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THE EMERGENCE OF CHRISTIAN TELEVISION:  
THE FIRST DECADE  
1949-1959

Thesis

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The purpose of this research was to describe the relationship and to compare the programming of major Christian ministries during the first decade of Christian television. A historical perspective was the method used in identifying and explaining the events and activities that constituted Christian television from 1949 to 1959. The results of the research concluded that Christian television began at a time of social trauma, unrest, and confusion in America. Competition for a viewing audience was not a factor. Leading personalities presented themselves as independent thinkers who also saw themselves as "preachers" with a strong desire to succeed. Motivation was provided by a sense of "dominion" that emerged from the Great Awakenings within the churches of America that became a driving force in the first three decades of this century.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In 1939 and 1940, the National Broadcasting Company telecast six hours of programs and 800 hours of test patterns from its New York station to an estimated three thousand television receivers, the estimated audience--fifteen thousand--all located in New York.<sup>1</sup> This early experiment included religious programming by the three major faiths. The programs were presented in cooperation with the Federal Council of Churches--later to be named the National Council of Churches--and were a test of television as a medium for the propagation of the Gospel.<sup>2</sup>

Not until seven years later was further serious consideration given to programming religion for television. The Southern Baptist Convention, by then a large user of radio time in the South and Southwest, considered the matter officially at its annual convention, and decided to move aggressively into the field. The convention declared: "In a matter of months, Southern Baptists must face the opportunity of this new open door for the propagation of the gospel."<sup>3</sup>

The Missouri Synod Lutherans soon followed, with a vigorous interest in television programming surfacing in the late 1940s. The Synod was petitioned in 1949 for funds for television programming, and television was hailed as a new medium for preaching. In 1951, however, plans for the televised "Lutheran Hour" were set aside for the development of "This Is The Life," a half-hour dramatic series, which was the first effort of its kind in religious television.

The first national religious television program was broadcast in late 1949 through the Protestant Radio Commission of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ (FCCC). ABC-TV presented a series entitled "I Believe" on Tuesday evenings, with noted theologians discussing religion as it affected everyday life. The same year a television puppet series began, dramatizing well-known Biblical stories such as the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the Lost Sheep, and the Ten Talents.<sup>4</sup>

Church historian J. Harold Ellens stated:

Network religious television had an auspicious beginning. The formats were innovative and suggested exciting future prospects. As the commercial scope and sophistication of television broadcasting grew, so did the ecclesiastical interest in its unusual potentials for religion. From the NBC-FCCC experiment in 1939-1940, and the earnest beginning of network programming in 1949-1950, the church's involvement and interest in religious television has reflected increasing intensity, variety and sophistication.<sup>5</sup>

The church's concern with broadcasting was focused on its potential as a tool for ministry and its potential for

shaping social value systems. The Federal Council of Churches made the following observation about television:

The churches have a valid concern . . . quite apart from . . . specifically religious use. Nothing that affects the social well-being can fail to be of concern to organized religion. In particular, the fact that broadcasting enters so largely into home life makes it incumbent upon the Christian Church to maintain an intelligent and active interest in its future development. The churches have no more right than other institutions to dictate the policies of the industry, but they have a definite obligation to make their influence felt and to cooperate with the industry in the progressive improvement of its standards.<sup>6</sup>

This latter concern was pointedly expressed by the United Presbyterian Church USA.

Why should the church be concerned with broadcasting? This is the basic question and here are some of the basic answers: because there is the Great Commission--"Go into all the world and preach the Gospel . . . "; because the majority of the mass audience only nods toward the church, politely or negatively, when it appears on radio or television; because the church must involve itself in the if it is to fulfill the Great Commission.<sup>7</sup>

Television began to captivate the entire nation in 1950, even though at the time less than ten percent of all households had a set.<sup>8</sup> Since most of the television stations were concentrated in the major cities of the Northeast, most TV sets were also there. One out of four homes in the Northeast owned a set that generally entertained a roomful of neighbors and visiting relatives. By 1955 other regions of the country had television stations and sixty-five percent of the nation's households owned a

set.<sup>9</sup> By the end of the decade, television was nationwide and nine out of ten homes across the country had sets.<sup>10</sup>

Challenges began to emerge for the Church and its relationship with television. First, the Protestant Radio Commission of the Federal Council of Churches was given responsibility for the public service time allotted by the major networks for religious broadcasting. The major Protestant organizations, Catholics, and Jews were given time on an equal basis.<sup>11</sup> Some of the smaller Protestant denominations, because of their size, were not treated equally and began to protest.<sup>12</sup> Where protests were of no avail, these denominations, as well as independents, purchased time on a local, regional, and national bases.

The second challenge came from within the Church itself. Some church leaders proclaimed that what the Church did best was to preach, worship, and partake of sacraments. Questions raised initially which have continued to the present included:

Should the Church participate in media blitzes, national advertising campaigns, radio and television networks, and be cast in the role of the hustler? Are we so caught up with the American ideal of action that we have neglected to question the means by which the action is accomplished? Are we so enthralled by the sight of superstars endorsing Jesus on television that we shrug off the trivializing effect of the deodorant ads it is sandwiched between? Has the medium become the message?<sup>13</sup>

The Church began to seek guidelines--a scale of judgment for determining, on grounds other than pragmatism, what is the

proper expression of the Christian faith through television. The fear was that all forms of expression have been borrowed from the surrounding milieu and, if not corrected, the results would be ridiculous, absurd, and heretical.<sup>14</sup>

The third challenge was simply "image." The Christian media began to use some of the same techniques of "image building" as the secular world around it.<sup>15</sup> Image advertising suddenly became the norm with personalities such as Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, Rex Humbard, Oral Roberts, and others becoming household names. They were not only priests and ministers, but were now stars of television. The supposition was that the Gospel would be more palatable if it was placed in the secularly appealing setting of staged entertainment.<sup>16</sup> The total image of religion became one of being successful, svelte, and integrated.<sup>17</sup>

The factors of time availability, observation, and image building, affecting the embryonic stages of Christian television, have continued to modify perceptions and even moral values to the present day.

### The Origin of Religious Broadcasting

The expansion of religious activity now underway in America, including tele-evangelism, has roots in the history of belief, specifically the belief that America is a special nation holding a covenant with God, with dominion as the reward for faithfully honoring it.



The American quest for dominion began with the English Puritans. The Puritan "Awakening" during the early 1600s was a movement aimed at "purifying" and reforming the Church of England.

Within a generation, the Puritans had become more revolutionaries than reformers within their own society. They held the heretical view that the Bible alone was absolutely authoritative, an assumption that potentially undermined important customs and traditions of the Anglican church. They also propagated the belief that an individual could communicate directly with God and the power of the Almighty could transform the hearts of the individuals. The impact of this dogma was not sudden, but as the history of the Church has revealed, it has been the most radical doctrinal transformation in the history of Christendom. The effects of the privatization of faith are still unfolding to the present day.

