our rampant consumerism enslaves us, wounds creation and interferes with our relationships with God and others. Television constantly brings the message of the false prophets of consumerism into our homes—not only blatantly through commercials but also through the programs themselves.

Violence is a symptom of our sin and alienation that predates television, but an article by US Army officer Dave Grossman convincingly argues that violence has increased since the advent of television and video games ("Trained to Kill", *Christianity Today*, Aug. 10; *MB Herald*, Jan. 8, 1999). He points to studies showing that playground violence increased dramatically after television was introduced in

a region, and then displays how television and video games use the same training armies have developed to make soldiers more willing and able to shoot to kill. The article convinced me of the urgent need for the church to address the issue of violence and television.

I could also mention the whole area of television and sexuality. For all of these reasons, I decided to include a section on television in my ethics class because of its close relationship with other forces of alienation and death in our society.

Although most would probably agree that Menno Simons and the early Mennonites would be concerned with the link between television and consumerism, violence and inappropriate sexuality, they might ask, "But wouldn't Menno also see that television has a positive side?" Perhaps the simplest way for me to answer this question is to say that we have a television in our home and I occasionally use videos in my classes. So, my actions communicate that I think TV has positive things to offer. At the same time, my TV ownership has been sporadic and covers only 10 of the last 25 years. That fact communicates my ambivalence about television and my sense that the negatives outweigh the positives.

Although commercials and commercial programming represent my greatest concerns, only watching programs or videos we deem positive does not completely solve the TV problem. Any means of communication has its strengths and weaknesses. Television is a powerful and engaging form of communication, but the value gained from it can be outweighed by what is lost if it replaces other forms of learning (reading, lectures, conversations) and prevents us from experiencing life firsthand. For example, I enjoy watching sports events and nature documentaries, something positive that TV offers me, but if they take the place of playing sports or visiting the wilderness, even these positive features of television become negative.

We can't know whether Menno would have a TV or not, but at the least as followers of Jesus I believe he would urge us to think of ways we can lessen the negative impact of television on our lives. In my class, we have discussed how we might do this. One suggestion is for families, small groups or churches to keep track of their TV viewing for a week in order to

become more aware of what they watch and how much they watch. Then, they should not watch any TV for at least two weeks and observe how their life is different without TV. Finally, they should discuss the experience and covenant with each other to make changes in their TV habits.

Another suggestion is to become more intentional about critiquing commercials and discussing programs. This can be done while watching TV or by videotaping a number of commercials and watching them with others in order to discuss how commercials' messages conflict with the truth of the gospel.

Getting rid of our televisions is one option. Putting them in storage periodically is another. If you and those in your home find it difficult to maintain a commitment you've made to only watch a certain amount of television or certain programs, then keeping the television in a closet, or at least disconnecting the antenna or cable, might help. It will make watching television an intentional decision that requires more effort than just pushing a button.

It is crucial that we do not simply say "no" to TV or certain TV programs, but that as churches, families and small groups we plan alternative activities that allow us to relate to others and live as the people God has created us to be. This reflects what I said earlier. I do not discuss television in my ethics class simply to label it a moral taboo and point an accusing finger at those who watch too much. My conviction is that forces of evil in the world hinder us from thriving as God intended us to thrive. Through Christ, we have the possibility of joining together with other Christians to live in greater freedom from these forces.

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The raven-haired victim

JERRY RAAF

At 0400 hours, a yellow Camaro takes flight
As Bob Dylan screams in the stereo deck
A sound of cold painful metal preludes
Moans of a raven-haired girl, just 20
Gold necklaces try to hide in the folds
Of the motionless black lace sweater
Black racing gloves remain snapped on petite hands
Snow partially covers separated high heel shoes
A hard cover book slides on crusts of snow
TITLE: Possession and Exorcism

The Devil laughs and it echos in the Bow Valley
As the ignition buzzer mourns its owner
Time carries on, for even the second hand
On the small wrist continues to move with sterile precision
Emergency red and blue lights scrub the hillside
Tell me
Try to tell me, Go ahead
Tell me there would have been no difference
That things would still be the same
If Jesus had been a passenger in that car

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