

"Evangelicals, Television, and American Society in the 1950s"
Excerpts from Edward J. Carnell, *Television: Master or Servant?* (1950)

1. "Television is compounded with the freedom of man. . . . This ability of freedom, however, can be either a blessing or a bane, depending upon the moral nature of the one directing it. A free man has power to create, and he has power to destroy. Skilled creation represents the outside possibilities of man's *positive* freedom, as illustrated in the creative work of libraries, hospitals, cultures, art, science, worship. Vitriolic destruction is the *negative* threat of freedom, the power to kill, maim, dynamite, torture, corrode. In a free man's hand a shimmering blade can slice bread to nourish the infant, or it can be plunged into the little one's heart. . . . Television lies within the pincers of these alternatives: It can propagate the good or it can herald the bad. All turns on what a free man elects to do." 15

2. "The crucial, core-problem of television is neither the instrument itself nor its technological might, but rather the hands and hearts of him or owns and controls video. The crucial problem, therefore, is one of *ethics*. . . . In no meaningful sense, thus, can we say that the TV set itself is our problem. Our problem is, was, and shall be, *man*." 16-17

3. "All of society is comprised of the citizenry of these two cities, [the children of light and the children of darkness]. This is the profoundest reason why television will inevitably remain a mixed offering. Children of light are bound to labor side by side with the children of darkness in the production, direction, and maintenance of the new medium. . . . From mixture only mixture can come. It would be unrealistic to believe that TV will be either all good or all bad. The children of light will remain the salt of television, preserving TV from corruption and spoilage; while the children of darkness will tend to be a gravitational force in video for its secularization. As long as the collision of the two cities continues within society, each group will incline to complement the other, canceling out a consistent turn in television for either pure righteousness or pure unrighteousness. Both those who throw a halo over television, thinking that nothing but good will come from it, on the one hand, and those who decry it as an unalloyed voice of unrighteousness, on the other, fail to recognize the ubiquity and inevitability of the category of mixture in nature and society." 21-22

4. "Nothing is more characteristic of this "aspirin age" than that fear and unrest which characterizes a people whose technological insights has outrun their moral strength." 24

5. "In the light of the desperation of the modern scene, the mixture of television protrudes in bold relief. . . . Television may become a medium for the endless increase of human happiness and security. This is our hope. But it may fall into the hands of those who will use it as a further means to exploit sinful potentialities in man. This is our fear. Between the tensions of fear and hope we must tack, relaxing neither alternative at any point." 25

6. "Inasmuch as TV has placed the warfare of the two cities in the parlor, to be a direct influence on all, the time needed to mold the minds of the masses of men has been made frightfully short. Whereas it formerly required years to propagandize a nation, the task may now be accomplished almost overnight. America's anxiety over the atom bomb and biological warfare, violent and

lethal as such powers may be, must not blind it to the Trojan-horse threats of television. Thus, with every hopeful promise of TV there rides, like poliomyelitis germs on the dawning of a mid-summer's day, the crippling virus of evil." 25

7. "One of the most serious challenges that television has to meet is that of keeping men entertained with wholesome programs. And there is little doubt but what this side of video's schedule will be well padded. . . . However, before one leaps to hasty conclusions about either the caliber or the worthwhileness of television's entertainment programs, he had best be cautious not to underestimate the responsibility of the new medium to keep men laughing. Man is a laughing animal, and unless he smiles now and then he will dry up inside and die." 29

8. "All men ought to laugh heartily now and then. Collective humanity -- righteous and unrighteous alike -- crave the pleasures of the picnic, wedding, songs with old friends, a walk in the park. The dichotomy of either serving or not serving God is not even in question here. The point is that whether one serves God or the devil, he still is a human being, and as a human being he needs the placating and soothing release of fun and relaxation." 32

9. "At this point the children of light must guard against another premature censure [of television]. While it is true that television, by giving man *some* comfort, might contribute to the blinding of man to the more *ultimate* satisfactions in Christ, the Christian can not for this reason support the indefensible attitude that the natural man should be kept in poverty and grief until he finally solves his problem in Christ. . . . By being kind to a perverse and wicked generation, rather than lordly, censorious, or faultfinding, the Christian will win that respect from the non-Christian which must be cultivated before the latter will hear and heed the gospel message." 35-36

