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The Electronic Church

Eugene F. Klug

It is entirely appropriate for Lutherans, particularly Lutheran preachers, to be asking the question about the propriety and worth of the wide use of electronic media, radio and television, in the propagating of the Word of God. After all, who has been in the field of broadcasting the Gospel over the air waves longer and with more effective outreach? The fiftieth anniversary of the "International Lutheran Hour" has just been observed. It lays rightful claim to the longest sustained history of any such broadcast; its program is regularly beamed over 1800 stations, in some forty-five languages, with an estimated audience of forty million people around the world. Also supported by the Lutheran Laymen's League is the program "Day By Day With Jesus," a five-minute devotional program carried by about four hundred stations every day throughout the United States and Canada alone. The television series, "This Is The Life," a situational application of Christian faith and principles, has a long, respected history. These are hardly negligible achievements; certainly they are evidence of heavy involvement in media broadcasting of the Gospel. It may rightly be claimed that Lutherans, particularly those of the Missouri Synod, have long ago settled the question for themselves whether Christ or His apostles or the prophets of old would have employed the wizardry of electronic systems for the propagation of God's truth among men. They required no further approbation than the mandate of Matthew 28:19 to carry the Gospel into all the world.

But what about the present-day electronic church which has suddenly occupied the center of the religious broadcasting stage, especially the television tube? Does it serve as a harbinger of God's grace in Christ? Does its style suit the Gospel? Does its theology build genuinely Christian faith and life?

There can be little doubt that the masses need to be reached. That has always been true. The question is whether the so-called electronic church meets that need. The "Great American Congregation" has been described in a recent Gallup poll study conducted for *Christianity Today* as an "illusory ideal," a somewhat mixed bag in which a group known as evangelicals, or neo-evangelicals, seems to have outdone and outshone its perpetual rivals, the liberals of various stripes, in all categories church attendance, support of their churches, and effective outreach.¹ But even in this so-called conservative milieu the question still remained whether they were attaining "Scripture's

picture of a loving, living intimate community in which needs are met" or whether they were "as alien to modern believers as the poll results seem to suggest?"² In the same issue of *Christianity Today* consideration was given to the reasons why people were turning away from the main-stream denominations in growing numbers, with the possible exception of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, and why the evangelicals so-called were growing. Among the conclusions were these: (1.) the major denominations were losing ground because they had to some extent lost a sense of priorities, particularly over against the Bible; (2.) fundamentalist and conservative groups, on the other hand, continued to grow, because they had not tended to reverse this central Christian commitment; (3.) church growth ultimately has to do with local churches, within which believers can find a home for spiritual nurture; and, (4.) finally, there is no substitute for personal witness for the faith.

Much of this is not new to us. Our questions turn around the propriety and viability of what today passes for the electronic church, particularly in the format of high-styled, high-g geared, well-oiled programs like Pat Robertson's "700 Club," Jim Bakker's "PTL Club," Jerry Falwell's "Old Time Gospel Hour," Robert Schuller's "Hour of Power." Is this what preaching the Gospel is all about today? Is it possible, as William Kuhns strongly suggests in *The Electronic Gospel* that there is a large element of "careful manipulation of audience" that is going on.³ Some have noted that we have come out of the stereotyped programming ghetto of radio broadcasting of the Gospel into an era where "the smiling, praying, singing, money-collecting guys . . . make all answers and solutions so simple that the truth disappears," even though one could not actually accuse them of "lying."⁴ This somewhat jaundiced view of sideliners, who enviously admit their failure to do better, is nonetheless partly supported by the salty comments of the famed British pundit, Malcolm Muggeridge, himself an old hand at the use of the media, especially radio, and widely listened to by an appreciative audience over the years. Muggeridge wishes that C. S. Lewis "had lived long enough to deal with this [the present-day barrage of television programs, including the religious ones] in another masterly Screwtape Letter."⁵ "Good news for Satan's Kingdom" is his severe judgment upon many of the television offerings which can only delight the devil himself, Muggeridge contends. He is concerned about the saturation effect, for one thing, the sheer quantity of the thing, not to say anything about the quality, and he seriously doubts that "our Lord would accept the Devil's offer

to prime time on television.”⁶ Muggeridge grants that the point is arguable, but he believes that “St. Paul’s amazing missionary journeys [were] surely the way he [Christ] wanted it [the Gospel] to be propagated, and I don’t feel that television would have fitted in with that way.”⁷ Like many other observers Muggeridge is especially disturbed and “very dubious about estimating influence by counting heads,” since, as he holds, “God speaks to us in a still, small voice, and leaves the thunderous words to Caesar.” “The truth is that what is effective is truth.”⁸

This is enough to prepare us for a closer look at the phenomenon of what has come to be called the “Electronic Church,” which day after day, week after week, gathers millions in its magical wake. Our approach will be a simple one: (1.) a look at the principals, the leading faces and voices that emanate through the television set; (2.) a necessary scrutinizing of the principles on which the whole operation is grounded; (3.) an evaluative pondering of the kind of faith which sounds forth from earth to orbiting satellite station and back again to the television set in the home.

