



Faith Pulpit

Electronic Evangelism Versus the Old

Stars appear to fall, and some religious TV superstars assuredly do. The disclosures of the last year have been lurid enough, and the press has often called those men Fundamentalists, thereby lumping them with us. Two years ago the top six of them grossed about three quarters of a billion dollars. This year the receipts will probably be far less than that. The damage to the Gospel cannot be measured in money, but it appears to be serious.

The decline of TV evangelism may not be all bad, however. We may hope that some earnest thinking comes out of it, and that the churches return to the evangelism they once had. In the hope of leading lost people to Christ, we have some things going for us.

1. Reality versus Spectacle

TV evangelism has a profound disadvantage: it comes in the setting of show business. The medium is ideal for selling products and propaganda; but for simply encouraging truth and reflection, it just isn't ideal for those things. Any insider knows that while it conveys the appearance of reality, so much must be staged. Some may claim that it has brought the new birth to many; it may well turn out that many of those were only vaccinated with the Gospel, for reasons that will appear. Whatever else may be said, it is still a medium which is often dependent upon show business procedures.

Face-to-face gospel preaching, however, touches reality. Whether a preacher in his pulpit, or a personal worker through jail bars, or a seven-year-old pleading with his friend to receive Christ, all are in reality situations. We have marvelous advantages: we plead honestly, sincerely. We may not have a corps of technicians and make-up artists, but we do follow a Biblical pattern and draw on Holy Spirit's power. We do have eye-contact with people as we press on them the claims of Christ.

This is not to say that all electronic evangelism has failed. And, in fact, some have used this medium in a way which honored the Lord and which God has used to reach many with the Gospel. But we must also recognize its disadvantages and dangers. And remember that it does not relieve the churches of their duty to evangelize.

2. Sinners versus Spectators

We have the Biblical advantage of speaking to sinners. The TV audience, however, is made up of spectators, people in an entertainment setting. They expect to be amused, and they are in control; one jab of the forefinger and the electric church becomes the ball game. Furthermore, each one of them is a potential donor. How many of them are likely to have impressed upon them their lost condition, their corrupted nature, their evil heart? The temptation is to tone this down.

Here again we have the advantage. We may not seem to reach so many, but those we do reach have the chance to hear their sins exposed and their evil nature opened as to the eyes of God. They may resist our words, or resolve not to come back; but they must hear the message that without Christ they are dead in sins and blind to righteousness. The old dictum still holds: you have to get them lost before you can get them saved. And at this point we have by far the better chance—assuming of course that the local church has not sold itself as a form of entertainment.

3. Plea for Repentance versus Plea for Money

If we ask the unsaved TV watchers, we might learn that electronic evangelism is a means to raise money. Even the fallen continue their urgent appeals, that the ministry is terribly dependent on your giving, and right now. They do not tell how much also their personal fortunes depend on our giving, but the thought smuggles itself in.

Against this constant pleading, which often needed to finance large evangelical media enterprises, we can with clear conscience do our own pleading. I trust that we have rejected greed, lust and pride as our motivations. We can then plead with sinners to turn from their evil ways and to receive Christ. We can preach the cross in a reality situation, sincerely, not just with the appearance of sincerity. We do not pursue mere statistics nor sheep to be shorn.

A pastor with a strong visitation program told a class of mine today that he has come across many professing Christians who give no real evidence of salvation. Someone has induced them to pray the convert's prayer, and now they suppose that they are born again. Ask them, "What has Jesus done for you?" They respond, "Well, nothing that I can think of." "How has your life changed since you had that experience?" They reply, "Now that you mention it, I can't think of any ways." Yet their number is legion. If any one of us is capable of making such converts, how much more easily the purveyors of entertainment religion?

A century ago the churches were still reaping a rich harvest of adult conversions. With the coming of the automobile, radio, and television, our task has become much more difficult. Lost people once went to church just to hear the preacher. No longer. The very process of preaching has become discredited. Yet it is still by the foolishness of preaching that we can expect God to save them that believe. This calls us to a new inventiveness, that in reality situations we find ways to confront lost men with their sins and press them to cast themselves on God's grace.

If God will show us such ways, we will doubtless conclude that it was worth the fall of TV religion to get our eyes open to the benefits of face-to-face evangelism.

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Dr. Robert Delnay (Th.D., Grace Theological Seminary) was a distinguished theologian, educator, and author whose ministry spanned over seven decades. A graduate of Wheaton College, Dallas Theological Seminary, and Grace Theological Seminary, Dr. Delnay served in numerous leadership and teaching roles, including at Faith Baptist Bible College, where he was a beloved professor known for his commitment to expository preaching and biblical scholarship.

A prolific author, he wrote several books and articles, leaving a lasting legacy of theological insight and pastoral wisdom. Dr. Delnay's deep love for God's Word and his dedication to training the next generation of Christian leaders impacted countless students and ministries worldwide. He went home to be with Christ in 2023.