Broadcasting Mainline Protestantism: The Chicago Sunday Evening Club and the Evolution of Audience Expectations from Radio to Television

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Having recently celebrated its centennial, the Chicago Sunday Evening Club (CSEC) is an institution with a history that is both a testament to persistence and a study in decline. The CSEC was founded in 1908, when some of the leaders in Chicago society and philanthropy arranged to use Orchestra Hall on Sunday evenings to present an ecumenical and mainline Protestant viewpoint to the public. Its institutional creation came at the same historical moment as Walter Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel movement (*Christianity and the Social Crisis*, his first major book, was published in 1907) and its mission was the same: combine mainline Protestant theology with projects aimed at social and urban reform. In using the ornate home of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, a building just across Michigan Avenue from the Art Institute, the Sunday Evening Club attached itself to the city's leading cultural institutions, and it quickly became a major part of the city's public life.[1]

In 1922, the CSEC began broadcasting its Orchestra Hall services using the new medium of radio, and the response from the listening audience was quickly and strongly supportive. The broadcasts attracted many who were enthralled by having what they felt was a religious experience based around listening to disembodied voices emerging from an electronic device, and they inspired speculation about the possibilities that radio offered for spreading religious messages. The CSEC parlayed this early 1920s enthusiasm into a lengthy and successful tenure on the radio, and, in 1956, the club decided to expand into the newer medium of television.[2] All the while, the organization has remained devoted to, as its website stated in 2009, a "mission . . . to enrich spiritual life by communicating stories and ideas that engage people of many faiths, and to foster compassion, reconciliation and peace." For more than a century, the Chicago Sunday Evening

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Club's consistent mainline message and commitment to using new media to disseminate it have made the organization a persistent part of the city's and, for a time, the nation's public culture.[3]

However, while committed to growth and expansion as an organization, the CSEC has operated within a climate of the long-term decline of mainline Protestantism in American public life. As the legal scholar and minister Dean Kelley wrote in a widely influential 1972 book, in recent years, "something remarkable happened in the United States: for the first time in the nation's history most of the major church groups stopped growing and began to shrink," and one of the most significant religious developments in the post-World War II United States was the flourishing of more conservative forms of Protestantism alongside the contraction of mainline denominations.[4] For sociologists Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, the shift had to do with what they call the "new voluntarism of the 1970s and 1980s." As millions of Americans loosened older bonds of family and community through internal migrations to suburbs and to newly developing regions of the country, many were also motivated during and after the 1960s by desires for both a freely chosen personal identity and a sense of an "authentic" self and lifestyle. In this environment, choices about faith became part of an "enhanced religious individualism," and leading Protestant denominations found themselves attracting fewer adherents. Across the country, Americans making choices about what faith to follow increasingly became adherents of evangelical and fundamental strains of Protestantism. This formed a nationwide process that sociologist Robert Wuthnow calls a "restructuring of American religion," and, as a result, mainline Protestants found their institutional hegemony over American religion challenged.[5]

Many historians of the modern United States argue that mainline Protestantism lost ground to evangelicalism and fundamentalism because it became too accommodating to science, progress, commerce, and worldly life, leaving it epistemologically weightless and increasingly irrelevant in the lives of many of its believers. As historian Richard Wightman Fox argues, "By being so adaptable, so full of good will, so eager to open itself to new experiences and even, to some degree, to other cultures, liberal Protestantism failed to distinguish itself forcefully from various secular currents that it flirted with, incorporated, and baptized." In contrast, more conservative denominations succeeded in mobilizing adherents through what Dean Kelley describes as a totalizing theology based on an "assurance, a conviction of rightness, of being on the side of God, that most people in most human endeavors cannot match."[6]

The study of the Chicago Sunday Evening Club as a constant institutional actor and broadcaster draws connections between two of the most important trends in American public life in the last century: this eclipse of mainline Protestantism in public life by more conservative denominations and the increasing importance of electronic media, first radio and then television, in disseminating religious messages. In exploring the significant and complicated relationships between religion and media in the twentieth century, scholars have focused the majority of their attention on religious conservatives and their "evangelical futurism," as Quentin Schultze calls it. The consensus has been that, while challenging mainline Protestantism in American public life, evangelicals and fundamentalists embraced broadcasting and fit their messages to the demands of the various media, while mainline Protestants were either disdainful of or unwilling to adapt to what was perceived to be a less dignified form of religious address. As Dennis Voskuil argues, "Despite relatively easy access . . . mainline Protestants were never very comfortable with the electronic media," and they "do not appear to have taken full advantage" of radio and television. At the same time, "fundamentalists and Pentecostals, avowed theological antimodernists, eventually became the juggernauts of the electronic media." Conservative Protestants used broadcasting as a wedge to open up a much greater space in American society, in the process muting and obscuring the public voices of the mainline denominations.[7]

