

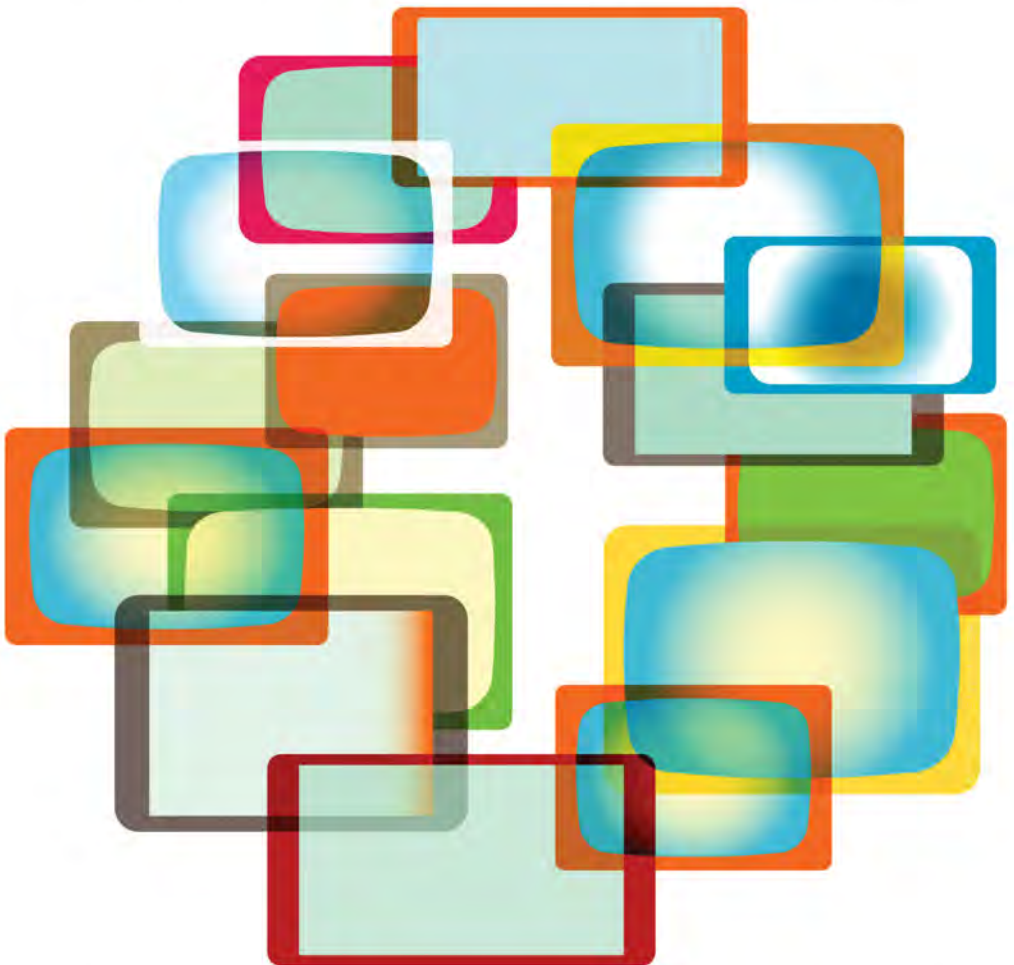
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contents

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction: Turning Us On 1

1. The Pilot Episode: What Is TV? 19
 2. Becoming TV Literate: Formal Analysis 37
 3. Becoming TV Literate: Process and Practice 63
 4. The *Telos* of TV 87
 5. A Very Brief History of the Church and TV 109
 6. Channeling Theology: TV and God's Wider Presence 137
 7. Ethics: Is There Anything Good on TV? 163
- Conclusion: The Season Finale: To Be Continued 195

Appendix: Theology from TV 215

Glossary of TV Terms 237

Notes 241

Index 265

acknowledgments

“Theological experts must unite their best insights with those of professional script writers.”¹ Edward J. Carnell penned these words in 1950, long before TV became the cultural force that it is today. But in a very real sense, this book—written nearly sixty-five years later—takes his suggestion to heart. Without knowing exactly what we were getting ourselves into, Dean Batali and I (one of us a professional TV writer and the other a professional theologian) agreed to collaborate on a project exploring the theological significance of television for the contemporary world. What emerged from our countless conversations over coffee (what else?) is a final product that neither of us would have entirely anticipated when we began. As with any real dialogue, we did not always agree with each other, and sometimes our disagreements seemed intractable. But at the end of the day, our ongoing and often animated dialogue helped to produce something far more interesting and, indeed, life-giving than anything we could have created on our own. (At one point we thought we should publish the transcripts of our conversations!) So while it is often said that no book is written alone, in this case it is literally true. Although I (Kutter) wrote the bulk of what follows, every word was birthed from the kind of interaction that I think Carnell envisioned years ago—a process in which the best of my theological insights were sharpened and deepened by Dean’s insights into TV storytelling and the TV industry. As a result, whatever we have done here that is worthwhile is the result of Dean’s contributions. But any and all of the book’s faults are of my own making. I am thankful for both his partnership and his commitment to the hard work of collaboration, but even more so for the friendship that has resulted from our time together.

