

EXCUSES, EXCUSES

by

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(Under the Direction of NATHANIEL KOHN)

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an autoethnographic exploration of what happens when faith and culture collide. The conflict between my love of television and my dedication to my Christian faith has been, and continues to be, tested over and over. My current favorite shows clearly portray morals and value systems that are in direct contradiction to those set up by my religion. After a fairly sheltered childhood, when did I make the switch from having my viewing habits filtered through my faith to watching anything and everything? Why did I make such a turnaround? Where do I draw the line and how do I determine where that is? Join me on a journey of self-discovery and revelation.

INDEX WORDS: Christianity, religion, television, autoethnography

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DEDICATION

To my family – Mom, Dad, and Ashleigh. Thanks for the support and encouragement along the way. I think I’m done with school for a while.

To Bird, Jennifer, and Donna – my partners in crime and fellow pop culture, um, let’s say “experts.” (It sounds so much nicer than addicts.)

To Paul – When my heart beats, it says your name. You are my partner, my lover, and my friend. You stick with me in the trenches and refuse to let me get away with anything. Thank you for joining me on this journey of life.

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Evangelicals may have distinctive views of Scripture and of the need for personal conversion, but they are as likely to watch a given soap opera or situation comedy as are people for whom Christ is merely a myth. Apparently, evangelicals' relationships to Christ have little or no impact on their television viewing.¹

INTRODUCTION

I remember the precise moment I fell in love with the magic of television. My mom was on staff at PTL² and had recently been involved in the production of several music videos for Christian artists. I was about eight years old and had watched the final products at home. One video in particular caught my attention. It was for the song “Gods of Men” by Randy Stonehill³. The lyrics of the song list all the things Randy dreamed of being: famous, a rock star, a hero, a Don Juan, etc. Ultimately, he found his completion in a more settled Christian lifestyle with a wife and kids, and he warns the listener away from the “gods of men.” To convey the message of the song, the video producers put Randy in costumes signifying each of the “dreams.” The footage was then edited so that every time he lay down in bed and sat up again, he was in a different costume.

After I had seen the video at home (and thought it was really cool), I had occasion to go to work with my mom and walked through the very studio where the video had been shot. In the corner, I saw the video set and the bed where Randy had been. My mom pointed it out and asked if I wanted to go see it up close. I don't remember exactly what was said or what I was wearing, but I very clearly remember the wave of fear (panic? excitement?) that washed over me when I thought about going over to that bed. Even though I had been around television production for every one of my eight years and had

¹ Television...., Schultze 12

² PTL was the international television ministry of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker.

³ You can watch probably still find this video by searching for “Gods of Men” on YouTube.

an elementary understanding of how it all worked, I was terrified that if I went to that bed, it would, I don't know, suck me in and put me in costume or something!

I finally calmed down when I realized my mom wasn't going to force me into the bed. At that moment, something very tiny sparked in my brain and heart and I became fascinated with the magic that happens in television and video production. I was in awe that something as simple and everyday as a bed could have that effect on me. Though it would be years later when I realized just how deeply I had come to love production, it was that moment where it all started for me.

When a family focuses much of its energy and interest on a television set, so much so that its solidarity is maintained and negotiated in the space governed by the screen, the family members have ritualized their behavior around this "icon."⁴

Many researchers and authors have written about how television affects and influences the family unit; how when television became popular in the 1940s and '50's, the family started its slow decline. TV dinners replaced home-cooked meals and Ed Sullivan's opening monologue replaced conversation around the dinner table (which had been replaced by TV trays, of course). In my family, television had a sort of different effect. My parents met while working in television production and my mom has continued working in it to this day. My parents worked for some of the biggest names in early Christian television: Jimmy Swaggart, Kenneth Copeland, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. My earliest memories take place in studios and control rooms. I don't remember the first time I wore a headset or learned that you count backwards in TV. I don't remember seeing a studio or director's console for the first time. These things are as much a part of

⁴ Grimes 222. In this article, Grimes discusses several different ways audiences make television viewing a ritual. He does not believe, as Quentin Schultze does, that watching television or television itself is automatically ritual. However, the ties between ritualized viewing and religion as ritual cannot be ignored. This particular statement about the family jumped out at me because of our unique relationship with television and video production.

me as learning that my hair is brown or I'm right-handed. The process of television, the sights, the sounds, the cool temperature of a studio. These things help make up who I am.

Another major part of who I am is my faith. I grew up in an evangelical⁵ Christian home and in charismatic churches. My family didn't just regularly attend church; we attempted to live out our faith in the everyday. I was taught that you aren't just a Christian on Sundays. Once you decide to "give your heart to Jesus," it should affect you, change you, make you different. My parents had two daughters, my sister and myself. Being Christians helped justify their requests that we be modest in our dress, well behaved, well mannered, respectful of elders. Growing up, I knew my parents were strict, but it didn't seem unreasonable...until *Beverly Hills 90210* came along.

*If Americans were willing to allow such "distasteful" programs into their homes, they could expect nothing more than the "ruin which awaits such a people."*⁶

I had heard tales of kids not being allowed to watch TV shows before. I had friends who weren't allowed to watch *The Smurfs* because of a character named Azrael⁷ and the magic portrayed on the show. My husband wasn't allowed to watch *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* because *God* is the master of the universe. Maybe my own television viewing was more limited than I remember, but I don't recall ever wanting to watch something and not being allowed until *90210*.

⁵ The term "evangelical" has become something of a buzzword as I write in Spring 2007. It is unfortunately being linked to politics and hard-line conservatism. To me, the word simply denotes an emphasis on evangelism and the belief that a relationship with God is a daily effort, not a one-time thing.

⁶ Rosenthal 138. This article outlines the intersection of religion and media in the magazine *The Christian Century* between the years 1946-1960. This particular quote was used to describe a 1960 television appearance by Elvis Presley. A few questions spring to mind: (1) Was this the first time Christian viewers found their faith in conflict with their television shows? (2) What would these same people think of a Grammy broadcast? (3) Is there something to be learned from such devotion to the faith and such abhorrence for sexualized television appearances?

⁷ Azrael is one of the names given to the Angel of Death (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Azrael>)

90210 came on in 1990. The characters were in high school and I was still in elementary. I was eleven, they were fifteen or sixteen. Though the subject matter was pretty mature (serious dating relationships, sexual language and situations, some adult content), most of my friends were allowed to watch the show. My parents explained to me then that these messages (along with immodest dress, emphasis on wealth and outward appearance, and disrespect toward parents) were not ones they wanted me to see. I remember being very frustrated and feeling left out when my friends would discuss recent episodes.

*Frustration, confusion, and guilt can cripple those desperately trying to harmonize the Bible with their everyday lives. We have bridged that gap by reading our bible through the grid of pop culture.*⁸

This conflict between my love of television and my dedication to my faith would be tested many times in the future and, in fact, continues to be tested today. My current⁹ favorite shows are ones that clearly portray morals and value systems that are in direct contradiction to the morals and values set up by Christianity. When did I make the switch from having my viewing habits be filtered through my faith to watching anything and everything? Why did I make such a turnaround? Where do I draw the line and how do I determine where that is? These are the questions I hope to answer in the next few chapters.

⁸ Detweiler and Taylor 10. Shouldn't it really be the other way around? This statement describes me, yet bothers me in the describing. Shouldn't the Bible be the priority and everything else read through its lens?

⁹ "Current", as of the time of writing, refers to the 2006-2007 season. Specific shows will be discussed in details in future chapters.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

As I started typing up my notes for this paper, I found that every time I typed “autoethnography,” it was underlined in red, which denoted a misspelled word.¹⁰ I wondered if this was a subtle caution: *This word doesn’t exist. What you are doing bears no merit.* My computer certainly wouldn’t be the first to question autoethnography (there’s that red underline again) as a form of legitimate research. The form has only really been recognized for the last few decades, but, from what I can tell, seems to be gaining popularity.

*With understanding yourself comes understanding others.*¹¹

I have the opportunity to work on a Christian talk show called *Faith Café*. The show is set in a coffee house (the Fake Café, according to off-camera asides made by the show’s host) in an effort to create a comfortable environment for discussing issues of spiritual development. The show’s topics have ranged from divorce to Christian sub-culture to the isolated male to social justice. Anything and everything is up for grabs. A goal of the show is to ask the “tough” questions, digging deeper and finding significance in one another’s struggles.

The fact that this show is set in a coffee house is no accident. Producer Charles Powell often makes note of the “coffee house nation” he hopes to reach with the program. There are millions of people who find comfort and community in Starbucks and other coffee shops around the country. The environment of Starbucks is calculated to welcome

¹⁰ On a side note, I generally like to use Microsoft Word with that automatic spelling and grammar check (the red and green squiggly underlines) turned off. I find them very distracting and prefer to be a careful proofreader than constantly interrupted by bright colors on my otherwise black and white page. However, I’ve recently begun using a MAC and have yet to figure out how to turn that feature off. Lucky for me, that feature is now giving something back and adding to this whole thesis experience.

¹¹ Ellis xviii

people and encourage conversation. This is exactly what Powell hopes to achieve with the Faith Café. He wants people to feel comfortable discussing those topics that may make them very uncomfortable in other circumstances.

The guests on *Faith Café* normally have gone through some kind of harrowing experience and have lived to tell the tale. Christians who have navigated the waters of abandonment, sexual sin, and disbelief now want to encourage others by saying, “You can do it. You can make it through.” They have learned what it takes to survive and want to share it with everyone they can.

The fact is this generation and at least one prior have the privilege of being more self-centered than those of the past. We¹² have the luxury of not having to do very much physical labor. We have grown up comfortably. We are educated, well read, self-indulgent, spoiled, entitled. We love to examine the minutia. We love to challenge and be challenged. Nobody can tell us what to do, so it’s going to take a lot of conversation amongst ourselves to figure it all out. In my opinion, what’s actually good about this emergence of the coffee house nation is that people are slowly giving more credence to the stories of others. I seek my friends’ counsel when I have a problem. If I know someone else, even just one other person, has gone through a similar situation, it gives me hope that maybe I can make it through.

