

THE TV CHURCH

By W. Robert Godfrey

What is the 'electronic church'? If you turn on your TV, you will find a variety of religious broadcasting, from Roman Catholic masses to traditional Presbyterian services to charismatic talk shows. Some of these programmes are rather amateurish local broadcasts of local worship services. Others are sophisticated and expensive programmes syndicated all over the world. Some of these programmes are produced by honest, earnest people trying to be helpful to others. Others seem to have questionable messages and methods. In one sense, all these programmes are part of the electronic church.

Usually, though, 'electronic church' is used to refer to those programmes distributed beyond a single local area and supported by the contributions of viewers. For the purposes of this article, the 'electronic church' will refer to any TV broadcast that becomes a central part of the religious experience and practice of its viewers.

My concern here is to argue that the electronic church at its best can only be a religious supplement in the life of the Christian. There are indeed many useful supplements for Christians today, including Christian bookstores, radio stations, and a host of local, national and international organizations for various educational, evangelistic and welfare goals. But the purpose of this article is to maintain that all those supplements must remain subordinate to and supportive of the Christian's commitment to the local church.

The necessity of the local church is clearly taught in Scripture and is indispensable for the Christian life. Before we critique the idea of an 'electronic church', we should understand the nature of the institutional church.

The Institutional Church

God has a great redemptive purpose in the world. He intends to save a people from the judgment and wrath to come and has sent his son, Jesus, into the world to fulfil all righteousness and to die for sinners that such people might be redeemed. God's saving work, however, is not concerned with individuals in isolation. Rather, God is redeeming a people whom he calls the Body of Christ, the church: *And God placed all things under [Jesus'] feet and appointed him to be head over everything in every way* (Ephesians 1:22-23).

What is this church about which the Scriptures speak so highly? In the Bible, the word 'church' is used in two ways. The first meaning refers to the universal or organic church—all believers in all times who are united to each other and reconciled to God by their union with Christ. The second usage refers to the institutional expressions of that universal church.

Many Christians today seem to assume that all God requires is a relationship to the universal church that occurs automatically for the believer. In other words, it is often said 'the church is people'. Hence, belonging to the church means belonging to Christ, not to an institution. That, however, is not true. The Bible is clear that Christians are also required to be part of the institutional church's life, particularly the life of the local church, which God himself has brought into being and structured by his Word.

God's structuring of the local church began with the apostles. Jesus chose from among his disciples twelve apostles. (Luke 6:12-16) He sent them like the prophets of old to preach God's Word. (Luke 11:49) These apostles—specially chosen leaders who had been eyewitnesses to Jesus' life (Acts 1:21-25)—became the foundation of the life of the new church, and their teachings were authoritative for the church (Ephesians 2:20). The apostles were not the only officers appointed in the earliest church. In Ephesians 4:11 there is mention of pastors and teachers, and in Acts 14:23 the Apostle Paul is described appointing elders in each church he founded. In 1 Timothy 3 Paul gives qualifications for the offices of overseer and deacon.

It is clear that the apostles themselves established two or three officers as continuing positions of leadership and authority in the life of the church. Those officers have important responsibilities for the Christian community given to them by the Lord through the apostles. Look, for example, at the solemn charge Paul gave to the Ephesian elders concerning their care for the church at Ephesus. Elders are to guard the flock as a shepherd protects the sheep from the wolves (Acts 20:28-29). They have hard work to do to protect the weak (Acts 20:35). The danger is real, sometimes arising from within the church itself. The officers of the church are able to nip false teaching in the bud because of their official role in the church.

The care Christ and the apostles took to provide us with officers and an institutional church should make a great impression on us. Christ and his apostles established an institutional church to help us in our need and weakness. Elders are appointed for our sakes, and we need to submit ourselves to their authority in the local church if we are to be obedient to the Lord and his vision of the Christian life.

Submission to elders is closely tied to the question of church membership. Some people today object to the idea that Christians must be church members, suggesting that such a requirement is unbiblical. But surely Christ established eldership in his church. Elders are necessary to teach and admonish and discipline us. But how can elders carry out that work unless we submit to them? What is church membership but to join our local congregation and submit to the elders' authority? To be sure, elders are not infallible. Sometimes they can deviate. Indeed, they have, from time to time, been known to leave the faith entirely. But the fact that some elders are unreliable does not eliminate our responsibility to find godly elders and submit to them.

