

6-1-1962

Religion in America and the Church's Use of Mass Media

Carl Schalk

Lutheran laymen's League, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schalk, Carl (1962) "Religion in America and the Church's Use of Mass Media," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 33, Article 33.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol33/iss1/33>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Religion in America and the Churches' Use of the Mass Media

By CARL SCHALK

(EDITORIAL NOTE: This article was prepared for a study conference of the staff of the Lutheran Laymen's League, St. Louis, Mo., where Mr. Schalk has been the director of music and assistant program director since 1958. Prior to this time he served Zion Lutheran Church, Wausau, Wis., as Christian day school teacher and organist.)

THERE is little doubt that the church today faces a unique opportunity as well as a unique responsibility in communicating the message of God in Christ to man today.

The greatest need is for the churches to listen to what God says to them and through them. Yet the churches have equal responsibility to determine the best ways in which they can pass on to those who do not hear and who do not listen, what they know and believe about their Lord and Savior.

In utilizing mass media to present to people the message of the Gospel, the churches must take care that they avoid the two heresies of Christian communication: (1) the neglect of the condition and capabilities of the hearer on the grounds that, after all, nothing can be added either to God's Word or to the recipient's ability to hear it; (2) the glorification of techniques with the implicit assumption that success will follow if only the proper method can be discovered.

The churches need to examine carefully both men and methods. They need to do this particularly in terms of the America of our day. To do less than this is to be less than faithful to the commission given by

the Lord to His church. For to be relevant means, first of all, to discover the real nature of the situation. It is to this concern—the real situation of man in America today—that this presentation addresses itself. Consideration will be given, first of all, to several important aspects of the religious character and structure of American life and society, and then we shall proceed to the implications of these findings for the church's utilization of the mass media in contemporary America.

INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS

One factor of primary importance can be clearly discerned in American religious life today. It is that the classical dichotomy between the "pagan" and the "Christian" world no longer exists.

Distinctions which for centuries clearly marked the Christian from the unbeliever have become indistinct and blurred as the result of both religious and social factors documented in recent years by countless social scientists and religious commentators on the current scene.¹

The church no longer needs to meet in secret or to suffer physical pain and social ostracism because of its very existence. No longer does the witness of the church stand

¹ Examples of such recent documentation can be found in Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, revised ed. (New York: Doubleday Anchor Bks., 1960); Martin E. Marty, *The New Shape of American Religion* (New York: Harper Bros., 1958); and Peter L. Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1961).

in sharp contradiction to the situation in which it finds itself.

Instead, the churches are "fat and flourishing." They are welcomed with open arms by a society which asks their blessing upon its institutions, practices, morals, and ethics. In America today the church has become in large measure a partner with its culture in the upholding and sanctioning of the good life.

The invasion of our world by the Word made flesh was without doubt *skandalon* to the worldly wise of the New Testament era, but at least it was a "scandalous possibility" in a world view in which man was the center of the universe. It was at least a live option. And it was really "news"!

The view of many 19th-century Christians—that the world was simply a series of closed doors waiting for the churches to batter them down or charm them open—was the picture which furnished the incentive for much of the mission of the churches in the century which has been called the "age of missions." It was an age in which the churches proudly carried the Word to unknown lands. In answer to Reginald Heber's challenge

Can we whose souls are lighted
With wisdom from on high,
Can we to men benighted
The lamp of life deny?

the church shouted an emphatic no! The 19th century was a hopeful age in which Christian soldiers optimistically marched to war.

The naive optimism engendered by the rapid expansion of the churches of a century ago was dealt severe blows by two world wars and the resurgence of the non-Christian religions. Today the situation in the world, and to a growing degree in

America itself, has been characterized as post-Christian and post-Protestant.

If these terms mean anything at all, they mean that in the thinking of large numbers of people the Christian church is no longer a live option. It is a nostalgic possibility which they have already considered and rejected, which they have weighed in the balance and found wanting.