I. The Principals

“Personalities” is the best way of characterizing the performers on the key programs devoted to evangelization through electronics. They all purport to being Gospel-proclaimers, but at the same time they are also star performers in their own right and in their own way. It would be impossible to deal with them all; an effort will be made here to describe only a few of the most successful at the present day.

Pat Robertson

The founder of “The 700 Club” is M. G. “Pat” Robertson, sometimes known as the “Johnny Carson of TV Evangelism,” because of the show’s resemblance to the “Tonight Show.” Robertson, fifty years old, has considerable professional and educational background. He is an ordained Southern Baptist minister, a graduate of Yale Law School, a successful businessman, with combat duty as a Marine Corps officer. His father was the late Senator A. Willis Robertson of Virginia. “Pat” Robertson has been the brains behind the creation of the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), a sophisticated satellite-equipped outlet for religious broadcasting. Begun twenty years ago, the network today has the potential of reaching virtually all households in America and is the largest coordinator of religious programming. The title “The 700 Club” originated with a mid-sixties appeal for seven hundred partners at the modest figure of

ten dollars per month to help bail out the struggling enterprise at that time. It was ultimately successful and has since grown into a religious broadcasting empire under the expert management of Robertson and his team. The "Club" now has more than a half million "partners" and grosses more than one million dollars a week. Its headquarters are in Virginia Beach, Virginia, on a 280 acre spread, with spanking new headquarters, the finest television equipment, and a university specializing in communications, fine arts, law, and political science, appropriately called CBN University.

Jim Bakker

Originally connected with CBN, Bakker, an Assemblies of God evangelist by background, left the "700 Club" in 1972 to strike out on his own. He had learned the "trade" from Robertson. There have been rough spots in his efforts, brought on by what apparently were high-handed, sometimes questionable business practices on his part as chief executive officer, but the "PTL Club" ("Praise the Lord," or "People That Love," or, in the mouth of the critics, "Pass the Loot") has survived very well and is now thriving, likewise grossing a weekly intake of one million dollars or more, from more than 700,000 PTL partners. "Heritage Church and Missionary Fellowship" boasts a sophisticated broadcasting headquarters near Charlotte, North Carolina, on sprawling grounds of 1,400 acres, with Heritage University presently under construction, and facilities for retreat and recreation, retirement care, and even burial. It is evident that the Jim Bakker team has modeled things for the most part after the "700 Club," including the various tangent enterprises.

Jerry Falwell

This astute Southern Baptist (now an independent - a fact which is of no great significance in an independence-minded denomination) has likewise succeeded in building a broadcasting empire. Home base is Lynchburg, Virginia, where in 1956 Falwell founded a congregation in an abandoned soft-drink building. His viewing audience today rivals that of Johnny Carson, and grosses somewhere around one million dollars per week. His television start began locally in Lynchburg, in the early days of television programming, just six months after he began his ministry there. His warm, magnetic personality elicits trust and confidence in his disciples. Falwell's political involvement in recent years, something which for years he eschewed, has earned him considerable national prominence, specifically through the founding of the "Moral Majority," a voluntary organization dedicated to combating evils in politics, society, etc. There is apparently

hard evidence that he and his cohorts made a considerable impact in the recent (1980) elections, affecting the presidential, senatorial, congressional, and state races. Falwell's "Old Time Gospel Hour" has adopted the format of the other successful religious television programs, but manages to retain some of the old evangelistic, revival style as well. Empire building, is also part of Falwell's design, as with his chief competitors; he has founded thriving Liberty Hill Baptist University at Lynchburg on some 2,400 acres, with a claimed enrollment of four to five thousand students. Primarily it is a Bible college, with a concentration in communications and ministerial training. Like the other colleges mentioned, it has accreditation woes. Notable perhaps in Falwell's enterprise is his tie to a local parish, which was his starting-point and gives his efforts something of a church structure. He travels widely, however, and because of his warm, engaging, articulate manner is often drawn into national television interviews of various kinds, especially since his successful entry into the field of political influence and moral issues.

Robert Schuller

From the somewhat unlikely background of the Reformed Church in America, Schuller struck out for the west in 1955 and founded the Garden Grove (California) Community Church in an outdoor drive-in theater. His humble efforts have mushroomed into a massive program that has seen the erection of a 15-story "Tower of Hope" headquarters building. Most recently Schuller's booming enterprise blossomed into the construction of the striking Crystal Cathedral, seating well over four thousand people. At the same time Schuller draws people off the highways and byways into his adjoining drive-in facilities, well equipped with television conduits. His "Hour of Power" is probably, according to some of his sharpest critics, still more palatable than that of his competitors, since his showmanship is somewhat less of the religious talk-show style and more semi-liturgical or worship-oriented. Schuller's enterprise is likewise a multi-million dollar effort, reaching out on Sundays to millions of viewers. In addition, Schuller initiated a Telephone Counseling Center for all who dial N-E-W-H-O-P-E at any hour of the day. His Institute for Successful Church Leadership has been one of the country's most successful church-growth training programs, attracting clergy and lay leaders from various denominational backgrounds around the country and world, scheduled for training periods three times a year. Unabashedly and with no apologies, Schuller has built on the positive-thinking ministry of Norman Vincent Peale.

