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A CHRISTIAN EDUCATOR'S CRITIQUE  
OF TELEVISION ADVERTISING

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## A CHRISTIAN EDUCATOR'S CRITIQUE OF TELEVISION ADVERTISING

By 1965 Desmond Smith, writing in The Christian Century, had already recognized the power of television: "It has been said that all television is religious -- the difference is only in which god is worshiped" (Haselden 133). If that statement was true nearly a quarter of a century ago, what would Smith say now, as we approach the 1990's with nearly total saturation of this mass medium in American homes? Arthur Holmes cites the French sociologist Ellul regarding modern technology's grasp on those in the business world, and then suggests that our "hi-tech" inventions offer still more sophisticated options for good and evil today than ever before (Holmes Contours 6). Much criticism has been directed toward the prevalence of low-quality content -- especially violence and sex themes -- in the entertainment programming on television.

Another "department" within the commercial broadcasting scene, however, has perhaps been underestimated as to its power in our society, and that is advertising. The amount of money spent annually for selling on television has spiraled from about \$300 million in 1952 to some \$16 billion in 1983 (Hefzallah 104). Many viewers are not aware that more time, talent and dollars are often invested in the production of a 30-second commercial spot for network TV than for the entire program which it is helping to sponsor. The average American sees more than 10,000 television advertisements per year (Haselden 141) promoting a dazzling array of products and services.

A wide range of opinions can be found about the value of these commercial messages which constantly grab for our attention. And, a wide range of issues confront the Christian educator evaluating what place television advertising should occupy in an academic curriculum. Many Christian schools are now teaching mass media courses, including television and advertising. Should they be taught? If so, how? What are the justifications for teaching advertising, and what cautions and philosophical considerations ought to shape the way in which it is taught? In light of a Christian world view, how should a church-affiliated college teach advertising differently from the way it is presented to students in a public institution of higher learning?

The primary purpose of this paper is to explore issues which the Christian teacher should bring to the attention of students whose careers will touch, and perhaps embrace, the field of advertising -- especially television advertising. This involves primarily students majoring in communication, journalism and

business. It is in the media industry and in the corporate world which supports it that the endless array of promotional messages transmitted daily originates. By considering moral, ethical and spiritual dimensions of various practices and trends within the field, students can be better prepared to apply Biblical values in their work as professionals.

An important secondary purpose is also intended, however. The typical undergraduate mass media or advertising class includes students who will not actually work in the advertising profession, but they will witness countless ads in their lifetime. Furthermore, even those who do become professional communicators will also spend much time as part of the mass media audience. The Christian teacher must be concerned with raising their awareness of the world-view implications of what they are seeing and becoming more responsible media consumers.

After examining a "mini-apology" for the inclusion of advertising in the curriculum, the heart of the paper explores some of the key areas of controversy in the industry today from the perspective of Christian principles and concerns. Finally, suggestions are offered for how the conscientious disciple of Christ should respond and relate to these issues appropriately -- in the career setting or in the family room.

#### A Case for the Need to Teach Advertising

The ultimate question in this paper -- regarding the "how" of teaching advertising Christianly -- begs the answering of a more basic question: Should it be taught at all? Leland Ryken suggests that, because the arts (of which advertising might be thought a popular form) are intrinsically loaded with values, Christian educators should weigh carefully what they select (emphasis mine) for study, as well as how they treat it (Ryken 111).

In spite of British historian Arnold Toynbee's categorical condemnation of advertising as "evil" in "any circumstance," Kyle Haselden observes that advertising does serve society in some beneficial ways. Among other things, it informs the public of products available and their prices, it plays a key role in industry and finance, and it advances a number of worthy causes (Haselden 144-46).

Corporate sponsors of TV programs have responded to complaints in recent years of advertising without informing, research indicates. Marc Weinberger and Harlan Spotts found that 66 percent of the TV ads they examined in 1985 in the United States had at least one statement with concrete information. Of course, this could be much higher, but it does compare favorably with the rate of informativeness in a similar study in 1977 (Weinberger and Spotts 89). The move toward more comparative advertising and naming of rival brands has also pushed sponsors to offer more specific facts in their ad copy.