An example of such sophisticated dismissal of the Christian alternative before literally millions of television viewers occurred with the appearance of Harlow Shapley, world-renowned astronomer, humanist, and exponent of the "expanding universe theory" on a recent Jack Paar Show (Oct. 30, 1961). Discoursing engagingly on the place, or lack of place, for God in the contemporary conception of the universe, Shapley engagingly pressed his view that in the face of man's growing awareness of the universe in which he is but a speck of dust among the cosmic spaces, the "religionists" were, at their best, out of date and hopelessly inadequate.

The view of the church and its "message" with which such people are confronted may be entirely erroneous. It may bear little resemblance to the church described in the New Testament. Yet for the church today to consider these people "classical pagans" (in the sense of people to whom the Gospel will be *new news*) is to misinterpret the present situation and to commit a basic error in strategy.

The churches in America must realize that they are addressing what is largely a "burned over forest," people who have considered what has been presented to them as the Christian alternative and rejected it. The churches must also realize that with the rise of the "new humanism"

and the significant growth of interest in the exotic religions (liberal Judaism, Zen, the writings of Radhakrishnan, etc.) Christianity is no longer seen as presenting the only real alternative to man seeking meaning, help, comfort, and security in a world largely escaping his control.

The development of religious establishments is no new historical phenomenon. The development of America's "religious establishment," however, with the attendant absorption and dilution of many Christian specifics into the general culture of the nation, presents unique challenges and problems to the Christian witness — but particularly to the Christian witness in and through the mass media.

As James Sellers has correctly pointed out, the church is no longer faced with a neatly divided audience of "insiders" and "outsiders" — Christians and unbelievers. Rather it is faced with a new group of "outsiders" both within and without the organized church. Some of them claim to be Christians but are really hidden outsiders, and others profess being outsiders but are hidden Christians.²

And it is this new kind of outsider — both within and without the church — that must be approached in a way radically different from the classical pagan of the early church.

Nonadherents are not the "simple pagans" in the classical sense. Nor are adherents to the faith single-mindedly committed. The "outsider" of today tends rather to bear witness to the Christian faith

and then to deny its importance and its consequences.

The task of the church is, as it always has been, to raise the question of open, explicit commitment, not only to the Christian faith but to the community of faith reflected, however imperfectly, in the organized church as well. This is made more difficult today because the "Christianized values" residing in our culture and in the consciousness of our society make it easy for men to be superficially "Christian" without any decisive commitment either to Christ or His church. When the person exposed to the message of the church has the impression that he is already Christianly religious, the call to formal commitment seems irrelevant.

On the other hand, when the person who receives the church's message has already converted Christian categories into cultural attributes, the Christian communicator has few, if any, distinctive Christian terms or categories left with which to delineate the radical Christian commitment.

If the church fails to realize that the stereotype of "classical pagan" and "classical Christian" — which has supplied the basis for most missionary motivation and material of the past century and upon which so much of its use of the mass media has been built — no longer obtains, the church will continue to justify the claims of its detractors who suggest that, at best, it is simply irrelevant.

THE SHAPE OF PIETY

That America is a religious country is, in the popular mind, beyond doubt. The expressions of America's "faith in faith" and deference to "faith in God" can be seen on our coins, at political conventions, in the rising status of the minister as the

² For a more complete exposition of this point see James Sellers, *The Outsider and the Word of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1961).

representative of organized religion, in the baccalaureate services of the public schools, and in the invocation of God's guidance upon institutions ranging from Congress to the local troop of the Boy Scouts of America. One suburban St. Louis supermarket even showcases a mosaic highlighting the words "Give us this day . . . !"

The claim that America is a *Christian* country is something else. Rather than being termed a country which has made a radical Christian commitment, America would better be described as a country whose original theocratic foundations have become diffused in a culture which has adopted many of the ideals and ethics of Christianity. The phrases "good American" and "good Christian" have become virtually synonymous in this new shape of religion-in-general.