The electronic church is a reality; we have touched at least the surface by describing some of the chief "operators"; by no means have we exhausted the list. Notables still missing who cut a large swath through the mainline churches on a Sunday morning would include Oral Roberts, who in recent years has modified his faith-healing ministry to a more modest program resembling that of the other religious television personalities. He has been called the "Ed Sullivan of the evangelical networks"; and he has devoted much of his time, money, and effort to his pet project, the founding and furthering of Oral Roberts University and Medical School in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Since he gave up the screeching faith-healer image, Roberts has joined the more staid United Methodist Church.

Rex Humbard, of Akron, Ohio, has likewise become a national television personality with programs originating from his Calvary Temple, and soon from his five-thousand seat auditorium, the "Cathedral of Tomorrow" in Akron. This is a ministry which he — a half Bible-belt Baptist, half hillbilly Pentecostalist — has successfully built up during the last thirty years in Akron; and he is now reaching out to an ever larger electronic audience, with his folksy "You are Loved" style of preaching and programming. Like Schuller he accentuates the positive possibility kind of theology and offers his followers a book to answer their troubles and fears, "How to Stay on Top When the Bottom Falls Out."

In a list like this one can hardly omit the Herbert Armstrong-Garner Ted Armstrong Worldwide Church of God effort, though it defies classification in any group of fundamentalists, in view of its Anglo-Israelite type of theology, which combines strange elements of Old Testament ceremonial legalism and dietary rules, anti-Trinitarianism, and denials of Christ's vicarious atonement. Nonetheless, it is undoubtedly one of the most successful electronic enterprises, if financial success is a standard of measurement, since more than sixty-five million has been estimated as its annual income. This, at least, was so until recently, when the two leaders had their falling out through the elder Armstrong's excommunication of Garner Ted, apparently on charges of his marital infidelity. It is a muddled picture at the moment, since it now appears that the elder Armstrong himself, perhaps somewhat senile at this point, has himself engaged in various kinds of "excursions" with the opposite sex. As a result the "empire" has come under assault from various complainants within the "church" who are charging mismanagement of funds and extravagant living on the part of the erstwhile czar of their cultic organization.

Suffice it to say, the field is heavily loaded at the present time with what appear to be very successful entrepreneurs in the religious broadcasting field, controlling powerful television satellite networks and saturating large listening audiences with their brand of fundamentalism.

II. The Principles

Depending upon the source, one gets varying opinions and judgments as to what constitutes the basic grist and substantive material of these religious television “artists.” In a general way it would seem to be correct to characterize them as coming from the Arminian (Methodistic) side of Reformed theology. There is virtually no support for the traditional means of grace, Word and Sacrament. Except for Schuller’s “Hour of Power,” the emphasis clearly is on a variety “show,” featuring guest personalities, figures from the sports, entertainment, and political arenas with their “testimonies.” These guests describe their religious experiences and decisions for Christ, the “born again” angle, with a heavy dose of “I” running through each encounter with Jesus, who is spoken of very often in buddy-buddy sort of way.

If the program leader leans towards Pentecostalism there will be the usual amount of charismatic action — testimonies concerning healings, prophecies and tongues, revelations, etc. In order not to lose their audience, however, the Pentecostals generally have toned down the display of charismatic outpourings on the air.

Since all (except perhaps for the Armstrongs) are fundamentalists (and Garner Ted may now fit into this category), the historic fundamentals which came under attack with the advent of liberalism are openly defended: Scripture’s inspiration, Christ’s resurrection, His miracles, the virgin birth, Christ’s deity.

All of the electronic masters of ceremony are undoubtedly millennialistic, though this teaching is for the most part subdued, because of their studied intent not to say anything that will lose their audiences (and their support) for the program. The “positions” which are taken are in almost all cases those which every red-blooded American would support — for example, pro-life and anti-abortion stands, anti-Communism, opposition to the homosexuals, pornography, and immorality in high and low places, etc. — plus a straight-from-the-shoulder countering of all that smacks of liberalism. There is an obvious focus on the troubles and fears and disappointments which people experience in their lives, and each of the practitioners makes a special effort to assure his listeners that “God loves you” (Bakker), “you are loved” (Humbard).

Perhaps the “power of positive thinking” theology is still most pronounced in Schuller’s so-called “possibility thinking,” a throwback to Norman Vincent Peale’s theology of a few years ago, heavy on psychological healing. The “Hour of Power” is intended to give people a lift, not to drive home a sense of guilt and repentance, but rather to mount an appeal to turn from being an “impossibility thinker” to a “possibility thinker.” In that switch lies salvation, each man’s salvation. Schuller plainly spells out the necessary ingredients in “possibility thinking” or mountain-moving faith:

1. Dreaming - fix in your mind the goals you want to achieve and write them down on paper.
2. Desiring - Ask yourself what it would take to make this goal a possibility and list these things.
3. Daring - ask yourself what price you are willing to pay to achieve these goals, in terms of time, money, self-discipline.
4. Beginning - establish for yourself right now a calendar schedule in which to work.
5. Expecting - write down your strategy and plan, and make sure that you list several ways of eliminating obstacles to your goals.
6. Affirming - build into your thinking a pressure producing system of rewards and punishments and then give yourself the reward or the punishment based on the accomplishment of those objectives.
7. Waiting - program yourself mentally to want what is needed for success and to not want what blocks success.
8. Accepting - read your written assignment at least twice a day to instill it into your mind.