Matt Aughtry joined us at an early stage in the process, serving as both sounding board and de facto consultant regarding the direction our project was heading. In addition to putting up with two fast-talking loudmouths, he

fastidiously recorded the aforementioned transcripts of our numerous coffee conversations. We are incredibly thankful for his assistance, even when all we could do was pay him with coffee and pastries for his hard work. Matt also served as the teaching assistant for the Theology and TV class at Fuller Theological Seminary that I first offered in spring 2015. The students in that class read early drafts of the manuscript and offered helpful and challenging feedback. The book is a result of conversations with those students as much as it is a product of the conversations between Dean and me.

Rob Johnston and William Dyrness, the general editors for this series, offered us much-needed insight, wisdom, and encouragement along the way. They also happen to be two theologians whose work has left an indelible mark on my own understanding of theology and culture. Their influence on this work cannot be overstated.

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Finally, I (Kutter) also want to thank the women in my life who willingly endure extended periods of time in which their father or husband is either writing, thinking about writing, or planning on thinking about writing. My three

viii ——— acknowledgments

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daughters are growing up in a world where they are surrounded by screens of every kind, accessible at every moment. In many ways, this book is about the world we are envisioning for them. Likewise, my wife and I have always shared a fondness for TV and film stories. But as our little tribe has grown, we have discovered the beauty of domestic life, which means that our viewing habits have shifted from film to television, the location of our screenings from the theater to the living room. It is in this shared domestic space, accompanied by these four beautiful women (Jessica, Callie, Mattie, and Maeve), that something as simple as a TV show can become imbued with a meaning beyond meaning. As with all my work, this book is dedicated to them.

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introduction

turning us on

Season 1: Episode 1, “Pilot”

The scene opens in complete DARKNESS.

A single, four-letter word emerges from the background. The stark, all uppercase font slowly comes into focus. It reads:

LOST.

A cacophonous SOUND rises from the silence. It is more of a semi-structured noise than instrumentation per se—the relentless chaos of nature being held at bay, but always on the verge of breaking free of its sonic constraints. The text is continually moving, unmoored from the center of the screen. It twists and turns, slowly shifting to the foreground until it swallows us whole. Down the rabbit hole we go.

SMASH CUT TO:

An extreme close-up of an EYE. The eyelid OPENS to reveal a dilating pupil. First there is sight; then there is seeing. Consciousness arrives. The frame widens. The owner of the eye is wearing a suit and a tie. He is bleeding from the head. He is lying on the floor of a jungle—out of place, disoriented, and alone. Muffled sounds slowly transform into piercing screams.

The man rises to his feet, staggers, and then regains his balance. He finds his footing and begins to run. The dense trees and undergrowth fade into a blur as he races toward the sound of those crying out for help. He emerges from the forest and onto a BEACH.

He stops dead in his tracks.

Crystal-blue waves are lapping at the shore. The sand is white and untouched—serene even. The camera slowly moves along the shore of the beach, in tandem with the man’s gaze. What comes into view is jarring given this picturesque tableau.

The man sees nothing but CHAOS.

The fiery wreckage of an airplane is scattered along the beach. Dead and wounded PASSENGERS are strewn about the debris. Survivors are hysterical, barely aware of themselves or others.

The man begins to assess the situation and treat the wounded. (That he is a doctor becomes evident as he administers CPR, dresses wounds, and assists a woman who is in labor.) He instructs one young man to watch over the laboring woman so that he can help someone else escape the still-exploding rubble. As the doctor turns to help another nameless stranger, the young man calls out: “Hey! What’s your name?”

The man replies: “Jack.”

Flash forward to March 2014. A Boeing 777 with 239 passengers on board disappears en route to Beijing from Kuala Lumpur. Days turn into weeks as the search goes on, and what soon enters the public conversation about this real-life human mystery is . . . a TV show. More specifically, the prime-time TV drama *Lost* becomes almost immediately bound up with the tragic events as they unfold. Among others, newscasters, internet message boards, and daytime talk show hosts reference the popular TV series as a way of making sense of the nonsensical. Indeed, in the wake of the Flight 370 disappearance, the similarities are nearly impossible to avoid. At an event featuring the head writers from *Lost* that takes place a few days after the airplane’s



ABC/Photofest 2004 ABC, INC.

Matthew Fox as Dr. Jack Shephard in ABC’s *Lost*

2 — watching tv religiously

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disappearance, the moderator pointedly instructs the audience not to bring up the Malaysian flight because of concerns that it would be “in poor taste.” But it is clear that everyone in the audience is already thinking about the numerous connections between this fictional narrative and these real-world events. Perhaps more important, it is also clear that a serialized television program has captured the public’s imagination.

Looking back, it is perhaps unsurprising that *Lost* was able to provide a common vocabulary for people to speak of something that simply could not be. After all, everyone knows that planes don’t just vanish.¹ But much like it did on *Lost*, a giant hunk of carbon fiber and aluminum alloy had seemingly evaporated into thin air. As a result, the stories about the survivors of *Lost*’s Oceanic Flight 815 provided a well of resources for weaving the incomplete and sparse data from Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 into a more meaningful whole. Of all things, it was a television show that functioned as the interpretive framework through which individuals accepted and understood these events. Apparently, scientific protocols and sophisticated technologies were simply not enough, for they could neither explain away the ambiguities of the situation nor satisfy the public’s collective desire for these random and muddled events to mean something more. Instead, what allowed something meaningful to emerge—some coherence in the midst of chaos—was TV.