The Chicago Sunday Evening Club's history in broadcasting complicates this narrative. "Technological futurism" was not unique to evangelicals, and mainline Protestants were not uniformly unenthusiastic about taking to the airwaves with their messages, as the CSEC's ongoing commitment to making religion a significant part of American public life shows. By going on the radio in 1922 and on television in 1956, the club dramatically expanded the reach of its ecumenical message using the newest technology of the day. What it found, however, was that the reception of that message changed, and that it did so in ways not always directly related to the content. Over time, audience members came to expect and demand different things from religious broadcasting as their understandings of what it meant to have a religious "experience" through the media changed.[8]

In the 1920s, radio listening was such a new and wonderful act in and of itself that to listen to religious services was to many tantamount to experiencing those services. Many seemed pleasantly surprised by how "spiritual" an experience they found it to be listening to religious programming on the radio. The experience of their encounter with television in the 1950s and 1960s was different for many CSEC audience

members, as the Club found that the responses it received from viewers were often quite different in content and tone from those it had received from listeners in the early days of radio. The act of watching a live television broadcast of a CSEC program inspired less rhetoric about the spiritual qualities and enrichment potential of a new medium than it did grousing about the poor technical and aesthetic quality of the picture and transmission. Orchestra Hall, the CSEC's home, was not designed to accommodate television broadcasting, and the early remote telecasting equipment produced a picture that seemed inferior and even distracting to many. As other early religious television broadcasters like Rex Humbard, Oral Roberts, and Fulton Sheen developed studio-based programming and a sophisticated visual language designed to look good on the screen, the CSEC's remote broadcasts from Orchestra Hall looked primitive and unappealing in comparison. In contrast to radio, as many viewers wrote to the CSEC, television seemed to provide not a singular "experience" but rather spectatorial access to events taking place elsewhere. When given more from the media, the audience expected more, and these shifting expectations shaped the history of the Chicago Sunday Evening Club as a public entity and the history of mainline Protestantism in the mass media.

Religion and Reform in Chicago's Loop: The Chicago Sunday Evening Club at Orchestra Hall

The Chicago Sunday Evening Club was formed in 1908 by a group of the city's Protestant elite, the same year that the Federal Council of Churches (the leading mainline organization at the national level) was formed. The CSEC was firmly rooted in what William R. Hutchison calls the "Protestant establishment" and shared patronage with such prominent institutions as the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Chicago.[9] The original trustees were some of the most prominent figures in Chicago society and philanthropy, including Adolphus Bartlett, John Nuveen, Jr., Norman Wait Harris, Charles Hutchinson, Cyrus McCormick, John T. Pirie, Jr., and John G. Shedd.[10] The dominant force in the club was its president, Clifford W. Barnes, an energetic reformer involved in a wide range of civic activities. Barnes was the first president of the Chicago Community Trust, the leader of the anticorruption Legislative Voters' League, and the head of the prominent local antivice squad, the Committee of Fifteen. In the early 1900s, Barnes was outraged that "all kinds of cheap theatrical shows [had] found a place for themselves in the Loop" and that "the vice element in our big city had developed into a power for evil."[11]

This was same local milieu that inspired Jane Addams to establish Hull House, and Clifford Barnes shared with the leader in the settlement house movement a desire to promote urban reform using Christian principles. As Addams wrote in 1910, Hull House was "only one manifestation of that wider humanitarian movement which throughout Christendom . . . is endeavoring to embody itself, not in a sect, but in a society itself. I believe that this turning, this renaissance of the early Christian humanitarianism, is going on in America, in Chicago, if you please, without leaders who write or philosophize, without much speaking, but with a bent to express in social service and in terms of action the spirit of Christ."[12] This sort of religiously motivated urban reform ethic motivated Clifford Barnes in 1908 to create in the Loop an alternative to the lures of the saloon and the theater. Once the Chicago Sunday Evening Club was formed, Barnes succeeded in renting Orchestra Hall, home of the Chicago Symphony, on Sunday evenings to provide a program of music and religious talks.[13]