Recent surveys of religious opinion disclose the extent to which our peculiar "religious establishment" has penetrated America's thinking about itself. Herberg's analysis indicates that from 70 to 75 percent of the American people regard themselves as church members; that another 20 to 25 percent locate themselves within one or another religious community (Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism) without actual church membership; and that "only about five percent of the American people consider themselves outside of the religious fold altogether."³ The discrepancy between the groups which locate or relate themselves to a religious community and the 66 percent of the American population which the churches themselves report as members is apparent. The fact is clear that a greater number of Americans consider

themselves to be church related than the statistics of the churches will allow.

What we have here are three broadly distinguishable groups on the American religious scene. The first and largest group is that which more or less actively associates itself with a local religious communion. These are the church members. They have "joined" the church. They may have joined for any of a number of reasons, but they belong.

The second and next largest group consists of those who locate themselves within one or another religious tradition without actual affiliation. These make up a "fringe of sympathetic by-standers." These may well be the people who, sensing that the general moral and ethical values of Christianity have to a large degree become part of the generally accepted cultural values, see no point in any more specific or radical Christian commitment.

The third and smallest group disavows any religious commitment. They place themselves outside the religious fold. It is significant that this group, formerly personified in the village atheist, has increasingly become an anachronism in the current American scene. For to be an American is to be religious. And to be religious means, for most Americans, to associate oneself more or less actively with a local communion or at least to consider oneself related to one of the historic religious traditions.

PIETY AND SOCIAL CLASS

Moving from consideration of religious groupings derived from the opinions Americans have of their relation to God and faith, we turn briefly to the develop-

³ See Herberg, pp. 46 ff.

ment and movement of the structure of the social classes in American society.⁴

The religious attitudes of the American people throughout their history have been significantly affected by the position of various segments of the population in the social structure. Especially has this been true of the churches founded and peopled by the immigrant waves in the latter 19th and early 20th century. Sociologists have pointed to the consequences for the church as immigrant groups rise in the social structure. It may be profitable, therefore, to look at the movement of the present American social structures as the situation relates itself to religious concerns.

The classic symbolization of the social structure of most historic societies has been the upright triangle. The ruling classes at the top of the triangle constitute the smallest group, which controls the property and exercises control and direction of the various strata of society beneath it, down to the lowest class of laborers which forms the broad base of the triangle. (Figure I)

The increasing industrialization of America and the shift from a production-oriented economy to a consumption-oriented economy have resulted in drastic changes in the traditional triangle of social structure.

Characterizing the present American social structure is the emergence of a broad middle class dominated by a trend toward urbanization and by a rapid vertical mobility upward in social and economic scale. Symbolizing the current stage of a long period of development leading to the present situation might be a diamond bulging

in the middle and tapering off at both top and bottom. (Figure II)

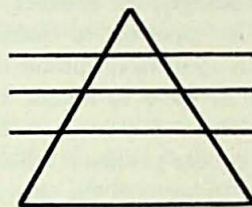


Figure I

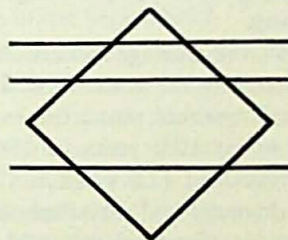


Figure II

These structures are of particular interest in view of the most recent trends in the makeup of the population and in social class flexibility. The most important of these trends may be summarized briefly as follows:

1. *The increasing urbanization of the United States.* It is estimated that 70 percent of the population will be urban by 1975. Most important for our consideration is the fact that urban values will become increasingly important in the lives and thoughts of most of the people to whom the church will be addressing itself.

2. *The increasing rise of educational levels in the immediate future.* According to a 1959 report of the Bureau of the Census of the U.S. Government, the number of high school graduates will rise from 52 million in 1960 to 70 million in 1970, to 95 million in 1980, compared with 38 million in 1950. Thus the number of high

⁴ Criteria used in determining social class ordinarily include such factors as income, education, employment, housing, etc.

school graduates in 1980 will be 2½ times the number in 1950.

Correspondingly, the number of college graduates is expected to increase from 6 million in 1950 to 8 million in 1960 to 11 million in 1970 to almost 15 million in 1980. These increases in both high school and college graduates reflect not only a continued increase in the population but more importantly a successively larger proportion going on to complete higher levels of schooling.