10. "The rule of Christian living is as follows: 'Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.' (I Cor. 10:31) A healthy-minded Christian will evaluate television as part of the mixed order of the world's light and darkness, being careful to remove the good from the new medium, using it to the glory of God, while rejecting the unclean. . . . Nothing is clearer than the fact that God did not intend the world to be a bed of nettles for man. It is sin, and sin alone, which has entered a good universe to distort and corrupt its perfection. The thorns and thistles came as a result of God's pronouncements against sin and sinners. The Lord ordained harmony for man. Sin disturbed it. Yet, the pleasures of this world are still abundant and God-sanctioned. What would existence be like without joy? Without the pleasures of love, friendship, rest? The Lord has not decreed that man's way should be one of grief and travail. A television age forms no exception. . . . Should the children of light spurn the positive and wholesome in television in the name of fidelity to eternal values, they will only exhibit their ingratitude for what God has done." 45

11. "Video is the first effective invention which can economically and dramatically juxtapose the nations intimately one with another, so that international understanding, by the crisscrossing of cultural patterns, is made theoretically easier. . . . Television, if geared into international networks, can systematize the relations between continents. If it can succeed in making the

customs of one nation the common knowledge of all other nations, it will assist greatly in the breakdown of narrow, unhealthy loyalties. If a person can only experience a thing long enough, often enough, foreign overtones will vanish and in its place a warm familiarity and understanding will germinate." 58

12. "In its ideal powers TV may break down pride by introducing into the life of the individual some of the problems of others. Here -- where human beings live and move and have their being - - is where a real tug on the hearts of men can be begun."

13. "The sum of the matter is this: Television, by removing man from the narrow field of self-defined interests, is capable of teaching what it means to be fully man. If the quickest entrance to life's tragedies comes through the eyes, and if video has united sight with sound, then one can rightfully require the medium to discharge its responsibility to teach men to cry as well as laugh. Ideally directed, TV can move man out of his sinful isolation and place him face to face with the world outside where the barbed and thorny human drama is being played." 65

14. "If one will only grant the point that television has powers and that these powers can be used for the good, he will grasp at once the endless ways in which the new medium's potentialities can be exploited." 67

15. "Whatever ancillary role TV may play in formal, institutionalized education, its undisputed value still lies in the education of the multitudes of the people, those who revolt from the mere thought of a bookish education. . . . Now, it is . . . 'John Q. Public,' who, obtaining his education from the university of life, will do much of his graduate work perched in front of a television set. . . . But what he does not want to submit to is a formal, bookish method of training. He cannot sit still long enough for that. He cannot keep his mind on abstractions. His education has to be one without texts, assignments, tuition, examinations. His education must be dramatic, colorful, and painless. . . . Television is the perfect professor to the masses." 80

16. "Television is the advertiser's dreams. TV is, in fact, a *sales*, rather than just an advertising medium. It combines the virtues of the movies, radio, house-to-house calling, and the billboard. . . . Human nature is such that people will rebel when they have the faintest inkling that they are being forced into action. Television will not as much as softly rap at the door. The advertiser will suddenly appear at the end of a newscast to announce pleasantly the virtues of the product he is trying to sell. Telecommercials will, when they come to maturity, be laid out on that same entertaining level as the thrilling teledrama which precedes them. . . . One may not care about smoking, yet he cannot but be impressed with the ingenuity of the Lucky Strike cartoon with its battalion of ani

mated, marching cigarettes. By studying such ingenuity one can begin to realize what the art of advertising, given some real thought in preparation, is capable of performing in TV. Television is a subtle sales medium, indeed. The masses of the people, whether they drink or not, will find their front room jammed, with beer salesmen vying with one another to tell fifty-five reasons why one's

tastes will be so much more satisfied with one brand rather than another. Powers for good are also powers for bad!" 82

17. "Television arrests man in his solitude. Thus TV, while it may threaten to convert every home into a theater, can also turn every parlor into a church. . . . Whether it will become a theater or a church depends once again on both the skill and the morality of those controlling the medium. Religious telecasters therefore must be courageous, remembering that by overtaking man in his solitude TV enjoys an access into hearts which the organized church does not. Many, whose self-pride might otherwise prevent them from entering a church, may eventually find God through television." 89

18. "Whoever among the children of light wishes to capture the imagination of the viewers must prepare to vie with all of the dramatic wealth, talent, wonder, and ingenuity that Broadway and Hollywood can collectively combine." 91

19. "Religious telecasting will either be good entertainment or it will die a natural death. Nervous fingers will quickly replace a dull, Christian telecast by a less sublime, but more entertaining, feature." 97

20. "In the early days of television a young Southern California minister, while making a pastoral call on one of his church families, was not a little embarrassed upon his arrival to find the entire family, not in meditation or rest, but huddled before their gleaming new television set, avidly watching a full-length Hollywood movie. The incident was all the more distressing because they were the very persons who some weeks before had made the pious boast of never having gone to a movie in their life. . . . Whereas formerly a man could close out the world when he shut the door of his home, now the world with its good and evil, marches right into the living room and boldly takes its place beside the family hearth. The furniture in the home is being rearranged to make room for the television set. The invasion of the world into both the homes and the hearts of men has been incredibly accelerated in an age of television." 108