The subject of the authority of pastors and elders, and church membership, is closely related to the matter of church discipline. Discipline is not a popular topic today. Parents may talk regretfully of a lack of discipline among the young, but many parents are short on willingness to insist on discipline at home or to support it in the schools. Adults in our society often fail to discipline themselves. Think of the misuse of drugs or alcohol, the high divorce rate, and irresponsibility on the job, to name only a few. In such a society, church discipline has almost disappeared. Churches often are so eager to attract people that they make very few demands upon them.

But the Bible teaches the importance of a disciplined church life. After all, the church is a hospital for sinners. Its members are going to continue sinning, even though they are Christians. They need the support and discipline of older and wiser Christians as they mature in their faith. Setting aside responsibility in the interest of independence is no more healthful for growing Christians than for growing children. Of course, there is Christian liberty, and the church cannot command the conscience where Christ has freed it. Nevertheless it can and must care for the flock in the way its Chief Shepherd has prescribed.

Jesus taught that when informal attempts to handle problems among Christians have failed, the church must proceed formally, even to the point of expelling someone from the church (Matthew 18:15-18). There are examples of this in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 5:17, 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15). The hope in such discipline is to restore the sinner to the Lord and to the church by repentance (2 Corinthians 2:58). But if that does not happen, at least the church has been protected and purified from scandalous and unrepentant behaviour.

Many people do not like the idea of a disciplined church. They believe they should be able to do whatever is right in their own eyes. Such an attitude reflects the militant individualism of our society. But it does not reflect Christ's teaching about the life of his church. Proper discipline by the officers of the church is necessary for the well being of individual Christians as well as for the church as a whole. Such discipline can take place only in the context of membership in a local church.

Christ's structuring of the church is not limited to offices and discipline. Christ also directs the church as to its life and worship. From its earliest days after Pentecost, the church gathered with eagerness and devotion (Acts 2:42). When some became negligent in worship and fellowship, a stern warning was issued: *Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-and all the more as you see the Day approaching* (Hebrews 10:25). This warning stresses Christian worship as one source of the encouragement needed to lead the Christian life faithfully.

The Worshiping Community

Space does not permit a full look at the teaching in the New Testament on the way in which the church should worship. But it is essential to reflect on one text that relates worship to the priority of the local church. That text is Acts 2:41-42: *Those who accepted [Peter's] message were baptized and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.* This text promotes at least four elements of worship: the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the sacraments, and prayer.

The Apostles' Teaching

The first element is the apostles' teaching. Those early believers had the opportunity to hear the apostles themselves as they taught and directed the lives of the new converts and those growing into Christian maturity. Today the church finds the teaching of the apostles faithfully recorded in the Bible. It is in the study and preaching of the Bible that the contemporary church has access to that authoritative teaching of the apostles. That is why,

historically, the reading and preaching of the Word of God has been such an important part of Christian worship. That is also why Christians have devoted so much time and energy to establishing colleges and seminaries. They have wanted well-educated pastors who could responsibly teach them the Scriptures.

Is the teaching of the Bible one area where the electronic church can do the job of the local church? Surely television can provide instruction in the Bible. But it would be a good test to measure on any given religious broadcast how much time is actually spent in preaching or teaching the Bible. On too many programs, entertainment and fund-raising greatly diminish the time spent in God's Word.

Even if the Bible is taught on a TV programme, how is the listener to evaluate the reliability of what is taught? There are many programmes that undermine or reject the teachings of the believer's local church. Many televangelists mock the institutional church – it is clear that cynicism is the dominant attitude toward the institutional church among many leading televangelists. There are also programs where outright heresy is taught under the name 'Christianity'. Who monitors and evaluates these programmes and their teaching? How can the Christian be sure that what is taught is not blatantly or subtly undermining the faith? Surely it is the responsibility of the local church and its officers to ensure that God's people are fed apostolic truth. Once again we see the necessity of the local church and how, at best, the electronic church can only supplement the local church's ministry.