Schuller claims that the system works, pointing to the amazing growth of Garden Grove Community Church as a prime example of how it worked in his life and ministry. “God can do wonderful things for you,” too, is his heartening message to his flock in the Crystal Cathedral, in their cars at the drive-in hook-ups, and in front of the television tubes across America. It attracts millions who are for one reason or another down on their luck, who want some of God’s wonderful things in their empty lives too. There is little of sin and grace, Law and Gospel, justification and sanctification in his message.

Too much theology would lose the audience, is Schuller’s conviction. While he uses a Biblical base, and often cites the Bible, he depends heavily upon story and anecdote to make his pitch for

“possibility thinking.” He strongly believes that every three or four sentences of theological thought or message must be followed by some vivid story or illustration, otherwise you no longer have the audience in the palm of your hand. Whatever might be controversial, Schuller studiously avoids. Obviously that would include much of solid Christian teaching, since human reason finds it objectionable. Schuller dismisses any implication of being an evangelist of the old kind. “If we are to use the media, we must respect the individual’s dignity. I can’t insult my audience.”⁹ If sin is toned down in his message, it follows that the vicarious atonement will be also; after all they are opposite sides of the coin in God’s teaching concerning man and his need. Thus the niceties of the programming from beginning to end, to the details of seating and parking, are more important than the niceties of Christian truth as they concern man’s salvation from sin.

Much of Schuller’s high-toned positive thinking would, of course, be suited to the fundamentalist preachers of Falwell’s or Humbarb’s stripe. Even there the old Elmer Gantryism, the guilt and hell-fire type of preaching, has been largely supplanted by a well-mannered, soft-spoken kind of “evangelism” delivered by men in vested suits and surrounded by posh settings of flowers and palms. The parade of performing stars who deliver personal testimonies and songs of pure fervor is intended to make the viewing audience feel good, and it usually does — at least, the kind of audience which is likely to be willing to absorb this sort of religious palaver. Undoubtedly there are many who view it all with a disdainful tolerance or simply tune it out. This has led some to the conclusion, including the performers themselves, that it is highly possible that they are talking only to those of like mind, the born-again set, the religious self-helper who makes much of his decision for Christ.

There is a pattern of sameness that parades across the stage of most of the programs. Instead of basic gratitude for the Holy Spirit’s regeneration or conversion through Word and Baptism, or being washed in the blood of the Lamb, or simply avowed belief in God, there come the personal testimonies of how “I have met the Lord,” or “I now have a personal relationship with Jesus,” or “I have let Jesus into my life.” The new relationship is described in terms of a friendship of equals, a first name basis between the individual and the Almighty, suggesting more emotion than substance.

Understandably the evaluation of what is going on is a mixed bag of comments, some gentle, some not so gentle, depending

upon the source. The mainline denominations, with some exceptions, have apparently been hurt in the pew and in the pocket; attendance has been affected, drastically according to some; church membership has likewise plummeted in some sectors; and, not unexpected, offerings have likewise shown the effect, which, with inflation added, can be quite serious. The *Saturday Review* titled its survey of the phenomenon "Milking of the Flock," as it sketched the religious television merchants, with their estimated billion dollar business, skimming off the cream.¹⁰ With a snide barb the *Christian Century*, hardly known for its evangelical fervor, stressed "hucksterism and fraud" as ever-present threats in the electronic church and warned of the "spreading tentacles" of this type of religious use of the media.¹¹ "What a Friend They Have in Jesus" is the caption of another *Century* article, which, while it grants that "these evangelists are not dangerous" in the way of Jim Jones, nonetheless warns "that if religion becomes a hit and God becomes a pal, then the world will cancel the one when it becomes boring and snub the other when he becomes demanding."¹²

There may be more truth to this judgment than one cares to admit; but, on the other hand, the *Century* itself is ill equipped to keep its readers from becoming bored with God and refraining from snubbing Him. Somewhat more incisive and pertinent perhaps is the *Century's* lashing out against Pat Robertson's slightly veiled prophetic surmising that "just maybe Jimmy Carter was 'a piece of cheese in God's mousetrap,' put into the White House to set up this current conflict in Afghanistan, where the 'infidel Muslims' are at war with the atheistic communists.'" ¹³ In sharp repudiation of smug contentedness on the part of the "in-group," the *Century* glowered and exploded: "Born-again Christians who await the Second Coming are sitting in the catbird seat, because *their* God is pulling the strings," all of which is "a serious threat to public discourse and a potential for bigotry aimed at anyone who is not a 'born-again Christian.'" ¹⁴

But all of the critique is not negative. *Christianity Today*, for example, tends to remain more objective in its appraisal. It notes that the electronic "emcees" themselves are often concerned about the fact that they have grown so fast and rake in so much money, and that they have overextended themselves in kinds of enterprises tangential to their broadcasting. But none of this concern alters the fact that "there is hardly a midsize town in the United States without a viewer who attributes his conversion or spiritual revitalization" to one or the other of these religious shows.¹⁵

