

The Electronic Church

It is a truism to say that the media in general, and TV in particular, is the greatest single influence on our society. Television has even become the "real world" for multitudes. Many viewers don't think something is really important unless it shows up on CBC, CNN, or made-for-TV ministries. Years ago Christians frowned upon television. Sermons were preached against the "tube." But times have changed. Christians too watch television. Most of our young people have never known a day without it. And television has even become a vehicle for religious programming. In 1979 Ben Armstrong, then executive director of the National Religious Broadcasters, said that television is the fulfillment 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 earth, and every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people.

Armstrong claimed that communication satellites, which fly above the earth, make it possible for billions to experience the fulfillment of Revelation 14:7 "Saying with a loud voice; `Fear God, and give glory to him for the hour of his judgment is come." And he asked. "Is it possible that the angel specified in Revelation 14:6,7 is a heavenly body weighing forty-seven hundred pounds; measuring eighteen feet in length and eight feet in width, flying in geosynchronous orbit twenty-thousand miles above earth?"

Armstrong's question reveals not only his peculiar understanding of Scripture, but also the reason for the fact that many evangelicals think of radio and television ministry strictly as preaching," medium."

Are television ministries effective tools for the Gospel ministry? I doubt it. Most of the time television is expected to entertain. Our culture has become addicted to diversion, the pursuit of recreation and pleasure. Christian broadcasters have been impacted by this entertainment mania. Church services on television are more fast-paced, exciting and engaging than the plain services of one's own church with the same pastor, the same faces, and without the chutzpah. And the "electronic church" is usually audience driven. Since television is mainly an entertainment medium, the viewer and not the message is sovereign.

Television feeds on consumption. Hence its 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 culture tells us that we deserve whatever we want, whenever we want it, and that mentality has also infiltrated the churches. Samuel Adler, composer at the Eastman School of Music, said that TV preachers present the kind of God that Nietzsche so dynamically told us was dead: "a slot-machine God with whom one bargains for favours."

Television has changed our form of communication and learning: Kenneth Myers argues that the dominant form of communication in our culture is visual rather than verbal. He notes that the image rather than the Word is now the basic form of

communication. Knowledge no longer comes from reading but from viewing. But the Gospel relies upon the Word rather than the image; and explanation rather than a show (Rom. 10). Malcolm Muggeridge commented that when the Children of Israel turned aside from God and made a golden calf, they may be said to have televised him. Christians draw their source of inspiration not from images but from the Word of God. Christians are people of the Book.

Since television is for profits and not prophets, the Gospel preached via this medium is truncated. A John the Baptist in ascetic garb, camel's hair and loin cloth, denouncing adulterous relationships in high places and calling the wicked to repentance; would soon be jettisoned. The electronic church stresses experience rather than doctrine. We are told to "think positively, to feel good" and be "non-judgmental." Leave hard doctrines alone. They are not marketable. But doctrine does matter. Truth matters for Christ is the Truth (John 14:6).

The "electronic church" has created religious superstars and celebrities. It is ironic that America; the bastion of liberal 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 non-existent. Mastering radio and television, in these terms, is only a logical extension of mastering a preaching circuit." 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 that due to their skill and theatrics 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 - became better known than the elected leaders of the major denominations.

After Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart fell into disgrace, religious television experienced a dramatic loss of viewers. Southern Baptist Dr. John Mark Terry observes that research showed that all television evangelists draw a sizable majority of their viewers from America's South and Midwest. The research also revealed that 70 percent of the audiences are older people, that 60-73 percent of the viewers are female, and that the vast majority are already church members. The Tel-evangelists mainly preached to Christians rather than to the un-churched

How does the "electronic church" relate to the local church down the street with real believers off-key congregational singing, ordinary pastors who call for discipleship, and plead for stewardship and outreach among the down and out in the community? It undermines the Biblical concept of the church. It is a church without the sacraments, without pastoral care, without supervision. 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 the great Reformed theologian/preacher

Dr. D.Martyn-Jones said about radio broadcasting in his lectures on Preaching and preachers at Westminster Seminary in 1969 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 corporate life of the Church ... So the whole notion of coming together, sitting around the Word, and listening to an exposition of it is seriously damaged. The very facts and statistics demonstrate that during the last fifty years the life of the church, as such has deteriorated very seriously.

Why should we take the time and trouble to go to church on Sunday when television makes home delivery of spiritual goods available? Because Scripture says. "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Heb. 10:25).

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