21. "The interpretation of TV, like that of life itself, is a delicate and complex assignment. There is no simple answer to the TV problem. Video is no either/or. It is a both/and. It is both good and bad, both to be praised and to be challenged. If life has complexity and mixture studding it everywhere, it is no surprise to learn that television, which boasts of being a mirror of life, also carries along with it an attending good and evil." 108-109

22. "Of the several ways in which television may be a destructive force of the manners and morals of our culture, none rises to such disturbing heights as that of threatened secularization. By this is meant that video may make a generation of bread eaters out of us. . . . The things of flesh may be dressed so alluringly and kept so accessible, that a chronic televiewer, deluded into thinking that many *may* live by bread alone, will sell out his divine sonship in favor of the baseness of animality. No more lethal force in TV could be conceived than this efficiency to blind men to both their kinship with God and their responsibility to live by the word proceeding out of His mouth. The

efficiency of television to mirror the world in the home may swallow up any abiding concern in man to be devoted to the things of God. . . . Television may repeat, night after night, week in and week out, with the tireless rhythm of the sea, that man is most fully man, not when he is lined up to the precepts of God's word, but when he is taking his ease with bread. TV's appeal is cunning. It is as subtle as any temptation. It does not ask man to kill or steal; it only commands that stones be made into bread. Like trickles of water seeping through small fissures in a dike, television's pressure upon the heart of man may force its way through remaining resistance, until at last its power is so relentless that all opposition crumbles before it. If the children of light spend Sunday afternoons looking at Hollywood movies over television, what place will the children of darkness give to bread? . . . In television, then, 'bread and circuses' will be glorified far beyond any point ancient Rome could boast. . . . Television's error is infinitely more subtle than such overt corruption [as drunkenness, nudity, gambling, etc.]. It does not wear its heresy on its sleeve. Its sin is covert. The trouble with TV, as with the rest of the entertainment world, is that its *whole* emphasis, its *basic* philosophy, makes no room for Jesus Christ. All problems are happily solved without any serious reference to His cross. Life can successfully be met without the slightest petition of grace." 113-115

23. "TV officials thus far show little concern for the predicament of modern man. While the world totters on the brink of chaos, television programs merrily beam bread-entertainment to the world, just as if all is well and peaceful. With a persistence matched only by the egress and regress of the tides, video gluts the air waves with ball games, puppet shows, water carnivals, circuses, ancient films, comedians with a hundred gimmicks, jugglers, wrestling burlesquers, acrobatic dancers, card players, and a dump truck full of other balms to soothe man into believing that he is able to know life's fullness by bread alone. It is almost incredible that such a mass frivolity could be condoned when our civilization seems to have a prophecy of doom written over it. It is just a plain lie that man can have peace without reference to God." 117

24. "Curiously enough, television, which has a responsibility to entertain men, bids fair to be so efficient in its assignment that initiative in man may be choked to death. The more television does man's entertaining for him, the less he is bound to do for himself. Even the simple interruption of a telephone call -- be it from one's pastor or the local butcher shop -- is a resentment to an avid televisioner who is having others do his thinking for him. TV may make lazy men even lazier. . . . If television does everything for a man, it will become increasingly unlikely that the individual will stir up any self-activity himself. The more he has his thinking done for him by another, the less he will be interested in doing any himself. Once again television has the opportunity of creating either an enlightened proletariat or molding a mass mind to respond to the dictator's whims." 123-125

25. "When television programs are beamed in full color . . . the resistance of the viewers to snap off the set will shrink immeasurably. . . . If multitudes of people lessen their vocational pursuits, reading and writing, watching telecasts in black and white, who will excel in personal initiative when video is beamed lavishly in full color?" 129

26. "By its voracious appetite to gobble up every spare moment, the work of taking time to be holy will now be exceedingly complex. It may encourage viewers to forfeit their privileges of prayer and fellowship with God by jamming their time with entertainment. But with a private movie screen in the living room, anxious to light up during the hours of the night, it will not be easy to set aside a time for prayer and Bible reading in the home. . . . [The children of light] ought at once to reconcile themselves to the speed and restlessness of the age, therefore, determining that they will take time to be holy, regardless of what others may do. Unless the children of light are going to risk having their fellowship with God endangered, they must periodically bring their speeding life to a grinding halt. Time must be taken to be holy. Holiness will not come automatically. Trivialities can rob even the enlightened of fellowship with their Redeemer." 131

27. "Television, with its best eye on the Sunday multitudes, is bound to put its finest foot forward that day. Video will be a new menace to righteousness if it schedules telecasts designed to woo away the Sunday night church attendant from spiritual faithfulness. The children of light must take caution." 134.