The clout of the television evangelists was never better

demonstrated than when President Carter himself appeared at the thirty-seventh annual National Religious Broadcasters Conference in January 1980. What used to be a rather droll and smallish affair drew all the principals from far and near; admission was by invitation only and restricted to certified members. The electronic church leaders had reached their zenith. Optimism soared very high and there were clear avowals that the FCC would never try to interfere with the religious broadcasters, nor would the IRS ever try to mess with their tax-free status, as long as they kept their charitable projects carefully defined as in the public interest and for the common good. Ben Armstrong, executive secretary of the NRB, could assert without fear of contradiction: "Broadcast religion touches more people than all the churches combined."¹⁶ Perhaps the most significant statement at the convention was made by an invited guest who was not present, Alexander Solzhenitsyn. He sent this prophetic word:

There is in our days a prevailing and entirely wrong belief that the contemporary world's dangers and disasters are the result of this or that political system's imperfections. It is not so, however. The truth is that they all stem from the relentless persecution of the religious spirit in the East and from the fading of this spirit in the systems of the West and the Third World. Yet there is no salvation possible other than the return of this spirit to the inhabitants of the earth.¹⁷

It has been claimed that the cults are the unpaid debts of the church; they arise because the churches have failed in some way to be about their business. It is entirely possible, if one agrees with Solzhenitsyn's judgment, that the electronic evangelists are succeeding, at least at the moment, because of the void, or gap, they are filling as a result of the mainline churches' default to be about their business. Man is incurably religious. The spirit must be filled. If the churches do not do it, then the television "hucksters," or whatever one may choose to call them in a pejorative sort of way, will attempt to do it. Thus, I do not agree with the simplistic view of Martin Marty when he claims that they do not speak to a mass audience, but are talking to themselves about themselves.¹⁸ Nor do I agree with the *Christian Century's* article by James A. Taylor which dismisses the thought that Jesus would have used television as a medium for preaching the Gospel and that, therefore, "the mass media cannot really create religious disciples" or convert anyone.¹⁹ It is possible, as he claims, that "those people already predisposed toward a particular kind of religious experience" are the ones listening and responding, but I believe he overextended himself when he asserts broadly that no

one can be converted through the media, since this must be done only by face-to-face encounter from one person to the next.²⁰ I also disagree with psychologist Richard Liebert's prediction that some day soon the electronic church will become a denomination of its own.²¹

It is to be expected that organizations like the National Council of Churches would be negative. After all, the pews and coffers of the member churches are being emptied by the impact of the "old-time religion." But statistics show that there has already been a swing away from the liberal, sterile theology of the NCC to Bible-oriented churches, whether electronic or not. There are some who claim that the "electronic church" has actually served to increase interest in things spiritual, in church attendance, in support of the local churches.²²

Roman Catholic writers are concerned, too, by the impact being made by these "evangelists with white shoes and styled hair, country and western musical interludes, Bible-thumping oratory and the personal testimony of the newly converted."²³ But rather than simply dismissing them as passing fads, the Romanist theologian is asking some serious questions, like "In what sense can they be called churches at all?"²⁴ The critique comes down heavily on the theology which emphasizes "faith over works and Scripture over tradition," as one might expect; and the conclusion simply is that "the doctrine and methods they use to win popularity and perpetuate their churches are not what Catholics can or should accept."²⁵ Given an individual like Fulton Sheen, the story would, of course, be different, because here would be "a man of the church and not as a church unto himself."²⁶ An earlier article in *America* spelled out very carefully the growing need of the Catholic Church to fight fire with fire in this way, by itself using the media to the fullest, in order to get into those out-of-the-way corners of human existence, where the church does not otherwise stand a chance of entering.²⁷

What we need to realize at this point, among other things, is the evident reality of the electronic church or churches. They are here to stay. Or at least the individual practitioners are probably bound to stay, just as the revivalistic crusaders have survived. Wesley did not just come and go and lie forgotten. Nor was his rise without explanation. The Anglicans then, as now, opposed him as an unwelcome intruder. They still contend, as Paul Moore put it, that "it is the traditional churches who merit the description of truly conservative" and that "the answer to false conservatism is true conservatism."²⁸ What the good bishop forgets, as the Anglicans of the eighteenth century forgot, was that Wesley was

addressing the man down under who had been forgotten by a church that had lost its very soul up yonder in the wispy clouds of religious sterility. Pat Robertson frankly admits that the present electronic church is nothing more than the “early Wesleyan movement” revived. And if today it is “regarded as controversial and unconventional,” it is because in his opinion it fulfills “needs not met in the established church.”²⁹ It is as simple as that, even though Colin Williams of Yale Divinity School disagrees. The comparison with Wesley’s revivalism is “inappropriate,” Williams avers, on the grounds that “Wesley emphasized bringing new converts into Christian communities for nurture,” and “I do not find that same insistence in the electronic church.”³⁰

Colin Williams aside, and the looseness of the electronic community aspect as well, the fact stares one in the face — the theology and the methods are Arminian, or revivalistic Methodism, perfectionism, and pentecostalism all over again. They stare the Lutheran Christian, especially the Lutheran pastor who is concerned to feed his flock faithfully, straight in the face. Moreover, every nook and cranny is now open to their influx and input. The implications of the theology are what concerns us the most. This, after all, is more serious than the political dabbling that is going on also on the part of the Religious New Right through the NCPAC, the National Conservative Political Action Committee. I believe that we can count on our people to fend for themselves well enough with political issues and politicians; but we cannot necessarily assume that they will be able to sift genuinely Christian teaching from that which comes in Christian garb but denies fundamental articles of faith, endangering salvation itself.