Even if the electronic church gives good time to reliable teaching of the Word, it still cannot effectively fill the shoes of the local church. The church can see to the pastoral preaching of the Word – the teaching of Scripture applied to the particular needs of the local group of believers. However faithful a televangelist may be, he cannot know the special direction that a particular local church may need to take, in the way a faithful pastor can. The encouragement to good works of which Hebrews 10 speaks takes place uniquely in the local community. Devotion to the apostles' teaching best takes place in the local church.

Fellowship

The second element mentioned in Acts 2 is fellowship. The word 'fellowship' here is *koinonia*, which means sharing in common. It means being together and participating together in various concerns and activities. It means hearing and responding to the Word together. It means supporting one another in prayer. It means sharing financial resources to provide for the poor and to accomplish the work of the church. The central form of fellowship is found in the public worship of God. As we join our voices, hearts, ears and minds together, fellowship takes place in the highest degree.

Can the electronic church provide such fellowship? At first glance, some may think so. People from all around the country are united in hearing the same songs and sermons. TV as a medium seems to be personal, immediate and intimate. The speaker can seem close and concerned. But is this really the fellowship that our text describes? There is no human contact with fellow believers. The TV preacher cannot possibly meet his viewers on a personal, immediate, intimate level, since he has no personal contact with them. Once again, TV may supplement the fellowship of the church, but it cannot be a substitute for it.

The Sacraments

The sacraments constitute the third element. For many Christians today, the sacraments are not a central, vital part of Christian life. They may believe that the sacraments are peripheral to Christianity, but if they want to be biblical, they must hold the sacraments in high esteem. The Bible clearly makes the sacraments an important, even necessary, element of Christian experience.

Luke tells us, for example, that when Peter finished his Pentecost sermon, his listeners asked what they had to do to be saved. Peter gave a two-fold answer: *Repent and be baptized* (Acts 2:38). The apostles regularly linked the inner response of faith and repentance to the outward act of baptism, as the beginning of the Christian life.

The brief summary of Christian devotion in Acts 2:42 includes *the breaking of bread*. That expression can mean nothing more than having a meal together, but in this reliable context it surely means the unique breaking of bread that Christians share in the Lord's Supper. When our Lord instituted the Supper, he commanded the church: *Do this*. (Luke 22:17-20) Paul gave careful direction to a church on how this sacrament must be observed for spiritual benefit (1 Corinthians 10, 11).

Can the electronic church administer the sacraments? Some TV ministers readily admit that they cannot administer Holy Communion over the airwaves. There certainly can be no proper supervision of the sacraments over television, nor can there be genuine fellowship. After reading the apostle's warnings in 1 Corinthians 10 and 11, I cannot imagine any

evangelist having the courage to offer the Holy Supper via television. Yet Pat Robertson, Oral Roberts, and Paul Crouch are among those who have offered Communion over the airwaves. In fact, Roberts has sent packets of Communion wafers to his donors to be taken during a telecast. This is sacrilege! Most TV preachers either implicitly or explicitly minimize and trivialize the importance of the sacraments. But the Scriptures make baptism and the Lord's Supper indispensable to any church, and without them such a ministry is incomplete. Again we see the necessity of the local church.

Prayer

The final element mentioned in Acts 2 is prayer. All Christians recognize the importance of prayer, of personal and corporate communication with God. Prayer is one way in which the Christian cultivates a living relationship with God. In the worship at the local church, significant time is spent in prayers of adoration, confession, thanksgiving and intercession.

Can the electronic church lead Christians in prayer? There is again the problem of what it means to pray with a videotape. There is also the problem of how such prayer can be personal and particular. Some programmes have tried to solve that problem by having viewers send in cards with prayer requests. But is it genuine intercessory prayer for a preacher to put his hands on thousands of cards and just ask God to grant those requests? That is not true prayer but is more like spinning a prayer wheel or lighting candles and calling it prayer. Further, since all believers are priests, there is more benefit in having a fellow Christian intercede personally on one's behalf than to send a card to a preacher. A TV celebrity preacher is no closer to God than one's Christian neighbour. In fact, quite the contrary conclusion might sometimes be drawn.