The format of the club's meetings was established in these early years and would remain consistent for decades after. The program began with hymns, prayer, and organ music, and its centerpiece was an address by a guest speaker. Throughout its history, the club regularly had prominent religious figures give this guest address. By 1966, Harry Emerson Fosdick had spoken twenty-six times, Reinhold Niebuhr twenty-three times, Ralph Sockman thirty-one times, and Charles R. Brown thirty-four times. Interspersed among these specifically religious speakers were prominent political figures, educators, and reformers. Jane Addams gave five addresses, and Social Gospel pioneer Walter Rauschenbusch addressed the club in 1916. Other prominent speakers included Jacob Riis, Booker T. Washington, Norman Hapgood, Edward Ross, Ralph Bunche, Franklin D. Roosevelt (as assistant secretary of the navy), Senator Albert Beveridge, and President William Howard Taft. In November 1916, William Jennings Bryan drew more than ten thousand people to his CSEC appearance, the vast majority of whom could not fit into Orchestra Hall. Afterward, Bryan went across the street to the Art Institute, where he gave a second address to the assembled crowd.[14]

From its inception, the Chicago Sunday Evening Club demonstrated a commitment to attracting a wide and diverse audience not only through prominent speakers but also through a theologically inclusive religious message. Even though occasional speakers from secular spheres might not speak directly about religion, the overwhelming majority did, and communications scholar Steven Vitrano describes the club as "one of the earliest attempts to implement the

ecumenical ideals and concerns of the church by means of a concrete, sustained effort to bring Christians together in common, nonsectarian worship and communion." Vitrano is one of the few scholars to have devoted sustained attention to the CSEC, and his assessment of the overall message of the club was that of "good news about the Kingdom of God and its coming, about faith and hope and love, and an application of the truths taught by Jesus in a genuine Christian activism in the home as well as in society at large." Vitrano's understanding was gained through close reading and content analysis of CSEC addresses from the 1913–1914, 1953–1954, and 1963–1964 seasons, and he concluded that "on the whole the preaching of the Sunday Evening Club is distinctively Christian."[15]

Though the Bryan address drew an extraordinarily large crowd, the club in its early years was consistently successful and soon was regularly testing the 3,000-seat capacity of Orchestra Hall regardless of the speaker. In 1918, after ten years of attracting large crowds to Orchestra Hall, the club could feel confident enough to note on the cover of its program that it was "helping to make democracy safe for the world," and it rather boastfully invited guests to come for the "heart warming singing . . . chorus choir of 100 voices . . . big organ . . . [and] big talks by big men." The club's popularity and achievements in its early years impressed many observers. Bruce Barton wrote glowingly of the club in 1908, remarking that its trustees were "associated with huge enterprises during the week, and they do not believe in running their religion on any little plan on Sunday." The club was "succeeding because big business men have determined that it shall." The kind of work done by the Chicago Sunday Evening Club clearly struck a chord with Barton, who later went on to become one of the country's most successful advertising executives and, in 1925, wrote *The Man Nobody Knows*, a book celebrating Jesus Christ as "The Founder of Modern Business."[16]

This simultaneous commitment to commerce, religion, and progress defined the project that the CSEC was engaged in during the 1920s. Club trustees had, in Paul Heidebrecht's view, "created what might be called a businessman's religion. Such faith was pragmatic, activist, and geared to measurable results." This commitment to growth and results was demonstrated in the club's efforts to promote itself as widely as possible. In 1913, the club's publicity committee listed in exact and often painstaking detail just how many of its handbills, posters, and other advertisements had been placed around Chicago, at one point going so far as to note that to "replace lost signs 38 frames were placed in 18 old locations." The club increased its promotional network by enlisting the cooperation of the Associated

Press, which assigned a reporter to cover the meetings. Many, if not most, of the addresses over the next few years received at least a brief notice by the AP, and, depending on the prominence of the speaker, the article might run in more than a hundred newspapers across the nation.[17]

Even before radio, the CSEC used public relations campaigns and cultivated close relationships with existing media institutions in order to promote the organization. Radio offered the CSEC an opportunity to extend its reach even further. Radio, club officials believed, could be used not only to promote the CSEC's meetings at Orchestra Hall but also to take the content of these meetings to a wider public. With radio, the CSEC in the 1920s found a way to make itself known and to be heard across the country. During a decade in which, as Paul Boyer argues, many came to believe that urban, rather than rural, society could provide the best sort of moral and cultural center for American life, radio was perhaps the ideal way to project this new image of the city.[18]

