is a clear encouragement not to let visual media fill our minds with these things.

5. We live in tension with the culture around us. We need to keep in touch with our culture because this is the setting of our relationships with people and our service to God. But we cannot simply conform to society's patterns of behaviour. Rather, we critique our culture from a gospel perspective. Serious media presentations often address issues important in our society. We can learn from these without losing a sense of the tension between gospel and culture.

Taking Responsibility

In view of these and other principles from Scripture, what can Christians do in a society where viewing options are increasing rapidly and accountability structures appear to be fading?

1. Take full responsibility for viewing choices. Frank E. Gaebelein once said in relation to contemporary literature, "As a Christian I am responsible for the furniture of my mind." This responsibility must increase with visual entertainment—which offers unforgettable images of the details that literature merely describes. Christians are free to follow a higher standard.

2. Choose the best, leave the rest. There are indeed many viewing options that are thoroughly enjoyable, and some that are helpful and uplifting. We should be quick to commend whatever is true, pure and praiseworthy. But is "video grazing" an option for Christians? Are we under compulsion to view what is not helpful? Our goal should be to test everything. "Hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22).

3. Speak truthfully and accurately. Is it responsible to describe films and TV programs that contain gratuitous violence, obscene language or recommendations of immorality as "good" or "excellent"? We can acknowledge impressive special effects, good acting or skillful scriptwriting without giving blanket recommendations. We can also develop the habit of saving our highest praise for material that will truly enrich fellow Christians.

4. Discuss and evaluate. Within family or small group settings, we can discuss what we are watching and evaluate the values presented. What is real, and what is illusion? What is true, and what is false? Take advantage of Christian movie guides. Be open to the counsel of fellow Christians. Are we willing to let other Christians influence our viewing habits?

5. Set a limit on time use. The needs of families and churches for the time of ordinary Christians is not decreasing. Nor is there less need for time spent in Bible reading, devotions or prayer. Why should time spent with visual media be increasing? We should not give more time to visual entertainment than is healthy for our spiritual lives or relationships.

6. Ask the Holy Spirit for help. None of us by ourselves is able to resist the temptations with which our evil desires entice us. Neither are we able to make good viewing choices consistently without Gods help. But we are not alone. We are a part of the body of Christ. And the Holy Spirit dwells among us to guide us toward the good and to give us the power to pursue it. ■

For additional reading, see Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992). • Malcom Muggeridge, *Christ and the Media* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977). • Kevin Perrotta, *Taming the TV Habit* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant, 1982). • Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Viking, 1984). • Quentin J. Schultzein, *Redeeming Television* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1992).

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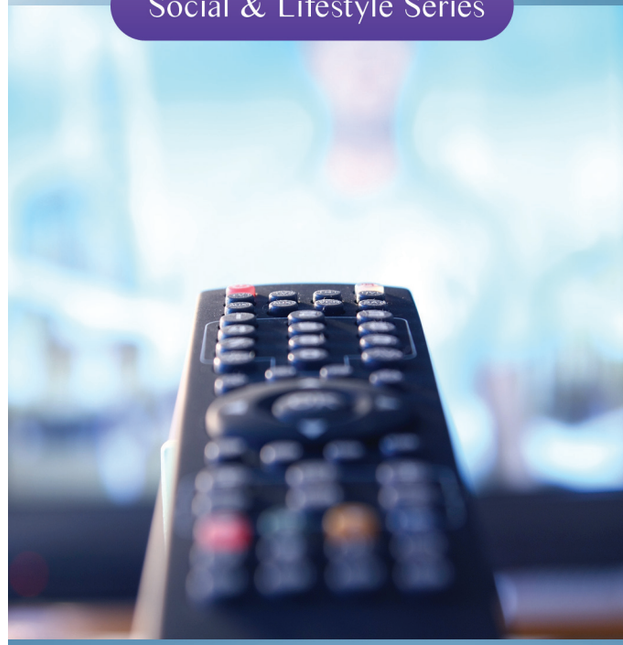
Making Good Viewing Choices:

Videos, Movies, and TV

Social & Lifestyle Series



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Faith and Life

Making Good Viewing Choices:
Videos, Movies and TV

Jeff and Jennifer want to do something together on a Friday evening. The two committed Christians decide to go see a movie. They open the entertainment section of the newspaper to check the offerings.

Jennifer is attracted to a movie she saw advertised on TV; Jeff points to a second movie his friends call "excellent"; they read the recommendation of a third by a movie critic. Beside each of the three movies, they notice warnings for various combinations of graphic violence, coarse language or sexual situations.

What sort of discernment should Jeff and Jennifer exercise in their viewing? Can a choice of movie have an influence on their faith and life? Could they be more helpful to each other in making decisions? Does it matter?