Beyond the problems of praying over television is the question of how much time is spent in prayer on TV programmes. In reality, very little effort is given to prayer on TV because prayer is not the kind of activity (dare I say entertainment?) that broadcasts well. Once again we see that prayer that carefully, thoughtfully, and intimately communicates with God is not possible on TV, but is part of the ministry of the local church.

The Attractive Church

If the biblical case for the local church is so strong, why are so many people attracted to the electronic church? The TV Church is so attractive because it fits many cultural characteristics. It serves the search for the easy, the individualistic, and the interesting.

Easy

The electronic church is easy. It requires no more effort than turning on the TV. It does not require the discipline of getting dressed, driving somewhere, and arriving on time. Since some religious broadcasts are available at many different times throughout the week, one is not required to set aside Sunday as the day of worship. Almost any time will do. There is no pressure to attend meetings or to undertake any of the tasks necessary to maintain a local church.

In many ways 'easy' can also mean shallow. It's easy to grasp the music and message of the electronic church because it is so shallow. The tunes are often insipid, and the lyrics are usually centred on human emotions rather than on divine attributes and actions (which inspire genuinely human emotions). The message does not often stimulate the mind to reflect on anything profound. Immediate emotion rather than gradual growth in grace seems to be its goal.

The easy church is often the undisciplined church. The pursuit of genuine holiness is a life-long, arduous task. It is not easy. Holiness easily attained is easily lost. Religion that feeds immediate emotional gratification will encourage immediate gratification of other appetites as well. Financial and sexual scandals are the logical outcomes of such religion.

Individualistic

The electronic church is individualistic. America, especially since the 60's, has greatly stressed the rights and prerogatives of the individual. Linked to that concern for the individual has come a distrust of institutions. Institutions are often seen as the bastion of hypocrisy, bureaucracy, and opposition to the individual's freedom. The church has doctrines and ethical requirements and services that interfere with the individual's freedom of thought and action. The electronic church provides an ideal alternative. The viewer says, 'I can watch the show that says what I want to hear

and that encourages (or at least tolerates by its silence) my life-style. I do not have to participate in any genuinely human communal life. I can just do my own thing.'

Interesting

The electronic church is interesting. Perhaps the most common charge brought against the local church is that it is boring. The TV church, by contrast, is fast-paced, exciting, and engaging. It has attractive people and personalities, professional music and effective communicators.

Probably the single word that most viewers believe best describes the broadcasts is 'inspirational'. But what does it mean to be 'inspired'? It is a feeling of being moved religiously. What determines the genuineness of inspiration? What separates inspiration from entertainment? Perhaps the dividing line can be described this way: Genuine inspiration is an emotional response to a genuine encounter with the living God. Inspiration, therefore, is not an end in itself or even something we should seek. It is rather a result of seeking and meeting God in his way. Inspiration is the result of something profoundly God-centred. Entertainment is profoundly man-centred. In entertainment one looks for pleasure.

Entertainment emotionally gratifies the viewer. Whether it pleases God may be quite a secondary matter. Error can inspire. It can make people feel good, though it displeases and angers God. The electronic church too often is in the entertainment, not inspiration, business. One is more likely to meet and be moved by singers and personalities than by God. To mask the quality of their programmes with the ambiguous term inspiration is dishonest.

One of the great tragedies of our time is that so many local churches are choosing to try to copy the electronic church. Many local churches are seeking to be attractive by emulating some of the easy, individualistic, and interesting features of the electronic church. This strategy is self-defeating because usually the local church cannot match the professional production and slick graphics of television. But more important, the strategy dishonours God by failing to be what he wants the local church to be.

The local church will fail to teach in depth, or discipline, or spend time in prayer. It will lose touch with the great hymns of praise. It may adopt a style of worship that contradicts the reverence before God that Scripture commands (Hebrews 12:28). The local church is a divine institution that has fallen on hard times, and it must once again learn to devote the greatest care to pleasing God and serving him according to his Word.

The Successful Church

Frequently, the electronic church is defended on the basis that it is, after all, successful. That attitude is a beautiful summary of pragmatism, but it must not be applied to religion. Truth is not established by majority vote, and the religion with the largest number of adherents is not necessarily true. It is especially ironic when Protestants accept such pragmatism, since on that basis we should all be Roman Catholics.

