

IV THE ELECTRONIC CHURCH

Many Christians watch "religious" television. Programs featuring prophecy from a dispensationalist-sensationalist perspective, faith healing, and David Mainse's Crossroads are regularly watched by some Reformed Christians.

Many evangelicals have a positive view of religious TV. Many even believe that it is the fulfilment of Revelation 14:6, " And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people." They claim that communication satellites, which fly above the earth, make it possible for billions to experience the fulfilment of the next verse of Revelation, "Saying with a loud voice, `Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come' " (14:7).

Ben Armstrong asked, "Is it possible that the angel specified in Revelation 4:6,7 is a heavenly body weighing forty-seven hundred pounds, measuring eighteen feet in length and eight feet in width, flying in geosynchronous orbit twenty-two thousand miles above the earth?" (1979, pp. 172f). Armstrong's question reveals not only his peculiar reading of Scripture, but also shows the reason for the fact that many evangelicals think of radio and television strictly as a "preaching" medium. There is little understanding of the electronic medium as a means to proclaim a Christian world and life view.

Is the electronic church a hindrance or a boost to the spread of the Gospel? Does it further kingdom causes, such as Christian schools? Or does it undermine the work the Christian school community is doing? To answer these questions we must look at the impact of television upon our culture.

Christian television ministry exists within the context of North American culture. In this culture even religion has become a recreational pursuit. Since TV is mainly an entertainment medium, the Gospel message is twisted to suit the audience. Television does not lend itself to rational argument. Reality is not determined by God's Word but by what is seen on TV. If we see it on television, it must be true. Knowledge no longer comes mainly from reading, but from viewing.

Kenneth Myers points out that the dominant form of communication in our culture is visual rather than verbal. He notes that image rather than the Word is the basic unit of communication (Myers, 1989, p. 161).

Television changes people from active participants to passive receptors of knowledge. Christian viewers become an audience rather than active workers for God's kingdom. Even God comes within easy reach. His transcendent, inscrutable, and wholly other nature does not square with the modern idea that everything has to be understandable.

Since television is made for profits and not prophets, the Gospel preached via this medium has become truncated. God the judge is not stressed. He is the good God, more likely to reward than to punish. Doctrine rather than experience counts. Feelings are stressed at the expense of rational thought.

As Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan points out, "television is an immediate, total experience" (Armstrong, 1979, p. 147). Much of television programming is consumer-oriented. The great masses of consumers determine what programs should be produced and watched. The dollar is the ultimate yardstick by which the success of a program is measured. Our consumer's culture tells us that we deserve whatever we want whenever we want it, and that mentality is rapidly infiltrating the churches.

Richard Collman points out that the ultimate blasphemy of a consumer culture is its desire to consume God. He notes that televangelism is the ideal medium for this (Collman, 1995, p. 39).

Samuel Adler, composer from the Eastman School of Music, said that televangelism and radio preachers present the kind of God that Nietzsche so dynamically told us was dead: "a slotmachine God with whom one bargains for favours" (Collman, 1995, p. 40).

RELIGIOUS TELEVISION PERSONALITIES

Television does not seem able to treat a topic in depth. Programs are bound by time. Their life span and popularity are determined by ratings. Television trivializes everything by breaking life into eight-minute segments between commercials. Within this context, we can see how TV preachers become "stars" and celebrities.

The content of religious programs is defined by finances. If a program depends solely on free-will offerings by the audience, the content will be much more "crowd-pleasing" than a broadcast supported by a church or parachurch organization. Quentin J. Schultze is a professor of communications at Calvin College who draws a distinction between televangelism and general religious broadcasting, particularly distinguishing between audience-supported and denomination or church-federational-supported programming (*Journey of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 1993).

I find it ironic that America, the bastion of democracy, has always been enthralled by strong, charismatic leadership. Mark Noll, professor of history, notes,

A leader's ability to draw his or her own crowd has always been essential in North America, where formal establishments were weak or nonexistent.

Mastering radio and television, in these terms, is only a logical extension of mastering a preaching circuit. (1992, p. 503)

One notable difference between 19th century preachers riding their circuits and today's television celebrities is their denominational membership. Most of today's TV preachers have created their own organizations and operate as independents, without benefit of denominational support and discipline.

Noll comments:

Because of their skill or chutzpah on television, a number of religious entrepreneurs Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwell, James Robison, Jim and Tammy Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, Kenneth Copeland, Robert Schuller, and Rex

Humbard-have become better known than the elected leaders of the major denominations. (1992, p. 504)

CHARTS AND STATISTICS

The charts and statistics focus on an American audience. However, I believe that they are useful for Canadians as well since they generally watch the same religious programs as Americans. The following figures for February 1980 show the estimated audiences of the televangelists and how they ranked in the top religious programs.

Rank	Program	Preacher	Audience Size
1	<i>Oral Roberts and You</i>	Oral Roberts	2,719,250
2	<i>Rex Humbard</i>	Rex Humbard	2,409,960
3	<i>Hour o Power</i>	Robert Schuller	2,069,210
4	<i>Jimmy Swaggart</i>	Jimmy Swaggart	1,986,000
6	<i>Old Time Gos el Hour</i>	Jerry Falwell	1,455,720
9	<i>The PTL Club</i>	Jim Bakker	668,170

Percent of Audiences by Region

	East	Midwest	South	West
Oral Roberts	10.3%	24.6%	53.9%	11.2%
Rex Humbard	14.7%	23.8%	46.5%	15.0%
Robert Schuller	24.0%	33.2%	30.1%	12.7%
Jimmy Swa art	11.5%	23.0%	51.3%	14.2%
Jerry Falwell	12.9%	26.9%	44.9% - -	15.2%
of US	22.5%	26.7%	32.4%	18.4%

Research also showed that 70 percent of the viewers were older persons, that 60 to 73 percent were female, and that the vast majority were already church members. In other words, television as a means for evangelism has been a failure (Terry, 1994, p. 205f).