*I feel as if I’ve always been an ethnographer, from the time I was a kid trying to figure out my parents’ relationship, my relationships, and the hidden – or not so hidden – dramas in the small town in which I lived.*¹³

¹² By “we” I refer to Generation X and beyond. Could Starbucks have gained as much popularity without flannel shirts, Nirvana, the Seattle sub-culture of grunge, and the countless hours spent at Central Perk with our *Friends*? Would coffee shops be as prevalent if people weren’t so interested in talking about every little detail of their friends’ and their own lives? I don’t think so.

¹³ Ellis 27

I grew up in charismatic Christian churches for my entire life. One of the common characteristics of these churches was the taking of prayer requests and the opportunity to give a testimony. Most of these churches would ask for prayer requests to be spoken right out loud during a designated time of the service. A need was brought before the congregation and would be lifted up along with the others during the time of general prayer. Testimonies were a little different, though.

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short."¹⁴

Testimonies were important not just for the encouragement of the congregation, but also for the discouragement of Satan. When a Christian can give testimony of something God has accomplished in their life, it's a major blow to Satan's evil schemes.

So, coffee shop nations and charismatic church confessions...what do these have to do with research for a Master's thesis? Well, for me, these have been instrumental in helping me sense an intrinsic value in stories. Personal accounts. Personal opinions, even.¹⁵ Throughout my childhood, I was an avid reader. If anything were put in story form, I would eat it up. As I moved into my time in academia, I found I most responded to research presented this way as well.

¹⁴ Revelation 12:10-12 (NIV)

¹⁵ As a child, my parents encouraged having my own opinion. This made me cute and "growny" (to use a very Southern word) as a youngster, but annoying and a bit of a know-it-all as a teenager. As the headline of my blog says, however, I don't think my opinions are better than anyone else's, I just always seem to have one.

I've loved writing for as long as I can remember, but I've never been a good creative writer. I'm more of a journaler. Maybe it's hard for me to imagine stories because I feel, somehow, like I have so many real life ones. I could tell the story of my parents' divorce, of growing up in small town America, of what it's like to be a big sister. I could tell the story of the H Girls¹⁶, of attending a small Christian college, or of meeting my husband. All of those are things in my life that I have, at one time or another, thought critically about, described, and journaled.

*Stories are the way humans make sense of their worlds. Stories are essential to human understanding and are not unique to autoethnography...Given their importance; stories should be both a subject and a method of social science research.*¹⁷

For months I've fielded the question, "What's your thesis about?" I now have a stock answer: "It's an autoethnography exploring why evangelical Christians watch secular television shows that portray contrary morals and values to what Christianity has set up." That answer is followed by the inevitable, "...It's a what, now?" And then I say slowly: "Auto-eth-no-graphy...it's like autobiographical research where you use yourself as the research subject." They say, "Ohhh...that sounds cool?" Then, after about thirty minutes of discussion on the topic, they are fascinated and want to tell me why they engage with shows like this. Apparently, we're all autoethnographers.

*To do this kind of writing, one has to have something that I doubt is teachable. That is a sense of what Buddy Goodall, after Will Blythe, calls "soul," by which he means "opening up a deeply personal space in your life from which to create understanding."*¹⁸

¹⁶ The H Girls are the five girls I lived with in college and continue to keep in touch with on a regular basis. Our name comes from the fact that we lived in Trailer H – a triple-wide trailer installed on our college property when the residence halls became too full. Yes, I'm serious.

¹⁷ Ellis 32

¹⁸ Ellis 98

Like I said, I've always enjoyed writing about my experiences. I keep a blog¹⁹ that runs the gamut between reporting on the latest celebrity gossip and examining the spiritual implications of *Battlestar Galactica*. Maybe I've been practicing autoethnography without realizing it. Doing a little self-examination and sending it out over the world wide web, hoping someone somewhere gets something out of it.

It makes me a little nervous now, though, as I embark on such a huge project. Will it be accepted? Will it make sense? Is my experience interesting enough to keep people reading for tens of pages? Does it matter? Autoethnography seems to suggest that what I get out of writing this project will be just as important as what other people might get from reading it. So, here goes nothing, I guess. I can't wait to see how it all works out in the end.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

There is quite a bit of literature regarding the topic of "Religion and Media," however, most exists outside the scope of what I wanted to research for this particular paper. Many books and articles deal with topics of identity and meaning making, specifically religious media, and how media consumption often poses as religious activity. Though these topics are not exactly on target with Christians' interaction with secular television, the research does inform my topic.

Mediated by Thomas de Zengotita discusses "how the media shapes your world and the way you live in it." De Zengotita outlines what he calls "the Blob"; it is the situation in which we now find ourselves, inundated with a barrage of media messages,

¹⁹ I now see that "blog" is also underlined in red. Perhaps my version of Microsoft Word has just not caught up with the hip lingo of kids these days. Wonder what would happen if I typed in MySpace...yep, there's the red line.

trying to find a way to make sense of them. I was caught by the question: “So you need to ask yourself this: do you parse the real from the fabricated in the *mélange*? Not *can* you, but *do* you?”(22)

Mediation, for de Zengotita, “refers to arts and artifacts that represent, that communicate – but also, and especially, to their effects on the way we experience the world, and ourselves in it” (8). The book’s strengths lie in de Zengotita’s conversational tone and ability to identify with his audience. It is an important book for media scholars since, if nothing else, it should make them question their decisions about the media messages they send and receive.

Belief in Media, edited by Peter Horsfield, Mary E. Hess and Adan M. Medrano, provides a “cultural perspective on media and Christianity.” This book, like so many others in this genre, is a collection of essays and articles by many different authors. What I love about this format is the well-rounded presentation of giving several authors a chance to chime in on a general topic.

Belief is broken down into three major sections: The Cultural Perspective, Mediated Christianity, and Media Culture and Christian Institutions. A strength of this particular collection of writings is the focus on international cultures and their relationship with religion and religious media.

I very much enjoyed the smaller fourth section of the book, An Overview. This section includes only one essay: “Major Issues in the Study of Media, Religion and Culture” by Robert A. White. As one of the first items I read in preparation for my thesis, this overview was very helpful. White selects ten issues ranging from media acting as

symbols to the construction of personal identity, from religious education to the discussion of spirituality.

White finds these topics important because “the religious and the popular are the sites where we are building our cultures, including our religious cultures. We need to ask what kind of culture we are creating in these experiences, whether these are the kinds of cultures we want to create, and who is involved in the creation process” (215).

I found two other compilation-style books to be very useful for getting a sense of the academic climate surrounding my topic. Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture by Steward M. Hoover and Knut Lundby focused more on religion; how media is used within, how religious ideals influence culture, and what some future religious trends may mean for the individual. Religion and Media, edited by Hent de Vries and Samuel Webster, traces the relationship between religion and media through the years. The book is broken down into four sections. Introducing the Concepts includes essays such as “Religion, Repetition, Media” by Samuel Weber and “The Deconstruction of Christianity” by Jean-Luc Nancy. Part II, Seeing and Believing: Historical and Philosophical Considerations, has a more media-centered focus. The third part, Local Rites, Global Media: Critical and Anthropological Approaches, breaks down into religious sub-cultures: the Mediatic Jew, Hinduism, the Media Lionza Possession Cult of Venezuela, Iran, Aborigines. Finally, Two Documents closes the book with two articles providing somewhat of an overview.

I particularly enjoyed Jenny Slatman’s essay “Tele-vision: Between Blind Trust and Perceptual Faith.” “Taking the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as a point of departure and confronting it with some themes from the work of Jean-Luc

Marrion and Gilles Deleuze, [she provides] a rough sketch of the phenomena “television” and “televviewer” (217).

Religion and Media is a thorough volume covering a wide range of subtopics. It is a must have for any scholar.

Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium by Richard Cimino and Don Lattin attempts to chart future religious trends in America. “Using the past as [their] guide, [they] can predict that the religious convictions of Americans will remain fairly stable well into the next millennium...There will be major changes in how these beliefs are expressed and interpreted by different social groups and traditions” (2). The authors give a plethora of statistics detailing how the vast majority of Americans believe in God (or some higher, universal power) and most would identify themselves as spiritual or religious. Using this information, Cimino and Lattin make ten predictions for the future of American religion. The trends are varied, but the one that leaped out at me was this: “As the entertainment media becomes the primary conveyor or common culture, it will compete with religious groups as the main bearer of spiritual and religious insight, no matter how mundane and homogenized those revelations may be” (38). This trend is already recognizable in my own life and the little Christian subculture where I’ve lived for the past several years.

Working at a Christian college has given me the opportunity to see every kind of creative way to engage college-aged students with their faith. One of the most successful programs the college offered was called “Reel Theology.” We would show a free movie on campus then discuss the spiritual truths hidden within. The movies shown included *The Princess Bride*, *TRON*, *The Village*, and several others. We also did a series called

“Chapel at the Movies”. In those services, the entire movie wasn’t shown, but selected clips and commentary was provided to get to the same conclusion: truth is everywhere and movies (even “secular” ones) have something to teach us. Students responded more to these events than to any other spiritual life program I have ever seen on campus. Clearly, they had no problem accepting “spiritual and religious insight” from entertainment media.

There were two other essays that stood out within their compilations. “Turn It Off: TV Criticism in the Christian Century Magazine, 1946-1960” by Michele Rosenthal is included in Practicing Religion in the Age of Media: Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture. This volume, edited by Stewart M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark, focuses mainly on public religious practices played out in the media. Rosenthal’s essay was particularly relevant to my topic as it explored the ultra-conservative Protestant reaction to regular television viewing among families. Spring-boarding off a televised appearance by Elvis Presley, the Protestants came down hard against TV. They were appalled at the content and were convinced the process of watching would “change the quality of the mentality of [their] generation” (142).

The essay, focusing on such an early stage of television history, provides several humorous anecdotes that seem ridiculous to the modern reader. For example, Protestant leaders were outraged that game shows were becoming so popular. “Any device which encourages gambling and leads people to put their faith in ‘getting something for nothing’ mars the integrity of the individual personality for which the churches have a particular concern” (150). The fear of game shows’ impact on viewers seems ridiculous considering today’s viewing options.

For me personally, this was a striking essay to read when juxtaposed against my own viewing habits. Perhaps it provides a more extreme perspective than the one I may ultimately take, but it was still a wake-up call. As a modern-day viewer, I've considered game shows, for example, as "safe" viewing, family viewing. It never occurred to me to question the implications of watching what amounts to gambling. I've never considered what effect on my own work ethic these programs may have.