Advertising is fundamental to the commercial broadcasting system in America. Networks and local stations are economically dependent on the revenues produced by selling air time to sponsors. Admittedly, this might be argued in some cases as a point against the merits of advertising, when it supports a questionable program. Still, the same economic link can be credited for bringing some highly informative, educational and attractive programming into our homes. Furthermore, advertising in our free-enterprise system announces new products to consumers and apprises them of the benefits of using other merchandise and services. As Ibrahim Hefzallah asserts, "Advertising is essential to a healthy economy" (104). Courtland Bovee and William Arens add that advertising has helped to encourage healthy competition, keeping pressure on companies to develop quality products at moderate prices (10-13).

Television advertising has helped advance many "noble" and useful programs and social causes, such as campaigns to drive safely, prevent crime, say "no" to drugs, and others. David Ogilvy, a veteran ad agency executive, adds to the list campaigns which have successfully promoted anti-littering, health awareness (American Cancer Society, etc.), facilities for the performing arts and international concerns (e.g., Radio Free Europe) (160-62). Indeed, advertising has more than occasionally performed educational and informational functions, serving the public interest, as well as a persuasive function to benefit a specific sponsoring organization.

How, then, should the Christian relate to such an integral component in our society? Multiple writers contend that the Christian has a responsibility to take an interest in any serious human endeavor, to function within this world, to avoid the "dualistic" notion of fleeing from any contact with so-called secular activities (Drew 110, Walsh and Middleton 150). Richard Niebuhr observes, further, that even those who claim to reject our culture are actually living in it and, to some degree, depending on it (69). These contemporary views are not without sympathy from earlier Christian thinkers. Martin Luther held that it was appropriate for a disciple of Christ to engage in things such as commerce, which "cannot be dispensed with and can be practiced in a Christian manner" (Niebuhr 174-5) (emphasis mine).

Scripture offers examples of those who engage in commerce (e.g. the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 who buys and sells real estate, fine linen, etc.). The wise man indicates that profitable labor is honorable and says, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might" (Ecclesiastes 9:9, 10). Is it not reasonable to see within these general principles a place for the honest promotion and selling of appropriate goods and services to interested consumers? It is not hard to imagine that merchants of Bible times erected signs and perhaps communicated in other ways to draw attention to their wares. The purpose today is much the same; the size of the audience and the media are vastly different. A theistic world view portrays man as having been created in God's image with the potential to communicate with Him and with each other, and to do so creatively for a variety of purposes in the

course of cultural activity. As Holmes implies, creativity does not constitute sin; rather, the way it is channeled determines its morality (Contours 205). Commercial (and noncommercial) advertising -- like most other spheres of human life -- has the potential to serve the real needs of humanity and glorify God or to exploit people's desires and vulnerabilities and dishonor their Creator.

Reputable practices and Christian practitioners can be found in medicine, carpentry, farming, law, business -- and advertising. The fact that ethical and/or moral problems exist does not categorically invalidate the worth and the role of any of these specialties. Nor does it make them inappropriate for academic study in a Christian setting. Indeed, it may provide an even stronger mandate for sensitizing students to the issues involved and helping them develop criteria for distinguishing between the good and the bad. The Master Teacher said in John 17:15, "I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil."

Advertising, it seems, ought to be taught, and taught Christianly. Students will benefit in general by becoming more enlightened viewers and, more specifically, by gaining a stronger Christian orientation to "doing" advertising as a vocation.

### Problems Associated with Advertising

Having established the legitimacy of making television advertising a subject of academic study within a Bible-based world view, let us turn now to two broad areas of concern. The first of these has to do with the art of human persuasion and the methods used to accomplish it. The second will deal with the question of the actual products and values promoted on television.

### Persuasion and the Christian Ethic

Arthur Holmes notes that communication is essential for responsible citizenship in our democracy and that this often includes the persuasive use of communication (Holmes Making 25). One does not have to look far to realize that the influence of persuasive symbols in our world is not by any means limited to the commercial media or the business world. In fact, Theodore Levitt proposes an interesting comparison between modern marketing and the artwork of Michelangelo on the Sistine chapel. They are both forms of symbolic interpretation of reality -- a type of "distortion," if you will. "Man seeks to transcend nature in the raw everywhere. . . . He refuses to live a life of primitive barbarism or sterile functionalism" (Levitt 254-5). We expect exaggeration, Levitt continues, from the poet or artist or musician, as well as from the creator of an advertising message.

