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Christian Use of Media: Personal Freedom and Communal Concerns

TIM NEUFELD

The Changing Shape of Media

How should Christians respond to a confusing barrage of media in the twenty-first century? Much has changed in the last few decades: the mediums utilized to report information and entertainment have evolved, content has adapted to new technology and new systems of delivery have transformed the way we engage media. Fifty years ago the choices were much simpler. We listened to radio, watched television and read books, magazines and newspapers. Today, however, young children are weaned on types of media that leave an older generation confused and anxious.

In this article, “media” will be used broadly and defined as any type of mass communication that influences people through the distribution of news, entertainment and information. Traditional media developed historically first with print sources, then radio, film and television. “New media,” while being a narrower field of media studies, is more complex due to its ongoing, interactive and ubiquitous nature, often including any form of content that is on-demand and digital such as computers, cell phones, social media, video games and the Internet. Today, the medium, the content the medium delivers and the system with which the content is delivered are symbiotic, all interactive and dependent on one another.

Americans are more media savvy today than at any other time. In general, viewing, reading and listening habits are shifting away from traditional sources in favor of the new media and people are spending significantly more time engaging media at younger and younger ages. The following statistics are worth noting as we consider how a Christian should use and respond to media.¹

- Still the dominant form of media, TV and video continue to hold steady with adults watching an average of four hours and thirty-four minutes per day in 2011.
- Radio, newspapers, and magazines are big losers in every recent survey. Americans report significant decline in usage of these mediums in the last few years.
- Internet use continues to soar. In 2008 adults spent an average of 137 minutes per day surfing the web, while in 2011 that figure jumped to 167 minutes per day.
- Between 2006 and 2011, Americans increased time spent on social networks (in order of popularity: Facebook, Tumblr, Pinterest, Twitter) from 2.7 hours to 6.9 hours per person per month, and watching TV online (i.e. Netflix, Hulu, iTunes) from 6.3 hours to 23.1 hours per person per month.
- Getting daily news through online and mobile sources skyrocketed for adults between 2005 and 2011 from twenty-four percent to thirty-nine percent, far outpacing newspapers and radio and offering a serious challenge to television news broadcasts.
- One-quarter of Americans used an electronic reader such as Kindle or iPad to read books in 2012, up from sixteen percent a year earlier. In the same year, readership of printed books went down from seventy-two percent to sixty-seven percent.² (At the time of this article's writing, Barnes and Noble is struggling to remain as the last national bookstore.)³

- Regarding cell phone ownership among children, twenty percent of third-graders, eighty-three percent of those in middle school, and eighty-six percent of those in high school have them.
- Texting is by far the preferred way of communication for teens; those who have phones exchange an average of 3417 text messages per month.
- Minority kids spent an average of thirteen hours per day using mobile devices, computers, televisions, and other media in 2011. Alarmingly, that is four and a half hours more than white children.
- Americans are using more than one screen at a time to accomplish a task such as browsing the Internet, booking a flight, or managing finances. Ninety percent use multiple screens *sequentially*, moving from one device to another, and seventy-seven percent use devices *simultaneously*, such as engaging in social media on a tablet while watching TV.
- Forty percent of US households owned a video game system in 2009. Sixty-seven percent of American households engaged in playing video games on a system, computer or mobile device in 2010.⁴

In this world of ever-changing media, we need to critically evaluate our use of things like on-demand TV, streaming movies, digital music, eBooks, websites, video games, social media and more. Most of our viewing and listening is interactive, Internet-based, and easily accessible through home networks and mobile devices. These new media create opportunities for both good and bad uses.

Paul's Dilemma

Two thousand years ago, the Apostle Paul faced an interesting dilemma in Corinth. An investigation of his context may help Christians today formulate an appropriate response to media. In Paul's day, many believers thought eating meat was evil because it had been sacrificed to idols in pagan temples. This was a common practice in the major metropolitan center of Corinth. Butchered by priests, excess meat from temple ceremonies was sold in the market where it would be indiscernible from other meat products not used in idol worship.

The Jews were strictly forbidden from eating temple meat and thus required to investigate the source of the meat they were buying. A series of questions would help determine whether the meat being purchased was "safe." In a similar way today, many consumers are concerned about the origin of food they eat: Is the chicken free-range? Are the vegetables organic? Is the coffee fair trade? Though more information is available to the modern consumer about food products through labeling and education, the Jewish buyer was responsible for knowing whether or not the meat being bought had its origins in the temple worship of other gods.