Appeal of Visual Media

Every day influential images offer to enter our worlds through the gateway of the eye. Visual entertainment—by means of film, television and video—makes a highly persuasive appeal. The appeal needs a careful response from Christians who are concerned about its influence on their own lives, their families, their churches and their society.

In the past century, the technologies offering visual entertainment have been heading toward a greater personal choice. At the same time, accountability structures and community controls have been weakening. This means that responsibility to make good viewing choices has grown. And it suggests that Christians need to develop good filtering mechanisms to help each other discern.

The attraction of movies and television is easy to understand. They bring a lot of enjoyment into our lives. These media can picture situations of great variety and give viewers the sense that they are "right there." Comedy, adventure, suspense, tragedy, romance—all are portrayed in fascinating ways. The best productions of classic stories, for example, show us how good these media sometimes are or could be. Their amazing capacities to make what is imaginary seem real, and the growing skill of directors, producers and technicians to entertain people visually, have made movies and television a powerful force within our culture.

Need for Discernment

But every technology is both a blessing and a burden. The same media that can tell a good story well can make illusion and falsehood seem true. Movies and television can make immorality appear beautiful, violence appear right, revenge appear sweet. In the hands of people who do not share a biblical vision of living life under God, movies and television can become a pervasive source of falsehood and negative moral influence.

Visual technologies and their corresponding viewing patterns have been changing at a bewildering pace. When movie theatres opened earlier over a century ago, it was easy to keep their influence at arm's length. Viewing movies required a deliberate trip to the theatre. But when television was developed, and more and more families took it into their homes as a permanent—and sometimes central—piece of furniture, the influence of visual media became more difficult to control.

For some decades network television seemed to observe certain limits on moral content. But then cable systems and satellite technology introduced viewing options that no longer depended on social approval or control but simply on personal reference. With the introduction of the VCR, movies that had once been out of bounds because they were shown in a theatre were now available for home viewing in an apparently harmless format. And along with the "classics" of the past came a selection of R-rated and X-rated material that had until then been available only on the sleazy side of town, if at all.

Advances in technology have taken away the accountability once built into the earlier stages of visual entertainment. The rapid development of internet access suggests that the future will put even greater responsibility for good choices on individuals, families and Christian communities.

Content Problems

A major problem area for Christians is the glorification of extramarital sex in movies and on television. Another concern is the repeated recommendation of violence as a way to solve problems.

Quentin J. Schultze suggests that materialism is by far the biggest moral problem with television: "Dramatic shows, comedies, sports and commercials all preach worldly success and idolize consumption." Movie critic Michael Medved also finds a sustained attack on religious faith coming out of Hollywood.

Nor is content the only concern with visual entertainment. Malcolm Muggeridge concluded, after several decades of broadcasting experience, that the effect of the media at all levels is to draw people away from reality, which means away from Christ and into fantasy. Many others have noted how media that started out as diversions or attractions have ended up as obsessions. Movies and television have become a rival source of teaching in competition with not only traditional social institutions but with Jesus himself. Neil Postman, the media critic, notes that the emphasis of these media on image over printed word tends to trivialize their treatment of important subjects such as politics, education and religion. He finds them unable to communicate ideas well or to stimulate public discourse.

Scriptural Principles

God's Word and the Christian community can help us make good viewing choices. Although the New Testament was written at a time when these modern media of visual entertainment did not exist, from its pages we can learn some key principles.

1. Pictures and images involve our eyes in a serious moral process. Jesus said that if a man looks lustfully at a woman, he commits adultery with her in his heart. He said that the eye itself plays a part in the sin (Matthew 5:27-29). Much of what is available in visual entertainment—including prime-time network TV—not only presents women and men to the eye for lustful viewing, but invites the lustful look. Is this something to take lightly? Did Jesus take it lightly?

2. There is a line that separates God-given desire from sinful craving. Our lives are greatly enriched through viewing the universe which God has created. But much of what people crave, and what 1 John calls the "lust of the eyes," comes from a world in rebellion against God. A love for these things is mutually exclusive from a love for God (2:15-17). God has given us much to enjoy. We need to sense when we are crossing the line into sinful desires.

3. Our thoughts are the seedbed for our actions. Temptation begins in the depths of the human heart. Each person is enticed by their own evil desire. "Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown, gives birth to death" (James 1:15). There is a progression within our thought world, and people who nurture their imagination with images of degradation will experience a desensitization that can eventually bring great harm both to themselves and others when they begin to act out what they are thinking.

4. Evil content cannot help us grow in discipleship. Living as "children of light" has practical implications. We seek to be "made new" in the attitude of our minds, and to put on a "new self," which God has given us at our conversion. Paul writes that this means giving up unwholesome talk, obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking. Also, "among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people" (Ephesians 4:29-5:16). This

▶▶ continued on reverse

Movies and television can make immorality appear beautiful, violence appear right, revenge appear sweet. Christians need more discernment than ever.