This notion strikes at the heart of what selling is all about -- at least as generally practiced in a free-enterprise system. Product manufacturers and retailers highlight certain aspects of

their products which they believe prospective consumers will perceive as most appealing. Less desirable aspects are left out of the advertising message. Is this ethical? Is it honest?

Douglas Uyl contends that sellers are not obligated to provide full disclosure on every negative detail. This does not condone lying if one is asked about a specific item, but "selective emphasis" is appropriate, as the consumer also bears some responsibility to evaluate messages critically (Uyl 52). But citizens' groups and government agencies object when they perceive the distortion of reality goes too far. For example, Kellogg's All Bran cereal ads in 1984 sparked no small debate when they claimed the cereal's high-fiber content would help prevent some kinds of cancer. After nearly five years of discussion in government and the industry, the Food and Drug Administration ruled it is permissible for food manufacturers to make health statements but not to claim their products can prevent disease (Meyers 33, 45).

Another form of misrepresentation can result from the attempt to portray a product as significantly different from competing brands in the same generic category. Overcrowded markets have put increasing pressure on advertisers to "differentiate" their brand in the mind of the prospective buyer. Sometimes, of course, real differences exist and should be highlighted for the benefit of both seller and consumer. But where is the line crossed between genuinely unique "positioning," as Al Ries and Jack Trout would call it (Bovee and Arens 181), and pseudo-differentiation? David Ogilvy admits a surprising number of advertisements are built on the premise that people can be influenced to prefer one brand of cake mix or detergent over another even when both are substantially identical (Packard 20).

Another factor behind this trend is found in the T.V. audience structure. As George Comstock explains, the profit-driven system in which our media operate means the large stations and networks aim for large numbers rather than unique audience segments, to attract the advertising dollars (23). The resulting homogeneity of audiences draws sponsors with very similar products and services to sell. The result: more "parity products" and artificial differentiation. While this practice is lauded as creative promotion in some professional circles, the Christian communicator must ask how this fits with the Biblical standard of integrity and honesty.

In some cases, companies have been charged with omitting information about important safety cautions associated with a product. Vincent Barry illustrates this point with the example of a bicycle shop which advertised skateboards. Parents complained after their children were injured while attempting to perform flips, somersaults and other maneuvers they had seen depicted on the television ads. No mention or disclaimer was made about the potential dangers (Barry 249-50). Even stronger concerns are often voiced in behalf of young children who are exposed to T.V. commercials interspersed with regular programming. Groups such as Action for Children's Television argue that youngsters below a

certain age cannot distinguish between the programs and the ads, so they may accept the advertisers' claims as "gospel" (my quoted word) more than would adults (Comstock 109-17). It should be acknowledged that these concerns are not restricted to Christian viewers. But those who accept Christ's command to do unto others as we would have them do unto us certainly will have even more reason to question product misrepresentation or exploitation of susceptible minds.

Persuasion involves not only logical processes within the human mind, but emotional as well. Considerable controversy was sparked in the middle of this century when Vance Packard authored a book claiming that marketing experts were making a sophisticated science out of identifying consumers' needs and desires and packaging their products with psychological appeals geared to trigger those emotional yearnings. Called The Hidden Persuaders, his collection of examples illustrated how the marketers, or "merchants of discontent" as their consultants in the behavioral sciences dubbed them, were learning to reach consumers at an in-depth level. For instance, he said freezers were sold in high volume right after World War II, with subtle cues in the ad copy that promised emotional security at a time when many people were anxious over food supplies and general survival preparedness in the event of another war. Packard went on to identify eight such hidden drives. These include the need for a sense of power (appealed to by selling men motorboats), the need for a sense of mortality (targeted in life insurance advertisements), and others (Packard 19-20, 68-78).

Even vocal inflections used in broadcast commercials can persuade us in ways we are not consciously aware of, according to Tony Schwartz, educator and former advertising executive. For example, he describes a commercial in which the line, "Got a headache? Come to Bufferin" might be spoken in a fashion similar to the way a concerned mother says to her child, "You don't feel well? Come to Mama." The promise of headache relief, Schwartz asserts, is associated with memories of maternal comfort in our childhood (59).

