

Though it may be un-American to say it, not everything is televisable. Or to put it more precisely, what is televised is transformed from what it was to something else, which may or may not preserve its former essence. For the most part, television preachers have not seriously addressed this matter. They have assumed that what had formerly been done in a church or a tent, and face-to-face, can be done on television without loss of meaning, without changing the quality of the religious experience. Perhaps their failure to address the translation issue has its origin in the hubris engendered by the dazzling number of people to whom television gives them access.

“Television,” Billy Graham has written, “is the most powerful tool of communication ever devised by man. Each of my prime-time ‘specials’ is now carried by nearly 300 stations across the U.S. and Canada, so that in a single telecast I preach to millions more than Christ did in his lifetime.” To this, Pat Robertson adds: “To say that the church shouldn’t be involved with television is utter folly. The needs are the same, the message is the same, but the delivery can change. . . . It would be folly for the church not to get involved with the most formative force in America.”

This is gross technological naivete. 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.

To come to the point, there are several characteristics of television and its surround that converge to make authentic religious experience impossible. The first has to do with the fact that there is no way to consecrate the space in which a television show is experienced. It is an essential condition of any traditional religious service that the space in which it is conducted must be invested with some measure of sacrality...

Moreover, the television screen itself has a strong bias toward a psychology of secularism. The screen is so saturated with our memories of profane events, so deeply associated with the commercial and entertainment worlds that it is difficult for it to be recreated as a frame for sacred events. Among other things, the viewer is at all times aware that a flick of the switch will produce a different and secular event on the screen—a hockey game, a commercial, a cartoon. Not only that, but both prior to and immediately following most religious programs, there are commercials, promos for popular shows, and a variety of other secular images and discourses, so that the main message of the screen itself is a continual promise of entertainment. Both the history and the ever-present possibilities of the television screen work against the idea that introspection or spiritual transcendence is desirable in its presence. The television screen wants you to remember that its imagery is always available for your amusement and pleasure.

(Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business - 20th Anniversary Edition by Neil Postman, Penguin Books, Kindle, 2005 [1985], Page 118, 119 of 183, Text Modified)