The Puritans believed in the possibility of radical social transformation and the creation of God's kingdom on Earth.<sup>18</sup> They were Calvinists and believed that some among them were "saints" predetermined by God for salvation. They viewed thrift, hard work, and diligence as virtues; by practicing them, they frequently did prosper. The English Crown was politically unstable and became increasingly intolerant of this growing number of misfits. The Puritans

fled persecution and the threat of persecution and found their way to North America in great numbers.

By 1640, there were approximately sixty thousand Puritans in the colonies. This large number of pioneers had a profound influence on the fragile societies of the New World. They gave the land its core culture, with the idea of a special covenant with God at its heart.<sup>19</sup> They also contributed a value that would have enduring importance for later generations for Americans: freedom of conscience and the separation for church and state. The Puritans were here to stay and desired to effect radical change in the political system. They believed change could be brought about through religion. They charted a course that would bring an awakening to all segments of society.

In order to understand the radical changes in American religion, the concept of awakening is critical. An "awakening" became the tool with which Americans repeated attempts to reward their understanding of the covenant. Revivals generally reached the church. The awakenings, however, reshaped whole civilizations and altered history.

In the mid-1700's the colonies experienced the First Great Awakening--an event that revised the notion of a special covenant with God and created the cultural foundation for the American Revolution that came later.

Religious vitality had been lost. Church membership was a matter of social class. Formal worship was the norm,

but highly inappropriate for the commoner. Significant numbers of the population went unchurched.

British evangelist, George Whitefield, began to captivate his audiences with his charismatic, energetic preaching style. More important than his style, however, was his message. He preached Arminianism, the belief in human reason and free will to choose the grace of redemption offered by Christ, rather than predestination.

Jonathan Edwards joined the growing numbers of visible ministers proclaiming that no one was either irrevocably damned to hell or guaranteed salvation. Most older Puritans regarded the emotional preachers and teachings with contempt, but their influence spread quickly. Converts numbered in the thousands and this "new light" on the gospel message effected every colony. The doctrine of predestination was not compatible with the opportunities found in the new frontier. Calvinist fatalism became a negative message in the burgeoning, energetic environment of the largely prospering colonies.

The First Great Awakening contained dimensions far beyond revolution. The awakening provided the colonies with a new set of values that rose beyond local boundaries. The new message became a source of cultural unity to transcend regional differences.<sup>20</sup> Historians have noted that intense religion primes people for extensive change.<sup>21</sup> The covenant now rested on the efforts of Americans and no longer on a

passive, predestined elect group of people. The secular consequence of the First Great Awakening was the creation and establishment of a new political philosophy that became the basis for legitimizing the young Republic.<sup>22</sup>

The terms of the covenant, now refashioned by the generation that fought the Revolution, promised dominion for all if they would respect the fatherhood and authority of God. In the nineteenth century, young America chose to embark on a literal dominion quest. The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and, later, the Minnesota Territory offered rich land and minerals. As the nation expanded, dominion served as the conscious rationale for both government and private enterprise. Dominion excused many wrongs. Indians forced from tribal lands were "savages" and were "in the way" of America's white, Christian destiny. Politicians reaffirmed what they believed was the Deity's support for empire-building.<sup>23</sup>

A Second Great Awakening came at a time when the colonies were experiencing fragile loyalties of its member states. It began as a series of evangelical revivals in the Appalachian frontier. The message spoke of a golden age to come; it was emotional, and pietistic in stressing devotional idealisms of religion. This awakening created an even greater surge toward "national" direction and unity as it emphasized the covenant. The ministry helped to bring a discipline of Christian ethics to a lawless frontier. A

lawyer, Charles Finney, converted and preached to enormous crowds in major cities including Boston, New York, and Philadelphia.

Numerically, the Second Great Awakening brought thousands into the church. It was estimated that although in 1800, only one in fifteen Americans was a church member, by 1850, one in seven belonged to a church.<sup>24</sup> The impact of this number was an increased influence on the concept of dominion.

Two major ideas emerged from this movement that still hold sway in the twentieth century: first, God's grace in the New World was seen as having a specific purpose--to reform and establish a Christian nation, then to evangelize the world; second, the goals of dominion began to shift from just building a Christian nation on the North American continent to carrying the quest around the world. Nationalism and the Great Commission had been fused. America, for the first time, had a mission beyond itself.

Interdenominational organizations began to spring up including the Home and Foreign Mission Society (1812), The American Bible Society (1816), the African Colonization Society-1817, and the American Tract Society (1825). The Second Great Awakening reworked the covenant theme once again. God's grace was still free for the choosing, but America was to be the instrument to carry it to the world.

Christians were to have dominion, and Christian America was to spread Christianity. It became to many a Divine Mandate.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, American evangelical Christianity had arrived at a crossroads. Dwight Moody and Billy Sunday were accused of "selling out" to big business interests. The religious moderates, theologically and socially, had accommodated the masses and became the mainline denominations--but had lost their evangelical fervor.

Evangelical Americans had to choose between two options: join the religious moderates or reject modernism. This second option became a social movement generally referred to as fundamentalism, a loose alliance of antimodernist evangelicals. The movement took its name from a series of ninety articles published in twelve volumes beginning in 1910 called The Fundamentals.<sup>25</sup>

Some of the traits of fundamentalism included anti-intellectualism and biblical literalism, super patriotism, individual piety, and conservative lifestyles. Academics and ministers in mainline denominations largely ignored the series. The conservative evangelicals closed ranks and reasserted boundaries of orthodoxy. Bible schools were established. The revivalists, who had heard a spiritual call to social reform, founded liberal arts colleges such as Wheaton.<sup>26</sup>

Anti-intellectualism found its champion in Billy Sunday whose coarse preaching style became an earmark of the entire movement in the public mind. Fundamentalism and secularism drew swords in a Dayton, Tennessee courtroom when a substitute high school biology teacher, John T. Scopes, taught from a text that featured an evolutionary perspective. Scopes was put on trial in 1925 and achieved immortality in the history of American church-state relations.

Modernism versus fundamentalism was the driving tension in American religion during the first three decades of this century. Seminaries and churches were divided creating new denominations. Many remained mainline liberals.<sup>27</sup>

Frustrated fundamentalists began to reject modern society and grimly awaited the "last days." Some historians have referred to this as the Great Reversal. The Great Reversal saw the notions of covenant and dominion go into exile. Patriotism kept the covenant theme alive, but pessimism kept it subdued.

The fundamentalists faced resisting modern culture, yet, desired converting the culture and people to Christ. Many followers of this movement, however, felt they had another choice. There were a wide assortment of parachurch activities--schools, conferences, missions, newsletters, and magazines. Fundamentalists created new interdenominational groups directed to proselytize with only the conservative

message they wanted. Historian Joel Carpenter has explained this little-known history.<sup>28</sup> He notes that The Sunday School Times, a fundamentalist magazine, listed more than sixty Bible colleges and schools in 1930. Another thirty-five were added in the next ten years, and in the following decade (1940-50), sixty additional schools were begun. Moody Bible Institute became the model. It trained pastors and evangelists and published, through Moody Press, millions of items. The institute had its own radio station and taped programs for others.

