

## Religious Broadcasting at the Crossroads

by Peter Horsfield

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Whatever else one may think of them, one thing must be admitted: evangelical broadcasters have thrust the church into the electronic age. Their aggressive use of television, communication satellites, computers and mass marketing practices has created an array of effects and implications with which the church is still grappling.

It would be good to have a little theological breathing space in which to consider some of these implications. Such a grace appears not to be granted us. The futuristic scenarios in technological communication which once were the stuff of science fiction are rapidly becoming present realities, and the broadcasters are just as quickly adapting them to their purposes.

While the evangelical broadcasters have demonstrated an aptitude for using these innovations, however, they have not yet demonstrated a corresponding aptitude for justifying theologically the validity of their enterprise and some of the compromises which have been made in order to adapt to the demands of these new technologies. Perhaps as technical entrepreneurs that is not their responsibility. But for the church as a whole a theological evaluation of the promise and dangers of electronic technology is critical: as human society rapidly becomes an extended electronic network, it is imperative that the church's response be guided by clear theological insights and not mere opportunism.

While it is unlikely that the electronic world will stop while the theologians get on, a valuable historical perspective has recently emerged, one that offers the opportunity to view and evaluate the effectiveness of current Christian uses of mass media. Trends in the syndication and audiences of evangelical television programs over the past few years indicate that the much-heralded development of the evangelical use of television has reached its peak, so that Christian broadcasting as a whole now stands at a crossroads and is poised to move in a new direction.

Audience figures gathered for the past ten years indicate that the combined audience size for all syndicated religious programs reached a peak of growth in 1977-78. This pattern is reflected in both Arbitron and Nielsen audience survey figures. Since then the combined audience for these programs has been fluctuating, but it is still below the level for 1977-78. Because the major portion of current religious broadcasting is made up of nationally syndicated programs, the pattern indicates market saturation by religious programs. That is, it appears that religious television shows have reached the point at which they are now largely attracting the segment of the total television population that is going to be attracted by the present formats and contents. While there has been some movement in the sizes of audiences for different programs -- some have been increasing while others have been decreasing -- the total combined audience for all programs reflects the saturation point.

This marketing reality has several implications for religious broadcasting as a whole. First, it places us in a position from which we can begin to evaluate the effectiveness of the evangelical broadcasting strategy. This is a most useful historical perspective. No longer can

these broadcasters' shortcomings be excused by saying, "Ah, but they're still growing!" The youth has grown into an adult, and we can see what he looks like. What we see is this: evangelical broadcasting has become a specialized programming service for a specialized audience. The overwhelming majority of the regular audience of evangelical television programs are people who are already evangelical Christians, further distinguished by other, more specialized characteristics such as frequent use of Scripture and other devotional materials, regular attendance at midweek as well as Sunday church activities and meetings, and residence in southern states.

These audience characteristics come as no surprise to those acquainted with general mass communication theory and practice. Television is a selective medium, and any program's audience is determined to a large degree by the nature of the content. The more general the content, the more general the audience; the more specific the content, the more defined the audience. Evangelical programs appear to have succeeded very rapidly in attracting their appropriate audience. The specific nature of their content has largely excluded other viewing groups.

The syndication patterns of evangelical programs reflect a similarly limited penetration of the general television population. Though some of the programs are broadcast in almost every market in the country, religious programs in general are to be found clustered in areas that already display a high degree of religious interest and church affiliation: on Sunday mornings, in geographical areas of high church attendance, and on stations recognized as being "religious" in their format. If evangelical programs are intended to reach the nonbelievers and the unconvinced, there is little evidence of these programs' ability to get out where the nonbelievers are. Of course there are recognizable economic reasons for these phenomena, but they serve not to justify but simply to illuminate the problem.

To understand fully the implications of this market saturation, one must consider the historical context of evangelical broadcasting in the past 15 years. Evangelical paid-time programming has virtually taken over the religious broadcast field, displacing almost all other types of religious broadcasting. It has justified this takeover by suggesting that with its independent financial resources, gained through audience support, it has been able to overcome the limitations experienced by mainline broadcasting -- which was dependent on the television industry for production facilities and free public-service air time. By strong audience cultivation and solicitation, evangelical broadcasters claim they have been able to buy their way out of the religious ghetto and resist pressures to modify their strong doctrinal content.

The recent trends in syndication and audiences of Christian programs suggest that the evangelical strategy has also failed. While evangelical broadcasters have apparently been very successful in raising money, building large organizations and support services and providing sophisticated religious programming for evangelical viewers, they have not demonstrated any greater ability to get their message across to the general television population.

Some broadcasters recognize these limitations and see the overcoming of them as the challenge of this new decade. Tom Bisset, manager of an evangelical radio station, suggests that the challenges of the future for evangelical broadcasting include reaching nonevangelicals, speaking prophetically to current issues, and upgrading program content (*Christianity Today*, Sept. 4, 1981). Ironically, evangelical broadcasters in the 1950s criticized

mainline broadcasting for these same deficiencies. What is not readily admitted is that if these qualities were not present in evangelical broadcasting at its zenith, it is not likely that they will be developed in its wane.

Part of the problem has been evangelicals' unwillingness to take seriously the limitations of television as a means of religious communication. They have been so enamored of its potential that, like a lovesick adolescent, they have been blind to its faults. Television is a highly selective medium, and people choose to watch largely on the basis of their existing interests. This selectivity is magnified in the case of cable television -- so that while the development of cable may offer greater potential for Christian communication, it also presents greater limitations.