Whereas the average educational level of the population 25 years old and over in 1950 was 9.3 school years, the average is expected to be 10.8 years in 1960, 12.0 years in 1970 and 12.2 years in 1980.⁵

If the character and direction of any social group is largely determined by the highest stratum in its membership, the church can hardly afford to neglect this most significant group as it reaches out with the radical message of salvation in Jesus Christ to the American populace.

3. *The decline in the symbols of low and inferior class status.* With increased wages and standards of living, the differential in goods consumed by families of different class levels has declined. Today radios, television, automobiles, are generally available to all.

4. *The decline in workers in low-status occupation categories.* Specialization and increased skill requirements of workers emphasize the expertness of the person rather than his background or the status of his family. Note the decline of the domestic servant.

5. *Increasing mobility.* Increased movement tends to make for fluidity of class

lines. As people move from place to place, they are accepted more for what they are than for what their family was or has been.

The import of the increasing fluidity and vertical social movement has been the rise of a broad middle class. It is this enlarging middle class or white collar world of which C. Wright Mills has said that "it slipped quietly into modern society" and to which we must look for much that is characteristic of our 20th-century existence and which will continue to determine the general force and direction of life in America.⁶ It is this middle class which is pushing into the suburban areas (already numbering over 60 million people) to which the church must address itself as the most significant manifestation in the social structure today.

It is this group which must be studied to discover the thought world in which it moves, its attitudes toward the church and religion. Only with a clear understanding of all these factors can the church fashion a philosophy of witness through the mass media which will be built upon the situation as it really is. Only then will it be truly relevant.

It is to the thought world of this "new American" that we now turn.

THE NEW AMERICAN AND HIS WORLD OF THOUGHT

Broadly speaking, the "new" American is an educated American. If he is 25 years old or over in 1961, he may have completed no more than the junior year at his local high school. But his education did not commence with his formal education, and it is certain that it will not end there.

⁵ These figures are taken from the 1959 edition of *The World Almanac*.

⁶ C. Wright Mills, *White Collar* (New York: Galaxy Bks., 1956).

In his formal education he has been exposed to ideas and attitudes which profoundly affect the church's attempt to reach out to him. Not the least of these influences has been the background of scientific thought against which most of our attitudes have consciously or unconsciously been formed.

But the "new" American is also educated in informal and unstructured situations. Extensions and popularizations of the work of the so-called intellectuals in their ivory towers are on every hand. Popularizations of Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*, *The Waste Makers*, and *The Status Seekers*, *Readers Digest* book condensations, the *Saturday Evening Post's* "Adventures of the Mind" series, all these and many more supply the thought world and conversational material for literally millions of people.

Comments—significant or insignificant—of Billy Graham or Alexander King on television's late night programs help form or reinforce attitudes of countless people in this broadening middle class. It is for this specific group that much of the material of our so-called mass culture is developed and on which it feeds. *Life* and *Look*, *Playboy* and *Confidential*, *Guns* and *Smoke* and *Douglas Edwards*, record clubs and the *Reader's Digest*, form the reservoir from which many of the ideas and attitudes of this "new" American are drawn.

For purposes of discussion we shall divide this rising middle class into three groups distinguished by their attitudes and relation to the generally rising levels of education: The educated middle class, the uneducated middle class, and the intellectuals.

The "educated" middle class includes that group which has been exposed to

levels of formal education beyond high school. Here we classify the proverbial "college graduate." Exposure to a systematic, formal education beyond high school often results in the absorption of attitudes and ideas which seriously affect the churches' attempt to reach out to the "educated" middle class. It is this group which has placed the distinctive mark on suburban America and which will, in growing measure, guide the thought world of the country in the years ahead.