The fundamentalists could now shape huge rallies. Stadiums and large auditoriums would fill to capacity with sixteen thousand at Boston Garden and fifteen thousand at a Chicago Coliseum rally. Charles Fuller, a pioneer in radio evangelism, drew forty thousand believers at an Easter service located at Chicago's Soldier Field. In 1939 he filled Carnegie Hall in New York. Fundamentalists used the newest medium, radio, with great success. More than four hundred religious programs on eighty radio stations in 1932 were endorsed by The Sunday School Times.

Encouraged by the growth of parachurch activities and by their success in turning out large crowds for rallies and conferences, some fundamentalist leaders began to sense the opportunity for a large-scale revival in America. During World War II, a sense of mission and solidarity spread throughout the nation. The urgency of the crisis



served as a powerful stimulant to the reawakening of the nationalistic and patriotic aspects of covenant and dominion.

By the close of World War II, the National Association of Evangelicals, the National Religious Broadcasters, and Youth for Christ had been formed. Evangelicals experienced a transformation of self-image. The covenant-dominion theme had gone full circle. There was a reawakened sense of national mission with men such as Billy Graham, Bishop Sheen, Rex Humbard, and Oral Roberts creating newer and larger parachurch organizations to evangelize the world. Together they discovered the tool of television. Even though this medium was in its embryonic stage, they seized the opportunity and began the renovation of the gospel witness that was to catch national attention.<sup>29</sup>

#### Statement of Problem

The problem of this thesis was the identification and explanation of the events and activities that constituted Christian television from 1949 to 1959.

#### Purpose

The purpose of this thesis was to describe the relationship and to compare the programming of major Christian ministries during the first decade of Christian television.

Questions to be answered included:

- (1) What was the major impetus that created the idea that America was to evangelize the world?
- (2) Originally, was there competition for the new-found television audience by tele-evangelists?
- (3) Was there strong debate over format?
- (4) Was the "Christian Spectacular" used in the first decade, and, if so, with what effect?
- (5) Did "electronic education" enter into the minds of the tele-evangelists in the early years?
- (6) What personalities emerged as the leading tele-evangelists and how did they present themselves?
- (7) Were political and financial pressures problems in the beginning?
- (8) Did the leading personalities seek to build the "star image" that finally became their trademarks?

#### Survey of the Literature

Few have attempted to chronicle the beginning of Christian television that to this day is an important part of the television broadcasting industry. Books and articles have been written about the various Christian television personalities that emerged during the first decade. Most of them, however, do not explain why certain formats were used,

the scheduling restrictions they found, the duration of the programs and the use of music, guest artists, and other related elements.

Media experts of the postwar period were enthralled by television. It was not only new--it was revolutionary. Ben Armstrong stated: "The television medium began to captivate the entire nation in 1950, even though at the time, less than ten percent of all households had a TV set."<sup>30</sup>

Horsfield suggested that the practice of the networks was to deal primarily with what he describes as religious groups. Catholics were represented by the National Council of Catholic Men, Jews by the Jewish Seminary of America and the Protestants by the Federal Council of Churches of Christ.<sup>31</sup>

Parker, Barry and Smythe measured the reaction of the audiences to the leading television personalities in the 1950s. According to them, the "Bishop Sheen audience was the largest by far of all the followers of religious radio and television programs of his day."<sup>32</sup>

A. William Bluem, a historian of the era, wrote, "The institutions of religion and public communication in every modern industrial nation are confronted with severe challenges in performing their traditional functions."<sup>33</sup>

One of the most stimulating discussions about the "television image" is Virginia Stem Owens' The Total Image, or Selling Jesus in the Modern Age. Her critique on

Christian ministry stated,

The Christian media have, like the rest of the culture, inadvertently taken up the same techniques as the secular world. Driven by a laudable response to the call of the Great Commission, they have used the most effective model for communication they know--image advertising. Its success makes old-fashioned apologetics look like an archaeological oddity. Catechisms are replaced by conferences on lifestyle.<sup>34</sup>

In 1974, J. Harold Ellen, a church historian and pastor of the University Hills Reformed Church in Farmington, Michigan, published Models of Religious Broadcasting.<sup>35</sup> In his careful analysis of electronic evangelism, the author identified four distinct types of religious broadcasting. His models include the "Mighty Acts of God," the "Pulpit" model, the "Instructional" model and the "Leaven" model. The "Mighty Acts of God" refers to the staging for the television spectacle as costly and magnificent, including dramatic music, awesome settings, careful psychological timing, and smooth transition from music to sermon. Ellens claims the television set becomes a window on this "mighty act of God." He refers to the "Pulpit" model as the engaging personalities that have become the "stars" of the religious television screen. From his analysis, Ellens concluded that the future success in religious broadcasting lies in the "Instructional" and "Leaven" models, which he interprets to mean the production of documentaries, lectures and dramas of religious significance and talk show

interviews with well known religious personalities and program hosts.

The Hour of Television-Critical Approaches, written by N.D. Batna, was written to help enlighten the person who watches television critically and to serve as a window to American civilization. He wrote,

with television viewed as the most popular art and a means of utilizing a vast marketplace, the medium has accommodated critical approaches of various kinds. The profusion and fecundity of television programs and their myriad alternative uses--from education to pornography, information to entertainment to evangelism--have invited all kinds of pundits to try out theoretical assumptions about the medium. Because the medium has created a near total dependency in audiences and has become a decisive ecological factor in the growth and decay of society, it has induced widespread anxiety and apprehensions in the minds of parents, religious leaders, politicians, educators, criminologists, minorities, or anyone whose niche in society is presumably threatened.<sup>36</sup>

Although Russell Hubbell's Television Programming and Production concerned itself with an analysis and definition of the nature of television and helped formulate a basic theory for its development as an art form, many of its conclusions are relevant to a study of television evangelism. According to Hubbell,

Sociologically, television should be our most potent medium of education and propaganda. Its powers of persuasion have still to be tabulated by researchers. Rough and somewhat primitive estimates indicate television will far surpass other media and may be roughly equal to the combined impacts of aural radio, motion pictures, and the press.<sup>37</sup>

The TV Establishments--Programming for Power and Profit was written by Gaye Tuchman. It studied ways in which television maintains hegemony and legitimates the status quo. She stated, "Television has acted as a conservative force that raises more issues than it settles."<sup>38</sup>

Max Wilk wrote,

In 1949 network leaders burbled euphorically that television is growing, changing, adjusting. It's a field where there is no established taste, no formula. While its audience is untrained and still developing, television is a challenge to creative imaginations to learn the basic characteristics of the medium and then desire suitable material for it.<sup>39</sup>

Wilk's The Golden Age of Television, contains reviews of some of the early shows, news commentators, talk shows, and serious drama of the first decade of television.

