



The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

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OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

The Unreality of “Reality TV”

A Statement from The Office of the President
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(St. Louis—February 20, 2001)—The other day I heard someone talking about the influence of television on our culture and in our society. They said, “If a person were to come into my house, sit on my couch and start using the kind of language that we hear on television, and talking about the kinds of things we see portrayed or discussed on television, I would show him the door. So, if this is true, why is it that night after night Christian families across our country allow an uninvited guest into their house that does this very thing?” I thought that was a striking way of illustrating the challenge we all face when it comes to that ever-present house guest: the television set.

Recently, we have noticed TV take one more step down with “Reality TV.” Shows that feature couples being tempted to commit adultery, shows that feature crime and violence, and shows that feature perverted behaviors, and twisted and troubled family relationships are shown—all in the name of “entertainment.” But how “real” are these shows?

The problem with “Reality TV” is that it is not nearly real enough. Because it operates with a distorted philosophy of what reality is, TV keeps missing out on the possibilities of realism. “Survivor” has its contestants scheming against each other in a survival-of-the fittest test that leaves only one person standing. But human history shows us that real survival depends on people cooperating, helping and supporting one another.

“Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?” had the surface glitter and glamour of modern-day romance, combined with the pragmatic, “realistic” motive of marrying for money. But real marriage involves responsibility, depths of involvement, intimacy and commitment that what was simply another TV beauty pageant could never produce, something the contestants soon realized.

“Temptation Island” claimed to be a test of relationships by putting couples into situations where each partner was tempted by another man or woman. It turned out, to the disappointment of the producers, that in the end, the couples pretty much decided to stay together after all. They recognized that genuine relationships have to be based on more than good looks and TV-style glamour.

“Temptation Island” though, does illustrate something about the problem with today’s entertainment industry. The issue goes far beyond mere portrayals of sex and violence. The issue is temptation.

When we entertain ourselves with fantasies about adultery, or greed, or hate or murder—fantasies manufactured and sold by a billion-dollar industry—we are harming ourselves morally and spiritually. Even if we never act on those fantasies, the damage is done. Jesus tells us that adulteries and murders that happen only “in the heart” can be just as deadly to our moral condition (Matt. 5:21-28).

Such fantasies can harden our hearts, dull our sensitivities to other people, make us shallow, and deaden our souls, as we are slowly pulled away from God’s vision and will for us as His children. Given human nature, temptation is indeed very entertaining. Just as the couples on “Temptation Island” had to forgive each other in order for their relationship to continue, we too constantly need the forgiving love of God. This is the way God makes us survivors! Indeed, in Christ our Savior, we have the forgiveness, mercy, peace, joy, love, hope and comfort we need to face true reality.