As Paul began to work with the early church in Corinth, he was faced with a difficult contextual problem. The new gathering of "the Way" was an amalgamation of both Jews and Gentiles, and as a result, there were cultural problems that created significant tension between these two groups. Paul identifies several issues that are *adiaphora*, a Greek concept often applied to Pauline theology referring to the "nonessentials" of faith in Christ such as circumcision, observance of special holy days, and abstinence from meat sacrificed in the temple. Each of these would be held in high regard as regulatory and normative for the Jew, but Paul argues that these Jewish cultural practices no longer have merit in the new community of Christ because they mean nothing to God.

Turning to First Corinthians, we find a robust discussion of freedom, conscience, and care for others. Multiple times Paul refers to an oft used phrase heard in Corinth, "All things are lawful" (6:12, 10:23).⁵ The noun in Greek meaning "lawful" is *exousia*, signifying a possibility that exists by virtue of a

God-given right. This freedom of conscience is foundational to the argument Paul is making in his letter to the Corinthians. Rather than restrict the young church membership, Paul endorses an attitude of freedom and permits people to consume the previously forbidden meat, instructing them, “Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, ‘The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it’” (10:25).

Paul’s use of *exousia* indicates a conviction that all followers of Christ are granted a right, authority, or liberty to make personal free choices about *adiaphora*, culturally neutral issues. Earlier in his letter Paul says, “But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do” (8:8). Commentator Gordon Fee summarizes, “We are none the worse if we do not eat such food (as with not being circumcised) and we are no better if we do (as with being circumcised). Such are strictly matters of indifference to God. For Paul this would still be true, hence the positive way the aphorisms are presented. This is the ‘authority/freedom’ of the person in Christ.”⁶

But while Paul is advocating for a freedom with regard to eating temple meat, he is also issuing a warning not to abuse this freedom. Each time he repeats the Corinthian expression “All things are lawful,” he also adds a condition. In 10:23 he continues, “but not all things are beneficial” and “not all things build up.” In doing so he turns the phrase. Some of the Corinthians were too quick to claim their right to freedom (*exousia*) and did so only to please themselves. The Jews may have used this argument in asserting their right/freedom to impose dietary regulations on the Gentiles. In return, the Gentiles could claim the same liberty in denouncing the prohibition of meat. In each case, the believer supported his or her position on the merit of personal freedom. Paul, however, warns that the point of freedom is for the benefit of others, to build them up, not for personal comfort or gain.

Paul supports a surprisingly liberal and broad sense of personal freedom, but there is a condition: “No one should seek their own good, but the good of others” (10:24). The right to exercise freedom, *exousia*, has its limits. The principle Paul teaches is that believers have great freedom to engage the culture

around them and make choices regarding *adiaphora* (in this case eating meat), but also that restraint should be exercised if the freedom could cause another person to stumble (8:9, 10:28). On the contrary, freedom in Christ is granted so that believers may first and foremost practice an ethic of love, caring for the needs of the other. Fee again provides a summary, “Hence ‘freedom’ does not mean ‘to seek my own good’; it means to be free in Christ in such a way that one can truly seek to benefit and build up another person.”⁷

In the end, eating or not eating meat sacrificed to idols is not really the issue. The most important thing a follower of Christ must do is examine how his or her action will impact other believers. Paul was less worried with eating meat and primarily concerned about the edification of the early church. Such action by believers on behalf of the common good is an appropriate use of liberty and freedom.

Paul’s teaching regarding meat is a good case study for us as we try to determine how Christians should use media. With regard to issues of *adiaphora*, Fee and Stuart appropriately note:

In twentieth-century America alone the list of such matters has included clothing (length of dresses, ties, women’s slacks), cosmetics, jewelry, entertainment and recreation (movies, television, cards, dancing, mixed swimming), athletics, food, and drink. As with those who judged Paul’s freedom on the matter of idol food, so it always is that those who think abstinence from any one of these constitutes holiness before God do not think of them as matters of indifference.⁸

For some believers, it is tempting to think that various forms of media are evil, but like meat in Paul’s day, television, websites, social media and the like are not good or bad. Nor is a particular form of media Christian or non-Christian. Media are neutral—they are *adiaphora*. It is what we do with them that serves a good or bad function. How we exercise our *exousia*, our right to free choice, might place us in jeopardy not because of what we eat or drink, but by how we influence our Christian brothers and sisters through our eating and

drinking. An ethic of love modeled after Jesus should always work to build and edify the community, never to offend or tear it down.