The Mirror in the Corner was written in 1972 by Peter Black and is an overview of the beginnings of television in England. He stated, "Television is here and an immensely powerful, evergrowing medium it is."<sup>40</sup>

Douglas Carter and Richard Adler wrote a book of essays of the Aspen Workshop on Television entitled Television as a Social Force: New Approaches to TV Criticism. They commented, "The introduction of television in this country coincided with the beginning of a remarkable, unprecedented period of change in American society."<sup>41</sup>

The book Staging TV Programs and Commercials was written by Robert T. Wade during the first decade of television in America. He described TV production

facilities in the earliest days of production. According to Wade, "As television was developed largely by network broadcasting corporations, it necessarily followed that administration and programming were taken over by radio-trained men. TV production was considered as a function which, in effect, added sights to sound and provided a 'picture' to illustrate aural matter."<sup>42</sup>

The TV Book is a compilation of 150 points of view--a collection of facts, theories, gossip, stories, and memories--from the beginning of television to the present day. Author, Judy Fireman, stated, "The television evangelist exudes the same folksy lushness that inspires mother pillows and paintings of bullfighters on velvet. Blending a slightly countrified, Jesus-centered religion with a good deal of showmanship, the nationally syndicated television preachers are the superstars of popular religion."<sup>43</sup>

#### Methodology

In this study, extensive use was made of primary source material, particularly the articles written by Bishop Sheen, Rex Humbard, Oral Roberts, Ben Armstrong and Pat Robertson. Secondary material included (1) periodical articles commenting on the television broadcasts of the era; (2) background texts on the economic and social structure of America in the decade of the 1950's; (3) films and video tapes.

I encountered great difficulty in obtaining any information from Rex Humbard, Oral Roberts, and their associates. In visiting archives and libraries associated with these ministries, I was denied the privilege of copying documents and audio recording videocassettes. This negative attitude toward journalists and researchers is apparently the result of the widespread coverage given to televangelists who have been found guilty of financial improprieties and sexual misconduct.

I made several attempts to interview some of the leading personalities of Christian television who contributed to the first decade of Christian broadcasting. My requests for interviews, however, were denied.

I also observed some of the first religious television programs. I paid particular attention to personality, voice, pace, gestures, set design, camera angles in an attempt to evaluate the appeal of the programs to general audiences. Unpublished articles such as diaries, personal notes and television scripts were important sources of information. Background reading included research into the general socio-economic conditions of the late 1850's to the first decade of Christian television as they related to the church.

#### Definition of Terms

Electronic church: The local or national church organization broadcasting via television.



Electronic education: A model of religious broadcasting consisting of a teaching approach to the ministry. The television camera and the microphone become an extension of the lecture hall podium.

Ministry: The transfer of knowledge of the Bible by the minister to the television audience for the express purpose of effecting moral and social change.

Non-denominational: A grouping together of many different types of church organizations without a central structure of authority.

Parachurch ministries: Ministries including schools, printed materials, missionary objectives, and conferences in addition to the normal functions of the local church.

Three major faiths: Protestant, Catholic and Jewish.

Religious spectacular: The staging, dramatic music, special settings, psychological timing, vigorous rhetoric and special guests comprising a religious television "special" or production.

Independent: A minister or ministry not associated with any religious organization that is tax-exempted by State and Federal government.

NRB: The National Religious Broadcasters Organization.

Non-profit organizations: Religious organizations or individuals holding a not-for-profit status with State and Federal government. These organizations are tax-exempt from

State and Federal taxes and are also exempt from income taxes on net receipts.

Social gospelers: A title used to describe members of the liberal wing of the American clergy at the beginning of the 20th century.

FCCC: Federal Council of Churches of Christ.

#### Limitations of the Study

This study did not include Christian television production and personalities involved at the local level. It did not include the elements of drama used in the first decade nor the emergence of religious children's programming. The study presented, in historical perspective, the first decade of Christian television, 1949-1959, with emphasis on three leading personalities; Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, Rex Humbard, and Oral Roberts.

## CHAPTER NOTES

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## CHAPTER TWO

### THE ELECTRONIC EVANGELISTS

Revivalism never disappeared from American culture, but after the glory days of Billy Sunday and the events of the Scopes trial, which involved the teaching of evolution, it subsided temporarily.<sup>1</sup> Billy Graham organized an effective evangelistic organization in the 1940's that received an unexpected boost in 1949 from newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst. Hearst's celebrated two-word editorial directive, "puff Graham," triggered a flurry of media attention bringing the youthful evangelist into the national limelight.

In 1950, Billy Graham decided to produce a weekly radio program, "Hour of Decision," a move that firmly linked nineteenth century urban revivalism to modern religious broadcasting. Almost immediately, he was preaching to the largest audience ever to hear a religious program. Within five years, his program aired on a thousand stations with an estimated audience of fifteen million.<sup>2</sup>

In 1951, Graham made another decision of paramount importance to his organization. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association began packaging his crusades for

the powerful new medium of television. This gave Graham even greater visibility and success and transformed evangelical religion into a mainstream phenomenon.

Graham's television sermons had a ring of patriotism, although never the bellicose "100 percent Americanism" of Billy Sunday in his later days. Still, while Graham eventually would repudiate his own involvement in politics, he set the stage for others to become even more deeply involved. Later history would record that both the latent and overt political messages of modern urban revivalists were to become a significant feature of religious broadcasting.

The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association modeled its crusades after the techniques of Finney, Moody, and Sunday: the engagement of local pastors and churches before the decision to conduct a crusade, advance-planning activities to arouse interest, top flight entertainment, celebrity guest appearances, appeals to the emotions, emphasis on the urgency of making a decision for Christ, and follow-up contacts. The Hearst boost gave Graham a competitive edge in access to evening prime-time television.

In spite of his reputation as the biggest and the grandest, Billy Graham was never particularly innovative. His worldwide crusades were originally filmed and edited for television. His programs changed very little in some



thirty-five years. Other contemporaries, on the other hand, went through as many as five major format overhauls.

At about the same time that Billy Graham decided to go on television, two itinerant evangelists from Arkansas and Oklahoma and a Catholic Archbishop from Illinois recognized the medium's potential for influencing millions of people. Bishop Fulton J. Sheen utilized a small production studio, with few props, to produce a weekly television program. Rex Humbard sold his tent and built a cathedral especially equipped for broadcasting. Oral Roberts brought television cameras into his Pentecostal revival tent. A new era was born. These four men played roles in the development of the electric church that parallel those of Finney, Moody, and Sunday in the development of urban evangelism. Building on the organizational principles that resulted in the institutionalization of urban revivalism, Graham, Sheen, Humbard, and Roberts created yet another institution--the electric church.

The pastors of this electric parachurch found that their predecessors' legacy--the publicity, the organization, the popularity and success of urban revivalism--was important not only in attracting souls to the Lord. It also brought in funds, enabling them to raise millions of dollars needed to purchase and operate the new electric technology.

This study emphasizes the television ministries from 1949-59 of three leading personalities; Bishop Fulton J.

Sheen, Rex Humbard, and Oral Roberts because they chose to produce a weekly television program sustained by donations or corporate sponsorship. Billy Graham's ministry to television, on the other hand, was a sporadic presentation based on the television "special" concept and was produced in various cities and countries where his evangelistic association had chosen to conduct crusades.