From Orchestra Hall to the Nation: Radio and the Audience Response to Mainline Protestant Broadcasting

On Christmas Eve in 1922, the Chicago Sunday Evening Club gave its first broadcast over KYW, a station owned by the Westinghouse Corporation. Having just built radio towers some five hundred feet tall, KYW had a regular broadcast range of roughly 2,000 miles, and listeners as far as 3,500 miles away had heard its broadcasts. With this wide geographic reach, KYW had become a national presence through exclusive broadcasts of the Chicago Civic Opera, and, to Westinghouse officials, the Sunday Evening Club's services offered a similarly appealing way to provide radio content that might encourage people to buy one of the company's receiving sets. In Pittsburgh in 1921, Westinghouse's KDKA broadcast what were believed to be the first radio church services of any kind from Cavalry Episcopal Church, and the CSEC offered the company a similar opportunity to use religion to promote radio from Chicago. Westinghouse provided the club free airtime over KYW and covered the initial expenses of microphone installation and operation at Orchestra Hall.[19]

Listener feedback in the early years of the broadcasts was enthusiastic and even euphoric. One listener wrote to Clifford Barnes that "you asked 'where are the eager listeners today?' You were comparing the people of today with those early Thessalonians to whom Paul was writing. Well, here is an eager listener . . . and I am sure there are thousands of others." Radio seemed remarkable to many of its

early listeners regardless of what the program content actually was, and many of those inspired by religious programs felt that they were truly experiencing something momentous. This was an audience, for example, with members who felt as spiritually affected as the audience inspired by Paul's epistles. Many expected great spiritual growth because of broadcasting. As one CSEC supporter suggested, "Radio, properly used, can do more to bring about the Kingdom of God than any other agency so far known to man." To transcend distance as a radio listener and to be part of a large, dispersed public of believers gave radio an almost millennial significance for many, and the CSEC's early broadcasts elicited correspondence from the public that was filled with spiritual reflection.[20]

When the Chicago Sunday Evening Club made its first broadcast over KYW in 1922, it was extending its self-promotional activities by using a new medium to reach a mass audience. It was also, as it discovered from responses from listeners, working in a medium that had a strongly spiritual appeal in its early years. John Durham Peters reminds us of the etymological concepts underlying the idea of "communication" in pointing out that the act of exchanging information between people shares a root with "community" and "communion," the latter an especially powerful religious concept. Likewise, the term "medium" in its modern usage obscures its connections to "spiritualist traditions." What is often thought of today as a term to describe a method of information distribution (for example, "the medium of television") is also a term that denotes a person capable of transferring the voices of the dead to the ears of the living. Developments in the post-World War II period have uncoupled the technological and spiritual aspects of the word "medium" and, in some ways, have obscured how strange radio was to listeners in the 1920s, especially those of religious programming.[21]

For many early radio listeners, the experience comported quite closely to the description of a mystical experience that philosopher William James offered in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1902. For James, the "personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness," and these states were characterized by a feeling of experiencing "insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect." A person having a mystical experience felt passive and under the sway of some abstract entity, "as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power." Ultimately, James argued, regardless of "clime or creed," there was an "overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute. . . . In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become

aware of our oneness." In the early days of radio broadcasting, the electronic device seemed to offer this kind of experience.[22] Many discussions of the CSEC in its formative years on the radio were sprinkled with mixed references to spirit and sound, as, for example, the 1928 *Chicago Tribune* tribute to the CSEC: "Now through all the land the radio carries an echo of peaceful consideration of the needs of the spirit from a fancied Babylon where too many imagine the shriek of sin is dominant."[23]

Ordinary people used similar language in writing to religious broadcasters to express their gratitude for the broadcasts and to discuss what the broadcasts meant to them, as Philip Goff and Tona Hangen have uncovered in the rich listener correspondence in the archives of fundamentalist broadcasters Charles Fuller and Paul Rader. To many listeners, radio offered not only a way to practice religion from the (sometimes remote) privacy of the home but also a way to have what they believed to be a genuine spiritual experience. As one farmer from Saskatchewan wrote to Paul Rader in 1927, "The spirit of God was so real that we could feel His very presence, through the air into our room, and my wife, my family, myself and the hired boy all got so blessed that we had a little revival meeting right here in our home. We cannot get out to church very often, but we can feel the Spirit of God moving through your meetings."[24]