After Jimmy Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart both fell into disgrace, religious television experienced a dramatic loss of viewers. John Mark Terry, associate professor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, records:

Jimmy Swaggart saw his audience decline from 2.2 million households to 400,000. Oral Robert's audience dropped from 1,269,000 households in 1986 to 561,000 by July of 1988. Jerry Falwell's ministry went into a freefall, decreasing from 708,000 households in 1986 to 284,000 in 1988. These dramatic declines forced the televangelists to reduce their staffs

and stop airing their programs in areas producing little revenue. (1994, p. 206)

DAVID MAINSE

David Mainse, an ordained minister in the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, began his television broadcast in 1962, which expanded to a weekly half-hour program known as *Crossroads*, before the daily live 100 *Huntley Street* program went on air in June, 1977. In 1992, *Crossroads* opened a state-of-the-art broadcast production facility in Burlington, ON. Mainse's ministry includes emergency relief and development efforts, nation-wide telephone counseling centres, assistance with developing indigenous Christian broadcasting in Western and Eastern Europe, and the training of Russian nationals and East Europeans in production and counseling techniques. Once a week, Brian Stiller, executive director of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, gives a commentary on our times (Mainse, Nelles, 1992, p. 103).

Christian schools have been featured on the broadcasts. Home-schooling is supported. But prayer support for Christian children and teachers in the public school system receive the most attention.

BENNY HINN

Benny Hinn, called the "little faith healer from Canada," has cashed in on today's interest in spirituality, speaking in tongues, healing-the demand for a subjective religious experience. Hinn is controversial and disruptive. In a former congregation, some of the members went to one of his crusade meetings where they were born again. They no longer believed that a real Christian can become sick, and claimed they alone had the truth. Godly parents were told that they were not Christians. All churches were declared false.

Benny Hinn, who was born in 1952 in Jaffa, Israel, claimed that though raised in an Arabic culture, he is not an Arab. His family's religion was Greek Orthodox, but he attended a Roman Catholic school. He also claimed in a sermon that he was a sabra, an Israel-born Jew. He immigrated to Canada in July, 1968. Though he has a ministry, he never acquired any formal theological education. Writer David Lees comments, "This would not have been a problem in a religious tradition that had always been suspicious of education, but it was soon obvious to anyone who had been to Bible college that, theologically, Erin didn't know what he was talking about" (1994, p. 52).

Hinn has become known for his antics, such as blowing on people individually to receive the Holy Spirit, swinging his jacket like a scythe, knocking people down left and right. He believes that the Holy Spirit gives him visions of the future, visits him regularly, and heals the sick in his presence. His ministry is financially very profitable. In 1992, aside from the book royalties, Benny Erin Media Ministries grossed \$15 million.

Hinn has proposed some weird ideas. He told his audiences that since God gave Adam "dominion over the birds," Adam could fly, and was, in fact, a superman, and

the first man to reach the moon. He once even taught that God has a nine-fold nature. Recently, he has renounced this view of God as he wanted to join the Assemblies of God. Despite numerous protest letters, his application was approved in 1994.

Less describes Hinn's current ministries as follows:

The last time I watched "This is Your Day," the newly saved were still falling in droves, the hymns were about the glory of the Second Coming, and Hinn was tripping all over the stage like an animated pixie. But it was true that he had changed his style since the last time I had seen him. His hair was short, he wasn't throwing his jacket around, and he most certainly wasn't blowing on people. He was a messiah of instant gratification, squeaky-clean for the age of television. His theology might be aberrant but he understood, more astutely than any television preacher who had come before him, that it's only the medium that matters, not the message. (1994, p. 60)

Hinn adjusts his message to meet the changing demands of his viewers. He focuses on those issues and answers that bring in a positive financial response.

COMMENTARY

Religious television undermines the biblical concept of the church. Worship does not take place as one sits in front of TV and watches a religious program. It makes for lazy Christians, leads to cheap grace, and a spectator religion. What theologian David Martin Lloyd-Jones said about radio broadcasting in his time is even more applicable to television.

Broadcasting I fear has discouraged people from coming to the House of God and taught them bad habits. But even more serious is the harm it has done to the people's idea of the corporate life of the Church So the whole notion of coming together, and sitting together around the Word, and listening to an exposition of it is seriously damaged. The very facts and statistics demonstrate that during these last fifty years the life of the Church, as such, has deteriorated very seriously. (1971, p. 251)

According to Terry, the popularity of televangelism is due to four basic reasons: 1. It is easy. 2. It is individualistic. 3. It is interesting. 4. It is successful.

Terry also lists seven reasons why televangelism is problematic:

1. It reaches few lost people.
2. It exalts experience over Christian doctrine.
3. It has little if any personal contact or follow-up.
4. It threatens to replace the local church with "the electronic church."
5. It often presents a sub-Christian message.
6. It emphasizes entertainment and observation rather than worship and participation.
7. It causes viewers to judge their churches by unreasonable standards. (1994, pp. 207f)

In both school and church we must dare to go back to the deeper truths of our traditions, sink "deep roots in ancient soil." We must remain prophetic, build vibrant faith communities, and continue to preach and teach the Gospel of the kingdom.