The second essay that jumped out at me is included in Quoting God: How Media Shape Ideas about Religion and Culture, edited by Claire H. Badaracco. This essay really made me stop and think. "Mocha and Meditation Mats" by David Crumm explores the search for solace by modern Americans. What is most interesting to Crumm is that this solace is for sale all around us. For example, the local Target offers serenity candles, mediation CDs, fruit drinks guaranteed to motivate and sustain. Crumm's outing to a Starbucks becomes eye opening when viewed as a quest for something spiritual.

The coffee and croissant take the place of the Communion elements; phrases like "decaf white chocolate mocha" become chants, passed from one parishioner to another; real community with no pressure is offered, making confessionals natural. "Starbucks has designed an environment where millions of people gladly pay for what churches are trying to give away for free" (253).

That search for solace in material things is what really caught my attention. How often do I participate in "retail therapy" or buy something to make myself feel better, knowing it will end up in a charity pile a few months down the road? The comfort offered by material things is so fleeting, yet I can't seem to get away from it.

Perhaps my television viewing is yet another way of trying to find comfort and community in the craziness that is my life. It's my escape, those characters become my friends, their stories are as important as my own. I know in my head they are fictional, not real people, but they start to influence me in the same way my real-life friends do. Is this healthy? Hmm. I hesitate to answer, which usually means I know both the right answer and the one I'd be less ashamed of sharing. Maybe by the end of this paper I'll be ready to admit my own weakness and find some way to overcome it. But not right now.

Malcolm Muggeridge's Christ and the Media is a transcript of a series of lectures Muggeridge delivered at the 1976 London Lectures in Contemporary Christianity. Muggeridge was selected as a speaker based on his lengthy occupation as a journalist for the BBC and his relatively recent, but life changing, conversion to Christianity. Muggeridge comes down completely against media and television in particular. Speaking of television, Muggeridge says, "there is a built-in element of farce which keeps it teetering on the brink of absurdity" (11). Though Muggeridge finally admits he is prone to blame television for all the ills of society, he also warns against heralding the benefits of such technology. He believes television doesn't just have the ability to lie to its viewers, it has the inability not to. Focusing on the deceptive nature of the medium and the viewer's likelihood to become too caught up in earthly concerns, Muggeridge advised his listeners (and now his readers) to avoid watching whenever possible.

Much like the Rosenthal essay, these lectures present an extreme viewpoint of someone who holds a hearty amount of bitterness toward the medium of television and media in general. It is clear Muggeridge's conversion had an impact on his everyday life.

If nothing else, reading these lectures forced me to question whether my ongoing faith impacts mine.

The Journey Towards Relevance by Kary Oberbrunner is a Bible-based manual that offers a much more balanced approach to media consumption. Oberbrunner creates two extremes, the separatists (those Christians who try to fully remove themselves from any secular or cultural influence) and conformists (those Christians who allow any and everything to influence them until they're indistinguishable from non-Christians).

This book is targeted to those who are likely to excuse great amounts of media consumption as the attempt to be "relevant" to their peers. I have used this very excuse to justify watching programs such as *Grey's Anatomy*, *Friends*, or *Sex and the City*.

Ultimately, I find myself so drawn into the storylines, I forget why I started watching in the first place. I no longer care about relevance; I am simply another addicted viewer.

Oberbrunner challenges his readers to become transformists. Jesus did not call His followers to a full separation from their culture. Yet we are also to be "salt and light" to the world around us. We must know about the culture in order to influence it, but keep our eye on the eternal prize of a pure relationship with Jesus. Only with balance can we be truly effective in this way.

Quentin Schultze is widely regarded as the premier scholar when dealing with Christians' interaction with the media. I selected two of Schultze's books for my research. Television: Manna From Hollywood? attempts to define the role of television in the various sectors of our lives, church, home, school, etc. Schultze calls television "the major storyteller of our age" (5) and breaks down television shows by genre. The book is interesting and easy to read and serves as a practical viewing guide for Christian families.

The second book, Redeeming Television, describes “how TV changes Christians and how Christians can change TV.” Schultze opens with a story featuring aforementioned author Malcolm Muggeridge. Though Muggeridge openly and frequently touted the evils of television, Schultze recalls seeing him do a televised interview. The production value was simple, yet “the program powerfully communicated the authenticity of Muggeridge’s character and the relevancy of Christ for the human condition in the temporary world” (18). Schultze realized at that moment that Muggeridge’s strong distaste for media may be somewhat misguided.

Schultze again describes television as a storyteller and says this should not be an issue for Christians. We are accustomed, through the teachings of Jesus and His use of parables, to learning spiritual truth from fictional and hypothetical story. Sure, Schultze admits, too much viewing can be problematic, not just because of the content of what we’re watching, but because of the time commitment and tendency to neglect other important tasks; spending time with family, building meaningful relationships, growing ever-closer to God. Schultze calls Christians to watch TV, but watch it responsibly.

An area of research (and I use that word lightly) that seems to be growing in popularity is the attempt to find God or at least something good in pop culture. Eyes Wide Open by William D. Romanowski and A Matrix of Meanings by Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor share similar subtitles: “Looking for God in Pop Culture” for the former and “Finding God in Pop Culture” for the latter. Both of these books offer insight and practical advice for Christians who love watching TV and movies and don’t want to feel guilty about it. Both are centered in critical cultural studies perspectives and draw on much previous research to build a foundation for their case. Romanowski’s volume tends

to be more theoretical in nature, while Detweiler and Taylor get very specific with their advice. Both books were fun and easy to read, especially for a pop culture junkie like myself.

As I was reading these books, I couldn't help but feel like the connection was being stretched at times. Sure, I absolutely believe that God can use anything to reveal spiritual truth, however, not everything available to watch is worth watching. All of the authors warn against watching too much "worthless" media, but whole-heartedly condone looking over immoral sexual practices, profane language, or strong violence as long as the overarching lessons teach you...something.

Everything Bad Is Good For You: How Today's Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter takes this idea of looking for good in pop culture to the extreme. Author Steven Johnson doesn't argue that the content on television and in video games and movies has gotten increasingly violent and immoral. What he believes, though, is that the process of watching television (or movies or playing video games) has become more complicated. Participating in these activities now requires much more from the viewer than they once did. Television shows, for example, contain more storylines, more characters, and more subplots than ever before. Huge hits like *Lost* and *Heroes* come to mind. Johnson makes a strong case for regular participation in pop culture media. Again, though, one must be careful not to stretch the connection so far that it becomes simply another excuse.

Finally, in preparation for writing an autoethnography, I attempted to read The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart by Ruth Behar and Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social, edited by Deborah E. Reed-

Danahay. These books were personal and interesting, but not quite what I was looking for. I needed an instruction manual. I found one in The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography by Carolyn Ellis. This book gives practical advice and how-to steps for writing an autoethnography while also functioning as one itself. Ellis is a fantastic storyteller, seamlessly weaving fact and fiction until it's impossible to tell what's what. Set in a non-existent classroom with possibly existent students, Ellis provides a history and overview of autoethnography and shares her personal relationship to the form throughout the book.

Reading has always been one of my passions. I learned to read when I was four years old and have had a book in my hand ever since. I would previously have said I consider myself well read and very eclectic when it comes to book selection. Doing research for this project has broadened my horizons to include academic and challenging works I may never have noticed before. I have obviously been exposed to academic research before, but never has it seemed so real, so applicable, as it did while reading for this paper. I feel like my brain is so full of information that it will take years to thoroughly process and implement it all. I can only hope the mini-conversations I've had with myself and the act of writing it all down here for someone else to read is the beginning of that journey.

CHAPTER ONE

Relevance and Revelation

Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized—whatever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ—but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life.²⁰

I don't remember the first time I heard this word that has gotten so much buzz in the Christian community. But I know the sentiment. The point is to be applicable, be current, meet people where they are with a message that will satisfy their need. Be *relevant*. I get it. I've wondered many times if the Bible is relevant. The conclusion I always come to is yes. It is. But Christians often aren't. Oh, they're trying to be. They're desperately trying to be with their Yo Quiero Jesus shirts and their Bibles wrapped in duct tape. They're trying with their Faith Chips²¹ and their Christian romance novels. But are they being

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 9:21-22 from The Message. The Message is not a literal translation, but a paraphrase written by Eugene Peterson. Peterson wrote The Message after studying the original text. Peterson claims he “hoped to bring the New Testament to life for two different types of people: those who hadn't read the Bible because it seemed too distant and irrelevant and those who had read the Bible so much that it had become 'old hat.'” (<http://www.biblegateway.com/versions/?action=getVersionInfo&vid=65>) Is it ironic that I'm using this version in a chapter specifically dealing with relevance? Let's call it Providence instead.

²¹ These are not potato chips for eating (although, hey, that sounds like an interesting and lucrative product idea...). They're poker chips with messages like “Jesus went ALL IN for you, so ANTE UP your heart to him.” I wish I were kidding. I was first exposed to these chips at a Christian bookstore where I was shopping for Christmas cards with one of my best friends, Bird. They were sitting up by the register and we got a kick out of them. We started joking around and finally realized that the two guys working behind the counter (totally relevant with their spiky hair, baggy pants, and hemp/cross jewelry) were not laughing with us. I asked them in all seriousness, “What are these for, anyway?” One of them answered with condemnation in his voice, “They're supposed to be a *witnessing* tool.” I laughed in that poor guy's face so hard that tears freely flowed from my eyes. It's one of the few times I have truly made a scene in a public place. Bird asked, “Where? In a casino? Can't you get arrested for having fake chips?” At this point, I literally could not see or speak from laughing so hard. I couldn't help it. Just the thought of using a poker chip to try and share the whole of the message of Jesus was completely hilarious

successful? In my opinion, no. I don't see my non-Christian friends responding to "witness wear" or silly slogans on church signs²². I know these are genuine attempts to influence and change the secular culture around them, but relevant they are not.

