

## "CAN YOU TELL ME HOW TO GET OUT OF SESAME STREET?"

By Dr. Paul R. Shockley ©

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"Sesame Street" offers a grocery store, an apartment complex, and even a larger than life friendly bird, but never a church. Until now. The culture has met the only void on the block. Though one might not see Bert, Ernie, Grover, and Elmo sitting in the pews, it won't take very long to recognize the familiar ditties, the attractions for short attention spans, the humor, and the flashy images to perk your interest. Come with me and don't be a grouch now, you just may learn something more important than the sound of the letter "P."

In his thought-provoking 1985 work, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the late Neil Postman contends that the perils of television are infecting us with a growing appetite for nonsensical amusement.<sup>1</sup> Taken in by "dangerous nonsense," we are losing ourselves in amusement, becoming distracted, diverted, and immobilized intellectually, emotionally, and in all spheres of social and political discourse. While thirsting for the trivial, the popular, and the sensational, we have become bored with serious inquiry, analysis, argumentation, and reasoned discourse. Thus, we are losing opportunities, perhaps at an unprecedented rate given the amount of knowledge and social utilities at our digital fingertips, to make our lives count for something great. In fact, Postman writes:

When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversations becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in a short a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act [a variety show], then a nation finds itself at risk; culture death is a clear possibility.<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, Postman is not against technology. In fact, he argues that the solution to the dumbing down of people is not to shut down technology<sup>3</sup>. Instead, he brings to the forefront one fundamental principle: **how we learn is as important as what learn**. In view of the impact of the infusion of amusements in this digital world in which we now live, Postman's social commentary resonates more than ever.

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (New York: Penguin Press, 1985, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 156.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

Unfortunately, and perhaps due to the pervasive fallacy of reductionism, namely, focusing on one area of thought to the neglect of all others, too many churches fail to understand or willfully ignore that how we learn is as important as what we learn. Perhaps the willful ignorance is due to fixed biases by church leadership and/or congregation. But whatever the source is for ignoring this critical insight, the church needs to address their relationship to "Sesame Street" in a proactive and healthy manner.

In his analysis of television education, Postman examines the impact of shows like "Sesame Street." The goal of "Sesame Street" is obvious. He writes, "Its use of cute puppets, celebrities, catchy tunes, and rapid-fire editing was certain to give pleasure to the children and world therefore serve as adequate preparation for their entry into a fun-loving culture."<sup>4</sup> Yet, the very manner in which we learn from shows like "Sesame Street" is undermining the nourishing interplay that is critically needed between the educator, the student, and the setting. Considering the following:

The learning experience is not as nourishing when you are in a private setting away (your den) and not in a place where social interaction takes place;

No interaction with the teacher as compared to settings where interaction with the teacher takes place;

Educational shows demand attention to images and not to the development of language;

Watching TV is an act of choice (you do not have to turn it on) whereas attending school is a legal requirement.

There are no penalties if you do not watch TV versus a setting where attendance is required.

No public decorum is needed versus proper behavior at school.

Moreover, Postman observes, "Whereas in a classroom, fun is never more than a means to an end, on television it is the end in itself."<sup>5</sup>

Postman goes on to acutely observe three commandments that flow from the philosophy of education which television offers. The first commandment is that *no prerequisites are needed*. Postman states:

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 143.

Every television program must be a complete package in itself. No previous knowledge is to be required.... The learner must be allowed to enter at any point without prejudice.... In doing away with the idea of sequence in education, television undermines the idea that sequence and continuity have anything to do with thought itself.<sup>6</sup>

The second commandment that flows from the philosophy of education which television offers is that *no perplexity is allowed*. Postman explains:

This means that there must be nothing that has to be remembered, studied, applied, or worse of all, endured. It is assumed that any information, story, or idea can be immediately accessible, since the contentment, not the growth, of the learner is paramount.<sup>7</sup>

Lastly, the third commandment is the greatest enemy of television-teaching, namely, *the avoidance of serious exposition*. He asserts:

Arguments, discussions, reasons, refutations or any of the traditional instruments of reasoned discourse turn television into radio, or worse, third-rate printed manner. Thus, television-teaching always takes the form of story-telling, conducted through dynamic images and supported by music....

As a result of these three commandments, Postman states, "The name we may properly give to an education without prerequisites, perplexity and exposition is entertainment."<sup>8</sup>

Reflecting upon insights in relation to the activities of dysfunctional, unhealthy churches, I have come to the conclusion that many of our churches suffer similar problems: *No prerequisites are needed; perplexity is avoided; serious thinking is neglected*.