The actual disappearance of Malaysian Flight 370 was tragic. Families were left in limbo regarding the fate of their loved ones. China alone lost 152 citizens. But the cultural conversation that surrounded this tragedy was revealing in its own right, for it gave concrete expression to two important facets of the contemporary cultural imagination that will serve as core operating assumptions for this book. First, our collective ignorance regarding the technologies that we depend upon to live, work, and travel has carved out a space for the return of the mysterious and the mystical in the modern world.² Although modern culture is markedly disenchanted in some important respects, contemporary persons are increasingly open to a spiritually saturated world—one brimming with enchantment. This broad interest in spirituality may have started with shows like *The X-Files*, but it is now reflected in numerous television series such as *Supernatural*, *True Detective*, *Fringe*, and *The Walking Dead*, which, in addition to *Lost*, are all concerned with the mysterious, the fantastic, the unexplained, the undead, and even the religious.

Second, and equally important, the ways in which television shows like *Lost* function in our daily lives serve as a reminder that human beings are meaning-making creatures through and through. By “meaning-making” we do not simply mean “belief” or “intellection.” Instead, we are describing something far more dynamic and holistic. So here and throughout the book, we will be

using the term “meaning-making” to reference the world-making capacity of television—its ability to evoke or elicit an understanding of the world that is rooted as much in our affections as it is in our intellect. Put differently, we are concerned with *how* TV means as much as *what* TV means, and this kind of “meaning” is both broader and more integrated into the fabric of our everyday existence than purely cognitivist approaches recognize.

Given that humans are constantly caught up in this dynamic process of making sense of our life and the world, it is all the more significant that one of the primary ways in which we forge a meaning-filled life is through storytelling. In fact, some have even defined “culture” itself as “the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.”³ Because stories give shape, direction, and purpose to otherwise diverse and unrelated data, we are always in the process of locating the discrete events of our lives in a larger narrative framework. In other words, just like every culture that has preceded it, modern culture too has a mythic shape. Its deep structures of meaning cannot be accessed or understood apart from its core narratives. And if the dialogue surrounding Flight 370 and *Lost* is any indication, it is television that has emerged as the dominant storytelling medium of early twenty-first-century culture. It is both our preferred and most pervasive means for telling ourselves stories—about ourselves.

A Theology of Television

According to *New York Times* columnist Caryn James, “Anyone who does not watch television cannot possibly understand mainstream American culture. . . . We live in a vast, messy society, and television mirrors who we are in all our contradictions, complexities and uncertainties.”⁴ We couldn’t agree more. At first blush, this claim regarding the cultural prominence of television might strike some as a bit of an overstatement—or simply out of touch with the realities of our shifting media landscape. A book about television is surely a day late and a dollar short. After all, didn’t the arrival of the internet effectively announce the end of TV as we know it? It’s simply common knowledge that, when it comes to the real movers and shakers in contemporary culture, television cannot hold a candle to Web 2.0. So why commit so much energy to a cultural artifact that is quickly headed toward extinction? Besides, who even owns a TV anymore, much less watches it?

These critical voices are not completely unfounded. Times have certainly changed, and so too have the media we consume. The world does not look like it did in 1964, or 1994, or even 2004. The days of *I Love Lucy* and *The Dick*

4 ——— watching tv religiously

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Van Dyke Show, *Saved by the Bell* and *Friends* are now distant memories. And in an important sense, this book is an exploration of how much things really have changed and why those changes matter.

But let's get one thing clear from the very start: "Television" as we have come to know it is far from dead. If anything, it is more significant than ever, and increasingly so. Rather than being a medium in decline, television is entering a time of incredible expansion and proliferation—a "golden age" even. Of course, the technology that audiences use to watch TV changes almost daily, but the simple fact remains that more TV programming is produced and consumed now than ever before. And there is no indication that things will be slowing down any time soon. Indeed, the increase in consumer demand has even brought about a shift in the medium of choice for culture's most talented storytellers. Increasingly, aspiring TV creators now start their careers by making movies in the hopes that they might ink a deal with a TV network that will allow them to explore long-form, episodic storytelling.⁵ In this strange new world, movies now function as "calling cards" because, when compared with the creative possibilities of TV, the medium of film is thought to be rigid and constraining.

What is more, as the demand for the quantity of television has increased, so too has the demand for the *quality* of TV. In an age of content overload, it isn't that viewers are less interested in television. Instead, viewers are simply far less willing to invest time and energy in trite, poorly written, or aesthetically deficient stories.⁶ These changing viewer practices, along with shifts in technology and the proliferation of channels, have created the necessary conditions for the emergence of a highly complex and elaborate new form of storytelling on TV. This unique narrational mode is what TV scholar Jason Mittell calls "complex TV," and has become especially prominent in the first two decades of the twenty-first century.⁷ What this means is that audiences no longer tune in simply because "nothing else is on"; instead their programs of choice must meet certain aesthetic criteria that allow these complex stories to be integrated into the larger fabric of their lives. In other words, both TV production and TV consumption *mean* something to contemporary persons. And we want to suggest that this televisual meaning-making is both different and more central to contemporary life than it has ever been before.