Though the religious content of the CSEC's mainline program was quite different than that of Fuller and Rader, many listeners wrote similarly glowing letters to the Chicago Sunday Evening Club in which they connected the experiences of listening and religious observance as they expressed what the broadcasts meant to them. Many cherished the club's broadcasts since they made it possible for them to have access to religious services when they were unable physically to go to church. This was particularly true for invalid and elderly listeners, many of whom were grateful to the club for helping them feel a sense of religious community while confined to the home. As one noted in 1929, "I am the widow of a civil war soldier, 86 years of age, a shut in. I look forward to Sunday with great pleasure, as the Club affords us the opportunity of hearing such notable speakers. 66 years ago I heard Henry Ward Beecher say that music was a link between heaven and earth, and I often think of that when listening to the Club." A number of parents also claimed to have benefited from the broadcasts, such as one couple with three children who wrote that the demands of parenting made it "hard to leave and attend in person, which we did before we were married. But with the wonderful radio we can still attend and at the same time care for the baby." For many listeners in the early radio era, the practices of listening to

religious programming and being in church physically blurred together to the point that the verb "attend" could be used to describe both settings. This kind of usage was common among early radio listeners, as one wrote that, in the 1920s, "I had no Chicago church home. I could attend the Club at times, and my mother, three hundred miles away, could listen to the same service on the radio. We both derived pleasure from the knowledge that we were 'attending' the same service." In 1923, a Decatur, Illinois, listener remarked that "I went to church in Chicago on Sunday . . . but I stayed home in Decatur." What became clear in many letters was that these early radio listeners not only merged concepts of listening, attendance, and religious experience but also understood radio as something that made them part of a group, not isolated individuals. To listen to religious radio seemed like a legitimate religious experience.[25]

For many, this sense of listening to the radio synchronously with distant unseen others was a powerful experience that transcended the sense of being part of an audience and instead cultivated a strong sense of community. Anthropologist Benedict Anderson describes nationalism as a sense of "imagined community" in which spatially dispersed individuals become conscious of their "steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity" through such common practices as reading newspapers. For members of Anderson's imagined communities, "in the minds of each lives the image of their communion," and many listeners evoked these sorts of feelings in letters to the Sunday Evening Club. A man named Edward Steiner wrote that he was a regular listener not only because "it thrills me to hear the fine music" but "I also can hear the congregation think." One writer suggested that "we comprise, probably, the greatest congregation the world has ever known, physically separated, in many cases, by thousands of miles but united in spirit, in courage and in faith by the magic hour." Through radio broadcasting, religious groups like the CSEC were creating extended congregations of listeners who found the experience deeply meaningful, and not just providing an abstract sense of religious community but also a feeling like a concrete collective spiritual experience.[26]

Based on these sorts of responses, the CSEC, in its early years of using radio, saw unlimited potential in broadcasting and estimated, based on the number of letters received and the fact that letters had come from almost every state, that it had a regular audience of 500,000 listeners. This number, like virtually all estimates of listenership in the 1920s, is impossible to verify. Before systematic attempts to measure audiences began in the latter part of the decade, assessing audience size and composition was often a matter of guesswork, and

the CSEC did no significant audience surveys early on beyond tracking the correspondence and compliments that it received from listeners. By 1923, club officials noted, correspondence was so "constant and emphatic . . . that it seems the Sunday Evening Club threatens to make Chicago famous for religious activity, eclipsing the glory of the stock yards and the central manufacturing district." At the 1926 annual meeting, the club's secretary remarked that "Mr. Barnes finds that he encounters the inevitable radio fan at every function, and he has a reason to fear that he may become as uncomfortably famous as Douglas Fairbanks." On one day in early 1930, the CSEC received letters from listeners in Florida, Montana, Virginia, Missouri, Maryland, Texas, Wisconsin, Louisiana, Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana and, in 1931, noted that "letters from Canada have become frequent . . . [and] Mexico has been heard from."[27]