Another major aspect of TV commercials which capitalizes on vocal inflection along with attractive models, creative scripting and provocative photography is, of course, the heavy emphasis on sex appeal. Christians cannot help but be alarmed at the trend toward selling everything from cars and clothing to soft drinks and appliances by exploiting the sexuality of God's created beings. An entire paper could easily be devoted to this topic. Because it is impossible to do justice to this concern in a few sentences, the attempt will not be made here. However, other points discussed, such as the concept of "hidden persuaders," and the "myth of perfection" addressed in the next section, have implications for the sex appeal.

Yet another related area that could be explored at length is the controversy over subliminal persuasion. This primarily involves the allegedly deliberate use of provocative artistic symbols (sexually oriented, or perhaps related to themes of death

or violence) which are not obvious but subconsciously perceived. The charges made by some critics on this matter (such as Wilson Bryan Key in a series of books in the 1970s) have been largely challenged by scholarly observers in subsequent years. Again, space does not permit full development of this issue, but the reader should be aware of the questions it has raised.

It is not the intent of this paper to conclude whether the various types of psychological appeals addressed above are used or how effective they may be. It does seem a reasonable premise that if advertisers know certain techniques to be effective they will likely employ them to the extent they are legal. This discussion is also not meant to label any use of emotional appeal wrong, as will be addressed later. For now, suffice it to say that the teacher of advertising must sensitize students to the danger of going too far in manipulating people's needs and desires, especially when such appeals contradict logic and common sense.

### Values for Sale: World View Implications

In addition to examining how advertisements persuade, it is important to consider what is being sold -- what is the net effect on the viewer. The previous discussion addressed methods and means of selling products or ideas. Now, we turn to the "products" themselves. The most obvious target of complaint in this department, for the Christian, would undoubtedly center around products which are directly associated with major ills of our society, such as alcoholic beverages (especially when they are advertised so heavily on sports telecasts). David Ogilvy credits advertising (and without apology) for having persuaded 58 percent of adults in the United States to consume beer. For those "Puritans" who fail to see the legitimacy of the need to drink beer, he says, "I cannot reason with you" (Ogilvy 159). According to a report in Guide Magazine, a typical child will view people consuming alcoholic beverages in a glamorous setting 75,000 times on television by the time he is old enough to legally drink ("Focus" page). (This is not limited to commercial messages, but they certainly account for a significant share.) Other questionable products, from a Christian viewpoint, include such items as toy guns, rock music albums and R-rated movies in the theatres, to name a few.

The Christian college classroom is a place where young people need to be alerted to the potential abuses of the mass media in terms of selling harmful products. The Bible teaches that "as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." Holmes adds that we are just as responsible for what we think and imagine as for what we do, according to the tenth commandment (Holmes Contours 119). While it would not be fair to blame TV commercials for all the irresponsible purchases that are made, might they not play a role?

Those who promote these items will argue that the viewer has the freedom to choose what to purchase, much as one can select from the array of merchandise at the store what to take home.



Even now, a storm of debate is raging over whether the selling of alcoholic beverages on television should be prohibited by law. It is an interesting and -- for the Christian -- a troubling paradox that cigarette advertising was banned from the TV screen nearly 20 years ago, but beer ads continue in high volume. Regarding alcohol, people generally agree that drinking greatly harms society, but great dispute arises over the cause-and-effect link between advertising and actual drinking, as pointed out by Christians, Rotzoll and Fackler (160-162). Similar disagreement exists over the constitutional rights (for free speech, etc.) involved when a legally available product is in question.

The concerned teacher in a church-affiliated school will help students examine the various ramifications of complex problems like this. For example, the student should consider such questions as: Might government regulation in one area open the door to loss of other important freedoms -- maybe religious freedoms? Does the primary responsibility lie with those individuals or companies which choose to promote harmful products? Does it lie with the TV networks and station owners? With the advertising executives and copywriters? What companies can a Christian conscientiously work for? What jobs within the advertising and media industry are appropriate? These are the questions that go beyond the instruction and evaluation provided in the public education sector.