28. "One of the favorite devices of both the legitimate theater and the movies has always been that of modeling 'blazing beauties' for the lustful eye of the public. Hollywood has long encouraged 'leg art' among its starlets to keep the industry lush with funds. That is bad enough. But when a *public* medium gives provisional signs of resorting to the same unworthy method of retaining economic security, the very moral standards of the nation stand challenged. . . . In evaluating TV's potentialities to contribute to the moral delinquency in the land, however, one must be cautious and realistic, taking pains neither to exaggerate nor minimize the actual situation as it is." 138

29. "If keeping oneself free from deliberate exposure to new temptations was difficult prior to the television age, how much more will it be now that the world itself is catapulted into the living room. Television will greatly step up the problems of Christian sanctification. With the world in the front room of the home, it will require new skill to be *in* but not *of* the world." 147

30. "The children of light are citizens of this beloved land, and they ought not to rest until they have done their best to ease the nation into the television age with a minimum of friction or casualty. In any interaction, however, it ought to be remembered that the positive should be pressed home first. If the commendatory and the praiseworthy are not made the stronger witness, the children of light will soon be called censorious and carping. If this reputation is ever gained, then even the wholesome contributions that the children of light might finally make will be disrespected."

31. "As a result of having electronically wedded sound and sight, the simple censorship solutions adapted in radio will hardly cover video's new complexity. TV is a speaking medium. Yet it is more. It is an animated screen. This accounts for the fundamental difference between it and radio. . . . Whereas words [on radio] are easily measured, a picture refuses to be classified in any

simple, objective way. All men recognize swearing when they hear it. But when can one say that a glance or gesture is suggestive? When is a posture immoral? When does dress become immodest?" 159

32. "The children of light would make a regrettable mistake if, sensing the dark side of television's threat to the manners and morals of the nation, they concluded that passive resistance ought to characterize their attitude. . . . Every effort should be made for an organized effort in interpreting television's trends. . . . Power should be corralled first on the level of local initiative. Those among the children of light whose eyes have been opened to the promises and the threats of video ought to assume the leadership of local committees for discussion of the topic. . . . After local groups are organized, a national committee might be appointed. . . . The creed [of this committee] ought to contain the faith of the members that, being aware of the pledges and threats of the new medium, they will devote themselves to the work of making the good of the medium triumph over its threatened evil. A suitable name for the club might be the *Teleleague*. . . . The best of Christian talent ought to be combined with the warmest of Christian enthusiasm. . . . The *Teleleague* must never become a new form of power politics, a sort of 'righteous lobby' by which demands of the children of light are squeezed through the powers that be. *Teleleaguers* ought to resort only to good argument, based on calmly reasoned facts." 164

33. "This, then, is by far the greatest menace that television can become in the home: By being a perfect excuse for overactiveness, the medium may encourage such an excessive preoccupation with trivialities that vigilance in kingdom matters may be choked off. The threats of television to contribute to the moral delinquency of the child rank far behind this danger. The (average) child can be corrupted only after delinquency has first overtaken the parents themselves." 180

34. "[This] book was penned to nettle people into critical thought, not make them peaceful. . . . No final gesture is here made to harmonize the diverse data which make up TV's complexion. Rather, an effort is only put forth to stir up the critical faculties of two types of readers: *First*, pessimists who see nothing but evil in video. Looking at the medium through perfectionist glasses, such individuals feel justified in washing their hands of the entire matter. Against this type of mind, positive arguments in the defense of television have been detailed. *Second*, chronic optimists who, viewing video through rose-colored glasses, perceive nothing but good in the medium. This species of mind refuses to interact with the threats of TV. Against such an oversimplification, reasons why video has evil in it have been suggested. Both pessimist and optimist must recall the universality of the category of mixture." 192-193

35. "In video matters, therefore, the children of light must be skilled. Since TV will remain a mixture of good and evil until the end of time, the righteous must dig in for a long struggle. But regardless how extended the conflict may be or how wide a front the enemy has opened up, the children of light must never forfeit the dignity of their offices of prophet, priest, and king. As prophet, they are to interpret video for Christ's glory. As priest, they are to dedicate the medium to Him. And as king they are to rule over it for His glory." 194

36. "After the set is installed in the home, it would not be out of order to prove that television is your servant and not your master, by planning a short service of dedication. This should be done with care. Pray for God's care and protection. In the act of dedication one publicly declares an ownership transfer of his property to the Lord. Children ought to be Christ conscious when they

turn on the TV set. Jesus is near them -- nearer than father or mother. To please Him, one must neither see nor hear evil." 187