The "uneducated" middle class consists primarily of those people whose arrival at middle class status has been more recent and whose earlier position in the social system resulted in a formal education which ended with the high school years or before. The "uneducated" middle class includes many recent arrivals to this social stratum whose vertical mobility has placed them alongside their more formally educated neighbors in the sprawling metropolitan areas and who are eager and ready to adopt the attitudes and ideas they may feel are expected of them in their newly acquired status.

Both "educated" and "uneducated" share together in the sprawling suburbia that is rapidly placing its distinctive stamp upon American life and thought. Where the "thud of baseball against mitt, the abrasive grind of roller skate against concrete, the jarring harmony of the Good Humor bell tolled the day; the clink of ice, the distant laugh, the surge of hi-fi through the open window tolled the night."⁷

The education of the "uneducated" middle class may be down. But it is increasingly clear that their attitudes, thoughts,

⁷ "Americana: The Roots of Home," *Time* (June 20, 1960), p. 14.

morals, and ethics are up — directed toward a conformity with those who have "arrived" on the socioeconomic ladder earlier than they and from whom they will rapidly learn to adjust to the new norm.

Both the "educated" and "uneducated" middle class take great care to disassociate themselves from the third, and smaller, group making up this new large middle class—the "intellectuals." These are the people who are consciously involved in opinion making and in directing the opinions of others. These are the people who write the books the others read. These are the people involved in the publishing of newspapers and magazines, the people in radio and television, in advertising or in any activity which involves the conscious direction of opinions or attitudes.

While any grouping is largely arbitrary, these three groups—the "educated" middle class, the "uneducated" middle class, and the intellectuals—do form recognizable enough cells within the larger whole to warrant our attention. Significantly, they all possess, in different degrees, common attitudes and prejudices toward the world, religion, and the churches. These are of utmost importance as the three groups are presented with the message of the Gospel.⁸

THE BACKGROUND OF SCIENCE AND THE PREJUDICES OF THE NEW AMERICAN

Overarching all other considerations in determining the world of thought of the rising middle class is the background of science against which all his thoughts and attitudes are formed. It is evident in the boundless faith in science and the scientific

method to which people, consciously or unconsciously, look for the solution of their problems. Given enough time and money, this optimism suggests, all our problems from polio to war will be solved. And science will provide both the method and the solution.

Drawn from this background of science, three prejudices become particularly evident among this broad group of people.

Perhaps most characteristic is the negative reaction to anything demonstrating a *dogmatic attitude*. The education of this rising middle class, or their aspiring to the views of the more educated, suggests to them the necessity of a broader point of view and a more tolerant spirit. That Christianity may have some relative value is not necessarily questioned. But it is virtually impossible for many people to escape the fact that theology is anything but a massive systematization of personal opinion and fantasy. Unfortunately, the churches' methods of evangelism frequently do little to correct this view.

Closely allied to the prejudice of dogmatism is the assumption and judgment that the church is the bastion of *anti-intellectualism*. The portrayal of "religious" characters in much fiction and in many popular movies hardly helps to erase this caricature. With this image of the church in mind, it is difficult for many to take seriously the claims which the church presents.

A third prejudice is that the church is *hypocritical*. The failure of much of the church to speak unequivocally in the matter of race, for example, or to act in accordance with its usual pronouncements has done little to eradicate the impression of the church as an organization in which speech and act are not necessarily related.

⁸ For a parallel discussion see Joel Nederhood, *The Church's Mission to the Educated American* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), pp. 52 ff.

Such prejudices, coupled with the rising tide of the "new humanism" — witness the current popularity of the work of Albert Schweitzer — serve to establish a climate in which the Peace Corps, the United Fund, the Little League, the Boy Scouts of America, "social work" of all kinds, offer more effective alternatives for people's concerns than the "pious prayers of the church."

All the experiences of this rising middle class tend to tone down the uniqueness of Christianity, to view it neutrally, objectively, if not negatively. Huston Smith's popular television course in comparative religion being rerun throughout the nation and appearing in paperback books is only one example of a popular and widespread relativizing of the Christian faith.

In these ways religion (as opposed to Christianity) is paid homage as part of our "religious establishment" on the condition that it remain relative or, better still, irrelevant.