In order to come to a fuller understanding of all this meaning-making activity, the pages that follow offer an exploration of the theological significance of the medium of TV and the contemporary practice of TV watching. By approaching TV in this way, we hope to achieve three interrelated goals. The first goal is to outline a set of analytical tools for engaging critically with television so that everyday viewers might understand and appreciate more fully the power

and meaning of TV (we present these critical tools in chapters 2, 3, and 4). Second, we aim to introduce the reader to a process of theological reflection that seeks to articulate something of the presence and activity of God in this televisual world of ours (chapters 5 and 6). This process begins with a particular cultural product (e.g., a TV show like *Lost*) and the practices it fosters (e.g., fan conversations on *Lostpedia*) and places those into conversation with the biblical witness and the Christian tradition. The emphasis here is on lived theology—the ways in which our numerous and sometimes conflicting faith commitments find concrete expression in our daily lives. Bill Dyrness describes this approach to theological reflection in a helpful and elegant way. He suggests that theology is a matter of seeking to “develop theological categories, given to us by Scripture and tradition, in conversation with the contemporary cultural situation. It assumes that whether this is recognized or not, all living theology grows in this way.”⁸

Following directly from our first two goals, the third and ultimate goal is to develop a theology of television that allows for both celebration and critique of the medium (chapter 7 and the conclusion). It should be noted that celebrating TV from a theological perspective is more than a matter of affirming overt depictions of religion that align with some abstract and predetermined notion of orthodoxy. Beyond the explicitly religious, we are even more interested in the implicit theology embedded in television programs and, by extension, the inchoate spirituality expressed in and through TV narratives and the audience’s TV viewing habits. We are concerned with identifying the core impulses that compel modern persons to orient their lives around television and to derive significance from it. Thus, what distinguishes this book from others in the fields of media studies or cultural anthropology is our ultimate aim to connect the broader cultural practice of TV viewing to the presence and movement of God in the world.

Along similar lines, we are also concerned with the ways in which television is already functioning “theologically.” Television has the capacity to confront audiences with questions and concerns that, although diffuse and ill defined, are nevertheless theological to their core. As Robert Johnston puts it, “Conversation about God—what we have traditionally called theology—is increasingly found outside the church as well as within it.”⁹ This book will argue that these exchanges are regularly happening both on TV and among TV viewers. Our hope is to chart a path for Christians to join this theological conversation in ways that are as constructive as they are life-giving.

Of course, this kind of theological project will also need to address television content that is overtly religious. Some TV narratives traffic in explicitly religious symbols, images, and themes. In doing so, they articulate certain

6 ——— watching tv religiously

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conceptions of religious persons, communities, practices, and even the divine (e.g., *Joan of Arcadia*, *The Book of Daniel*, *The Simpsons*). In some instances, the explicit “theology of TV” is entirely superficial—a kind of clichéd or conventional shorthand used to evoke either laughter or a vague sense of institutionalism gone wrong. Yet other programs that feature overtly religious content move beyond generic conventions and actually offer affirming and sympathetic takes on religion and religious persons (e.g., *7th Heaven*, *Touched by an Angel*). Because these explicit religious representations are not our primary focus, we have included an appendix at the end of the book for readers who want to explore further television’s overt theology. However, it is important to note here that even when TV deals directly with faith, religion, and spirituality, it cannot be assumed that its theological significance is either straightforward or simple, and a theology that seeks to celebrate what is good and true and beautiful about television must be able to account for this inherent complexity.

Thus, by “celebrate,” we do not mean an uncritical embrace of all things cultural. Rather, we simply want to affirm those places where the Spirit of God is already present and active in culture, attuning our eyes and ears in a way that will allow us to discern how the people of God might collaborate with God’s ongoing project in the world. We will return to this topic later, but it is enough for now to say that God has a tendency to speak in some of the most unexpected places and in unpredictable ways. Just ask Balaam (Num. 22) or Moses (Exod. 3). This is often an unsettling reality for those who prefer closed and static theological paradigms, but it is a basic assumption of this book that the God of Christian theology is in fact a God whose Spirit “blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going” (John 3:8). We would like to suggest that, in and through certain television stories and even certain viewing practices, God may very well be present and active in contemporary culture, and this activity bears a striking similarity to the ways in which the Spirit once animated an angel-avoiding donkey and a rather enflamed bush.

Celebrating an overwhelmingly populist (and fiercely popular) medium like TV is not incredibly common, if for no other reason than the societal effects of TV have been called into question almost from the moment of the technology’s inception. Some readers might even assume that our theological critiques are ready-made, as if the ill effects of TV are so obvious that we can simply list them as a matter of course. Television is nothing more than mindless entertainment that encourages passivity and inactivity, promotes violence and sexuality, and peddles soda and sugary cereal to already hyperactive children. Or so the story goes. But we want to turn these assumptions on their heads and suggest that

the critiques that are most often leveled against television are in many cases blinding us from seeing what really matters.