A less-obvious, yet perhaps even more important, aspect of what is being promoted over the air waves is related to values in a more general way. Of special concern to many Christian observers is the prevalence of materialistic values transmitted hundreds of times daily on television. As Comstock puts it, the "glory of consumption" is a theme presented in much of the world of television programming and commercials as a primary basis for happiness (81). Haselden agrees: "You would think as you listen to some commercials that you are anti-American, that you are subverting the nation's economy, if you drive last year's model, wear last year's shoes, or refuse to use the new soap." Advertising, he contends, fosters a materialistic, consumption theme based largely on anti-Christian values. The industry tells us, "Thou shalt covet, thou shalt buy, thou shalt consume" (Haselden 150-51). Blamires adds that advertising is teaching us to "treat worldly possessions as status symbols rather than as serviceable goods." He cites an example of the bank which promoted its checkbook as "a visible sign that you're somebody" (Blamires 28-29). Even Ogilvy concedes that TV advertising has turned Madison Avenue into "the arch-symbol of tasteless materialism" and calls for more regulation of the industry in which he makes his living (163-64).

Many of the slogans reflect this philosophy of life in our Western civilization: "A diamond is forever." "Things go better with Coke." "Haven't you done without a Toro long enough?" "Built for the human race" (referring to Nissan cars). This is not to imply that any one of these products, or the appeals created to sell them, is wrong in itself. But how much of this

media diet can the Christian mind absorb cumulatively, without being somewhat conditioned?

Not unrelated to these images are those which the media portray of the glory of man's technological inventions. Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton contend this "technicism" is one of the "gods of our age," a manifestation of humanism which provides people with a sense of autonomous power and control over their environment (131-39). The TV commercials for automobiles, with all of their horsepower hype, may well exemplify what Walsh refers to. The danger, from a Christian world outlook, is that trusting in such technological prowess may lead us to forget that all of these "elements shall melt with fervent heat" when God cleanses this world (II Peter 3:10). In the meantime, man goes on racing his engines and consuming scarce energy resources -- sometimes needlessly, Arthur Holmes believes (referring to organized auto racing events, for example) (Holmes Contours 232).

A final point about values communicated through advertising addresses its effects on self-concept and our impressions of personal worth. As Blamires points out, advertising focuses on stereotypes of ideal people who are attractive and youthful (73). Lending support to this claim is research by Hefzallah which sampled 29 award-winning TV ads in 1973. About 74 percent of the ads featured people who were classified as young or middle-aged, and 72 percent implied the people shown were in the middle-income economic class (Hefzallah 176-93). A single hour's observation of typical television programming will likely reveal that most of the models, announcers, etc. used on the commercials are also physically attractive and dressed in style.

What is the impact of these patterns on viewers? Ronald Adler, in a book on interpersonal relationships, says advertising helps to perpetuate what he calls a "myth of perfection" in our culture. The media display models who appear flawless, and it is against these "ideals" that we tend to gauge our self-worth (Adler 46). The Biblical principle that a person's heart counts, in God's eyes, more than outward appearance (I Samuel 16:7) can easily get lost in the stereotyped images constantly confronting us on the screen.

With all of these indictments of TV advertising, the Christian reader might be inclined to conclude that either this paper is overly pessimistic or, if not, that Toynbee was right and Christians ought to have nothing whatsoever to do with this medium. Neither reaction is intended. Rather, it is hoped that thoughtful teachers and students will think seriously about how to relate to today's media culture in the spirit of Jesus' prayer in John 17:15. Some suggestions for reaching this goal have already been discussed. The final section focuses on more.

### Guidelines for Christian Choices

What should the follower of Jesus do about the advertising and mass media scene portrayed in the preceding pages? An "in the world but not of the world" approach to the issue of television

advertising requires a "Christian mind," as Blamires would phrase it, a mind which can see through the confusing environment of our secular culture, yet does not withdraw from that culture (Blamires 104-5). Certainly God expects us to be informed citizens and somewhat in touch with trends and societal issues communicated via advertising and other media programming. As for the professional communicator who works in a so-called secular job in advertising, the occasions for sharing his or her faith may be many. Furthermore, Engel and Norton point out that effective outreach programs of the church require that we avoid a dualistic isolation from our culture:

. . . we are sent to proclaim, in word and deed, the good news of this new order of life in the multitudinous structures of society -- family and government, business and neighborhood, religion and education, etc. (Engel and Norton 10).