It is to be expected that the educated will react to the churches' witness with the best at their disposal. Drawing from their knowledge and acquaintance with the popular presentations of science, anthropology, and what they see of the failings of the church in their society, the middle class will attempt in every way possible to avoid the final, ultimate, and radical commitment to Christ.

If the church ignores the widening horizons brought about by the growing exposure to new ideas and information on the part of this increasingly large segment of the population, it will cut itself off from the very people to whom it is attempting to present the Gospel in meaningful terms and relevant categories.

If the church ignores the prejudices of

dogmatism, anti-intellectualism, and hypocrisy, and ignores as well the other options which are presenting themselves as increasingly live alternatives to the Christian faith, the church will have consigned itself to meaninglessness and irrelevance in the current American scene.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS BROADCASTING

One overarching impression confronting anyone surveying material discussing the churches' use of the mass media is that of a healthy skepticism regarding many of the churches' traditional practices in this field.⁹

This is a healthy reaction to the overly-optimistic view in vogue at the advent of the churches' use of the mass media. Experience with the mass media, together with sharper theological insights, has brought a more realistic and sober appraisal of both the possibilities and the restrictions which face the church in attempting to present the Gospel through mass media.

Current thought, rather than ruling out the mass media as unsuitable for the church's witness (although some suggest that even this may be the case), is looking closely at just which aspects of the mission and witness of the church are most suited

⁹ See, for example, Parker, Barry and Smythe, *The Television-Radio Audience and Religion* (New York: Harper Bros., 1955); John Bachman, *The Church in the World of Radio-Television* (New York: Association Press, 1960); Malcolm Boyd, *The Crisis in Communication* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1957); idem, *Focus: Rethinking the Meaning of Our Evangelism* (New York: Morehouse Barlow Co., 1960); Christ and the Celebrity Gods (Greenwich, Conn.: Seabury Press, 1958); Martin E. Marty, *The Improper Opinion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961); Wm. F. Lynch, S. J., *The Image Industries* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1959).

to the demands and limitations of the particular medium.

It is a fact that in promoting the possibilities of the mass media among its constituents, churches have often overlooked the very real limitations peculiar to each medium. This has frequently led to exaggerated claims and exaggerated expectations which could not always be sustained because of the very nature of the medium.

Coupled with a rethinking of the general suitability of the mass media is the growing realization that use of the mass media encompasses only one facet of the church's witness. Where the churches' use of radio, television, newspapers, or magazines is most creative and most faithful to the medium, it neither attempts to duplicate work carried on by other facets of the churches' witness, nor should it be expected to.

If the discussion up to this point reflects even partially the situation in which the church in this country finds itself, several implications regarding the churches' use of the mass media almost inevitably follow. It is to four of these implications that we now turn.

THE PARTICULARITY OF THE WITNESS

In view of the nature of the "religious" beliefs of the majority of Americans as a religion-in-general, as a "faith in faith," worshipping a God we have created and packaged largely to our own liking, there is a pressing need for the clarion call of a witness pointing to the particularity of the Christian faith. Any religious program which avoids or waters down this basic responsibility is, to that extent, avoiding its Christian responsibility and commitment.

Examples of successful religious programs which avoid explicit commitment abound in numbers. Their very success may be due directly to their lack of specific Christian commitment. Edward R. Murrow's series entitled "This I Believe" and the long-running Mormon Tabernacle radio broadcast are stellar examples of religious programming thriving on common denominators which are "religious" but hardly Christian.

To witness to the particularity of the Christian faith in an irenic yet bold fashion may be for the mass media to raise an "improper question." Yet if the church is to utilize the mass media, it must always be with this goal in mind.

In the attempt to witness to the Christian faith, many religious broadcasters have tended to play down specific denominational affiliation. Yet the Christian broadcaster needs to seriously consider whether in a country like America, where a Christian religion-in-general has been the vogue, the proclamation of the kerygma by a historic branch of the church indicated as such is an asset or a hindrance.¹⁰

WITNESSING TO A MULTIGROUP AUDIENCE

A second problem is the need for the church to recognize the problem of witnessing to a multigroup population. If the word "mass" is used at all, it more naturally describes the media themselves—rather than the audience to which it is most frequently (and erroneously) ascribed.