Good or Bad?

Can the internet be used for evil? Certainly. Can cable, satellite and fiber-optic signals provide us with good and wholesome content? Absolutely. The question we should be asking is—as it was for Paul—does participating in this form of media edify or obstruct a Christian lifestyle, especially in relationship to other believers? All media have the potential to draw us closer to God, as well as drive a wedge between us and our creator.

Determining what materials are helpful or harmful is a tricky task. Just as eating meat in Paul's day was considered dangerous by some believers and neutral by others, many Christians today have vastly different viewing and listening standards. It might seem helpful to create a catalog of acceptable and unacceptable material, but blacklists are always relative and problematic. What is appropriate for one person might be a stumbling block for another.

Each of us needs to consider our own context carefully when deciding what type of media should or should not be engaged. Whereas some R-rated films have a message worthy of viewing, it would be inappropriate to view any R-rated movie in the presence of a 10-year-old child. A military documentary could be used in an educational context quite appropriately, but it might be detrimental to a veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. A fantasy novel might excite the imagination of one reader, but it also has the potential to frighten another. Video games can be a fun pastime for an entire family, but they can also lead to addiction for those who abuse them.

Returning to the Apostle Paul's dilemma, media resources themselves are *adiaphora*; they are matters of indifference to God. Our engagement with them is not in question. In fact, due to the ubiquitous, symbiotic nature of the new media, it would be quite futile to attempt a boycott of any one medium. For example, it would be impossible to completely abstain from video games as lines are blurred between video game systems, online educational programs,

interactive DVDs, instructional software, mobile devices, etc. The concerned consumer is left asking: What exactly is a video game? Is a website that engages the user's math skills to write html code with the end product of a tic-tac-toe game a video game? What about a program that teaches logic through chess lessons? Or gaming software that helps the user compose songs by teaching music theory, rhythm, instrumentation and digital editing?

Helpful Guidelines From Scripture

Though he promoted a spirit of freedom in engaging the culture, Paul also reminds the Corinthians twice that "not all things are beneficial" (6:12, 10:23). He accentuates the point even stronger in 6:12 by noting, "'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be dominated by anything." Paul was aware that the exercising of personal freedom could lead to unintended negative consequences. Paul warns that sometimes appetite itself can grow so strong it becomes the master. In a comparable way, believers today are free to use media, but never in such a way that media begin to control or dominate believers' lives. Appetites are natural and normal until the appetite itself enslaves a person. Two additional biblical texts help us examine whether we are wisely interacting with media in helpful ways.

Long ago, the Psalmist considered the value of things he placed in front of his eyes. In Psalm 101, singing of God's love and justice, the king proclaims his desire to live a blameless life. How will this happen? He pledges, "I will not set before my eyes anything that is base." He continues, "I hate the work of those who fall away; it shall not cling to me. Perverseness of heart shall be far from me; I will know nothing of evil." And later in the Psalm, "I will look with favor on the faithful in the land." Walter Brueggemann considers Psalm 101 to be a psalm of reorientation. This is a royal hymn that grounds the king and orients him to the nature of God in a new, surprising, and grace-infused way. Psalm 101 provides a model for reorienting one's self to the world and culture around.

As he concludes his letter to the Philippian church, Paul punctuates his passionate plea for unity by naming virtuous qualities that should characterize a Christian's life. He encourages the Philippians to focus on the things of God and get rid of all distractions. "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (4:8). Furthermore, Paul doesn't leave these in the abstract. He understands such virtuous character to be foundational for a Christian ethic: "Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me" (4:9). Paul expects these Christian graces to be lived out in the believer's daily life.

Questions to Ask

With guidance from Scripture, each of us is responsible for assessing our own use of media. As Paul suggests, there will always be a tension between personal freedom and the good of the community. Orienting ourselves to the nature of God and pursuing an ethic of grace and virtue will also help us be wise in making choices. While media are neither good nor bad, they can be used for such purposes. The following questions may be helpful in determining whether what we are watching and listening to is beneficial.