*One must follow pop culture in order to understand key issues that clearly affect and shape our society culturally, politically, and spiritually – the same society we are called to engage with Jesus' message and persona.*²³

There's a Christian magazine actually called *Relevant*. When it first came out, it was pretty groundbreaking for a Christian publication. It was hip, well designed, creatively put together. It featured articles written by some "cool" big names in the Christian circles and talked about everything from current news events to music reviews. And the albums they reviewed weren't just Christian ones, either. Shocker! Christians are listening to secular music...and admitting to it? It seemed so cool and I was a big fan. Look at this, they're pointing out things that are just wrong about the Church²⁴. How cool! Look, they're publishing a book²⁵ that's a tongue-in-cheek inside look at Christian sub-culture, and here's one about Johnny Cash. How relevant! Look, they're cutting down Michael

to me. I suppose it's someone trying to capitalize on the Texas Hold 'Em craze, but seriously. I couldn't get over it. Still can't. But I bought, like, five of them to take home to show my friends.

²² Oh, those clever Christians! Here are some of my favorite (and by "favorite" I mean the most cringe-inducing) church signs: "God answers knee-mail," "Having trouble with truth decay? Brush up on the Bible," "Read the Bible. It'll scare the hell out of you," "Our Sundays are better than Dairy Queen's!" And, always a winner: "Where will you spend eternity? Smoking or Non?"

²³ Detweiler and Taylor 21. This is a quotation that I struggle with. In a way, I think it's true. We should know what's going on so we can relate to people in the culture around us. However, what bothers me are two missing definitions: one for "follow" and one for "pop culture." How closely should we follow? Should we subscribe to *Us Weekly* (which I do)? Is it okay to get to the point where you're watching television more than you're reading the Bible (which I do)? Where is the line drawn? Pop culture can mean any combination of media consumption. Are these guys advocating consuming it all in order to "understand" the society in which we live? This seems to be such an extreme position without much practical instruction to back it up.

²⁴ A capital C is often used to denote the Christian Church as a whole as opposed to one specific lowercase c church.

²⁵ The company expanded to include a publishing company, creative design services and, of course, merchandise.

Jackson right in the middle of his child abuse trial. Wait...what? Somewhere along the way, relevance turned into rebellion and no longer looked Christ-like at all.

Concerning the separatists, the world believes such Christians are out of touch with the real world. Concerning the conformists, the watching world believes such Christians are no different than themselves. Thus, both camps, instead of being relevant to their world, become completely irrelevant.²⁶

I started realizing that I was often picking up Relevant Magazine when I was frustrated with the Church. I was tired of the sub-culture, sick of all the craziness, and wanted something that was relevant to me. The problem was, once I found it, it looked so much like secular media and messages, it became hard to tell the difference. I knew I couldn't take being a separatist, pulling away from all things pop culture, and I didn't want to be a conformist, looking unchanged by my relationship with Jesus. Where was the balance?

I'm thinking about the Christians I know. Many of them are, bless their hearts, completely irrelevant to the secular world around them. They don't fit in. They don't dress quite right. But it's usually the most seemingly irrelevant people that have the ability to love unconditionally. Because they place little or no value on physical appearance, taste in music, or any outward things, it's easy for them to accept people just as they are. I worry, however, that they will not have the chance because they push people away with their awkwardness. Other Christians, the ones who are my close friends actually, seem pretty cool. They listen to indie music, they dress fashionably, they drink coffee and beer. And they generally think critically (in both connotations of the word) about their faith and the world in which they live. However, there's often a bitterness in them (in me) toward the Church. It seems so messed up right now. It seems so irrelevant. The cool thing to do, then, is put it down. I find myself engaging in negative

²⁶ Oberbrunner 6.

conversations all the time, with both Christians and non-Christians. Okay, sometimes you have to vent, but what message does this send to non-Christians? I think I hope it sends the message that, hey, no one's perfect. Yes, the Church is flawed. It's made up of people, what do you think it's going to be? But am I going beyond that and saying the Church is not the goal here? Jesus is. And what does all of this (any of this) have to do with television, right?

Studies²⁷ reveal the attempt to use the media to cope with a much more pluralistic, multicultural world. Younger people especially know that they must live in a world in which they have to deal empathetically with people of greatly differing religious and cultural backgrounds. The ability to get along with everybody demands a high level of tolerance, low levels of fundamentalistic attachments and lower levels of visible symbols of any personal belief system.²⁸

I have lived in small Southern towns almost all my life. I've had the opportunity to travel to large metropolitan areas, but my day to day has pretty much been lived in tiny communities of only a few thousand people. I have rarely known people in real life who were any other religion besides Christian. Until this year, I had no close friends who were gay. I know only a few people who are of Asian descent, and they were all raised in the U.S. Through television, however, I've had the opportunity to gain access into cultures that are different than my own. Of course I know you can't trust everything you see on television. And I know that many representations are stereotypical and narrowly presented. But watching stories about people who are different from me makes me feel like a better-rounded person who is better able to deal with people unlike myself in real life. My quest for relevance really does inform my choices in television shows. There are a few things I watch just because I discovered them and like them. But I realize now

²⁷ Study by Lynn Clark (2003) on the role of media use by teenagers in the adolescent culture in the western U.S.

²⁸ White 201.

that I started watching most of my favorite shows because of a buzz. I didn't want to be left out of a conversation. I wanted to know what everyone was talking about. As a Christian, I should know what's going on in the culture so I can find common ground with a person, right? If I'm trying to talk to people about Jesus, but feel like it's too soon in the relationship, maybe we can talk about *Grey's Anatomy* and start up a friendship first.

Conformists justify the most extreme forms of media, movies, and music...justifying the need to know the world they are trying to reach. Their lives are marked by addictions to substances that were originally only a "tool" for evangelism.²⁹

Grey's Anatomy. How you have betrayed me. I didn't watch the first season of *Grey's*. I don't know why, I just didn't get into it. It was a mid-season replacement in the spring of 2005, and I didn't get pulled in. Over the summer, however, all anyone could talk about (critics, friends, everyone) was how amazing this show was. And what writing! The show has continued to receive accolades for its ensemble cast and brilliant writing, not to mention the deft use of popular music to help convey emotion and move storylines along. Words like "McDreamy" and "McSteamy" have worked their way into the cultural lexicon. The show is a bonafide hit.

When Fall 2005 rolled around, I decided I would give the show a chance. After all, I'm not only a Christian, I also work in the television industry. I should really be paying attention to what's on the cutting edge, right? So, I watched.

Right away, I realized that *Grey's*, like almost every show featuring adult relationships, contained a good bit of sex outside of marriage (which I believe is a no-no). But, hey, you can't expect non-Christians to act like Christians. I can deal with the fact

²⁹ Oberbrunner 63

that people have sex before they're married. It's their life. So, I watched. The driving storyline of the second season had to do with the love triangle of Derek, Addison, and Meredith. Addison was married to Derek, but she cheated on him with his best friend and sent him running to Seattle from New York. While in Seattle, Derek found solace in his new relationship with Meredith (who didn't know he was still technically married).

Addison surprises Derek by showing up at his new place of work in Seattle, proclaiming she wants to work on the marriage. Derek, supposedly one of the good guys on the show, decides he's going to give it a go in his marriage. Throughout the season, though, he gives these longing looks to Meredith and the audience is (I was) manipulated to root for the marriage to fail so that Derek's extramarital one, the one with Meredith, can succeed.

In the midst of my attempt to be relevant – to keep up with the industry, to have something to talk about – I found I was actually contradicting my own values. Marriage is something I value very highly and believe it should be forever. I don't believe in soul mates, but I think the person you choose to marry becomes the “one” for you. So, here was a marriage that was in pretty big trouble. Derek and Addison were looking at several years of healing, probably. There was Addison, really wanting to make the relationship work. And there was Derek. Hating every second he had to spend with his wife, pining away for someone else. And I was right there with him! It was a real wake-up call for me when I found myself literally saying out loud, “Geez, just dump your wife and go back to Meredith. You *belong* with her!” What? I was saying he belonged with someone other than his now-devoted wife? Who was I in that moment? Was I really still just trying to be “relevant”? I don't think so. I simply got so caught up in a *television show* that my real life values were being set aside. I was honestly shocked. I never thought I would be a

person who could be affected in such a way, what with my media literacy and working on my Master's and all.

*Commercialized entertainment was not just morally deplorable, but had affected the content and balance of the American mind: "This incessant bombardment of the mind with sensuous stimuli has subtly, but profoundly, changed the quality of the mentality of our generation."*³⁰

I really stepped back and took a hard look at myself. In fact, I'm still looking. What I've finally realized is that relevance is just an excuse. I'm not trying to be relevant to anyone in society by watching *Grey's Anatomy* or *Friends* or any other show that portrays secular morals and values. What I'm really doing is living vicariously through the characters on the screen. It's like, "Hey, I'm settled into my marriage, chugging along with the spark of a new relationship long since passed, but here's a relationship that allows me to experience those emotions again. Yeah, so, it's not exactly a Christ-centered relationship, but it's "true love!" And that's what really counts, right?" I am still in shock at the fact that I was so caught up in a television show, I allowed myself to get to this point. This point of not even recognizing who I am.

*I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!*³¹

³⁰ Rosenthal 142. Rosenthal focuses on the Protestant response to the ever-changing nature of television during her selected fourteen-year span. Ultimately, the Protestants came to believe that the process of watching television (not just the content contained within) contributed to the degradation of the human brain.

³¹ Romans 7:15,18,19,22 (New International Version)

CHAPTER TWO But What About the Dog?

I remember reading in The New Statesman about an experiment which, it was claimed, ‘proved conclusively’ that pornography does not have a corrupting effect. It seems that a Doctor C. Elthammer of the Stockholm Child Psychiatric Department arranged for some children between the ages of eleven and eighteen to see a film of a woman being raped by a group of intoxicated louts, then forced to have intercourse with a dog. None of the children, Doctor Elthammer triumphantly reported, were frightened during or after the film, but a proportion of the older girls did admit to being shocked, while two adults, also present, needed psychiatric treatment for a month afterwards. One idly wonders what, if anything, happened to the dog.³²

Media effects. Wow, that’s a topic! It’s one that gets discussed quite often in the realm of media research. If I had to classify myself, I would generally say television doesn’t influence me very much...as I’m sure most people would. I’m intelligent, educated, a critical thinker. For the most part, I believe I can watch almost anything and not really be affected.