III. The Ponderings

The theological ills of the electronic church are as numerous as flies around the barn in summer. It would not be wrong to state in a general way that the religion is sectarian, of the *Schwaermer*, or enthusiast, kind, strongly tainted with a high level of subjectivism and internalized sort of religious experience, rather than firmly grounded on actual Biblical moorings. As a result, the usual faults are there — evident mixing of Law and Gospel, with all the attending evils, trying to make the Gospel do what only the Law can do and, vice versa, making the Law do what only the Gospel can accomplish. The end is utter and sheer legalism.

Medieval monasticism and the holiness kind of life proclaimed by the electronic preachers differ only in form, not in kind. For all the avowals of total loyalty to Holy Scripture the whole crowd is susceptible to a gross type of Biblical literalism which tends to

create distortion of the meaning and sense of God's Word of truth. It would be impossible in a paper of this length to treat all the theological weak spots. We shall, therefore, limit our critique to what appear to be four areas of especially serious distortion: (1.) sin and grace; (2.) *theologia gloriae* versus *theologia crucis*; (3.) the means of grace; and (4.) the doctrine of the church. We shall look at each in turn.

1. Historically, Arminian theology, which is the underlying theology of all of the electronic ministries, has denied the total depravity of man. Scripture's teaching on the nature and terrible effect of original sin is simply not upheld. Even Schuller prefers to speak of a sort of manic depression affecting all of mankind rather than deadly sin. It is at this point that almost all of Protestantism (to some extent even Calvinism) and Catholicism (Roman and Eastern Orthodox) converge. While man by his fall into sin lost his moral likeness and conformity with God, he was not so totally damaged that he could not, with the help of God's grace, whether inherent still or newly infused, give a positive response to God's overtures to him for spiritual change-about. Some measure of grace each man has. Ultimately, if he is lost, it is not because he did not have God's grace in some measure, but because he did not use the grace which he had; and God would never require more of a man than that he live according to the measure of light and strength that were given to him.

This is Wesleyan theology. This is Romanist semi-Pelagianism. This is general Protestant thinking. This accords with the treasured doctrine of man's free will. This is why Billy Graham, Southern Baptist by connection, is a synergist theologically and answers to the question "What is conversion?" that there are three parts, one passive and two active. The passive is regeneration by the Spirit; the active are *your* willingness to repent and *your* free decision of faith. These are the things which *you* must do, and only *you* can do.

This is the theology which is pounded out upon people's minds and hearts and ears by all of the electronic preachers. It is sheer and unadulterated synergism. It inevitably affects the teaching concerning how a man is saved. It is outright denial of Scripture's central article of justification *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. It runs headlong against Scripture's clear teaching that "a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the Law" (Rom. 3:28), that "by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is a gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8,9), and that "knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of [in] Jesus Christ, even we have believed in

Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of [in] Christ, and not by the works of the law, for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified” (Gal. 2:16). Scripture’s doctrine on sin is the opposite side of the coin with respect to justification. It is no useless truism to remind a theologian: “Tell me what your doctrine of sin is and I will tell you what your doctrine of justification is, or vice versa.”

2. C. F. W. Walther never doubted that many of those who claimed that they were converted in the tent meetings, the revivals of the nineteenth century, were sincere and in many instances were actually led to their Savior in abiding faith. But because of the high degree of emotionalism which accompanied the preaching and the pointing inward to spiritual wrestlings and stirrings, Walther rightly feared that what was being preached and urged was faith in faith, rather than faith in the crucified and risen Savior, faith in the spiritual awakening and born-again happening rather than faith in the forgiveness of sins gained for sinners on Calvary, faith not in the objective means of grace through which the Holy Spirit works regeneration and faith, but in some immediate grace which the Spirit pours out directly into the heart.

It was not a new phenomenon peculiar to Walther’s day. It has been going on since the beginning of time, ever since Satan first diverted man from God’s Word to another word, to the thoughts and strivings of man’s own heart. Man has always preferred something internal, something within himself, to the promise which God has attached to His Word, the Gospel, to the water of Baptism, to the body and blood of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. Luther admonishes us: Take God at the point of His approach in the means of grace. He will never be any nearer. Do not try to climb upon high or descend into the depths; the Word is nigh thee, as the apostle Paul admonishes (Rom. 10: 6 ff.). If God were to tell you to pick up a straw or to strip a feather and to know that thereby your sins are forgiven, it would behoove you to take Him at His Word, for He is faithful and never deceives you.

