


A Christian Guide to Reality TV

Last week, I wrote about entertainment in the context of the city of Rome and admitted to being as much an entertainment addict as most people (maybe more), but I didn't discuss my particular weakness, so-called Reality Shows. Now, my favorite reality show is a Braves baseball game or a major golf tournament, but I have to admit I enjoy some of "unscripted dramas" that have filled the airways since the success of original *Survivor* (Palau Tiga) in 2000. Reality shows aren't really new, nor is their often-exploitive nature. Is anybody else out there old enough to remember *Queen for a Day*?

Experiencing withdrawal after the nearly concurrent conclusion of *The Amazing Race* (my favorite), *Survivor: Palau*, and *The Apprentice*, I started thinking about what the Bible might have to say about such shows. Admittedly, this is more than a little different than my usual fare, but everybody needs a little variety now & then!



 This Emmy-winning CBS show is essentially a competitive travelogue featuring 11 teams of two racing around the world, visiting notable landmarks and performing indigenous tasks.

Biblical corollaries:

"Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified" (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

"Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:1-2).

The Christian walk really is an amazing race, one that everyone can "win," and the prize for simply finishing is worth a lot more than the \$1,000,000 the winners of *The Amazing Race* receive!



The granddaddy of current reality shows, up to 20 competitors are abandoned (if you don't count the cameramen and the rest of the CBS production crew) at a remote, exotic location where they compete in both team and individual competitions designed loosely around the

cultural locale. Each week, they vote off one of their fellow competitors, sometimes the weakest or most obnoxious (evangelical Christians usually go early), but later in the competition, often the strongest, who represent a threat. Staying "under the radar" has become a major strategy for *Survivor* contestants.

Biblical advice:

"So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Romans 8:12-13).

"I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:12).

Paul would have no problem dealing with the physical deprivation of *Survivor*, but he wouldn't stay under the radar and would be eliminated in the first or second week after confronting the lazy (1 Timothy 5:8), the contentious (Titus 3:10), and the immoral (1 Corinthians 5:13). Is it possible that too many of us Christians view Christianity as a game of *Survivor*—just punching our ticket in a [This World is Not My Home](#) attitude rather than trying to make positive changes in our world?



On the Fox hit, thousands audition for one of 12 spots in the final group. Each week, contestants perform a song chosen from a specified theme. Viewers vote through a phone-in or text message system that undoubtedly enriches Cingular, and the contestant garnering the fewest votes is sent packing. The winner receives a recording contract and the opportunity to be handled by the music business.

Biblical response:

"Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols...So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, 'Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things" (Acts 17:16, 22-25).

It was nice to see two relatively simple, unaffected young people, Carrie Underwood and Bo Bice, who seem to value God and family and were not obsessed with winning, emerge as this season's *American Idol* finalists. Here's hoping Carrie can provide an anecdote for Britney Spears!



Thirty or so single people vie for the attention of a bachelor or bachelorette in a series of individual or group dates on this ABC show. The last one standing may get a proposal. To my knowledge, only one of these pairings has resulted in marriage.

Biblical advice:

"But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (1 Corinthians 7:8-9).

Does a match made under these conditions have any chance of surviving? Competing suitors living together in a mansion, expensive fantasy dates in the kind of exotic locations most of us will never even see, impulsive decisions based on minimal contact? When *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* gets down to the final few, they are offered the "opportunity" to spend a night together in some opulent suite bathed in candlelight. The women, at least, who display a modicum of moral fiber and turn this down are summarily eliminated.

The idea of being able to hand-pick from 30 beautiful, talented women may seem like every man's dream (or vice versa), but the show has shown the scenario to have a distinctly nightmarish quality. God may or may not have an ideal mate for each of us, but s/he certainly isn't revealed the way *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* does it!



Donald Trump's vehicle on NBC for displaying his enormous ego and roping in corporate sponsors features 16 aspiring young professionals competing as teams in tasks ostensibly related to "real world" business challenges. The eventual winner gets hired for a year at a \$250,000 salary.

A biblical observation:

"A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. It is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher, and the slave like his master" (Matthew 10:24-25)

Will the world be a better place if Kendra Todd (the latest *Apprentice* winner) becomes like Donald Trump?