We need a new vision and a new critical paradigm for assessing the ethics of television. So consumed are the many “watchdog” groups with depictions of sex, violence, and language that they have often missed the point. More important are questions concerning TV’s pervasive presence within the home and its tendency to segment our viewing habits. Selective TV viewing allows individuals, whether by choice or by accident, to envision a world bereft of diversity—one where everyone looks, talks, and behaves exactly like we do. And in an increasingly globalized and pluralistic context that is filled with intertribal violence between “us” and “them,” these kinds of homogenous visions have a great deal of destructive potential. Thus, when it comes to developing a theology of both celebration and critique, we are not interested in content analysis alone. Content matters, but a purely social-scientific approach to televisual meaning-making fails to take story seriously enough, much less imagination and ritual. So in distinction to many who have come before us, our constructive theological critique will be just as concerned with the overarching meaning of television narratives—its stories—and the profoundly formative nature of television viewing.

Trace Not Text

Another distinguishing characteristic of the present volume is that we are operating out of a framework more closely aligned with what might be called televisual aesthetics or philosophical aesthetics than with TV or media studies.¹⁰ Although our descriptions and analyses will be in conversation with TV and media studies along the way, we will emphasize TV creators and TV viewers more than media theory. Part of the reason for this emphasis is that we are approaching TV primarily in terms of its artistry, which means that we are interested in the complex web of relationships that develop between TV creators, TV audiences, and TV “texts.” The necessity of putting scare quotes around the word “text” is emblematic of the degree to which we depart from a pure media studies approach. “Text” is a slippery word, especially when it comes to an audience’s concrete, on-the-ground experience of TV. It is commonly used to refer to the individual television program or series that is under consideration, in part because no one has identified a better option. But whatever TV may actually be, viewers surely do not encounter it as a “text.” It is an irreducibly audiovisual experience that is qualitatively different from our engagement with texts such as novels, newspapers, magazines, or even webpages.

Still, there is a common thread that connects our concrete experiences with our critical analysis and our theological engagement. That unifying thread is the television program itself. However, we prefer the term “trace” instead of “text” to describe this common thread because it more accurately reflects the complex, dynamic, and ever-accruing form of meaning-making that takes place in our interaction with audiovisual media (which also include film, web videos, etc.).¹¹ Regardless of whether one’s critical focus is on an individual episode, season, or even series, TV is consumed in a variety of settings, delivered through numerous media, and in some cases watched repeatedly. To suggest that audiences are engaging with a static “text” is not only to underplay the ways in which television programs are basically multidimensional in form but also to overlook how individual episodes are never exactly the same “text” the second or third time they are seen. Indeed, prior to the proliferation of home recording devices, TV “texts” literally disappeared after they were aired, leaving nothing but a “trace” behind. The trace element of those broadcasts only became available to the public years later when reruns of syndicated shows began to underwrite the network TV business as a whole.

Even though nearly every series in television history is now available at the click of a mouse, TV programs still leave something significant behind long after the screen goes dark. Whether it assumes the form of nostalgia, water-cooler dialogue, a fleeting memory, or a critical insight, the **trace** of a TV show is present to viewers even in its absence. The notion of a “text,” however, privileges a certain kind of interpretation that hinges almost exclusively on the reading of literal texts and the writing of more texts in response. It also pictures both the artwork itself and the process of understanding art as something that is fundamentally inert rather than interactive and interpersonal. A text is fully autonomous. It is an object—an artifact even. A trace, however, is interdependent and intersubjective. In this way, the concept of “trace” embodies our concern with viewer response. Its very existence depends upon the viewer’s active engagement with and embodied response to the piece of art.

Also, the concept of a TV “trace” allows us to see that every “performance” (i.e., every screening, streaming, or broadcast) of a television narrative provides yet another occasion for the ever-evolving and ongoing work of meaning-making. Yet in order to assess these numerous performances, much less make any sense of them, we need to be able to analyze what it is that brings them all together—that common object of inquiry more commonly known as a “TV show.” It is for this reason that we dedicate chapters 2, 3, and 4 to outlining a basic set of analytical tools for interpreting and understanding various kinds of TV “traces.”

But Why TV?

All told, we hope to demonstrate the usefulness of an engaged, participatory, exploratory, and observational approach to television and television watching. Because we are all wholly implicated in the object of our study, we cannot operate as detached observers of some distinct cultural phenomenon. Neither can we separate our theological project from the larger cultural “matrix of meanings” in which we live and move and have our being.¹² It is not incidental that this larger cultural matrix is one in which television has become a major cultural force. We include ourselves among those whose imaginations have been fundamentally shaped by the prominence of TV in our lives. And we are not alone. Indeed, the reach and influence of television almost cannot be overstated. Since its inception, television has simply captured the cultural imagination, especially in North America. Outside of working, sleeping, and eating, watching television is *the* primary preoccupation of most Americans. Individuals consume on average between four and five hours of television on a daily basis, a number that only increases when online streaming and consumption on mobile devices are taken into consideration.¹³ Even in the face of radical technological change, television has adapted, continuing to exert a tremendous influence on the lives of contemporary persons. It is at once an emerging technology, a contemporary art form, a global industry, and a portal for our ritual lives. In other words, it is one of the centerpieces of life in Western culture, both reflecting and giving shape to the cultural landscape of the twenty-first century.