For example, there is one type of church that seeks to entertain the masses without an intentional and effective way to assimilate them into serious inquiry, thinking, and reflection about Christian life, practice, and thought in such a way that they make their lives count for something great, namely, thinking like and living like Jesus Christ in all spheres of daily living. While the worship services may be memorable with all of its flash, sensations, and antics, they fail to qualitatively feed the whole person, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually, in order that they may consistently habitually live out a biblical worldview. While attention may be arrested, no demand is made to actively interact in the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 148-149.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 148.

worship service. Thus, like sitting before a TV show, the audience is in a passive state, absorbing, but not growing. Saturated with what might be good and well-meaning, this type of church has failed to offer what is best. They trivialized the time slot that was given to them and did not seize each moment, living for that which matters most. They did not take advantage to learn from the past, integrate thought and life, and use resources in such a way that lifts up what it truly means to be a committed disciple of Jesus Christ. In sum, this type of church has become "Sesame Street." Their distinctiveness and impact is lost for they have become a puppet of culture, imitating the trivialities they see elsewhere.

On the other hand, there are other unhealthy churches who fail to realize that they too are on "Sesame Street." Refusing to acknowledge the ever-changing cultural context in which they are imbedded, these churches only offer truth through mediums of the past. Unfortunately, the church's leadership fails to recognize that these mediums for which truth is proclaimed are relics, viewed as ineffective by those who walk down "Sesame Street." But they keep on playing the 8-tracks, using the reel-to-reel films while glorying in the past while declining or even snubbing what is before them in the present. As a result of refusing to seize the opportunity to meet people where they are, like the apostle Paul did on Mars Hill, these churches are ignored by the masses. Why? The manner in which they offer truth is uninteresting, uninviting, and disconnected from where people are. Coupled with bombastic, dogmatic, elitist, and ungracious attitudes by some of these blind churches, those who live on "Sesame Street" see no reason to step through the church doors.

While spinning their wheels in the absence of fresh creativity, the blind church's programming is all the same. No changes. No anticipation. No vision. The blind church settles for only a restatement of what they believe, expressed in the "rutted" manner of which they are familiar. Thus, championing the routine, the hum-drum, they no longer demand prerequisites. See, everything is already anticipated. There is no ongoing sequence, no development, and no tension for they choose to isolate themselves from active engagement from culture that may be identified as "Sesame Street." In sum, the routine governs activity, thought, and life. *A result, no ongoing need for prerequisites are necessary.*

Instead of engaging an ever-changing culture, which generates perplexity, the blind church on "Sesame Street" only seek to do what has been done before. As a result of their love for familiarity, qualitative growth is stunted. Why? They are only interested in the restatement of what they have learned and in the manner in which they learned it. As a result, *there is no perplexity because the content is all together familiar.*

Now, some people that live, move, and have their becoming in the blind church, assert themselves from a position of wanting to hear a restatement of biblical truth to a position of judging to determine whether what we have learned will be said the same way. For example, some choose to listen to the sermon to determine if it measures up to previous teaching rather than finding areas in their own lives that can be challenged or changed for God's glory.

Lastly, because these churches seek to only state what they already know, there are no fresh arguments, analyses, and reasoned discourse. Excitement and passion is displaced by the familiar. Absent are fresh ideas and activities in reaching an ever-changing culture. The excitement and passion that is generated by engaging the changes that surround them are displaced. See, the blind church chooses blindness by not understanding the nature and ways of "Sesame Street." They do not seriously seek to meet these occupants where they are and earnestly bring them where they need to be. As a result, what the blind church offers is amusement cloaked in the routine. Therefore, what accompanies a lack of change is a lack of critical thinking because it is in working out problems in the present experience that generate serious inquiries, analyses, and discussions.

In conclusion, the irony is that *while* these two types of churches, that is, the church that mirrors "Sesame Street" and the church that is blind to "Sesame Street," are polarized from each other in their activities, *they both suffer from the same maladies: no prerequisites, no perplexity, and no exposition.*

Consider the fact that the audiences in both churches are in a passive position of learning. They sit and observe. Sadly, this passive position diminishes the potential impact they could make both inside and outside of the church. Why? Nothing is demanded from them; they are reduced to becoming a spectator rather than an active participant. Malnourishment and brittle bones become commonplace.

But these two types of churches not only lose opportunities to offer nourishing and meaningful interactions with those who walk to and fro on "Sesame Street," they also lose their effectiveness. How? Both churches fail to ask something great from us in relation to all the changes that continually occur in culture and what the God of the Bible demands from us. Because no qualitative growth finds expression, the church doors, whether it is the church that reflects "Sesame Street" or is blind to "Sesame Street," revolve with people wanting to move to another street. Or perhaps, they just choose to spend their time elsewhere, where more aesthetic, enriching, and fulfilling activities find expression.

Nevertheless, they leave the place that was originally designed to best address their greatest needs.

Refuse to live for the trivial and be immobilized by the routine. Though many in our culture have been raised on "Sesame Street," as those who belong to the Father of creativity, we can surely think of engaging ways to stretch minds, grows hearts, and deepen souls while not becoming a puppet on "Sesame Street." Although "Sesame Street" was a nice place to hang out for a while, most of us were glad for the opportunity to move on. Similarly, those who are occupied with the trivial *and* the mundane, will relish in opportunities to dynamically grow, experience a new depth of faith, and anticipate new horizons.

~ Paul R. Shockley, PhD