As the CSEC became a nationwide radio presence, this broadcast popularity also precipitated some unintended consequences. In the 1920s and 1930s, the CSEC established its identity both as a physical meeting in Chicago's Loop and as a broadcast service. As local listeners became more accustomed to the radio broadcasts, many chose to experience the club's services in this way instead of physically attending. As one listener wrote, "Before the days of radio I used to be a regular attendant at the Hall, and often, when a noted speaker was to be there, I arrived as early as 5:30 and would find the lobby packed to suffocation, which meant I had to stand on the outer rim for an hour and then take my chances to get inside. Now, however, as last week, I can sit at home, comfortable and uncrowded, and get the entire service in quiet and ease, and do not have to spend an hour getting home after the service is over." Though the content of the CSEC service remained appealing, for listeners like these, that content came to be something detached from public life. Radio, however, mediated that content in a way that did not lessen its appeal.[28]

This perception of radio listening by many as an acceptable and even desirable substitute for physical attendance would soon open the CSEC to competition from other broadcasters. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the club's program aired over stations with powerful transmitters and wide reaches. In 1927, the club moved from KYW to WMAQ, which had a similarly powerful transmitter and which had become an early affiliate of the National Broadcasting Company. In 1933, the Sunday Evening Club moved again to WLS, then to WGN until 1936, in both instances enjoying the nationwide reach of the stations' 50,000-watt (the legal maximum power) transmitters.[29] As a national media presence in the 1920s and 1930s, the CSEC began facing increasing competition for attention and influence.

Father Charles Coughlin attracted large audiences to his radio addresses, but, for the Chicago Sunday Evening Club, the more immediate competition came not from the Catholic Coughlin but from increasingly prominent and more theologically conservative Protestant broadcasters. Nationally, radio preachers like the fundamentalist Aimee Semple McPherson and the evangelical Charles Fuller attracted large audiences using entertaining and often theatrical presentations that were sharply different from the CSEC's more measured style. Tona Hangen describes Fuller's *Old Fashioned Revival Hour* as a program that "simply replicated a revival meeting" and points out that McPherson "was among the first to use the mass media to effect faith healing without a direct physical contact" when she implored listeners to put their hands on their radio sets to be cured of their ailments. Fuller's program, Philip Goff notes, originated from Los Angeles and had, by the late 1930s, become a national presence on the Mutual network, routinely reaching five million listeners with a program of "top-notch religious entertainment," combining music and preaching. Also from Los Angeles, McPherson used what Matthew Avery Sutton calls "dazzling religious theatrics" to make herself into a mass mediated presence of spirituality and celebrity. This kind of broadcast religious spectacle was not unique to the West Coast, and Chicago proved to be another epicenter for this kind of religious programming. The fundamentalist Paul Rader began broadcasting from the city in 1922 and, by 1925, had a nationwide audience, and the local Moody Bible Institute's station, WMBI, began in 1926 broadcasting programming that Dennis Voskuil describes as "unabashedly fundamentalist."[30]

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, these stations and programs began a gradual process of attracting some audience members that wanted a different sort of religious programming than the mainline Chicago Sunday Evening Club. Absent listener surveys, it is not clear how much of the CSEC's audience also listened to evangelical or fundamentalist programming, but the increasing popularity of these sorts of broadcasts would come at the expense of mainline broadcasts like the CSEC's. These divergent trends suggest that the audience for religious broadcasting began migrating away from mainline programs like the CSEC's. The novelty of early radio created a sense of wonder that could transcend denominational divides, but, for many listeners, this would fade as they grew accustomed to radio. Slowly but perceptibly, audience expectations began to shift from being just based upon the experience of listening to religious programming and toward desires for particular kinds of delivery and a particular sort of content.

There is a tantalizing piece of evidence of the early motivations for this shift in a 1923 letter to Clifford Barnes from a listener named W. L. Dunbar. Dunbar described his letter as "just a confidential note—man to man—and I fear that you will not understand my thoughts," but he felt that he and Barnes had a personal connection through the radio. "I feel that I know well enough to so address you now," Dunbar wrote, and he thanked Barnes for his broadcasts. "Your voice and manner of speech is so pleasing and appealing. So comforting to me—a man of 48 who has learned to appreciate people and good things. I am not professing to be good but do say that I am hungry for what you have to say in your dear talks and I thank God daily for you." Despite this gratitude, Dunbar also expressed a lingering desire for a different kind of radio presentation from the Sunday Evening Club. "I've often wished," Dunbar wrote, that "you might follow some of the customs of evangelists and ask all who wished to renew their allegiance to God—to 'stand.' Perhaps you cannot do that owing to the make of your audience but I am sure that there must be many who are wanting for such an invitation." Dunbar valued what the mainline CSEC did, but he also revealed that he wanted his religious broadcasting to have more evangelical content. As increasing numbers of broadcasters began providing the sort of programming that listeners like W. L. Dunbar desired, the Chicago Sunday Evening Club found itself in a precarious position.[31]