¹⁰ The cry most frequently heard in this regard, "We want to win men for Christ, not for the (*denomination*) church!" while true, cannot ignore the fact that any Christian will speak from the viewpoint of the historic branch of Christendom within which he happens to stand.

There is in fact no homogenous mass audience. There is instead a number of minority audiences to which the church must address itself and to which it must tailor its witness. And each of these minority audiences is of not insignificant size.

In the light of such a situation the churches' usual definitions of the audience they attempt to reach through the mass media—the "unchurched"—become unclear if not confusing and quite meaningless. Who are the "unchurched"? Are they the 5 percent who reject any religious commitment? Are they those who identify themselves loosely within a particular religious tradition but who do not see the need for a more radical commitment? And what of the "unchurched" within the church—the "outsiders" on the "inside"? The failure to perceive these differences is finally to suffer the fate of irrelevance.

And irrelevance may be highly successful. It may be accepted and welcomed as a significant part of our "religious establishment." But as far as the mission of the church to the world is concerned it will still be irrelevant.

What is called for here is the development of programs specifically tailored for a particularly delineated audience. In doing this the church would begin to apply the Great Commission to the vertical, as well as horizontal, dimensions of society.

This will necessitate a clearer definition of program target audiences than, for example, "all people," "the unchurched," or "the whole world." As such a change is effected, the confrontation of a particular group with the message of the Gospel will be clearer, more direct, more pertinent, more appropriate.

The "success" of such a venture in terms

of numbers of visible converts may or may not be different. But this is not our concern. We are called only to be faithful—and to convey that faithfulness as meaningfully as possible.

In witnessing to a multigroup society we must be careful to include all levels of our social structure. Particularly important is the need to witness to that smaller percentage of "opinion makers," "intellectuals," the results of whose thinking and writing will become evident within the general body of society a decade or a generation from now. In addressing itself to this numerically small group, the church certainly need not feel that it is compromising its mission responsibility.

THE FORM OF THE MESSAGE

The assumption upon which much of the churches' mission has been based is that the witness of the church necessarily begins and ends with verbalization. The church whose life and witness centers always in the Word dare never underestimate the power of words. Yet it dare never lose sight of the fact that the Christian witness is carried into the world in other ways as well. While Christ used words, He first became flesh and dwelt among us. His witness was one not only of words but also of incarnation, of acts, and of actions.

A frightening ignorance is shared by both the churches and by our culture as to what exactly constitutes a "message." The church, for example, is frequently looked down upon by the mass media because it is trying to "preach" or get across a "message." Yet, as Malcolm Boyd has correctly pointed out, "Every popular song, film, TV or radio show, magazine, comic strip, or newspaper is disseminating 'mes-

sages' by molding the thought and action patterns of men, women and children."¹¹

The reflexes of the American who becomes aware that he is about to become the object of a "message" are quite predictable. The mere mention of "And now a word from our sponsor . . ." is sufficient to send millions of television viewers into the kitchen. With the sponsor's "message" over, they may safely return to the message-free (so they think) entertainment of the soap opera, the western, or the discussion of current affairs.

Reviews in the secular press of such pictures as *Martin Luther, Question 7*, and *He Who Would Die* comment favorably and surprisingly upon the lack of "preachiness." Yet the "message" of these films stands sharp and clear. As John Bachman has pointed out, "we admit only Lutheran preachers to our pulpits, but we welcome at the back door artists who contradict the words of our sermons." "Have we concealed the agony of the reconciliation under saccharine pictures and sentimental melodies?"¹²

It is one of our most important tasks as people of God witnessing in contemporary American culture that we clarify—for ourselves at least—the meaning of "message."