But that is not the way the preaching goes on the religious television shows. The viewer is pointed inward, as with Graham, to himself, at least for the two active responses which must be coupled to the Spirit’s direct, immediate regenerating work. The means of grace are sorely lacking. They have become little more than a moral code, teaching men how to live.

But “Gospel” means good news or glad tidings, Luther protests, and the correlative to God’s promise of grace and forgiveness is

not *performance* but solely *faith*, which the Gospel has power to elicit and draw forth from men's hearts wherever it is proclaimed. It is a power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16). Baptism also has saving power, as the Scriptures teach (I Pet. 3:21). The Lord's Supper offers and works the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 26:28).

We do not deny that a believer has an experience of Christ in his heart through faith; but we also assert on the basis of God's Holy Word that this experience is grounded upon the objective means of grace which convey God's promise and Christ's righteousness. We short-circuit the work of the Holy Spirit, if we do not base our faith on this Word and on our baptism. Moreover, it is impossible to maintain the article of objective justification, unadulterated by man's works, if we do not simultaneously assert and depend upon the objective nature of the means of grace as God's intended instrument for enlightening men's hearts and working faith.

3. The continental divide in theology is the distinction between *theologia gloriae* and *theologia crucis*, theology of glory versus theology of the cross. This distinction was a Reformation discovery; or at least it was Luther who once more enlightened mankind on this crucial point and brought great joy to sinners' hearts. It was he who with terrible wrenchings of soul and mind was able finally to break free from the dreadful syndrome of works-righteousness into the glorious freedom of righteousness in Christ. The system in which he had grown up was geared to the notion of human striving, with the help of infused grace, to ascend gradually by means of spiritual exertions, asceticism, self-discipline, self-mortification, pious devotions, mystical exercises, to a God-pleasing level of acceptance. Luther tried this route with might and main, but found that this hopeless spiral of effort on his part brought no real peace.

Even St. Augustine, a member of whose monastic order Luther was, had failed the church on this point, teaching that it was love that formed and adorned faith — thus sparking the whole frantic pursuit after righteousness — rather than teaching what the Scriptures so clearly say, that it is faith which forms and adorns love, or good works. What Luther showed to the world was that the theology of the church in his day was actually a self-love, a self-seeking, acquisitive love, a seeking after what man could get from God, rather than seeing and embracing what God has done for him, the sinner. This theology proceeded from the context of the Law; it was the most subtle form of idolatry, since those who practiced it would be most indignant if one should call them idolaters. Redemption amounted to our bearing our crosses, our offering our domestic and internal righteousness, rather than

Christ bearing His cross for our salvation and our receiving *His* alien and external righteousness, worked outside of us, as a free gift.

It was theology of glory, a theology that glorified man, instead of theology of the cross, Christ's cross, proclaiming the salvation of lost sinners through Christ's meritorious sacrifice. This is the radical difference between Christianity and all natural theology. For Christian theology to obliterate this distinction is to lose its very soul and reason for existing. Such a theology is ego-centric rather than theo-centric; it elevates man and makes him feel good about his religious strivings; but it pulls Christ from the cross and says, "I am Christ." Even an outsider, like the French existentialist novelist and thinker, Albert Camus, could see the flaw in what passed for Christianity in his homeland, France. It led him to write in criticism: "Today so many people are scrambling up on the cross, to get a better view, meanwhile displacing the One who has hung there so long." Is not this one of the chief faults of the theology that is emanating from the television tube today — *theologia gloriae* instead of *theologia crucis*?

4. The doctrine of the church naturally follows the doctrine of the means of grace and theology of the cross, for by Scripture's definition the church is the total number of believers, of those who by the means of grace have come to faith in Christ, their Savior. God's Word cannot be without God's people, Luther rightly emphasized in a day when the church of Rome wrongly identified the church with itself, with its own hierararchical structure and the rule over the faithful under its sacramental system. God will gather His flock, often in spite of such audacious claims and usurpation of powers.

Luther, of course, was also quite ready to grant that God's church cannot be without God's Word. But the fact is that it is the pure Word of the Gospel — no matter how impure the institutions around it might be — which gathers the Holy Christian Church. This even a seven-year-old child knows well from the Creed, said Luther. Thus no external, secular, family, racial, national connection accounts for the church, but personal faith in the Savior. Such is Christ's body and bride (cf. Eph. 1:22f.; 5:25ff.; 1 Pet. 2:9).

While personal holiness is the inevitable result of faith, by virtue of the imputed righteousness in Christ, and while holiness of life also characterizes the followers of Christ and inevitably begins to flow from faith, it is faith alone by which a man is justified and becomes a member of Christ's kingdom. C. F. W.

Walther, in the first thesis in his book on the church and ministry has put it well:

The church, in the proper sense of the word, is the communion of saints, i.e., the community of all who are called through the Gospel out of the lost and condemned human race by the Holy Spirit, truly believe in Christ, and by such faith have been sanctified and made members of the spiritual body of Christ.³¹

Luther never held that the Lutheran church is the only saving church, or that all in it are or will be saved, or that their way of life is perfect, or that they hold the correct view on all doctrines. But he did contend that the Lutheran church correctly holds to the pure Word of God, as its Confessions testify, and that every true believer of the pure Gospel would be saved. God alone knows who these are.