To be sure, TV’s influence has to do in part with its ubiquity, but it is television’s pervasive presence in the home that makes it a particularly significant artifact. In the span of only seventy years, television technology and programming completely transformed (and continue to transform) our habits and preferences, in large part because they situated TV as a permanent fixture of the modern household. More than being simply another appliance, TV quickly became the hub around which we oriented all our domestic life. With the proliferation of mobile devices and streaming services, television is now reorienting not only our habits but also our very notion of domestic space, in some cases collapsing the divisions between our public and private lives. The screens have simply moved from the corners of our living rooms, to the walls where art once lived, to the palms of our hands. Thus, to understand television is to understand more than a medium. Rather, it is to understand something of the contemporary imagination—the primary interpretive lens through which modern persons make sense of their lives and the world.

Given the degree to which TV is so fully embedded in the broader cultural context, it seems almost superfluous to state that people of faith—in particular

the Christian faith—ought to develop the necessary skills for engaging television. Yet pastors, theologians, and lay Christian leaders have paid very little attention to developing critical methods or interpretive frameworks that would enable religious communities to thoughtfully and faithfully engage TV. And this is to say nothing of how television might provide the context for constructive theological conversations or considerations of how God might be present and active in and through the medium. Of course, some might balk at the very idea that TV has any larger meaning or theological substance, especially those whose viewing habits do not fall into the “five-hour-per-day” category or who have written off television as at best frivolous and at worst destructive. Yet even for those who have never hosted a *Big Love* viewing party or a *Glee* sing-along or a *Scandal*-fest, TV still matters. It does not simply “reflect” or “affect” culture (although it does both of these things). Television is culture creating. And it is this culture—one mediated by television—that the community of faith is called not only to understand but also to engage with wisdom, wit, and clarity. In other words, a thoughtful engagement with TV is as much about mission as it is about meaning.

In addition to this external dynamic, a theological engagement with TV has internal benefits as well, whether one is an avid TV watcher or not. For those who do have favorite shows (or even guilty pleasures), TV often serves as an important resource for our spiritual lives. Our vision of who we are, the world in which we live, and sometimes even God, can be expanded in and through TV watching. Rather than dismiss these moments of insight and, indeed, revelation, we want to consider the ways in which TV can be spiritually enlightening and energizing for people of faith.

There is also a great need within the (Protestant) Christian tradition to reconsider the value and purpose of narratives, especially as it concerns the narratives we consider authoritative for our life and faith. By developing a deeper understanding and appreciation of TV storytelling (or any excellent storytelling for that matter), we are able to approach the biblical story in ways that we might have never considered. In this respect, TV stories actually provide a framework by which we might imaginatively reengage the biblical narrative, thus allowing the story of God to find a home in the deep recesses of our hearts and minds.

Indeed, we might even go so far as to say that the biblical authors would have made good television executives. That they are already well known as storytellers is evident in the first words of the biblical witness, “In the beginning,” which is like a theological version of “Once upon a time.” But the stories that are recorded in the Bible can also be looked at in a more episodic way—lives and events (one might even call them “episodes”) that sometimes span years and expand to multiple generations (today’s television networks call those “seasons”). The

person of David cannot be fully understood unless one looks at his whole life. If all we know of him is that he won a certain battle, or wrote a certain psalm, or had an affair with a certain woman, or slew a certain foe, we get a limited picture of who he was. But just as one cannot know Jack Bauer from sharing only one hour of his twenty-four-hour day, the life of David has to be seen as a whole—a “series”—that reveals who this “character” is.

Similarly, the lives of Daniel, Joseph, Ruth, Solomon, and Mary Magdalene—all their stories are not just one story. They are a series of many episodes that add up to something larger in the same way that a TV series can add up to a sum that is much more complicated and compelling than its parts. If a television series needs to be evaluated as such, so too does the biblical story. While certain moments hold special significance—the exodus of Israel or the death and resurrection of Jesus are obvious examples—the whole scope of God’s story cannot be reduced to just one episode. At the same time, neither are individual episodes meaningful only as a part of something bigger. They have a narrative integrity of their own, which calls for a form of analysis that recognizes the significance of their unique contributions.

The point of the matter is this: the very nature of storytelling on television calls for a new level of dialogue. It demands a different kind of analysis and more thoughtful response from those who are at the forefront of cultural engagement. The reconciliation that happens over twenty-two minutes in a sitcom, the healing that happens in less than an hour on a medical show, and the justice that is enacted before the end of the episode on a police drama (not to mention the character arcs that are intrinsic to the life of a series) all contribute to the ways in which television functions meaningfully in the contemporary world. Television’s significance is more than a matter of what is being said. It also involves how it is being said. The radically different, network-specific ways in which news organizations narrate the same current events is proof enough that how a story is told is equally as important as what the story is about. That the structure, format, limits, strengths, style, length, and—perhaps even most important—viewing methods of television all contribute to its power and meaning may seem obvious, but it has rarely been examined from a theological perspective, and it is our intent to do so with this book.