1669: The projected number of hours that adults (age 18 and older) will watch television in 2004. That is the equivalent of about 70 days.³³

As I really think about it now, though, I find I may be more affected than I’d like to believe. I was a big fan of *Friends* back in the day and joined the many throngs of women who ran out to their hairstylist to get “The Rachel.” I had really thick, medium-length hair, so I was a perfect candidate. I got the hairstyle and loved it; I wore it that way for several years. Looking back, I am still amazed at the sheer number of females who wanted that hairstyle, simply because it was worn by a popular television character. It’s unbelievable.

³² Muggeridge 27

³³ http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/001702.html. Obviously, this study is a few years old, but one can’t help think TV watching is only increasing. 70 days!

There are other occasions where I see or feel television's influence – my speech pattern is usually altered in some slight way to match my favorite television characters³⁴, I find fashion and music I'm interested in based on what I see on the screen. Perhaps my most embarrassing moment of interaction between myself and television characters took place in the later seasons of the show, *The X-Files*.

I had been a big fan of the show for a while and found myself getting more and more caught up in the storylines. In one particular story arc, Dana Scully, one of the main characters, had been diagnosed with cancer. It was a devastating blow to the characters on the show, as well as to audience members. Viewers were left wondering what might happen to this favorite character.

During this same time, I was working at Emmanuel College in the Admissions Office. I was a student tele-counselor, and we would all gather for a staff meeting each day before our shift started. A regular practice was to take prayer requests from the group and then pray for one another's needs. I had just watched a particularly intense episode of *The X-Files* the night before and Scully's situation³⁵ weighed heavily on my mind. As

³⁴ Although, I must say, this is not something unique to television characters. My own accent and speech pattern is greatly influenced by those around me. If I'm around my friend Jason, who has a very deep country accent, I slide right into that Southern Belle-speak that lives deep inside me. When I lived with my friend Emily for a month in France, I came back, and my husband said "You don't sound like yourself." It was true...my accent was somewhere between what it had been (a North Carolinian flavored by ten years spent in Georgia) and what Emily's was (a Floridian who spent a lot of time with Yankees) with just a bit of I've-been-trying-to-speak-French-for-a-month thrown in for good measure. When Paul said, "You don't sound like yourself," that was probably more profound than I realized at the time (but I was jet-lagged, so give me a break). I was changed by my month in France. I came back, and I wasn't the self he previously knew me to be. Living abroad for a month had something to do with this, I'm sure. But now, in the context of this particular discussion, I find myself wondering if the films I had seen (I was in France for the Cannes Film Festival) didn't also play a part. I saw films from all over the world, felt challenged by what I saw, sometimes angry, sometimes thoughtful. Perhaps my accent wasn't the only thing affected.

³⁵ I feel it necessary to remind the reader (and perhaps myself) that this is a *fictional* situation. No FBI agents were harmed during the filming of these episodes.

various people mentioned their requests, I came *thisclose* to raising my hand and requesting prayer for Scully. I know that sounds outrageous, but it is one hundred percent true! For just a moment, my reality and my fiction got mixed up, and I thought I needed to ask my friends to say a prayer for a character on TV. It sounds just as ridiculous now as I felt back then. I actually cracked myself up a bit at the time. I couldn't believe how seriously I was taking that show. Maybe that was the first time I ever consciously thought about media effects. I had gotten so caught up, so emotionally involved in this fictional story that I was ready to lift up this character's illness to my God, hoping there was something *He* could do.

If I were to spend 70 days doing anything else (exercising regularly, eating cheeseburgers, reading my Bible), there's no way I would say it had no effect on me.

Why do I continue to feel, then, that I'm immune to television's influence?

Media literacy is the ability to sift through and analyze the messages that inform, entertain and sell to us every day. It's the ability to bring critical thinking skills to bear on all media...It's about asking pertinent questions about what's there, and noticing what's not there. And it's the instinct to question what lies behind media productions – the motives, the money, the values and the ownership – and to be aware of how these factors influence content.³⁶

In the United States, the most widely used definition of media literacy is “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms.” This definition was a collaborative result of participants who attended the 1992 Aspen Media Literacy Leadership Institute. The Center for Media Literacy, however, suggests a more expanded definition of media literacy that emphasizes citizenship and democracy in addition to skills: “Media Literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms...Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy.”³⁷

³⁶ http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/teachers/media_literacy/what_is_media_literacy.cfm

³⁷ http://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Media_literacy

Perhaps what I really have going on in this thesis is an exercise in media literacy. I would heretofore have classified myself as media literate. In fact, I've used this "literacy" as an excuse (i.e. "I can watch anything and think critically about it.") and as a source of pride in my own life, looking down on others who are so easily swayed and influenced by their media consumption.

There is no doubt that the popular arts have some kind of effect. But what is the nature of that effect? The persuasive power of the popular arts comes from their roles and capacities as art. As representations of life, the popular arts can influence behavior, shape attitudes and opinion, and inform perspectives.³⁸

Returning to the *Grey's Anatomy* example from earlier, I am so ashamed of my response to that show. That I would throw away real world values in favor of fictional immorality is simply astounding to me. It honestly makes me wonder what I would do in that situation if it were reality. If I can't even handle the emotions of fictional characters, how would I handle my own if I were in the same situation? The question comes down to this: If I were unhappy in my marriage and found someone else to fill that void, would I go for it? My response to *Grey's* seems to suggest I would, though it's something I find difficult to actually voice (or even type).

I have no doubt that television violence will *not* influence me to commit acts of violence in the real world. And what harm is there in copying a hairstyle of a favorite character? But when issues of morality and values come up, and I find myself being carried off in a direction I ultimately do not like, what then?

People very much encounter the media environment as a source of symbols and values – some of which they adopt, some of which they throw away, some of which they re-interpret and reconstruct for themselves. They do not, by and large, see the world as a dualistic struggle between the sacred spheres of the home,

³⁸ Romanowski 31

*church, or tradition against a secular or profane sphere of the media. For them, in their practices of daily life, it is all part of a universe of symbols.*³⁹

I have to admit I spend a lot more time watching TV than I do reading my Bible. Really, a *lot*. It would seem the two are equal in my mind, or honestly, that TV time is more important than Quiet Time.⁴⁰ I know this is true, I've thought about it in passing before. I honestly try not to dwell on it, though, because I start to feel really bad.

*Christian viewers must become far more discerning about how stories influence their lives and shape their faith. Too many Christians wrongly believe that the tube is merely entertainment or mindless diversion...Discerning viewers will ask themselves how programs fit into their daily lives and whether the stories' lessons or values are in harmony with the Christian faith.*⁴¹

I've managed to write several pages of this chapter before getting down to one of the biggest personal effects of television for me. It's something I don't really want to write about. I know, as soon as I write it, it's going to be judged. Up to now, perhaps the reader has found me to be insightful, open-minded, on a mission of self-discovery. Now, I fear, you will believe me to be closed-minded, out of date, and (sin of all sins) irrelevant.

The topic I am about to discuss is so personal. It is something I have trouble reconciling within myself, much less to write about it here, in what may be the most important paper I've ever dared to write. I hesitate, even now, to begin typing the words. After all, some part of me deep inside knows I'm getting the chance of a lifetime here...the chance to write so openly about my faith in a secular academic environment. I'm thankful for the opportunity, but now we come to the part I've dreaded.

³⁹ http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/article439.html

⁴⁰ "Quiet Time" is a commonly used phrase in Christian circles, denoting the (hopefully daily) time you spend reading and meditating on God's Word, the Bible. The phrase is particularly popular in youth groups, giving a quick and easy label to something that should become a habit and ultimately as important as your daily meals. Somehow, I can always find time, even on my busiest days, to watch *Ellen* or *The Soup*, but I often forget to prioritize that "Quiet Time."

⁴¹ Redeeming..., Schultze 59

*Everything is cool, except for intolerance or absolute truth.*⁴²

In the mid-90s, there was a noticeable shift in representations of gay and lesbian men and women on television. Off the top of my head I remember when Ellen DeGeneres came out⁴³, the wedding between Carol and Susan on *Friends* and, of course, the *Will and Grace* phenomenon. I didn't watch *Ellen*, so her decision to come out (in real life and on the sitcom) did not affect me that much. I only had a passing awareness of the huge amount of media coverage and the backlash that ensued. I was a huge fan, however, of *Friends*. I had been a regular viewer and avid fan since the show began. It was in the second season that Ross' ex-wife Susan announced her intention to marry her long-time partner, Carol.

As I recall, there was a lot of news about the upcoming wedding on the show. If memory serves, I knew about the wedding in advance and had the opportunity to discuss it with family and friends. Though the show had regularly portrayed straight characters involved in promiscuous sexual relationships with members of the opposite sex, this was the first time they had put such a spotlight on the only homosexual relationship that existed on the show.

I felt so betrayed by this lesbian wedding. Looking back now, it seems so silly, but I was genuinely upset. I don't recall watching any shows before then where lesbians were primary or secondary characters. There may have been a "very special episode" or two where someone dealt with coming out or a gay friend. But never like this, in such a direct way.

⁴² Oberbrunner 72

⁴³ This prompted many in the Christian community to refer to the comedienne as "Ellen DeGenerate," a nickname several people I know still use now that she has become popular again.

At the time of this wedding, I was about sixteen years old and still entrenched in small-town, Pentecostal Holiness youth group. It wasn't all fire and brimstone (that was already considered too irrelevant), but a hard line was drawn when it came to sin...especially the sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll variety. I've matured so much in my faith and my opinions have changed so much since then, it's hard for me to remember how strong I felt about this homosexuality that was rearing its ugly head on one of my favorite shows. It was all anyone could talk about. You would have thought the world was coming to an end with the way people discussed this media event. It was simply one more thing to prove how immoral our society had become and how important a Christian witness would be.

It's funny, though, I don't actively remember there being much protest against *Friends* prior to the wedding. I had outgrown the point where my parents really told me what I could and could not watch, so I was watching it at home regularly. Most of my friends (even the ones who were not previously allowed to watch *The Smurfs* and *He-Man*) were watching. I don't believe that there are levels of sin, or differences among them individually. Sin is anything that separates you from God. There may be earthly consequences to varying degrees, but sin is sin. So, according to what I had been taught, and what the Christians around me supposedly believed, having pre-marital sex would be on an even keel with having a homosexual relationship. What would the difference be if it's all sin?

