

Chapter 1

What Is TV?

Suppose Buck Rogers's little green Martians really existed. And suppose that on a swing through the solar system they chanced to pass near enough to the earth to pick up one of our television programs. Let's suppose they became so fascinated with TV that they watched another program, and another, and another. What impression might they get of us earthlings?

Certainly they would discover what we look like: head, face, arms and legs, hands and feet, men, women and children, shirts and skirts. They would also know that our civilization is highly technological. They would see cars and planes, electric lights, tall buildings with elevators, and some sort of wire mesh sticking over the roof of every home in the land.

But what would they learn about our ideas? Our values? The things we are most interested in?

Perhaps they would think we like to laugh a lot or love a lot or both. If they happened by at five or ten p.m., they might decide we are interested in what is going on in the world. Depending on the program they watched, they would think coyotes were fascinated by roadrunners or that they scarcely pay them any attention at all. Would the Martians think we are basically a law-abiding civilization? Or would they conclude that it takes an immense police force to maintain order? And would they consider the cops or the

TELEVISION AND THE CHRISTIAN HOME

robbers to be the most inhumane in their treatment of other human beings? What would they conclude was most important to us: kindness and courtesy, or power and possession?

A Nigerian who tuned in to an American TV drama said, "I did not realize that Americans valued human life so little."

At the beginning of 1976 nearly 70 million American homes - 97 percent - had at least one working television set. The average home operated a TV six and a half hours each day. Nobody can accuse the TV of failure to put in a full week's work! The average American child watches television three to four hours a day, and one fourth spend more than five hours a day, seven days a week, in front of the set. 1 By the time he starts to school, the average American child has spent more time in front of the TV than a college student spends in the classroom. By the time he graduates from high school, he will have spent more time watching TV than watching his own teacher. Among major activities only sleep and work consume more of the average person's time than television.

The total purchase price of America's combined television sets is more than \$15 billion, with an equal amount invested in repairs. The cost of operating these sets (electricity) runs into millions of dollars each year. American industry spends \$5 billion annually for commercial advertisements and another \$13 billion for program development. 2 America is not getting its television entertainment free!

Where did this fantastic invention come from?

TELEVISION AND THE CHRISTIAN HOME

The basic scanning principle on which TV is based was first proposed about 1880 by W. E. Sawyer in the United States and Maurice Leblanc in France. A German scientist, Paul Nipkow, patented the first proposal for a complete television system in 1884. Boris Rosing, a Russian scientist, was one of the first to create an image on the screen. In 1907 he succeeded in reproducing crude geometric figures. In 1908 the basic principles on which modern television is based were outlined by Campbell-Swinton, a Scottish electrical engineer. An American scientist, Vladimir Zworvkin, developed an electronic tube in 1923 that later became important in the TV camera.

NBC began operating an experimental television station in New York City on July 30, 1930, and CBS followed about a year later. Regular broadcasting service began in Germany in 1935, though the image was very crude. Under the direction of Sir Isaac Shoenberg, Britain established the first high-quality broadcasting system in 1936 - a system that retained its basic features until 1964. Regular commercial broadcasting began in the United States in New York City on April 30, 1939. Production of television sets ceased during World War II, but refinement of the overall system continued, so that rapid expansion was possible when broadcasting resumed in 1946. By 1949 Americans owned one million sets, and that number had jumped to ten million by 1951. There are well over 100 million television sets in the United States today, and the figure worldwide is close to 300 million.

Back in 1900 most people thought Henry Ford's car was a handy substitute for the horse and carriage. But the impact

TELEVISION AND THE CHRISTIAN HOME

of the automobile on American life has gone far beyond replacing wagons. It has been largely responsible for our shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy, from a country society to a nation of city dwellers. Seventy-five years after Ford built the first car, America had all but completed the most massive public works project in history to accommodate his invention: the interstate freeway system. The Conestoga wagon crossed the continent in six months. The car covers the same distance in three to four days of steady freeway driving. America has been welded together by, among other things, the car.

Yet the impact of television has been greater. Little did Nipkow realize the impact his idea would have on America and the world when he patented the first idea for TV in 1884. The car moves the body about the neighborhood or across the nation. Television carries the mind around the world in an instant. The car affects where we go. Television affects what we think. Television controls when we eat and sleep and when (or whether) we study the Bible and go to church. Television has even forced the redesign of several large city water systems to accommodate the huge drain when everyone rushes to the bathroom during prime-time commercial breaks. 3 In 1975 U.S. News and World Report asked 1000 American men and women of distinction what institution they considered to be the most powerful in the nation. Television ranked third - after the White House and the Supreme Court. And a 1974 poll put television in first place. The radio, books, magazines, and newspapers exert a powerful influence on our culture, but TV is unquestionably the greatest single force reflecting and molding attitudes and

TELEVISION AND THE CHRISTIAN HOME

behavior in our society. Yet thirty years ago most Americans had not even seen one! We speak of educational TV as though it were special. All TV is educational. The only question is, What does it teach?

What is TV doing to our society? What is its potential? And how should the Christian relate to these issues? That is what this book is all about.