Yet, the argument often runs, the electronic church is not just successful in terms of numbers of viewers and funds raised, but is also successful in evangelism. For many Christians that is the ultimate test of success. Is not the Great Commission of our Lord (Matthew 28:18-20) a charge that makes evangelism the most important responsibility of all Christians?

Without a doubt some people have been evangelised by the electronic church. The number actually converted, however, is difficult to determine. It seems that most of the viewers of televangelism already consider themselves Christians. On a purely pragmatic basis, one might ask if the millions of dollars spent of TV time and production costs could produce more effective results if they were invested in home and foreign missions. Someone might respond by saying that without television those millions would not have been raised. That may be true. But if it is true, it probably means that money was raised more by entertainment than out of genuine concern for evangelism. And that brings us back to the basic question of what the electronic church is really all about.

It is not enough, however, to examine these questions from a purely pragmatic point of view. Again, we must ask about the biblical guidelines. What does the Great Commission really say? It certainly begins with a challenge: 'Go!' Christians need always to be reminded of their responsibility to look beyond the saving message of Jesus Christ. But in their 'going', Christians are not just to evangelise-if by 'evangelise' we mean some minimal communication about Jesus and some minimal

response. Our Lord said we are to 'make disciples'. We are to lead people into life-long commitment to learn from and follow the Lord Jesus Christ. The electronic church cannot make the personal contact necessary to discipleship.

The Great Commission itself specifies what the discipleship entails. It first mentions, 'baptizing them'. The initial phase of instruction in the gospel and response with faith and repentance culminates in baptism in the missionary setting. Baptism represents not only the promise of God to wash away sin, but the sinner's commitment to look to Jesus alone as his Saviour. Baptism is a public break with the old life.

For many, the drama and central importance of baptism may seem foreign to their experience. But they should listen to the missionaries' stories from places where it is fine to 'believe' whatever you want about Jesus as long as you are not baptized. Once baptized, however, family, friends and perhaps the government see you as one who has rejected his own religion and culture. Baptism is a powerful testimony to the unique claims of Jesus to be the Way, the Truth and Life. One is not truly a disciple, is not truly evangelised, until that kind of commitment. Evangelism includes incorporation into the church.

Second, The Great Commission specifies that making disciples involves *teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*. (Matthew 28:20) Here again we see nothing minimal about genuine evangelism. Evangelism is not a matter of rousing songs and repetitious, but empty, references to Jesus. Our Lord wants us to be carefully and deeply instructed, and he wants us to seek to be obedient in all things.

The electronic church cannot fulfil the Great Commission. At the very best it can provide some assistance to the local church. The electronic church must be secondary to the local church in the interest and support of Christians. It is the local church that can and must fulfil the Great Commission.

Conclusion

The danger posed by the TV church is two-fold. The first is that it threatens to replace the local church as the central focus of religious life for many people. Such a threat is serious because it is the local church that has been established by Jesus Christ as the centre of the religious life of his people.

The second danger is even more serious. Since the electronic church will not and cannot do all that Christ commissioned the local church to do, the TV church, as one's sole church will teach a religion that is sub-Christian. The electronic church will be sub-Christian in doctrine because, even if the doctrine is not wrong (though it often is), it will surely be incomplete. What is not entertaining or commercially appealing will be ignored. And the electronic church will be sub-Christian in ethics, since it will not be a disciplined church.

The danger televangelism poses is also an opportunity for all Christians and local churches for examination. Churches that have failed in teaching, or in worship, or in outreach or hospitality, should repent and, by God's grace, renew themselves for service. And Christians should realize that they must be more involved in the local church, reforming it and making it, by God's grace, what it should be.

Christians are the church, after all. It is to Christians in a local church that Paul said, *Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it* (1 Cor 12:27).

Dr. W. Robert Godfrey, a member of the Council of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, is president and professor of church history at Westminster Theological Seminary in California. Educated at Stanford University and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Dr. Godfrey is the editor of Through Christ's Word (Presbyterian and Reformed) and the co-editor of Theonomy: A Reformed Critique (Zondervan).

This article first appeared in *Modern Reformation* magazine (Nov/Dec, 1993) and is reprinted here by permission of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, 1716 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, PA 19103
www.christianity.com/ace