CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND CALLING IN A .COM WORLD

Frank Sawyer

Purpose

When we think about our identity, perhaps things like family, work, nation, church, or some psychological feelings come to mind. In today’s world identity involves more than our roots; it involves our great latitude of experiences, even if this takes place for many people mainly in front of the t.v. and internet. In this essay we shall listen to a number of comments by sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, and a variety of Christian thinkers who are concerned about the negative influences of the mass media. I assume that parents, teachers, pastors, and Christians in general have a calling to test the spirit of the times, also in relation to the .com influences of today. I hope to illustrate some concerns; at the same time, I hope not to give the impression that the negative forces of the media are the only ones. It turns out that the question of the use or misuse of t.v., videos, DVDs, the internet, and mobile phones is largely our own choice. One type of misuse is when we allow these ‘channels’ to over-dominate our time and even our personality. Another form of misuse is allowing the entertainment world to trivialize our hearts and minds. When we become addicted zappers, jumping from one channel or video or internet site to another without much coherence of purpose, we may be heading for a disintegration of our life.

So there are questions worth asking: what are the apparent or half hidden dangers, and what then is our calling as Christians in a .com world?
GLOBALIZATION OF THE MEDIA AND THE LOSS OF THE SELF

Hans Küng has stated:

Only a few people—of this we can be quite certain—are capable of using the many modern opportunities of information and communication in such a way as to be able to adopt a completely independent, critical attitude in society. And even the most critical and independent person is not guided simply by the norms which he has himself discovered and substantiated by reason. For no one begins at zero. Nor is this only because he is determined by his environment, pre-programmed and driven by instinct. He belongs to a community, to a tradition.¹

I recently read that about a billion people are surfing the www. Well, how many of those surfers are drowning? Probably more than we often realize. But is that the fault of the ‘technological surf’? Technology, it has been said, is a good servant, but an autocratic master. Today, it seems that many people are suffering from ‘techno-stress.’ Machines lead to more efficiency, but they do not return love and friendship the way people do. So if our life is surrounded by machines, we may find some other dimensions shrinking. Technology has solved many problems and increased the power of work, travel, and communication. It has also provided a comfortable environment for the modern world. But we sometimes forget that technology will not solve our ethical problems, nor compensate for the sinfulness of the human heart. Wars, greed, prejudice, theft, and other kinds of human deviance also use technology for their evil ends. Society seems more and more driven by economics and technology, while justice and ethics are often pushed aside. It has been said: “The technical ability to do something is not the same as a moral imperative to do it. …Though scientists may possess the technological ability to be gods, they nevertheless lack the wisdom to act as God.”² Some say that technology and secularization together guarantee the de-personalization and the de-moralization of our modern/postmodern culture.³

At first, radio and television had a predominantly unifying effect because people in the same country would be listening to and viewing the same programs, with little choice. This is, of course, convenient for