- Is the material violent? Many studies have been done on violence in media, but it is not possible to conclude that engagement with media violence alone causes one to act violently. However, movies and video games filled with gratuitous violence, blood and gore can indeed have the effect of desensitizing viewers, especially young impressionable ones.
- Is the material exploitative? Media that treat women, minorities, and any marginalized or victimized group badly are never accept-

able. In harmony with an ethic of love, we must choose carefully the websites, magazines, books, and music that we accept and subscribe to.

- Does the material use crude humor? Comedy that relies on an excess of offensive, obscene or sexual humor runs counter to the Christian lifestyle. Humor that denigrates or slanders another in an ongoing way does not build up the body of Christ.
- Is the material addictive? Pornography, social media, and video games can lead to addictive behaviors that often impede normal patterns of life. When sleep, work, family and spiritual nurture are disrupted by media, it is time to reassess one's involvement with a particular medium (or mediums).
- Does the material encourage harmful behavior? Any form of media that glorifies violence, substance abuse, and profanity has the potential to influence people, particularly children and teens, negatively.
- How much time is spent with the material? Balance is critical in all areas of life—too much time spent playing video games, engaging in social media, or watching movies will take time from other priorities.

Recommendations

Contemporary culture is replete with new media. These media can be used for good or bad, depending on how the user engages them. Paul assures us that we have freedom in Christ, especially with regard to nonessentials of the faith, but that the abuse of individual freedom can have a detrimental impact on the larger Christian community. When media engagement leads to unvirtuous

habits, either with regard to personal practice or community participation, it is important for Christians to assess their usage carefully. In conclusion, the following recommendations should be considered by followers of Christ.

- First and foremost, Christians should become more aware of their own media engagement, especially regarding the type and amount of media being consumed. Without careful reflection, believers are likely to succumb to unintended negative consequences.
- Ask about the implications of media usage on the Christian community and the larger culture. For example, many youth groups will use video games—even violent first-person-shooter games like Halo—as a way of attracting unchurched teens. It is important to consider how the use of these games, along with massive sound systems, rapidly shifting video images, and heavy electronic communication shape the life and experience of a community.
- Use media to examine and learn about the human condition, with careful consideration of humanity’s relationship to God. Truth can be found in both sacred and secular sources, and all truth gives the opportunity for reflection upon God’s redemptive mission in this world.
- Allow for Christians to have varied media habits and practices. Individual churches tend to be homogeneous regarding practical beliefs and standards of Christian lifestyle, thus, engaging those who believe differently in the same community becomes a difficult challenge reminiscent of Paul’s context. When extending a spirit of grace, followers of Christ will often find themselves in disagreement.

- Begin to discuss standards and practices in corporate environments, especially in the family. Many families do not consider together what might or might not be suitable media engagement. The topic at hand provides a remarkable, even divine opportunity to sit together as a family. Rather than follow a prescribed list of appropriate or inappropriate practices, each family should work hard to articulate their own plan for media usage in a spirit of consensus.

Whatever You Do

In his New Testament letters, Paul often speaks of freedom in Christ. This freedom, however, should never come at the expense of another believer or to the detriment of the believer's own spiritual journey. In today's rapidly changing media culture, Christians are often left dazed and confused, wondering what is right or wrong. Even worse, many believers are indiscriminately engaging in media without critically thinking through what Marshall McLuhan identifies as the medium and the message; both are important to a thorough investigation. It is time for an extensive hermeneutic of media.

As we seek to use media wisely, it is helpful to remember a final instruction Paul gave the Corinthians with regard to meat: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). We would do well to post this verse on every bookshelf, game system, computer screen, and mobile device we own, and then think about how we might do this together as followers of Christ.

NOTES

- ¹ "Media Literacy Clearinghouse," Frank Baker, accessed July 22, 2013, <http://www.frankwbaker.com/mediause.htm> unless otherwise noted.
- ² "Factbrowser," accessed July 22, 2013, <http://www.factbrowser.com/tags/ereader>.
- ³ "Has The Nook Saved Barnes & Noble From Going The Way Of Borders?," Lynn Neary, National Public Radio, accessed February 28, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/2013/02/26/172932960/has-the-nook-saved-barnes-noble-from-going-the-way-of-borders>.
- ⁴ "Video Game Industry Statistics," Infographic List, accessed July 22, 2013, <http://infographiclist.com/2013/02/20/video-game-industry-statistics-infographic-2>.
- ⁵ All scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

- ⁶ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 384.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 479.
- ⁸ Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1982), 64.