#### Bishop Fulton J. Sheen

One religious broadcaster who did not fit into any special category of the basic formats in religious television was Roman Catholic Bishop Fulton J. Sheen. Sheen's charisma and career were unusual in the life of the American Roman Catholic Church.<sup>3</sup>

He was the first to deliver a message from Radio City, New York, on the day of its opening. He also broadcast the first religious television program in New York when there were very few television sets in the entire city.<sup>4</sup>

Sheen began broadcasting in 1928 with a series of radio sermons over the popular radio station WLWL in New York. He continued as the regular speaker on the national "Catholic Hour" when the National Council of Catholic Men decided to sponsor the program on Sunday evenings in cooperation with the National Broadcasting Company. The inaugural broadcast took place on March 2, 1930.

The program, which began on a seventeen station network, was carried in 1950 by 118 NBC affiliates and by

short wave around the world, with an average weekly listening audience estimated at four million persons in the United States alone. Sheen frequently received as many as 6,000 letters a day from listeners, about a third of them non-Catholics. Several million copies of his radio talks were distributed. In 1940, Bishop Sheen conducted the first religious service ever to be telecast; the next year he served as narrator of the March of Time film, "The Story of the Vatican."<sup>5</sup>

Sheen, who was to become one of television's brightest stars, was introduced to the medium of television in the early 1950s. The refined, highly educated, and experienced radio speaker was not aiming to become a television star, but rather to introduce modern men and women to the basic principles of historic Catholicism. In contrast to other television programs of the period, Bishop Sheen's program ignored the Hollywood flourishes of music, scenic backgrounds, changing camera angles, and a large cast. Airing for thirty minutes a week, the program consisted almost entirely of Bishop Sheen's discussions on such subjects as personal responsibility or the value of church attendance.<sup>6</sup>

Sheen's national fame, as a speaker and personality, came through this national television program. He was approached by a commercial television network to present a regular television program with commercial sponsoring--to

compete commercially with other programs. The Church had nothing to do with the invitation, nor with sponsorship of the program.<sup>7</sup>

The program was entitled "Life Is Worth Living" and was televised, beginning in the Fall of 1951. By 1956, Sheen was appearing on 123 ABC television stations in the United States alone (not including Canada) and three hundred radio stations. It was estimated that he reached thirty million people each week. His "Life Is Worth Living" telecast claimed an audience of people of all faiths. He received as many as thirty thousand letters in one delivery, though normally, he averaged from eight thousand to ten thousand letters per day.<sup>8</sup>

The fee paid by the Admiral Corporation of \$26,000.00 per program was given to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith which originated the contract and used Bishop Sheen as its spokesman. The money derived from this contract, plus amounts received from viewers and listeners, was given to the world's poor for the building of hospitals, schools, and the furtherance of the communication of the world.<sup>9</sup>

After the initiation of the program Bishop Sheen decided he was no longer talking in the name of the church and under the sponsorship of its bishops. The new method of orientation had to be more ecumenical and directed to Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and all men of good will. A

reasoned approach was given to many subjects beginning with something that was common to the audience. Subjects ranged from communism, to art, to science, to humor, aviation, and war. He gradually proceeded from the known to the unknown into the moral and Christian philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Some program titles included "How Mothers Are Made", "Death of Stalin", "Fatigue", "Why Work Is Boring", "Freedom", "The Nurrian Lullaby of Coexistence", and "Why Do People Laugh?"<sup>11</sup>

One of the problems facing Sheen was whether a religious person could be sponsored commercially on television. A survey was made of radio and television editors throughout the country. All agreed, except Boston. Another problem was the matter of remuneration. It never became a problem to Bishop Sheen for he had resolved never to take anything from the income of the program.<sup>12</sup>

His only props were a chair, a blackboard, a table, and a Bible. Essentially it was the same presentation as his long-running radio program, but now there was the extra dimension of visual contact. Sometimes pacing the floor or spreading his arms wide, with the sleeves of his clerical gown falling dramatically into wing-like forms, Bishop Sheen spoke directly to the person watching, often flavoring his monologue with humorous anecdotes. At climactic moments he gazed silently at the viewer. His closing benediction was "God Loves you" as he would stand by a statue of the Virgin Mary.<sup>13</sup>

The only assistance he received throughout the program was from a single stagehand who cleaned the blackboard while it was off-camera. Sheen frequently referred to the cleanliness of the board when coming to use it again, attributing its cleanliness to an "angel," who became nationally famous.

The program was meticulously planned with Sheen spending about thirty hours each week preparing for the telecast. Days before the actual "live" broadcast he would present the talk to friends in Italian and French in order to clarify his comprehension of the subject. The actual program, however, was unrehearsed, partly because Sheen never used notes or a teleprompter and his remarks could not accurately be predicted.

No other religious program has ever gained such sustained commercial sponsorship and no other religious program has ever drawn the consistently high audience which Bishop Sheen attracted during his five-year series. His successes provided a model which was to be adopted by later fundamentalist broadcasters.<sup>14</sup> Sheen continued his weekly television program until 1966 when he became Bishop of Rochester, New York, ending his sixteen-year ministry on national television.

### Rex Humbard

When Time Magazine called Rex Humbard the "electronic evangelist" they had in mind his home base, the "Cathedral of Tomorrow", located in Akron, Ohio, which was designed and built with all the electronic devices necessary to fulfill one purpose: to produce and distribute evangelical television programs.<sup>15</sup>

At the age of thirteen, Rex Humbard was serving as a popular vocalist on his father's daily radio program that was being aired in the Akron, Ohio area.<sup>16</sup> As a teenager, Humbard was deeply influenced by a healing revival conducted by Evangelist Oral Roberts while in Mobile, Alabama. Subsequently, Humbard bought an old Roberts tent to launch his own ministry.<sup>17</sup>

In 1952, after sharing in a successful tent revival in Akron by his family, he decided to stay and to begin a church. With \$65.00 in his pocket, he asked Evangelist Kathryn Kuhlman, who had a large following in the area, to help him start his church. Humbard believed at first that he was harassed by the newspapers of Akron, but was welcomed by the city officials and proceeded to build his Cathedral of Tomorrow, a modern building with seating capacity of over eight thousand.<sup>18</sup>

The church was equipped as a major television production studio with hydraulic stage lights, an ample supply of Klieg lights, multiple television cameras with

cables hidden from public view, state-of-the-art audio equipment, stark red theatre seats for "television audience appeal" and a huge electronic cross suspended from the 220-foot domed roof measuring over eighty feet in length with more than 4,700 red, white, and blue lights capable of multiple color effects. A post production studio was located on the premises and used only when the worship services were not a "live" production. By the end of his first eighteen years as a television evangelist-pastor, the Sunday morning services were carried on a network of 310 television stations. The television time was contracted for with the individual stations and appeals were made during each broadcast for funds to pay for the television time and production costs.<sup>19</sup> From 1953 to 1969 Humbard was able to develop his program and financial support so that he was able to purchase air-time regularly on sixty-eight stations. In the following year, the number of stations carrying his program rose to 110, and an additional one hundred stations were added in each of the following two years. In just three years his purchasing capability and syndication quadrupled.<sup>20</sup>

The church services were structured to the interest of the television audience: sermons were preached that were easy to understand without notes, the use of popularly styled music was performed, doctrinal issues were never discussed publicly, all participants were required to



contribute by professional standards, the services were to be entertaining, and they were to be "spiritual."<sup>21</sup> The Cathedral of Tomorrow attracted communicants and adherents of over 2,800 family units in a short period of time noting that each television market was to pay for its local telecast after two years of support supplied by the congregation and other markets already self-supporting.