The final sections of this paper are devoted to offering guidelines for making choices consistent with the Christ-centered world view. The Adventist educator has a unique opportunity and duty to help students confront these issues and hopefully develop criteria for responsible evaluation and decision-making. Specific points for the advertising career-bound student are discussed first, followed by a briefer section with questions for more general consideration by all viewers of commercial television.

### Criteria for the Professional

#### 1. What product am I selling?

Any conscientious Christian must look carefully at the value of the product she would be promoting before accepting a particular job. Is it something she would be comfortable using herself, on a moral basis? Sue Chord, an assistant advertising manager for a leading women's magazine, decided she could not reconcile the conflict between her personal convictions and the magazine's extensive space given to cigarette advertising, especially when aimed at the female audience (Christians, Rotzoll and Fackler 154-6). Her resignation from that job serves as an example of the need to be selective in where one applies her professional skills. Students preparing for a career can be pointed to many products, services and causes worthy of their creative promotional energy.

#### 2. What indirect values are associated with the product?

As noted earlier, the philosophical implications of an advertising appeal may be as damaging as the actual item of merchandise. Brian Walsh offers the example of an advertisement promoting beauty schools which appealed to teenage girls to enroll so they could sell themselves socially and in the labor market. Walsh disapproves, not of the idea of looking attractive, but of this type of "economistic reduction of our aesthetic lives" (Walsh

and Middleton 153). What about other products? Should copywriters for prestigious brands of automobiles or clothing play heavily on the consumer's desire to impress others?

Leland Ryken observes:

People may assent to the proposition that the true end of life is not to make money and accumulate possessions, but if their minds are filled with images of big houses and fancy clothes, their actual behavior will run in the direction of materialism (Ryken 106).

Some products which are morally acceptable in themselves are promoted in a manner which conflicts with eternal, spiritual values. At times, this may mean turning down a given assignment or even an entire job. Of course, a more optimistic possibility is that the principled professional might be able to persuade his client or employer to use a different selling technique. Highlighting practical benefits such as a product's durability and utility might be just as effective, and more defensible from a Christian stewardship perspective.

### 3. Are the claims I make truthful?

The Christian communicator must be ever mindful of the danger of misrepresentation. As suggested previously, this does not preclude the idea of selective emphasis in promoting a product or organization. To emphasize a car's high fuel economy and not mention its limitations of size and comfort would hardly be viewed as wrong. The public realizes that advertisers will intensify the positive and downplay the negative in a paid commercial spot. But if, in promoting fuel economy, the ad cites EPA mileage estimates without noting that actual mileage may vary under everyday driving conditions, some could easily be misled. Stating half-truths or omitting contextual details can deceive as much as what is said. (After all, God did not approve when Abraham identified Sarah as his sister while in the king's court.) On the car mileage issue, the government some years ago required auto makers to add a qualifying statement to their mileage claims, as a type of "affirmative disclosure" (Bovee and Arens 64).

Exactly how much of the truth and which parts of it should be told rests, perhaps, on the question of what effect an omission is likely to have on the average consumer. There is much disagreement between advertisers and the critics over just how gullible, or skeptical, or maybe "willingly seduced" today's television audience is. At any rate, though, students planning on an advertising-related career should learn to think Christianly about these matters. Such thinking will mean considering more than just what is legally safe. It will compel the professional to see every viewer of an advertisement not only as a prospective buyer but also as a fellow human being in God's creation. The Golden Rule ought to be reflected in the approach used.

Frank Gaebelein asserts that even in advertising our church institutions, such as schools, we need to guard against statements which can give false impressions. For instance, he decries the

practice of some Christian colleges (especially in earlier years) of claiming to have superior scholastic standing when, in fact, they were not even close to the top academically (Gaebelein 100). Another church-related advertising strategy is more illustrative of the "affirmative disclosure" question. This involves promoting an evangelistic crusade at a public location such as a convention center or high school auditorium without mentioning the name of the specific church organization sponsoring it. Some believe this raises questions about the ethics of church-community relations and credibility of the church's name.