Four areas pointed out by Peter Berger in which the Christian engages in meaningful contact with society are indicated by the terms "Christian diaconate," "Christian action," "Christian presence," and "Christian dialog."¹³ These terms describe vital, relevant ways in which the Christian

"message" is being presented to the world today. It is significant that none of these four modes of Christian engagement with the world are concerned with a formal presentation of the faith in terms which we would ordinarily associate with "preaching" or "message."

The witness of Christian diaconate, Christian action, Christian presence, and Christian dialog is neither polemical nor hortative. It is characterized by an irenic spirit and by an indirect manner.

In a culture sensitive to being "preached at," and where the churches' problem in the use of mass media is exactly that of a message among messages, the indirect Christian witness may be the most effective. In a time when the popular image of the "preacher" is found in Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry* and in the bumbling, good-natured priest of Hollywood, the most effective witness may yet be the disclosure of a simple Christian concern, of Christian acts of loving service, and of Christian presence. In some places in the world they are the only avenues of witness left. *And these are the concerns which the mass media, by and large, are best suited to portray.*

To refuse to consider means which are somewhat more indirect in reaching people who tend to turn a deaf ear to the usual hortatory discourse of the church is to bypass social realities in favor of a more militant discourse better designed to bolster superficially the insecure position of still emerging church bodies.

The churches need to examine seriously whether their traditional concept of "message"—whether devotionally or polemically oriented—is the best weapon they have of reaching out through the mass media to the people who make up the religious situation in America.

¹¹ Malcolm Boyd, *Focus*, pp. 102, 103.

¹² John Bachman, *The Lutheran Standard* (Oct. 24, 1961).

¹³ Peter Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies*, pp. 140 ff.

The church needs seriously to consider whether its traditional concept of "message" is in any way at all a realistic and relevant means of reaching that growing body of "outsiders" to whom it would direct its best and most faithful witness.

EN-WORLDDING THE EVANGEL

The call to evangelize the world carries with it the corresponding responsibility of the evangelist to know the people to whom his witness is presented and to adopt modes of evangelism relevant to the situation.

To accomplish this end in an increasingly fragmented society, the Christian needs, first and foremost, to proclaim the Lordship of Christ over all of life.

Such a call needs to be issued loudly and clearly. But the Lordship of Christ over the totality of our lives is not accomplished in saying so. The fact is that it is already accomplished. Our responsibility is to demonstrate — also in our use of mass media — that it is so for us and for all people. This is the "en-worlding of the evangel" of which this section speaks.

By confining their proclamation of Christ's Lordship over all of life to the sermon only, the churches need to consider whether they are contributing to that compartmentalization of life which has so seriously affected their own witness. The broadening of the church's vision and responsibility to encompass the totality of life in which and to which it is called to mission will in no way compromise its "Biblical witness." It will, instead, have moved more responsibly toward fulfilling it.

Christian concern for the most faithful and effective use of the mass media begins with the realization of the particular facts

of the situation inherent in the American "religious establishment."

It is characterized by a concern for the vertical as well as horizontal dimensions of the Great Commission. It realizes that while the message of God in Christ does not change, its particular form of presentation must speak to people where they are in the society of which they are a part.

The "en-worlding of the evangel" will necessitate a readiness of the church to become involved in areas it may heretofore have thought of as secondary. It will necessitate a readiness to venture out into areas where it may not have the final word or the pat answer but where it can demonstrate its relevance through readiness to share serious concerns. It is ready to speak the truth *in love*. Yet it never shirks from speaking the *truth*.

Beyond this, the church realizes the possibility — from a human point of view — of failure. While the church does not seek failure as it utilizes mass media, neither does it covet success. The mission and motivation of the New Testament church was based upon the command and direction of the Holy Spirit. Success or failure were gauged only by the measure to which His command had been their guide.

We must remember that the Gospel, even with perfect communication, is still foolishness and an offense. In a time and in a society in which the "gospel of success" has increasingly demonstrated its failure, "faithfulness" to what God has done, and to the people for whom He's done it, will guard us both from a subtle Pelagianism and from a sacrifice of the content of our communication.

The rest we leave to the Holy Spirit.

St. Louis, Mo.