I chose not to watch *Will and Grace* because it was just too "out" there for me to handle at the time. Again, here I am, from a small Southern town where you might literally be stoned for being gay. I'm in a church where homosexuality is regularly touted

as the sin of all sins. I'm sixteen years old and just trying to figure stuff out for myself. *Will and Grace* was just too much for me. The merits of the show have been argued for years now – whether Will and Jack represented the full spectrum of the gay lifestyle, whether Jack's portrayal of the funny, flamboyant, gay man was actually a setback rather than a positive image, whether the show was a sign of the “end times” and that Jesus would be coming back any minute.⁴⁴ For me, it was all of those things and none of those things. I didn't watch it, choosing to separate myself, choosing not to let that be an influence on me.

*...Turning off the set is not liberation, but an illusion. You can turn off the set, but you still live in a world in which vast numbers of people don't. If you don't get information and ideas through the 'box,' yourself, you get them through the cultural "environment" created by the millions of people who are watching.*⁴⁵

Somewhere along the way, though, *Will and Grace* ceased to feel like such a threat. I started watching the re-runs on late night television and discovered a hilarious, brilliantly written show (at least in the early seasons). Millions of people were watching *Will and Grace* and Jesus still hadn't come back yet. At some point, I decided to give it a shot. Maybe it was just a little bit of rebellion creeping up, wanting to see what all the fuss was about. But I like to think it was more than that. I like to think it was maturity on my part.

⁴⁴ The “end times” refer to the last days before Jesus returns to Earth. Man, that sounds like a stupid sentence when you type it out and then read it back. However, I believe it is truth. When Jesus ascended into Heaven after He was crucified, then raised from the dead, it was foretold that He would someday return for the Church (Acts 1:9-11) – note the capital C. The book of Revelation describes the end-times and claims humans will be more sinful than ever just before Jesus returns. In other words, it's going to get a lot worse before it gets better. My experience has been that any time some kind of sin is brought to light (homosexuality in public, strip clubs opening in small towns, raging music festivals beckoning to young people with their promises of the aforementioned sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll), religious leaders will use that opportunity to give a nice “heads up” that the end times are afoot.

⁴⁵ http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/article439.html

I started to realize how ridiculous not watching a great show simply because it had openly gay characters really was.

Many people I know would tell you that the major effect of television is to demoralize and desensitize the younger generations (and possibly us older kids, as well). The problem seems to be that nobody in Hollywood is a Christian. Therefore, all the liberals get in positions of power and rub their hands together in delight at the prospect of corrupting young minds.

The effect of the media at all levels is to draw people away from reality, which means away from Christ, and into fantasy, whether it be at the lowest possible level, in appeals to our cupidity, our vanity, our carnality in overtly pornographic publication and spectacles, or, in more sophisticated terms, by displaying in words or in pictures, in one context or another, the degeneracy and depravity, the divorcement from any concept of good and evil, the leaning towards perversion and violence and the sheer chaos of a society that has lost its bearings, and so is materially, morally, and spiritually adrift.⁴⁶

The truth is television viewing does affect people. I think it affected (affects?) me, especially in this particular area. I wouldn't argue that I'm more open to knowing gay people and spending time with them than, for example, my parents are. I don't think my parents or other more traditionally minded people would be outwardly cruel to gay people. However, I know many of them would not be able to get over the "sinfulness" of the person to simply become a true friend to them.

Some of my okay-ness with gay people probably does come from just growing up and being more aware of the changing culture in which I live. And I don't want to pretend that life is perfectly easy for gay people even now. However, I honestly believe that it is easier for them (and easier for me) because of better representation on television.

⁴⁶ Muggeridge 60

In an increasingly complex and pluralistic world, most people are hesitant to restrict their identity to any one religious belief system and tend to avoid 'religion' because it is perceived as more constrictive.⁴⁷

Lately, I've been going through a really tough time spiritually, trying to figure out how to love people. Jesus, obviously, found this to be an important action and, in fact, called it the second greatest commandment.⁴⁸ Part of loving people, in my mind, is simply accepting them where they are. My faith is not about a list of rules and regulations, but about relationship. I try really hard to be a good representative of Jesus Christ and to point others to a relationship with Him. What worries me most about my media consumption is not that I'll become more tolerant of sin, but that my relationship with God will be affected. I'm not one of those "most people" who are trying to avoid religion. I love my faith, I'm happy to say I'm a Christian. I understand that may make me seem intolerant at times, and I'm okay with that. If I allow myself to watch things that ultimately separate me from God, that's when I enter into dangerous territory.

No matter what studies and researchers may say, even if they were to say TV viewing has little to no effect on a person, I know deep in my heart that it does affect me. I make time for TV, but not for God. I watch things that do not answer the call to think on things that are lovely, pure, good, and noble.⁴⁹ Regardless of the effects (or lack thereof) on my social life, my fashion choices, or my approach to people, it is the spiritual effects that are of the most interest to me. In fact, it is because of those very effects, I find myself exploring this topic even now.

⁴⁷ Horsfield 201

⁴⁸ Matthew 22:36-40

⁴⁹ Philippians 4:8

CHAPTER THREE

The Others

The two previous chapters described the excuses I feel I'm most likely to give for what could be inappropriate television viewing. There are certainly others. In the next chapter, I'll dig into what I feel like is really going on in making these decisions. I wanted to cover a few other excuses, though, that often come up when I'm trying to defend my media consumption.

FINDING GO(O)D IN POP CULTURE

*The answers to life's problems aren't at the bottom of a bottle. They're on TV!
(Homer Simpson)*

Like the Old Testament writings, pop culture is the collected wisdom of our era. It includes explorations of injustice, songs of sorrow, tributes to women. Like the Book of Esther, it may not mention the name of God. Like Ecclesiastes, it may suggest that in this life good doesn't always triumph over evil. Like the Song of Solomon, it may celebrate sex. It may not have a salvific purpose, but it still offers us essential perspective, comfort, wisdom. Its artistry often stands alone as smaller, isolated truths that endure the test of time.⁵⁰

Browsing through the Christian section at the local Barnes & Noble, several titles jump out at me: Looking For God in Harry Potter, Finding God in The Chronicles of Narnia, The Gospel According to the Simpsons, The Gospel According to the Sopranos. In fact, with the exception of that last one, I own all of those books. I didn't buy them so much to enhance my faith, but to feel like I have a defense when it inevitably comes up that I read the Harry Potter series and watch *The Simpsons*.

I'm something of a pop culture addict. I watch a lot of television, a lot of movies, read a lot of magazines. It's rare someone will scoop me on big news like Britney

⁵⁰ Detweiler and Taylor 11

shaving her head or the latest development in the Anna Nicole Smith tragedy. Actually, in my office, I have one entire wall (about 7 feet tall, 8 feet wide) covered in a huge collage of pop culture magazine clippings. There are a lot of pictures of Britney Spears, Jessica Simpson, Brad and Angelina, Tom, Katie, and Suri. The pictures that are up there really represent various things about me. If you studied it, you would figure out what music, movies, and TV shows I like. You could probably recognize that I grew up in the 80s (the cutouts of the Huxtables and Joe Elliot, lead singer of Def Leppard, give me away!). You would guess I love Elvis and George Clooney.

Upon their first entrance into my office, there is always a reaction from the person coming in. “Wow....” they normally say. “How long did that take?” I sense they’re really asking “How much time did you waste on that?” or “Do you actually do any work here in your office or just cut pictures out of magazines?” The truth is it took me about a year to get the wall completely covered and I would focus on it whenever I was particularly stressed out. I feel the judgment in visitors’ voices, though. It drives me to question whether this was a worthy way to spend time. Finding books that tell me I’m okay and there are others like me helps.⁵¹

I haven’t yet found one that encourages reading tabloids, but I’m always on the lookout! Seriously, the others that give pointers on how to “read” television shows and movies and find spiritual truths hidden within have seemed very valuable to me in the past. Now I wonder if they just feed this excuse.

I definitely believe there are positive, spiritual truths to be found in pop culture. Those things that apply to all humanity – love, rejection, the search for something more –

⁵¹ Reading this sentence back later, it sounds like I’m in desperate need of a support group or sponsor.

can be portrayed in a way that makes the audience consider their own life. This particular “excuse” is one that really exemplifies the struggle I feel between media consumption and dedication to my faith.

One of the things that contribute to this overall struggle, I think, is my church experience while I was growing up. Most churches my family attended were part of the Pentecostal Holiness denomination or something very similar. As the name implies, the P.H. denomination is marked by an emphasis on holiness – likeness to God. Many P.H. churches still promote a ban on things that are considered too “worldly.” Dancing, listening to rock’n’roll music, watching movies of any sort, and drinking alcohol are all pretty much prohibited. I guess the idea is that participating in these activities will negatively affect the individual’s relationship with God. There are many places in the Bible that discourage followers of Christ from becoming too caught up in things of this world. After all, according to Christian doctrine, our time on Earth is only temporary. Our ultimate destination is an eternity in Heaven, so why get caught up in activities that are only fleeting? Of course, the other side of this argument is, if things are so fleeting, one should live it up while one has the chance...but that’s a discussion best left for another day.

Growing up, my family was somewhere in the middle between liberal and conservative Christian values. As a child, I was taught to strive for holiness as my highest goal, but my parents took us to the movies and allowed us to listen to secular music⁵².

⁵² Well, we could listen to secular music up to a point. We listened to a lot of oldies and adult contemporary stations. However, I will never forget the experience of spending my own money to buy Bon Jovi’s “Keep the Faith” album and my mom making me return it. I was eleven at the time and apparently not old enough to handle the music in her opinion. Thus started my (forbidden) love affair with Jon and Richie. It continues to this day.

Exactly what we watched and listened to was carefully monitored, but my parents didn't write off all of secular entertainment as evil.

Before writing all of this down, I don't know that I would have previously said I felt (or feel?) guilty about engaging with secular media. Having set most of the paper aside for a few weeks, and now returning to read through it and make some adjustments, I notice I use the word "defend" a lot. Why would I feel the need to defend myself or my actions so often if I didn't have a nagging twinge of guilt tugging at me from somewhere?

I touched on my pride in being "media literate" in Chapter Two. I do have a tendency to use that ability to sift through all kinds of media messages and find some good as an excuse to let any and everything in. I recognize and acknowledge that about myself, but I also have honestly been encouraged, uplifted, and challenged (even in my faith) by things I've been exposed to through secular entertainment media.