A Method to the Madness of *Mad Men*

The basic approach toward cultural engagement that we will model is dialogical—conversational even. We seek to place contemporary television into a mutually enriching, two-way dialogue with theology. By engaging in this

two-way conversation, we hope to develop a deeper and richer understanding of not only TV but also our theological frameworks and language. Following Rob Johnston and Bill Dyrness, the coeditors of this *Engaging Culture* series, who have laid important groundwork for developing a constructive theology of culture, we describe the theological task as dialogical because it “seeks to bring together in faithful obedience the telling of our stories and the hearing of God’s story.”¹⁴

The telling of our stories involves thoughtful exploration of our concrete experiences (as both individuals and as a community), and the various cultural expressions that reflect and shape the broader culture in which we live (in this case, TV). Hearing God’s story is about placing these human experiences into conversation with a few key sources—namely, the biblical witness, the historical theological tradition, and one’s worshipping community. The Bible remains the central authoritative source for theology, but our ability to access the truth of the biblical text is mediated by these other sources (i.e., personal experience, culture, theological tradition, and religious community). Indeed, biblical truth is itself dialogical. It emerges as an authoritative source for faith and practice only when our stories find life and purpose within this larger, more expansive narrative. Thus, as Johnston puts it, “We read the authoritative biblical text from out of a worshipping community, in light of centuries of Christian thought and practice, as people embedded in a particular culture, who have a unique set of experiences. Here is the theological process.”¹⁵

As with any critical methodology, there is no set procedure or recipe that, if only we could follow it meticulously enough, will somehow guarantee the production of orthodox theological formulations. Instead, our theological method functions as a framework for collaborative creativity, a set of related terms and critical questions that allow a community of interpreters not only to describe but also to see reality with greater clarity.¹⁶ To be sure, as an active participant in this conversational to and fro, theology will eventually offer a response to television and the world it creates. But prior to articulating any sort of response, it is important to cultivate our instincts in such a way that our primary impulse is to listen rather than speak, to set aside our own agendas and presuppositions for the sake of honoring our conversation partners.

Some would challenge this notion from the very start, claiming that it is simply impossible to approach a cultural artifact without a ready-made set of assumptions that shape and, in some ways, actually determine our understanding.¹⁷ In terms of purely analytic categories, these critics are certainly not wrong. Our preconceptions, which create the very conditions for our understanding, do “color” and to a certain degree even “limit” our awareness of the world. However, if we frame all meaning-making in this way, we run the

risk of abstracting a process that, on a concrete level, is actually quite active, intentional, and relational. It is to suggest that our awareness of the world (our “worldview” as some would call it) is static and singular rather than a dynamic and multifaceted engagement with lived experience. It creates a false and unhelpful dichotomy that fails to recognize our active agency in the process and, perhaps more problematically, positions the other as fundamentally *unknowable*. It forces us to take up and even defend a position not unlike that of *Mad Men*’s Don Draper—holding fast to a perspective of the world that is not only skewed by his privileged location but is also tone-deaf and violently indifferent toward those with a different outlook.

What is more, by claiming that we can only ever come to the conversation presupposition-full, these critics make the mistake of conceiving of our unique “lenses” as hurdles rather than opportunities. It is true that we see the world through tinted glasses or, as the apostle Paul put it, “through a glass, darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12 KJV). We are, after all, enculturated beings whose understanding is always shaped by the particularities of our located-ness. But it is also true that clarity does not come by resigning ourselves to the misguided notion that we have no other option but to judge the other according to the dictates of our own limited vision. Rather, clarity is something that emerges when we allow another set of lenses to augment our vision—when we willingly enter into a dynamic process in which we “try on” other ways of seeing the world. This is a fundamentally others-oriented posture, for it recognizes that each of our visions is incomplete and inadequate on its own. We need the other not simply to see but to see well, and it is only through a convergence of perspectives that we are able to gain insight into the possibilities that our world presents.¹⁸

Another helpful way to conceive of this dialogical approach toward theological method is to think of it in terms of a relational model. Anyone who has ever participated in an actual conversation with another human being knows that, while we each bring to the table questions and concerns that are shaped by our prehistories, a dialogue (as opposed to a monologue or a diatribe) can only take place when both parties open themselves up to the other in order to receive from that person new ways of being in the world. In order not only to see and hear but to truly understand each other, we must consciously choose to put the concerns of the other before our own. And just as it is with people, so it is with television and other works of art.

We can say more though. This approach, which recognizes that theology has something to learn from and receive from culture, is in fact motivated by our theological commitments. We might even say that, when we talk about listening and setting aside our presuppositions, what we are really talking about is the development of Christian character. This process will of course never

be perfect, but if it is to be a truly Christian theology, then the practice itself must assume a Christian shape, which means that it must enact and embody kindness, hospitality, generosity, and openness toward the other in our midst. In other words, it is about cultivating friendships.¹⁹ And if the community of faith hopes to respond to our increasingly complex world in a way that is both faithful and makes sense to late-modern persons, it must be willing to enter into this kind of ongoing, constructive engagement.

While this conscious shift toward hospitality and nurturing friendship is theologically motivated, it is also rooted in a more realistic assessment of our contemporary context. Not only is the Christian narrative merely one of a multitude of other viable options, but the Christian community is no longer in the position of cultural authority that it once was (or that it once believed itself to be) while operating in the context of Christendom. This is not to decry or bemoan the situation; it is simply to describe it accurately. But it is important to do so because knowing the location from which we speak changes everything—not just what we say or how we say it, but whether we dare say anything at all.