On this CBS show, a group of 12 or so people, apparently chosen for their stupidity, sexuality, or abrasiveness, are locked up together in a "house" for several weeks. In some convoluted process, one "resident" is kicked out each week and the winner gets a lot of money, which they'll need for the therapy as this experience.

Biblical thought:

"For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:50).

The show's name comes, of course, from the George Orwell's classic 1949 novel, *1984*, where "Big Brother" is always watching you. *1984* is the grim story of the totalitarian state of Oceania, controlled by the "Party" and maintained by the "Thought Police," who track down, re-educate, and punish those rebellious to the state. Too much of Christianity portrays God as a spiritual "Big Brother" and the church as the divinely-appointed "Thought Police." Indeed, the Inquisition was certainly that kind of institution, and there are those today who feel justified and self-appointed in passing judgment over the world, but as I wrote in [ET&N 24 \(Immorality\)](#), it is role of Christians to introduce Christ to the lost, not to condemn them.



From the MTV website: "This is the true story of seven strangers, picked to live in a house and have their lives taped, and find out what happens when people stop being polite and start getting REAL. The Real World!"

Biblical truth:

"...our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12)

This is the real world!



On this ABC show, a group of 12 or so people, apparently chosen for their stupidity, sexuality, or abrasiveness, compete in various tasks at interesting locales to build up the bank of prize money, but one of them is a "plant" whose job is to sabotage the tasks without being detected. Each week, the contestants try to identify the mole and somebody leaves for some reason I don't know.

The biblical "Mole":

"But one whom you forgive anything, I forgive also; for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, I did it for your sakes in the presence of Christ, so that no advantage would be taken of us by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes" (2 Corinthians 2:10-11).

One of the serious questions I have (but which I am content not to understand) is "Why did God create Satan?" He certainly acts secretly to sabotage any attempts at righteousness by men and women, but we are all-too-often ignorant of his schemes. One of the great victories Satan has accomplished in the modern world is to convince the bulk of humanity that he does not exist or that he's just gotten bad press. The Mole of the TV show can cost contestants lots of cash, but the spiritual Mole can cost us a lot more.

Paul affirms the reality of dark forces in the world (Ephesians 6:12), but he also offers the assurance *"that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 8:38-39).



A bunch of twenty somethings, apparently chosen for their stupidity, sexuality, or abrasiveness, hit the road in an RV, completing tasks along the way to big bucks. I guess that some people come and go on this MTV show, but I don't know why.

Biblical rules:

"Jesus replied and said, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him,

he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.' Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?' And he said, 'The one who showed mercy toward him.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Go and do the same'" (Luke 10: 30-37).

Biblical road events:

Much of Jesus' ministry was spent on the road and, in addition to the memorable story of the "Good Samaritan," roads were a significant setting for other events before and after the Resurrection:

- When Jesus road into Jerusalem at the beginning of His final week, people spread coats and branches on the road before Him, an honor reserved for a king or a prince (Matthew 21:8; Mark 11:8; Luke 19:36).
- After appearing the [Mary Magdalene](#), Jesus appeared to Cleopas and a nother disciple on the road to Emmaus. The women had reported the empty tomb, and some of the men had gone and confirmed the disappearance of Jesus' body, but none of them believed. After first causing the men on the road to Emmaus not to recognize Him, He revealed Himself, and explained the events through Scripture (Luke 24: 13-35).
- Probably the most important single event after Jesus' Ascension also occurred on a road—the appearance of Jesus to Saul (Paul) on the Damascus Road (Acts 9: 1-9).



Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie wear as few clothes as possible in experiencing the lives of people they can ridicule for actually earning a living. The point of this Fox show...is there one other than wearing as few clothes as possible?

The biblical version:

"...make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).



A group of six people or couples, apparently chosen for their stupidity, physical features, or bravado, compete in a series of three allegedly fear-inducing tasks (but one usually involves eating something so bizarre God didn't even bother to include it in Leviticus). After each task, one or more contestants are eliminated, and the winner of the final event on this NBC show receives a measly \$50,000 in compensation for national humiliation.

A biblical response:

"For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him" (Romans 8: 15-17).

What is there to fear when, as Paul wrote, "If God is for us, who is against us" (Romans 8:31b)? On the other hand, I don't think Jesus was thinking about *Fear Factor* when He said, "*It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man*" (Matthew 15:11).