The Christian classroom is an appropriate setting for thoughtful teachers and students to examine the pro's and con's of various tactics, both in the corporate world and in church-related advertising.

#### 4. Are my advertisements manipulating emotions?

The Bible teaches that God made us to be both thinking and feeling beings. He desires that we should come and "reason together" (Isaiah 1:18), and yet He also appeals to our emotional nature at times, as He did with the thundering earthquake at Sinai. When it comes to advertising, it seems that persuasion which involves a mixture of logic and emotion (much like a good sermon) can be a legitimate form of human communication. Ethical questions arise, however, when an appeal relies totally on emotional response. Sex appeal may sell intimate apparel. Excitement sells cars. Fear or guilt may sell insurance. Patriotic passion sells political candidates. Should not the corporate executive or advertising strategist shun the temptation to exploit feelings at the expense of any factual and logical content?

#### 5. What programs am I supporting?

As mentioned in the opening pages, the financial link between advertising and overall programming in commercial TV is a strong one. A conscientious sponsor should examine the values transmitted and the moral implications of the television program in which that sponsor's advertising appears. A worthwhile product promoted honorably, as far as the commercial itself is concerned, may find itself in the context of a questionable program. Here is an area rich in potential for discussion in the college classroom. Should an Adventist Realtor allow TV ads for her agency to be aired during a violent or sexually explicit movie? Or how about a church promoting a community outreach program with paid spots during the local Sabbath afternoon telecast of a university football game? Admittedly, these questions fall in a broad grey area in which clear answers may be harder to come by; still, they should be confronted by those preparing to use the media in a manner consistent with their beliefs.

## 6. What can the church learn from corporate advertisers?

The church and its institutions will do well to study the successful marketing methods used in secular industry. The "products," of course, are different, but valuable insights can be gained as to how advertising works. Engel and Norton observe that many concepts regarding the how-to of mass communication from the commercial world can be applied to media evangelism. These include analyzing and targeting audiences, setting research-based goals, selecting which media to use, letting opinion leaders supplement the mass media message, and other points (Engel and Norton 79-102 et passim). The advertising classroom can be the setting for many fruitful insights of this nature. The author of this paper has found the showing of a film on how a TV commercial was made to be a good opportunity for stressing the value of professional teamwork, where people with diverse talents and temperaments cooperate to reach a common goal.

To be sure, not all of the tactics employed in the corporate world can be rightly imitated by Christian promoters and church organizations, but many are worthy of adaptation.

### Criteria for the Viewer

#### 1. How many and what kinds of ads am I watching?

Ibrahim Hefzallah suggests a 13-point checklist for assessing the quality of TV commercials one views and analyzing the strategies employed (151). The viewer may be surprised to realize, in looking back after a week's time, how many times he or she was exposed to a certain product, or to an ad with sex appeal, or to certain ideas and philosophies. Just the quantity of time spent watching commercials might be a shocking revelation. Blamires sees radio and television as modern inventions on which we can easily overdose, coming away with a "drugged acceptance" and a "mindless inertia" (159). As God's stewards should we not use the limited hours available in a day judiciously? Consciously scheduling specific time blocks in advance for TV viewing is one way to help curb excessive involvement with the medium.

#### 2. How is television affecting me?

This is a critical question, yet one which is difficult to answer with certainty. Some viewers are more vulnerable to the effects of TV (programs and advertisements) than others. Furthermore, the same person can be more susceptible at some times than at others. Hefzallah says that one can develop an "adult discount" skill -- a type of shield against unconscious or irrational reactions. Being aware of the persuasion techniques used and purposely avoiding a passive state of mind can help keep a viewer objective (Hefzallah 66-71).

When it comes to a person's basic beliefs, attitudes or behavior in life, the role of television likely depends somewhat on its interaction with other, non-media influences. Joseph Klapper's report of research on voting choices in an election suggests that the mass media alone are not apt to bring about fundamental conversions on major issues in one's life, if he or she is solidly entrenched in one position. Media messages can, however, reinforce existing attitudes or even make the difference if a person is caught between conflicting cross pressures (Klapper 18-43, 77-80, et passim). In practical terms, this theory may well apply to an issue such as television and the use of alcohol. The viewer who already is predisposed to abusing alcohol probably should avoid seeing hours and hours of TV programming supported by beer commercials. Similarly, a person who is struggling between childhood vows of abstinence and current temptations from friends to drink might be vulnerable to the clever sales pitch on the tube. The same could be said for attitudes and values regarding sex, diet, vanity or materialism. The Christian must earnestly pray, "Search me, O God, and know my heart," and then consider honestly her own weaknesses in shaping her TV viewing habits. For some, more media exposure to particular types of products or appeals might be safer than for others.