Of the four electric-church pioneers Graham, Sheen, Humbard, and Roberts--Rex Humbard was the most successful in mastering the art of personally communicating to each member of his audience.<sup>22</sup> He included his whole family in the act--wife, children, and grandchildren. They sang, read the Bible, and listened attentively to Humbard's stories and sermonettes. An entire generation grew up with the Humbards and, for many of them, the Humbard family was a part of their own--or they a part of the Humbard family.

Rex Humbard developed an audience that was intensely loyal. After several years of televising his ministry, the cost of air-time exceeded the revenues being received from an apparent shrinking audience. When it became evident that he couldn't pay, many television stations canceled his program. Almost without notice, Rex Humbard's long and illustrious television career passed from the scene of the electronic preachers.

## Oral Roberts

A strong element in the testimonies of all of the electronic evangelists is their humble beginnings. Oral Roberts began his life as a stuttering child of destitute parents. He overcame his stuttering, began ministering as a revivalist with a large tent, and later began a ministry in the media. Roberts became the leader of the deliverance revivalists in mass communications.

By the Summer of 1950, Roberts was preaching daily on eighty-five radio stations with an additional twenty-nine stations added by 1951. At the end of 1952, his network had increased to 175 stations, and by the end of 1953, over three hundred stations were carrying his daily program at a cost of \$250,000 per year.<sup>23</sup>

In 1951 Oral Roberts began to make his plans for a television ministry at the urging of fellow-evangelist Rex Humbard. A questionnaire was created and became a part of Robert's monthly magazine Healing Waters in which he asked his readers if they thought he should make such an expensive move to television. In 1952 he revealed a network of fifty television stations airing a thirty minute program would cost approximately a million dollars a year--a staggering sum for the minister who four years earlier had prayerfully borrowed \$15,000 to purchase a large tent for his crusade services.

Funds were needed for television and a wider saturation of his ministry into the local churches was also needed to expose this fast growing ministry to potential donors and sponsors. In 1952 Roberts made a film about his ministry, Venture of Faith, which was shown in hundreds of churches throughout the United States, Africa, the Philippines, and behind the Iron Curtain.<sup>24</sup> The response to the film and Robert's introduction to an even wider audience gave added impetus to his desire to televise the crusades under the "big top." The rationale espoused among his associates, as well as Roberts himself, was that television would someday overshadow radio. They reasoned that television could be used as a means of "follow-up" to the many converts being counted in the nightly crusade services.

After three years of planning, the first television program was premiered on January 10, 1954, on sixteen stations. Other stations were added as time became available and pledges of support were received by the ever-growing audience. The initial programming was produced by filming in a studio. Roberts felt the audience was not receiving the "real power and impact of the deliverance ministry."<sup>25</sup> An investigation began as to the possibilities of televising the crusades "live." A contract was agreed upon with an independent production company and in February of 1955 the first "live" service was televised. Mechanical and technical difficulties plagued the production. Some of

the worshippers felt it was sacrilegious to bring television cameras into the tent cathedral. Evangelist Roberts urged his followers to ignore the cameras and worship as usual that the true spirit of the crusade service could be captured for the television viewing audience.

By mid-1955, the program was being seen on ninety-one domestic and two foreign stations. The program was viewed in only three of the major television markets in the United States that included Los Angeles, Washington D.C. and New York City. Three years later the network had grown to 136 stations.<sup>26</sup>

Special financing for the payment of television time came by way of a plan proposed by Roberts to his viewers, the worshippers under the tent, and those who read his magazine Healing Waters. To his readers he would list the available stations and their rates and tell them the markets could only be penetrated by immediate sponsorship--through donations. He coined the term "Blessing Pact" that suggested to the people they could make a monthly pledge for the support of the television ministry to be paid over the period of one year. Supporters responded to this method of fund-raising and the "Blessing Pact Partners Group" became a reality. Testimonials of "partners" were often used during the telecast to encourage others to join this special "partnership group."

Roberts was a controversial figure, largely because of his belief in Divine Healing, and eventually was refused air time on the major networks. Undaunted, Roberts continued on non-network stations, televising testimonies of people who affirmed they had been healed by prayer and faith.

Later, Roberts was to change his style of ministry from the hustings of the tent revival televised for his network of stations to a continuance of his radio ministry and a new concept of television ministry. The new television program was to include an hour-long program consisting of bright contemporary music, attractive young people, a fast pace, superb technical quality, a well-known nationally recognized personality as a special guest, and a Bible-centered message from Evangelist Roberts. The "Oral Roberts and You" program was destined to become the top-ranking syndicated religious program in the United States.<sup>27</sup>

In comparison with more traditional programs, these three leading religious television personalities emerged with totally different formats. Their fund-raising methods never appeared to be copied. A sense of competition by the three for viewers or financial income was never detected by the viewing audience. Subliminally, if not directly, there appeared to be emulation of each fellow evangelist. They were able to build an organization, produce for television, and establish an audience to teach and preach their respective religious views. There was room at the top for

several dominant personalities at one time promulgating the Gospel.

### Selling the Image

Ernest Dichter, generally acknowledged as the father of image advertising, advised one of his associates that the "best technique for selling is to paint for the customer a total picture of the kind of person he would like to be, and then make him believe your product is a necessary part of that picture."<sup>28</sup> For this reason automobile advertisements display their product in the most unlikely places--on glistening beaches or in verdant meadows, all traces of tire tracks erased. The beautiful part of image advertising is that the audience can be aware of its use yet still be affected by it. Catching on to the gimmick does not make us immune to the infection. Despite our most rationally disapproving selves, we lust after the image in the picture.

The Christian media, in its early years, like the rest of the culture, deliberately began to use the same techniques. Driven by a laudable response to the call of the Great Commission, ministers began to use the most effective model for communication they knew--image advertising. The success of this approach in the succeeding decades of tele-evangelism has made old-fashioned defenses and proofs of Christianity look like an archaeological oddity. America learned not to spell out "Jesus Saves" with whitewashed rocks on the side of the road. Ministers

decided that the approach was not only embarrassing backward but ineffective. Instead, bit by bit, object by object, the picture of the Christian, no longer with Bunyan's backpack and staff, but in a basketball uniform, or a three-piece executive suit, was put before America--by way of television.<sup>29</sup> The first decade of Christian television became experimental in attempting to sell Christ to our culture, and was called evangelism or making the gospel relevant to our world. In either case the basic premise of presentation was to "create interest."