The Romanizing view, on the other hand, held that those under the rule and ministry of the Roman hierarchy and its teaching (including works-righteousness) would be saved. This view is, in effect, shared with the born-again evangelists of our day, who likewise put the stress on man's transformed life and submission to rules, discipline, and devotion to Christ as depicted and prescribed by them.

Luther never doubted that many within the Roman church would be saved through personal faith in the blessed Redeemer from sin, in spite of the faulty teaching by their church. We can say the same today for many who are nurtured by little more than the television fare served up by the electronic ministries. But for some to think of themselves, whether Romanist or perfectionist bodies of believers, as the total company of the saved, is a gross distortion of Scripture's wonderful teaching concerning the church, which is Christ's beautiful bride, the glorious body over which he alone is Head. The church against which the gates of hell shall not prevail is Christ's company of believers, the communion of saints.

Concluding Thoughts

It is undoubtedly correct to state that theologically nothing is happening in religious television broadcasting which has not happened before. We have tried to show this by pinpointing four crucial areas. That fact does not alter the situation, however, any more than wringing of the hands or loud bemoaning of the situation will change things for the better. J. Thomas Bisset, writing recently in *Christianity Today* on "Assessing the State of the Art" of religious broadcasting,³² is probably correct when he

states: "When people are allowed to become spiritually, emotionally, or intellectually impoverished, they become vulnerable to powerful media personalities and presentations." Moreover, he notes that it is "this very susceptibility that invites the gospel merchandising that is a matter of concern to Christian leaders," and "ideally," he adds, "religious broadcasting should supplement the local church."³³

The uniqueness of the Lutheran church and Lutheran theology has to do with its consistency in the teaching of the articles of Christian faith. This is something inherent to its strong confessional stand. Thus the first line of defense at the present moment is holding fast to that resolve to teach faithfully the whole counsel of God with unquestioning dependence upon the God-given means of grace. Only in this way will the central article of the Christian faith, the justification of the sinner by God's grace for Christ's sake through faith, remain front and center. And in faithful support of this main Christian article the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod can, by God's grace, remain the conscience of the Christian church on earth in our day. Then, simultaneously with this godly enterprise, it may also continue to support existing electronic ministries in its own midst and explore new avenues, locally and more broadly, for reaching out to the unchurched with the pure Gospel. God will bless such a stance and such efforts.

FOOTNOTES

1. Larry Richards, "The Great American Congregation," *Christianity Today* 24 (Nov. 21, 1980): 20ff.
2. Richards, p. 23.
3. William Kuhns, *The Electronic Gospel* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), p. 121.
4. L C USA, *Interchange* (Feb., 1981).
5. Malcolm Muggeridge, *Christ and Media* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 15.
6. Muggeridge, p. 84.
7. Muggeridge, p. 84.
8. Muggeridge, p. 103.
9. Robert Schuller quoted in John Mariani, "Television Evangelism," *Saturday Review* 6 (Feb. 3, 1979): 25.
10. Schuller quoted in Mariani, p. 25.
11. *Christian Century* (Mar. 1, 1978).
12. *Christian Century* (Sept. 19, 1979).
13. *Christian Century* (Feb. 27, 1980).
14. *Christian Century* (Feb. 27, 1980).
15. "News," *Christianity Today* 23 (May 4, 1979): 44.
16. "News," p. 49.

17. Alexander Solzhenitsyn quoted in "Religious Broadcasters," *Christianity Today* 22 (Feb. 24, 1978): 41.
18. "Talking to Themselves about Themselves," *Christianity Today* 24 (June 27, 1980): 59.
19. James A. Taylor, "No Miracles from the Media," *Christian Century* (May 30, 1979): 614.
20. Taylor, p. 614.
21. "Critics, Electronic Church Try Two-Way Communication," *Christianity Today* 24 (Mar. 7, 1980): 66.
22. Cf. Richard A. Blake, "Catholic, Protestant, Electric," *America* 142 (Mar. 15, 1980): 212, and "Critics," *Christianity Today*, p. 66.
23. Blake, p. 213.
24. Blake, p. 213.
25. Blake, p. 213.
26. Blake, p. 213.
27. Elwood Kieser, "Evangelism through Electronics," *America* 138 (May 6, 1978): 358-61.
28. Bishop Paul Moore Jr. quoted in Ft. Wayne *Journal Gazette*, 21 November 1980.
29. Pat Robertson quoted in "Critics," *Christianity Today* 24 (Mar. 7, 1980): 66.
30. Colin Williams quoted in "Critics," *Christianity Today* 24 (Mar. 7, 1980): 66.
31. C.F.W. Walther, *Walther and the Church*, Th. Engelder, ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1938), p. 56.
32. J. Thomas Bisset, "Religious Broadcasting: Assessing the State of the Art," *Christianity Today* 24 (Dec. 12, 1980): 28.
33. Bisset, "Religious Broadcasting," *Christianity Today* 24 (Dec. 12, 1980): 30.