Finally, sharing reactions to TV programs and commercials might be a useful approach to minimizing the "mindless inertia" syndrome. Follow-up discussions with family members, friends and classmates are valuable, it seems, for heightening awareness and thoughtful analysis of potential effects of media "transactions."

### 3. Do I really need the items I purchase?

Tony Schwartz contends, "No matter how hard an advertiser tries, he can't sell products for which people feel no emotional or physical need" (67) (emphasis mine). The question for the responsible consumer to ask is, Do I truly need this or do I just think I do? As Nicholas Wolstertorff points out, our genuine reasons are often not what we offer in rationalizing our actions. "The human heart is deeply deceitful" (Wolstertorff 144-5). The Christian student and media consumer is advised to examine whether he has a rational, as well as emotional, basis for his response to a particular promotional message. If the answer is No, then the "hidden persuaders" discussed earlier may be operating too potently, and the stewardship of his God-given resources, wanting. That new riding mower may satisfy more of a desire to keep one step ahead of the neighbors than a genuine need for the more advanced model.

This doesn't imply that every item acquired should serve strictly utilitarian purposes. Certainly there is room in the Christian's life to buy a few things just for fun. The point is that we ought to be conscious of our true motives in making purchase decisions and not allow the media to manipulate our temporal human nature at the expense of sound judgment.

#### 4. What can I do to improve the landscape of commercial TV?

The audience, collectively, has more impact on the mass media scene than most people realize. Advertisers and media executives operate under tremendous pressure to keep pace with the demands of a materialistic-minded market. As Haselden notes, advertising reflects who we are, as well as helping to shape society (152). Given the audience measurement and ratings system which drives the television industry, each viewer can be regarded as casting a vote every time he or she watches a program or purchases a product. The Christian teacher can draw this to the attention of students who will soon take their place as responsible media consumers.

Concerned citizens groups have boycotted programs, or the products which sponsored them, to voice their disapproval of controversial themes or products. Others have written letters to TV stations, network producers and corporate advertisers, as well as the local newspaper editor. Radio stations in the Northeast recently stopped airing ads for a brand of frozen fish dinners after listeners objected that the ads humorously trivialized the religious dietary convictions of devout Catholics. Of course, it is not feasible to embark on a massive campaign of this nature over every questionable advertisement seen or heard. Viewers needn't remain helplessly silent, though, when a major violation of good taste or moral standards stirs them to righteous indignation.

#### A Time for Discernment

In conclusion, the modern-day disciple of Christ is surrounded by an unprecedented array of hi-tech communications stimuli. As with the innovations of any age, the mass media today can be a wonderful blessing or a terrible curse to mankind. The cameras, tape recorders and other forms of technology are morally neutral. Advertising has the potential to benefit society or to hasten its ruin.

For the Christian teacher, the opportunities for expanding students' insights into the world-view implications of television advertising are manifold. A school whose mission encompasses the Master Teacher's philosophy cannot be satisfied to teach this subject just as a set of career skills or as a game of "trivial pursuit" in names of agencies and their clients. Rather, the Christian classroom must be a place where students evaluate knowledge and ideas from the perspective of eternal values. Much of today's advertising teaches that a man's life consists in the abundance of the things he possesses. And, Wolstertorff observes, many of our age are accepting the belief that the world is in a "pristine and unfallen" condition -- simply needing to evolve into a more nearly perfect state (142). Yet not all advertising advocates this theme. Indeed, the same TV screen which can



pronounce deception or drivel can also pronounce worthwhile information and ideas truly profitable for our culture.

A genuinely Christian-education environment can go far in helping tomorrow's advertising professional select with care what to sell and how. More generally speaking, it can alert tomorrow's value-conscious consumer to the importance of shopping with similar care -- downtown and at home.

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