#### The Beginning of Image Building

Bishop Sheen's program was ecumenical in its content, ranging over a broad spread of subjects, though the fact that he was a bishop of the Roman Catholic Church was continually apparent to viewers because of his priestly garb and cape. Interest in this ministry was maintained by Sheen's meticulous planning, vocal variety, eye contact with a single camera, gesture, excellent posture, relevance of his content, and the dynamic of his authoritative personality. His program began with orchestra background and with a deep-voiced announcer identifying the program with a "bed" of applause under the voice. Entering from stage left, Bishop Sheen worked on a stage at least ten feet deep. With Roman columns, symmetrically placed to form a "frame" within which to work, he would move within that perimeter--back and forth to his chalkboard--to illustrate

his points. Simple camera techniques were used making it apparent there was only one camera used for production purposes. The audio had a slight echo indicating the use of a microphone on a boom that helped to create accoustical problems existed in the small studio used for production.<sup>30</sup>

It was the selling of the image--the man himself--that helped Sheen to draw a competitive share of the evening television audience. Many bars turned on their television sets to his program; taxi drivers would stop work for a half-hour in order to watch. A blind couple in Minneapolis bought an Admiral television set to express gratitude to the sponsor of his program.<sup>31</sup> Making converts to his program and building his image included published pictures of Sheen with Pope Pius XII, with Milton Berle and Mayor Vincent Impellitteri of New York at a telethon, with comedian George Gobel at the Sylvania Television Awards Foundation dinner in New York City, and with Ed Sullivan for the Look Award Ceremonies in 1956. This eloquent spokesman for Catholicism, who provided a model for many broadcasters to follow, yet chose to "create interest" by association. The content of his ministry condensed to a half-hour each week was sufficient for thousands who comprised his audience. The Bishop apparently felt there must be the "selling of the image" and used public exposure outside the production studio to accomplish this.



### The Paternalistic Image

Within twenty-eight minutes and thirty seconds, Rex Humbard projected a paternalistic image to his viewing audience. Beginning in the early 1950s, Humbard put his family on the program and spoke as the head of this family while addressing the personal needs of viewers. The strategy reinforced his own credibility as a respectable and authoritative man. He asked his viewers to join the "prayer key family." In the form of electronic news gathering (ENG), he would show viewers alone--widows without families, mothers writing to children--evoking a sense of fatherly concern for the viewer. The program contained basically three parts approximately ten minutes of singing, ten minutes of preaching, and the remaining time for money appeals. Multiple cameras were used; the lighting was excellent as was the audio. The church, The Cathedral of Tomorrow, built by Humbard with a national television ministry in mind, was constructed as no other with stage and lighting "made for television." The red and black opera seats and clergy pews offered extreme contrasts for the television camera to record.

Humbard, his wife, and children were the stars of the program. A close relative served as announcer introducing Humbard. Camera switching was rapid as "full-shots," "close-ups," and "profiles" were used to expose the vocalist or quartet of singers to the television audience without due

consideration to the congregation present--sometimes numbering as many as five thousand. Humbard, in his messages, spoke little about doctrinal issues. He addressed problems of old age and loneliness. He never mentioned social or governmental issues.<sup>32</sup>

The paid-time religious broadcasters, such as Humbard, originally rejected the concept of an electric church, but functionally appeared to be promoting the concept.<sup>33</sup> Once a year Humbard presented a televised communion service and invited all in their homes to participate. He frequently referred to himself as "your television pastor." As a broadcaster he did not claim to replace the local church, but the images used and activities engaged indicated an effort to present himself as equivalent to the local church. This was all accomplished by using the medium of television--omitting personal appearances and published photographs with Hollywood stars. Humbard proposed a "health and wealth" theology, one which promotes the idea that God blesses those who are faithful to Him by giving them good health and material success.

With experienced producers and technical assistants Rex Humbard produced the first "variety-show" centered about his family and became an expert fund-raiser through his "home-spun" ideas. Image expansion to Rex Humbard came in the form of continual expansion in domestic as well as foreign

markets where he proclaimed the message that he was "television pastor to all."

### Beginning the Hollywood Image

The setting was a huge canvass tent erected in Cincinnati, Ohio. Five thousand people were in attendance. The two television cameras are in place with people eagerly awaiting the announcement by business-manager Bob DeWeese: "It is my happy privilege and pleasure to present to you God's man of faith and power--Oral Roberts." To the applause of the audience, Oral Roberts stepped from behind a screen lining the rear of a long and narrow wooden platform and began his ministry. He was the announced faith healer with fire, drama, and passion in his voice and actions. From time to time he had trouble with the single camera in front of him. He slipped into preaching to the audience and forgot the camera full-face. Someone cued him to focus forward--startled and momentarily disconcerted. This was the Oral Roberts now taking it "live" to the people under the big tent. The final production produced two images--Roberts looking at the people and, with an additional camera at the back of the platform, the congregation looking at Roberts. Little imagination was used to produce what became a standard three-part program that included preaching, a segment showing him praying for the sick, and the money appeal with special offers of gifts for sending a contribution.<sup>34</sup>

Oral Roberts was often seen on screen with a close-up shot, broad shoulders, single-breasted suit, slick hair, and with the microphone in his face. The audio portion became distorted as he would hold the microphone to his face and scream or shout to the crowd.

A new style of religious television had been revealed. From the smooth flow of wands from Bishop Sheen in a studio, to the giant auditorium of a church with ultra-modern television equipment showing the family of Rex Humbard, to the sawdust trail of Oral Roberts, tele-evangelism continued in its metamorphosis. Roberts eventually carried his ministry to the sophisticated sets, religious "specials", and guest star appearances.

Oral Roberts advocated the concept of "Seed Faith Offerings" to underwrite his paid-time television program. Additional markets added on a regular basis and the development of sophisticated computer technology and application in the late 1950's gave these tele-evangelists the tools they needed for handling larger volumes of personal mail and for solicitation of funds from the viewers. This support system, built by Roberts, became second to none and even compared with some of the premier corporations in America. What was once a presentation of conservative theology became sensationalized, to present images of luxury, affluence, success and grandeur, to entertain, to cater to their viewers' self-interest and

consumerism which had been cultivated by commercial television. These paid-time broadcasters therefore extended the evangelical movement, being those who popularized it within terms familiar to most Americans, the terms of television-land.

## CHAPTER NOTES

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- <sup>6</sup>St. Bernard's Seminary Library, The Archbishop Fulton John Sheen Archives, Rochester, New York, Life Is Worth Living Television Series, Dumont Television Network, Lists of 1st through 5th Series of Program Titles, 1.
- <sup>7</sup>Horsfield, Religious Television, An American Experience, 7.
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- <sup>10</sup>Sheen, Treasure in Clay, 72.
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- <sup>13</sup>Transcript of "Life Is Worth Living", Program entitled "How To Think", 1954.
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- <sup>17</sup>David Edwin Harrell, Jr., All Things Are Possible (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1975), 192.
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- <sup>19</sup>Rex Humbard, interview by Ron Wilson, 1973.
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- <sup>23</sup>Harrell, Jr., All Things Are Possible, 45.
- <sup>24</sup>Oral Roberts, My Twenty Years of a Miracle Ministry (Tulsa: Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association, 1966), 22.
- <sup>25</sup>Ibid, 20.
- <sup>26</sup>Harrell, Jr., All Things Are Possible, 45.