One of my favorite shows is *Battlestar Galactica* – the new version. On the show, the primary conflict is between humans and cylons. The humans created cylons several generations ago for military and industrial uses. Eventually, the cylons developed intelligence and rebelled against the humans. After a huge war, the cylons and humans reached a peace treaty. For forty years, the cylons left the humans alone. They disappeared...or so the humans thought. In the pilot episode of the show, viewers realize cylons have improved their own technology so that they now look like humans. In fact, they have been living among humans for years, preparing for a nuclear annihilation of the human race. The cylons strike, leaving only 50,000 humans alive. The humans have to set up a new government and figure out how to live in this new society that has been forced

upon them. Their only hope is to outrun the cylons and make it to the mythological planet Earth they've heard about in ancient prophecies and old wives' tales.

One of the most interesting things to me about the show is the integration of religion and faith. The humans portrayed generally have a polytheistic faith, believing in the Lords of Kobol. The cylons, however, believe in one true God. They believe God got so fed up with the humans not recognizing His existence that He gave the cylons souls and a knowledge of Him and His will.

Battlestar Galactica is not a Christian show. It's not even close. There are illicit sexual relationships, backstabbing, murder, revenge...it's all there. But the exploration of things like what it means to be human or have a soul, whether God has a unique destiny for each person, and the effectiveness of prayer are there too. These things challenge me to examine my own personal beliefs about God and help me work through some basic theological issues in my own life.

There is good to be found in pop culture. There's no question in my mind about that. I enjoy looking for it and appreciate it once it's found. However, I feel the need to include this as an "excuse" because I have found myself using it to justify letting all kinds of images into my brain and heart. I want to find a balance.

MIGHT AS WELL...

People watch television because no one is going to take it away from them. And they will watch it until and unless something more attractive can be provided in their everyday lives.⁵³

⁵³ <http://www.colorado.edu/Journalism/MEDIALYF/analysis/umcom.html>

So often I watch TV because “there’s nothing else to do.” It’s not that there’s really even anything I want to watch. I just turn it on because it’s there and I’m bored. It’s relaxing. It gives me time to sort of zone out. Throughout the process of writing this paper, I’ve given serious thought to giving up television once and for all. If I’m only watching it to waste the time away, surely there are more fruitful ways to spend my time. I don’t know a single person who does not have at least one TV in their home. And most people I know have several. Wouldn’t people think I was weird if they asked “What shows do you like?” And I said, “I don’t watch TV.” I can hear the rest of the conversation now. “Oh, you mean you’re not watching anything right now?” “No, I don’t watch TV at all. Not during the day, not in the evening. I only use the screen for special occasions when my family wants to watch a movie. I don’t watch TV.” I’m imagining myself being on the other side of that conversation. If someone were saying those things to me, I’d think they were radical, out there, taking things to the extreme for no apparent reason. But what if the reason is to save yourself from being inundated with advertisements that only reap discontent with what you already have? What if you want to set your priorities in such a way that the major influences in your life come from your faith and people who actually know you? Is that so weird? Is it so far-fetched?

The major message here is that to exist in today’s public culture, it is necessary to exist in the media. To withdraw entirely in the face of an omnipresent media sphere is to choose marginalization and loss of voice.⁵⁴

Maybe the watching is an attempt to stay connected. Maybe I’m scared that if I don’t know what’s going on in the Anna Nicole Smith trial, I’ll be rejected or laughed at for being so out of the loop.

⁵⁴ <http://www.iscmrc.org/english/mediaage.htm>

I had a conversation with a friend of mine several weeks ago. He and his wife are Christian artists and evangelists. They were about to have a baby girl. I asked if they had decided on a name yet. My friend said his wife had seen a name in a magazine several months earlier that they really liked. The name was Eva. "Come to find out," he said, "that's the name of one of those girls on that show *Desperate Housewives!*" He kind of chuckled and said they had discussed if it would be appropriate to give that name to their daughter, knowing there was a famous person on an immoral TV show with the same one. They finally decided they liked it so much, they would name their baby Eva, and deal with any fallout later.

The conversation caught me so off guard. This is a guy who is my same age, good-looking, and a hip dresser. Though he's very devoted to his relationship with God, and makes a point to not get too caught up in "worldly" things, I could not believe he seriously did not know whom Eva Longoria was. I can't imagine not knowing and that makes me a little sad.

It was that moment, I think, where I started considering giving up television and my *Us Weekly* subscription. I didn't look at my friend and think he was a weirdo. I admired him and something deep inside me wanted to be more like him.

I am absolutely surrounded by media. Should it not be a goal, though, to set myself apart as a Christian? If I'm doing things "just because they're there," that doesn't show a whole lot of introspection or self-discovery on my part.

More and more, I'm becoming aware that many of my theological beliefs and practices are cultural. What I mean is while I'm trying to live according to the principles of the Bible, those principles are colored by the fact that I'm a white, female, Southern

American. I can't separate from those things, but shouldn't my lived faith be strictly grounded in the Bible more than in cultural or circumstantial factors?

The Bible is clear on many things, but a lot is also left up to the individual believer. It would certainly be a lot easier to be a Christian if everything was all laid out in black and white. But that's not the case. I don't know why this is. Maybe it's because of that whole "free will" thing where God wanted us to be autonomous enough to figure things out and make a decision on our own about entering into a relationship with Him. Maybe it's just the nature of having a relationship with anyone – some things are revealed up front, but some things are learned only with time and intimacy.

I think it may also speak to the fact that every person is a unique individual. Like I said, there are some standard, non-negotiable aspects to being a Christian. You have to believe Jesus was the Son of God who died for your sins and rose again to make a personal relationship with God possible. Jesus Himself was pretty clear on a few additional things – love God, love people. This is really what Christianity boils down to – or should, if we're doing it right.

Outside of the challenge to love God and love people, though, so many details are left up in the air. But it makes sense if you study humanity. The debate over alcohol consumption within the Christian community illustrates this idea. The Bible never says don't drink alcohol, but it does warn against becoming drunk. Some people have a self-control problem when it comes to drinking. They may ultimately come to the conclusion that drinking anything at all would be wrong for them. Others may be able to enjoy alcohol in moderation and not have to concern themselves with the right-ness or wrong-ness of it.

I've joked about being addicted to television or pop culture in general before. When examined through the lens of this alcohol example, though, things start to make sense in a way I may not have realized before.

Television is not inherently bad. Even those shows that do portray non-Christian values and morals are not wholly evil. The problem is in my reaction to and use of these things. If I'm overusing television to the point that it becomes a greater influence on my belief systems than the Bible, I think that's wrong. If I get to the point where I'm truly addicted to watching, I think that's wrong. The question now is...am I to that point?

I honestly don't think I am. I do, however, think I'm in danger of getting there really easily. I believe God uses everyday things in our lives to teach us lessons about ourselves or Him. Maybe writing this paper at this time, examining these issues, was really His way of directing my attention toward a problem area in my life.

NOBODY TELLS ME WHAT TO DO

Religion is coming to reside more and more in the hands of individuals and less and less in the hands of institutions, denominations, congregations, or para-church groups. Sociologists call this the rise of personal autonomy in matters of faith. It is rooted in the twentieth-century revolution which has brought the self and the construction of the self and personal identity to the fore as the central logics of social practice.⁵⁵

Independence has always been something that was very important to me. Maybe it's just classic first-child syndrome, but I've always felt like I didn't need anyone's help. "I can do it myself and will probably do it better than if you interfere." I recently looked at a diary entry from when I was ten years old. The entry was written in anger and I was complaining that I was being treated like a child. I couldn't even make what I wanted for

⁵⁵ <http://www.iscmrc.org/english/mediaage.htm>

dinner! That conflict sums up my childhood. I hated to be talked down to (still do) and treated like a kid, even if that's what I was.

I think I enjoy feeling like, up to this point, I've sort of set my own rules for my faith. I often reference the Scripture "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). What I mean by quoting this verse is that I get to figure things out for myself. I don't need anyone giving me rules or guidelines. I seem to forget that second part "with fear and trembling," though. I allow all kinds of sin to creep into my life and file it away under "working out my own salvation." Am I really doing this with a respect for God and what I believe He's done for me, though? It doesn't look like it.

It's probably pretty clear what I believe a Christian really is. I think the label "Christian" is overused in modern American society (especially in the South). People who simply attend church on a semi-regular basis describe themselves as Christian. But I believe it's more than that. I think the Bible states pretty clearly that belief in Jesus should be followed by like behavior; there should be an attempt to become Christ-like. After all, if a person believes what Jesus said was really true, shouldn't it affect the way they live their life? Shouldn't there be a focus on holiness, on becoming more like God, on loving people unconditionally?

The funny thing is, I feel like I've got that stuff figured out for the most part. I love the things of God and want my life to be a testament to my relationship with Him. Maybe the real problem is that things have just gotten so messed up that it's harder to find true godly things in the craziness of modern society. I look at the example of Jesus and He used everyday stories to teach followers how they should live. Maybe television

does the same thing today. Too many people want to put television on one extreme or the other. It's either all bad or all good. Really, though, it's somewhere in between. To use an old expression, I don't want to "throw the baby out with the bathwater" and not recognize that television can be and has been a positive influence and teaching tool in my life.

However, because of what I believe a Christian really should be, it can't be okay to watch anything and everything. There has to be a way to decide what's okay and what isn't.

I don't know how that's even possible without the help of the Holy Spirit. A lot of people don't like talking about the Holy Spirit. It makes them uncomfortable or maybe they've had bad experiences with people who act a fool and blame it on this elusive "Holy Ghost." But I believe the Holy Spirit is real and helps those who believe in Jesus as their Savior. I know I've been given a brain and common sense so that I can figure some things out on my own. But the Holy Spirit is that thing inside us that tells us when something is harmful to us. He lets us know when things may be standing in the way of our relationship with God. Though I've learned a lot through this whole process of writing and exploring, I know this struggle will continue because I will continue to live. I may make small changes in my lifestyle, but I'm ultimately dealing with the same struggle that will last until Jesus comes back. What will be more important to me – the things of this world or the things that are eternal?