So Much TV, So Little Time

All of this is of course easier said than done, especially as we consider the sheer volume of television programming that exists.²⁰ Combining programs from the past seven decades with current and future shows, which are produced at an increasingly rapid rate and distributed through numerous portals, the landscape of contemporary TV is at best daunting and at worst impossible to navigate. Adding to the challenge of in-depth analysis is the fact that a single successful series can run for more than one hundred hours of programming. Where do we even begin? And how do we go about choosing which shows to consider and which to ignore? Do we discuss shows that we simply “like” or those that have received critical attention? Do we listen to the “masses” by focusing on highly rated broadcasts, or do we glean from the insights of passionate fans, recognizing that some of the highest-quality programming does not always garner the best Nielsen ratings?

Our selection process does not reflect an attempt to be comprehensive, as there are many shows we do not mention that might support or contradict our analyses. Neither have we set aside our own aesthetic judgments and preferences in the process. For the most part, the shows we have chosen to engage are those that we also happen to appreciate and enjoy, a methodological decision that is actually in line with other scholarship in the field of TV studies.²¹ And it is for this very reason that we have created a collection of supplemental

web resources. We want others to employ the critical tools we develop in the book in order to analyze shows that they deem to be culturally significant and theologically rich.

So at the outset, we want to acknowledge the inherent limitations of any endeavor of this sort. There is simply too much ground to cover in a single volume. At the same time, there is also a need to establish some reasonable criteria for our selection process so that, at the very least, we have a starting point for future discussion and consideration. For the sake of consistency and utility, the selection criteria we have established run parallel to the analytical categories we outline in ensuing chapters (i.e., form, process, practice)—modes of analysis aimed at helping us understand the power and meaning of television and TV viewing. Thus, the shows we consider exhibit certain qualities that TV creators themselves value (process), characteristics that justify their inclusion on the Writer Guild’s list of “101 Best-Written TV Series.” They also contain formal elements that have prompted both professional and self-described critics to describe them as excellent (form), a designation that can be found by consulting the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) website. However, because one of our goals is to understand the ways in which audiences discover and construct meaning through their daily TV viewing habits, we also include those shows that—for any number of reasons—have generated some of the larger measurable audiences in TV history (practice), information that is collected and collated by the Nielsen Company.

That being said, it will also be helpful to pause at times in order to consider those shows that don’t fit into any of these categories and to ask what it is that distinguishes them from our primary collection. Again, while we must leave it to the reader and to the broader scholarly community to decide if these criteria are helpful or in need of further refinement, they serve as the starting point for our discussion.

Truth be told, determining which shows to engage in theological dialogue is simply one step in a much larger process of discerning when and where God is present and active in the medium of television. Our broader aim is to identify and affirm those moments when a contemporary cultural product like TV might actually provide an occasion for people to encounter the divine Spirit in their everyday lives, perhaps even prompting them to engage in the dangerous act of loving their neighbor.²² We also seek to reconfigure our own notions of who God is based upon this inspired activity, recognizing that the Spirit often speaks to the people of God through voices coming from outside the community of faith, if only we had the ears to hear and the eyes to see. We are concerned with the *s*/Spirit that inspires our creative endeavors and animates the very basic human quest for meaning.

And this brings us back to the TV series *Lost*, which is a perfect example of both the unspoken spirituality and the core impulses that stimulate the contemporary imagination. The show was considered somewhat of a phenomenon at the time given its fractured sense of reality and nonlinear narrative, but its popularity should never have been surprising. *Lost* connected with viewers because it spoke to the core anxieties that hover over much of modern life: we are not only existentially lost but we also long to somehow redeem our broken past. Audiences did not simply watch *Lost*; they consumed it with near-religious devotion and continue to do so via the internet long after the airing of its last episode, in part because the show gives voice to the angst that plagues the contemporary situation (an angst only amplified by our technological naïveté). By doing so, it opens up avenues for engaging theologically with both the content of the program and the meaning-making associated with it. In other words, whatever *Lost* itself might mean (if it in fact “means” anything at all), it surely means something that, in order to make sense of the illogical, the unexplainable, and the mysterious elements of life, many people turned to a television program about survivors of a plane crash living on a mysterious island. We want to explore more fully avenues like these in order to discover what kind of theological fruit they might bear.

Of course, neither of us is anywhere near as striking (or strapping) as either Dr. Jack Shephard or any other character on *Lost*. And the journey we invite you to join in the pages that follow is likely not as epic as the story of the survivors of Oceanic Flight 815. But we do hope that, in some small measure, this book will spark constructive conversations that are at least as fun, enlightening, and meaning-filled as the conversations that surround so many of our favorite television shows. We may not actually be stranded on a mysterious tropical island with a bunch of strangers, but there is no doubt that we are living in an increasingly globalized cultural context that is religiously, ethnically, racially, economically, and politically plural. Generating new, life-giving visions that not only help us make sense of this world but also allow us to respond to the “other” in our midst in peaceful and loving ways has never been a more urgent task. So we are not simply offering a new perspective from which to look and listen. What we need are new eyes and new ears altogether. And it seems fitting to us that the ever-surprising Spirit of God might develop these faculties within us by breathing life into something as seemingly ordinary as television.