- <sup>27</sup>Wendy Marquardt, Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Paid Television, (Television/Radio Age, March 28, 1977), 79.
- <sup>28</sup>Sally Helgeren, "Virtue Rewarded", Harper's, May, 1978, 23.
- <sup>29</sup>Virginia Stern Owens, Selling Jesus In The Modern Age (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 28.
- <sup>30</sup>Bishop Sheen, World Mission Aid Society Television Program, Summer, 1954, videocassette.
- <sup>31</sup>Sheen, Treasure in Clay, 64.
- <sup>32</sup>Rex Humbard, "The Old Time Gospel Hour", Akron, Ohio, April, 1953, videocassette.
- <sup>33</sup>Horsfield, Religious Television, An American Experience, 56.
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## CHAPTER THREE

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to analyze the first decade of Christian television, 1949-1959, and attempt to answer several questions. Questions included:

- 1) What was the major impetus that caused dominance of thought that America was to evangelize the world?
- 2) Originally, was there competition for the new found television audience by the tele-evangelists?
- 3) Was there strong debate over format?
- 4) Was the "Christian Spectacular" used in the first decade, and, if so, with what effect?
- 5) Did "electronic education" enter into the minds of the tele-evangelists in the early years?
- 6) What personalities emerged as the leading tele-evangelists and how did they present themselves?

The method employed in research was to give an historical perspective of the first decade of Christian television. The analysis was based on research of historical documents and books related to the era and on actual video programs reviewed and assimilated with relation

to the most visible of the tele-evangelists who produced programs on a regular basis.

The design of the perspective was divided into three categories that included the origin of Christian television broadcasting, three of the leading electric evangelists, and basic critique relative to their programing.

### CONCLUSION

In the early 1900's a theological division occurred in American Christianity. The "modernists" and the "conservatives" espoused divergent views on many points of doctrine and lifestyle. The conservatives closed ranks discovering they had a large following and began to seek avenues to express their fundamentalistic views. The conservative Evangelicals experienced a new sense of mission believing they had a mandate to evangelize the world. From this mandate emerged parachurch ministries with one goal in mind--to evangelize the globe. Television became one of the tools to advance their cause that received the attention of the entire country. The medium became a springboard to launch obscure ministers into the national limelight.

Competition, at least in the public domain, was not considered a factor in the embryonic stage of the electronic church. The first decade of Christian television was a time of social trauma, unrest, and confusion.<sup>1</sup> The Civil Rights movement was gaining in momentum, the Vietnam war was to involve America, and our national leadership was

threatened. The social situation of the period created a need for clear leadership and unambiguous answers to social and religious questions.<sup>2</sup> The conservative Evangelicals presented an image of strength, competent leadership, and management. Evangelical television helped to unify this movement and gave it visibility as a growing alternative. In return, the evangelical community was found to be more generous in contributions than the older established denominational churches. A marriage resulted causing paid-time broadcasters a bonanza of financial support in a short period of time.

Bishop Sheen did not need this support because his program was sustained commercially. He was a lecturer and teacher--far removed from the styles of Humbard and Roberts. After two years of broadcasting, Humbard encouraged Roberts to join the elite group acknowledging there was room at the top for more. The ministries were so different it would seem incredible to believe they could compete and demand a greater share of an audience that was growing throughout America as television, in general, expanded.

In the first decade, the three major players in ministry maintained a somewhat bland approach in appealing to the mass audience. Bishop Sheen never varied from the lecture method of communication. He used the same set, relied upon a small production crew, and depended upon his great ability to communicate, using his uncanny intelligence

and dynamic personality. Rex Humbard produced "The Old Time Gospel Hour" from the Cathedral of Tomorrow without variance. By featuring his family in music and maintaining the position as program speaker, he held firm control. The red and black opera seats wore thin, yet the format remained the same. Oral Roberts was the only player who made a format change. He removed himself from the studio and into the tent cathedral where the audience applauded as he was introduced and the camera would scan the faces of the faithful followers. Later, after the first decade, Roberts would change from the drab canvas tent to the sound stage with singers good enough for secular television, prime-time specials, celebrity guests, and with a style now to be avuncular. Debate over format never surfaced among the leading Christian broadcasters. The debate may have been in the minds of the secular world.

The "Christian Spectacular" did not occur until the second decade of Christian broadcasting when Oral Roberts decided to "create interest" by purchasing prime-time slots for a full hour of Christian entertainment and ministry. His programs featured taped highlights of the building of his evangelistic headquarters and university with an appeal to viewers to help by contributing to the one-hundred million dollar project. Ministries in the first decade were struggling to maintain their market share while attempting

to increase coverage on Sunday mornings to move cities. The TV special seemed somewhat remote.

The idea of "electronic education" was first offered by some of the mainline denominations including the Southern Baptists and the Seventh Day Adventists. Theoretically, church leaders felt this type of ministry would be the only kind that would sustain itself. They were proven to be incorrect. The only "electronic education" to be seen on a national scale during the first decade was the ABC-TV series entitled "I Believe" with theologians discussing religion. It was short-lived. The weekly lecture series by Bishop Sheen was the only program with somewhat of a teaching content to be sustained during the entire decade. The other main tele-evangelists saw themselves as "preachers" with the mission of saving the lost souls of men.

Billy Graham, Bishop Sheen, Rex Humbard, and Oral Roberts formed the outstanding quartet of main-line tele-evangelists as Christian television made its way into the American home. This study has emphasized the latter three because of their status as weekly participants in sustained television programming. All three saw themselves as "preachers." They were concerned for the souls of men and presented a strong desire to add to the faithful. They presented themselves as independent thinkers, strikingly different personalities, with enormous egos, and a strong desire to succeed. The modern electric ministries were

direct descendants of earlier parachurch ministries that had been established--in both organizational form and sustance. Charles Finney, Dwight Moody, and Billy Sunday each made separate contributions to the growth of the parachurch phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> Finney developed theory and rationale for mass evangelism. Moody turned Finney's principles into routine techniques. Sunday was the showman but also the shrewd administrator.

The electric church and the multibillion dollar enterprise of tele-evangelism did not arrive overnight. Television preaching had organizational and strategic roots more than two centuries ago.

It is interesting to note that in the very first decade of Christian television in America, these ideas and concepts of mass evangelism exploded on the scene in the presence of Sheen, Humbard, and Roberts. The strident messages and flamboyant personalities of these men contributed to the stereotyping of all religious broadcasters. The Elmer Cantry stereotype made a spectacular transition from canvas tents and sawdust flow to television studios and sound stages. Only time will tell how far the message and messenger may go.

## CHAPTER NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Peter G. Horsfield, Religious Television (New York: Longman Publishing House, 1984), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Jeffrey Hadden and Anson Shupe, Television, Power and Politics on God's Frontier (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988), p. 44.

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