CHAPTER FOUR

Conversations

I find as I write (and live) that I need regular affirmation from the people in my life who are important to me. Actually, I'll take what I can get, not just from the people who are important, but really from anyone. It makes my day when someone leaves a comment on my blog. I fish for compliments when someone reads something I've read. As I've been working on this thesis, I've put out feelers for how the topic may be received among my peers. For the most part, I've gotten positive feedback. I have only let one person see any of the actual written pages, though. And that was my mom.

Is it stacking the deck to let my mom read it? Probably. I had no doubt she would be full of praise, even if what I wrote was absolute crap. I was proud of the introductory pages. I felt like they were readable, if nothing else. And they have to do with my childhood and early days around television production, so I knew Mom would enjoy it. When I visited her a few days after I completed those pages, I tentatively asked if she'd like to read it. She said absolutely, so I handed them over.

I sat in almost silence for several minutes, hearing only the occasional chuckle and page turn. After a while, I started hearing something different, though. At first, it was just a small sniffle, like someone whose nose is irritated by pollen or a gnat. But then there was another. And another. And another. They were getting bigger and coming closer together. My mom's husband, Chip, who was reading over her shoulder, noticed when I looked up to investigate the sound.

"You've got your mom in tears over here," he said with a smile.

"Why?" I asked, truly not knowing the answer.

My mom stood up and closed the notebook that held the pages. Wiping tears from her eyes, she said, “You raise your children, trying to teach them to do well and be good people, and you can only hope that some of what you’re teaching gets through.” She gets a little choked up. “When you said you knew we were strict, but didn’t think it was unreasonable...” She trails off, overcome for the moment. But I know what she means.

“This is great, Michelle,” she says, back in control. “From the first page, you set up your story, insert some humor, and ask questions people want to know the answer to.”

Well, what more could a writer ask for?

MySpace Comments...

LEAH: Hey, I read that Celebrity Baby Blog is hiring several positions and I thought of only 2 people! I figured you should let Bird know... this could be the job of a lifetime! Check it out! Haha- seriously, how are you?

ME: Gee, I'd love to check out that CBB job, but what with writing my stupid thesis that keeps bringing up convictions about consuming too much media, I just don't know how it would work out! Stupid thesis. :P

LEAH: Lord have mercy, girl! Who came up with that idea for a thesis? :)

My husband’s parents came to visit toward the end of the writing process. They are more conservative than we are and we often find we avoid certain topics to keep the peace. We respect them to the utmost and love hearing their input and opinions, but why provoke an argument among people who are probably not going to change their minds?

During their stay, we visited the Mall of Georgia. It’s about an hour drive from my house to the mall, but it felt longer that night on the way home. I was driving their vehicle and really having to concentrate on the road. I listened silently to a discussion

about the children who attend the elementary school where Faye works. The school is in eastern North Carolina, very close to several major military bases. A large percentage of students have at least one parent deployed in Iraq or Afghanistan right now. Faye is talking about the guidance counselor and the support group for children whose parents are deployed.

“I feel bad for kids whose parents are active in this war. Maybe more than other wars before,” I interject. I don’t want to start this conversation, not really, but the comment is out before I can catch it. “I wonder what they tell the counselor about why their parents are not around.”

“Well, the parents have to come up with reasons of their own to continue fighting,” Faye answers. There’s a bit of heat in her voice now. “The children usually give the same reasons their parents have given them.”

Under my breath, not wanting to talk about it, but unable to stay silent. “I just wonder what reasons the parents come up with.”

“They’re participating in the war on terror, they’re keeping terrorists out of America, they’re helping the people. We hear stories all the time about the schools they’re building and how much the people appreciate it. Of course, you never hear about that in the media.”

“I hope we’re not creating more terrorists in the process.” It’s not me who speaks this time, but Paul, my husband. I give him a look that I hope says, “Thanks for the support, babe, but let’s wrap this up.”

The conversation continues and I drift back into silence. I have something of a reputation in this family as an instigator, an arguer. I often fear the Wheelers think I’m a

bad influence on their son. Outside my thoughts, I hear someone say, “Why don’t they show the good rather than talking about how many soldiers were killed on a given day?” The phrase “If it bleeds, it leads” runs through my head, my communications training creeping up.

Somehow the conversation shifts. Pacifism, government control, world poverty. It’s been at least ten minutes since I’ve said anything (a long time for me). I chime back in, “It’s not like Christians are really doing anything about these issues. Not in a big enough way to get recognized for them, anyway. Why do Angelina Jolie and Bono and others get the recognition. Why isn’t the church stepping up?” The comment was meant to push the conversation along. It came out more defensive than I meant it to.

“Churches are doing things all the time. Our little church feeds homeless people and visits prisoners and takes care of people in the community. We don’t send out a press release when we do it, though,” says Paul’s dad, David.

“And even if we did, the media doesn’t want to cover that kind of thing. They don’t want to cover Christians in action. They portray us the way they want to,” says Faye.

I’m frustrated now. This is the very reason I generally avoid the big controversial topics like politics, war, media. But I’m willing to make it personal. “I can’t help but think people have no idea what a Christian really is. I wouldn’t be against Christians being persecuted a little more in America. That would at least separate the real Christians from those who find it comforting to pretend to be. Fine, let’s not talk about the Church (or the church, for that matter). Me. Michelle. Do people look at me and realize I’m different because of my relationship with God? Am I different? Is there something about

me that points people to Jesus? Am I just blending in with everyone else or am I standing up for Jesus, making a difference for Him in this world?"

Tempers are starting to rise. The tension is palpable. I can feel my heart beating faster and hear my voice rising. We're only a mile and a half away from home now. It's late and time to find an end to this conversation. I don't remember what the end was. Maybe I just stopped talking. Maybe I said something like, "I just want to be a good and effective representation of Jesus." That's what I felt.

The conversation ends, but my thoughts continue into the night. Too often I find I'm so not like Jesus. That's what this whole process has revealed. I want to be like Jesus, at least I say I do, I often think I do. And yet, I surround myself with things that pull me away from Him. Am I compromising not just myself but also my Christian witness when I watch things on television that influence my morals and values in a negative way? The thought, the knowing that it does, makes my heart sink and almost brings tears to my eyes.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions

Following Christ in a media culture demands that we become aware of how we use the media and how much we depend on the media to shape the routine of our lives.⁵⁶

I wish I had sat down to start writing this paper earlier in the semester. I've had plenty of time to do the research and finish the writing, I just wish I had started the documenting process earlier. I think I felt pressure to have it all figured out, to know what the end would be before I started the beginning. But I don't feel like I have it all figured out now. And maybe that's the point. After all, this is not a topic with easy answers. It's not simply about looking at existing research and compiling it to get an idea about what's already out there. From the research I did do, I get the distinct impression I am not alone in this struggle. And I haven't been for a long time.

There seems to be something about media, and especially television, that is contrary to the Christian lifestyle. People have been questioning the technology since it was first created. Now, with so many options and with it being so convenient, the questions still resonate.

I struggled with the title of this paper for many weeks. Even after I was well on my way in writing, the title eluded me. I had thought of "Excuses, Excuses" before, but wondered if it was academic enough. Did I need to have a long subtitle after it in order to give it credibility? Something like "Excuses, Excuses: The Christian's struggle to interact with secular media" might have worked. The problem was every time I tried to think of a subtitle, it came out sounding like a movie tagline. "Excuses, Excuses: One girl's journey to find peace and purpose." Ugh.

⁵⁶ http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/article587.html

When I finally decided it was okay to just use “Excuses, Excuses” with no subtitle, I felt a little freer. In a way, it was just because a decision had been made. I had *named my thesis*. It was paramount to naming a child. It was also freeing, though, because I think it describes me and my approach to this topic. It’s short and sweet (like me, of course). It’s also fairly blunt and has the connotation of judgment. That’s how I’ve felt these past few months.

It’s important to me to be my own judge. I don’t want to just coast through life without examining my actions and beliefs. I’ve finally accepted the fact that, for too long, that’s exactly what I did with my television viewing.

Is TV all bad? Of course not. I still plan to pursue a career in TV production and hope to never lose my passion for it. However, my eyes have been opened and I’ve felt what I believe is the conviction of the Holy Spirit throughout this process. It’s not just my morals that have possibly been affected by my viewing habits. My values have been as well. I find I’m much more fashion and material possession-oriented than ever before. I look around at my stuff and, rather than feel blessed at the sheer abundance of it, I feel discontent. I can’t speak for everyone, but I know within myself, this is a product of watching TV.

What it all comes down to is the fact that I have been regularly placing my relationship with TV above my relationship with God for quite a while now. I care more about catching my favorite shows than making time for Him. I allow these fictional characters and people I don’t even know to speak into my life. This is absolutely not something I want to continue.

As I said, I think I will always love television. And maybe it does make me more relevant to people around me. Maybe it doesn't have a huge negative effect on me. But the tentativeness with which I have approached digging deep and making serious changes as a result of considering this topic give me pause. Why so timid if it's not a big deal?

It is my highest goal to look back over the course of my life and see consistent growth in my relationship with Jesus. I want to become more like Him. If watching too much television is standing in the way of that, then I need to be willing to let it go.

I don't have this all figured out. Maybe I never will. Considering how much I love pop culture, this will probably be an issue I return to over and over again in the course of my life. I hope, though, that the progression will be an honest one. That I will not want to hold on to things of this fleeting world so tightly that I lose my grip on the eternal. That I will not make silly excuses to justify improper actions and activities. That I will look back on my life and say with conviction, "I did my best."

I've asked a lot of questions in this paper and maybe haven't provided very many answers. I don't feel like it's right to give answers just because, though. If I don't really have the answer, it would be almost hypocritical to provide one just because it might make you, the reader, feel more comfortable. I don't have all the answers. But I think questions have value too. Maybe you'll ask yourself these same questions and find different answers than I ultimately will. Whether it's an answer you'll find or not, the main thing I've discovered is my real goal is balance. I don't want to excuse negative or sinful behavior, but I don't want to force guilt on myself for things that aren't actually wrong.

Does this paper have a real end? I don't think so. This phase concludes with me looking through my Season Pass list on my DVR and deciding which shows may need to be cut (*Grey's Anatomy*, you're now on official notice). It involves me renewing my efforts in spending time (quality and quantity) with God. It's not the beginning of the story or the end. It's somewhere in the middle, really. And that's okay.

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