Similar to ABC's *The Bachelor/Bachelorette*, Fox adds the endearing twist that the winning suitor is forced to choose between the person s/he has been trying to seduce for weeks and a barrel of money. Most people seem to choose the money, and those who don't get dumped quickly.

Biblical response (this one's too obvious):

"No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Luke 16:13).

One of the most pernicious perversions of the Bible lies in the so-called "Gospel of Prosperity," which is usually expounded by television evangelists (an example of unreality TV) using Malachi 3:10 - "'Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this,' says the LORD of hosts, 'if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows.'" The all-too-common interpretation of this passage is that those who open up their pocketbooks will receive back many times what they give. Ignoring that the tithe refers to agricultural products to be brought to the communal storehouse (not the Temple), just what does that interpretation teach unsuspecting Christians? Give so you can get! It's bad enough when the appeal is to wealthy Americans, but it is reprehensible when this lie is foisted upon the helplessly poor (such as a recent [CBN broadcast into Zambia](#), where the average annual income is \$320). Just as poorer Americans tend to buy a disproportionate share of Powerball tickets, the "Gospel of Prosperity" is most likely to strike an emotional chord with the poor—"Here it is, Lord. Now whisk me out of my poverty."

Sorry, I was trying to have some fun with this issue—didn't mean to get preachy! Last comment then—the people who beg for more money so they can build more ostentatious studios, more fancy clothes, more wigs and make-up, more, more, more are trying to serve God and money—can't be done. Peddling the word of God (see 2 Corinthians 2:17) and fleecing the flock with a grotesque misrepresentation does far more harm to the Kingdom than doing nothing at all!



Expert appraisers set up in large city convention halls where people bring in the lamps, furniture, documents, pottery or other junk their reclusive Aunt Millie left them, hoping to discover that it's a priceless treasure. Viewers are flabbergasted to learn what some people will pay for dirty old stuff.

A biblical response:

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21).

While PBS's *Antiques Roadshow* usually features the most valuable items, both for their rarity and condition, occasionally the show presents an object lesson with a segment on something whose value has been destroyed by its condition, perhaps cracked, chipped, rusty, or moth-eaten but ironically, often by a cleaning that removes the natural patina that builds up over time. The furniture twins, Leslie and Lee Keno, can get positively giddy over old dirty on a chair leg and distraught over its removal. Similarly, God loves us as we are, and no amount of superficial cleaning on our part makes us any more worthy of God's acceptance. It is in turning ourselves completely over to Him that we become justified.



I have no idea what the details of this Fox show are, and since it's on Fox, I don't think I want to know, but the title makes a nice set-up for:

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16) and "We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16).

How close do you suppose *Anything for Love* contestants would come to **that** standard?



People (usually women) with physical and psychological shortcomings are transformed through the miracle of modern science into the prevailing concept of beauty at costs which must run well into six figures. The more successful (and redeeming) ABC spin-off, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, features a team of builders and designers renovating or reconstructing the homes of families who have experienced substantial misfortune.

The biblical version:

"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin" (Romans 6:1-7).

Now **THAT'S** an extreme makeover!!

Discussion

No discussion, really, although several readers expressed a similar sentiment, wondering how I had enough time to watch so many of those shows, so I must confess. I don't watch all those shows. In fact, other than an occasional surf-through, I haven't seen most of them. I do watch *The Amazing Race* (CBS), which is easily the best of the lot and worthy of its Emmy with its interesting venues. I do wish CBS would spend a little more time allowing viewers to get an appreciation of

the cultures. I also watch *Survivor* (CBS)—a guilty pleasure, probably because I like competitions and the interpersonal machinations are sometimes fascinating even when they are clearly exaggerated by the producers. My wife and I enjoy watching *American Idol* together. Lastly, I have watched *The Apprentice*, although I will avoid the upcoming Martha Stewart version, and after last season, I may skip Donald Trump's next installment.

Admittedly, it may be self-justification, but I think we can all use a little mindless entertainment from time to time, even if it has nothing whatsoever to do with our real purpose here. So if the two subscribers who said I was wasting God's time want to think that, it's fine; but I'll continue to mix business, family, and personal time, while trying to do what I can to understand God better and serve Him more.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, [post a message](#) so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Hot Spots, Double Helixes and the Crab Nebula

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