It is once again becoming obvious that if one is to gain a large non-Christian audience for a Christian program one must depend either on stealth (hiding the gospel in the guise of entertainment or some other subterfuge) or accident (the viewer's flipping of the dial). There is evidence to indicate that stealth and accident do supply a certain number of non-Christian viewers for most programs. However, research indicates also that the sustained effect of television programs on these viewers is very limited. Although evangelical broadcasters promote dramatic examples of respondents to their programs, the general response does not lead to involvement in an ongoing Christian group or to apparent changes in ethical behavior. Christian broadcasting may have some effects, but effectiveness in evangelism in its fullest sense is not one of them.

The saturation of the religious television market has a second implication for religious broadcasting as a whole. Evangelical broadcasters are now faced with the need to meet ever-increasing costs and heavy financial commitments with a declining -- or, at best, level -- base of financial support. This pressure is greatest for those broadcasters who are dependent on audience support -- and the situation is likely to become worse. As other church bodies such as the United Methodist, the Southern Baptist and the Roman Catholic begin to develop their own programming in an effort to regain the support of their own adherents, the segmented audience for religious programs is likely to become more segmented and the battle for the loyalty of supportive viewers even more frantic.

At this crossroads in their development, broadcasters appear to be faced with several possible options. One is to maintain the present level of religious content in their programs and to tolerate the inevitable drop in audience and development because of the increasing market fragmentation. This option would appear consistent with the evangelical concern for lack of compromise in content -- "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel."

Such a decision could result in a major retrenchment of activity. Because audience loyalty to these programs has been built so much on images of growth and success as indicators of God's direct blessing, cutbacks could have psychological as well as theological implications, producing a further loss of support even from loyal viewers. Nobody wants to back a losing horse. It is possible, therefore, that some broadcasters may show signs of becoming "established," consolidating basic identities and service functions, and developing as extended independent church organizations in line with their particular theological emphases.

Another alternative is for audience-supported broadcasters to try to develop alternate bases of revenue in an effort to stabilize their vacillating audience dependence. Those broadcasters who have previously invested excess income in revenue-producing activities



directions need to be taken.

*1. There must be a more adequate definition of the relationship of religious broadcasting to the total mission of the church.*

The evangelical attitude in the past has been to exaggerate the contribution which television can make to the mission of the church. An evaluation of recent achievements and trends indicates that while television must be taken seriously by the church, its direct application to the church's mission is limited. It is not a panacea for the church's problems, and its use must form only a part of the total communication strategy of any church. Yet this relationship has rarely been defined.

While religious broadcasters have continually said that their task is to supplement the work of the local church, there is little evidence of a sustained attempt by broadcasters to do this. A study of the content of the major programs shows little reference to the local church and its importance in the Christian life. Research also indicates that only a small percentage of respondents to programs are referred to local churches, and an even smaller percentage end up developing their initial experience within the life of a church.

*2. The specific objectives of each Christian use of television must be elaborated.*

It is deceptive and counterproductive to the cause of Christ's Kingdom to raise millions of dollars for evangelistic efforts which hardly touch non-Christians. It is destructive to spend millions running an independent computerized counseling service for people who have a church and pastor around the corner. It is counterproductive to the body of Christ to have a celebrity perform the same functions by television which are being performed faithfully but less dramatically by a non-celebrity in one's local community.

There are valuable complementary functions which can be provided by religious television if its concern is genuinely to be a servant to the church and not just to lay a base for its own perpetuation.

*3. Equal attention needs to be given to a strong educational program within the church to enable Christians to control their addiction to electronic technology.*

Christ's concern for individuals enslaved by the products of their sinful condition should be motivation enough for Christians to concern themselves for people today -- who are increasingly demonstrating signs of electronic narcosis, with consequent effects of isolation, alienation, fear, abnegation of responsibility and loss of joy. The answer does not lie in transferring their narcosis from non-religious to religious programs: it lies in liberation from dependence on mediated experience and escapist material. As one of the few remaining personal, interactive communities, the church has a unique opportunity to embody the redemptive love of Christ.

*4. Christians should develop a strong critique of television content in general.*

While some attention has been drawn to the Christian critique of sex and violence in television programming, the critique must also include other dehumanizing aspects such as consumerism, limited access for such groups as minorities and older people and the continuing exploitation of children and youth.

The effectiveness of this critique is substantially weakened when Christian programs, in their effort to be seen as relevant and sophisticated, adopt the same images of glamor and success.

*5. An ongoing “watchdog” program of research and debate is needed to ensure that our television communication remains faithful to the faith we have received.*

Each form of communication technology imposes its own order on what it communicates, both because of its electronic characteristics and its economic organization. Any new expression of the gospel must be continually evaluated to determine the extent to which it remains congruent with the gospel’s essential message. This process of apologetic and dogmatic has formed the dynamic of the history of Christian thought. The adaptation of the gospel to television is no different.

Religious broadcasting is at a crossroads. We have the opportunity to view and evaluate the effectiveness of both mainline and evangelical strategies, and to move in a new direction. It remains to be seen whether we have the wisdom and courage to master the medium, or whether we will fall victim to its awesome power.

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