In 1941, communication researcher Everett Parker conducted one of the first formal studies of religious radio broadcasting in the United States, focusing on Chicago. Parker found that there were seventy-seven different religious programs on in the city, not counting the all-day fundamentalist programming on WMBI. These programs accounted for forty-six hours of airtime, or about 3 percent of the total broadcast hours on all stations in Chicago each week. Most of these programs (fifty-four of the seventy-seven) aired on Sunday, and the "majority of the 41 Protestant programs are fundamentalist in character," Parker noted with dismay. "They lack dignity. Many of the ministers seem to play upon the credulity, the sentimentality, the superstitions, and the fears of their audiences. Their appeals for money are often blatant, but apparently they are sufficiently effective to bring in enough money to pay the costs of the broadcasts and perhaps even to make them profitable." Very different from the CSEC in content and style, these sorts of broadcasters were attracting increasingly large and devoted audiences by the early 1940s. They were also mobilizing at the group level, forming several major fundamentalist organizations during this period aimed at using broadcasting to spread their message: the American Council of Churches of Christ in

1941, the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942, and National Religious Broadcasters in 1944.[32]

Despite this new competition, the Chicago Sunday Evening Club retained a high level of popularity throughout the 1930s. In 1935, the *Chicago Daily News* called the CSEC a "Spiritual Power House," remarking that the "spiritual climate of the nation is warmed, and its spiritual zeal instructed and aroused" because of the broadcasts. In 1940, Clifford Barnes was honored as "Public Friend No. 1" by Mayor Edward Kelly. As the club entered the 1940s, however, the competition from evangelical and fundamentalist broadcasters would prove increasingly strong. As Tona Hangen notes, the "forties and fifties were decades of nourishment for the fundamentalist and evangelical subculture," and leaders of these more conservative denominations initiated a new era of religious broadcasting in which their programming would attain much wider popularity. This was true not only on the radio but also on the new medium of television, which would prove particularly problematic for the Chicago Sunday Evening Club. Television fundamentally changed audience members' expectations of what a religious program should be, and the CSEC found it difficult and eventually impossible to meet them from the stage of Orchestra Hall.[33]

The Word Made Flesh: The Chicago Sunday Evening Club on Television

One of the true stars of early religious television was Bishop Fulton Sheen, whose program *Life Is Worth Living* drew a large and cross-denominational audience starting in 1952. The program's set was, as Thomas Doherty elegantly describes it, a "cozy simulation of the bishop's study. With the expensive leather chair, sturdy desk, and tasteful bookshelves stocked with real books, it might have been the prize corner office of an academically inclined corporate executive, save for the statue of the Blessed Virgin and Child positioned prominently." Sheen cut a striking figure, presenting himself as a "commanding presence blessed not only with a priestly vocation but the theatrical instincts of a born ham. . . . Bedecked in the full-dress finery of ecclesiastical formalwear—scarlet skullcap, gold crucifix, and a long, flowing red cape set off against a jet black cassock—he stood poised for action like a dashing Don Diego Zorro or a suave Count Dracula." During each program, Fulton Sheen spoke directly and uninterruptedly to the camera as he moved about the set, delivering messages that combined biblical analysis with meditations on earthly affairs. Some years later, Sheen mused in his autobiography,

"I was born in the electronic age, when light waves are used to communicate the Word. Radio is like the Old Testament, for it is the hearing of the Word without seeing. Television is like the New Testament, for the Word is seen as it becomes flesh and dwells among us." For Sheen, the differences between the two media were as significant as those between the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, and television seemed so miraculous that he could metaphorically link it to the arrival of Jesus Christ as narrated in the Book of John.[34]

As many religious broadcasters followed Sheen and quickly and aggressively pursued the new medium in the 1950s as a way to reach the public, in many cases, this involved significant accommodations to the new demands of television as a medium, creating in postwar America the neologism "televangelist" to define popular religious figures known primarily as visually mediated personalities. As this unfolded, many mainline Protestants were highly critical of the style and content of religious television. Michele Rosenthal points out that the magazine *Christian Century*, a prominent print representative of mainline Protestantism, wrote about television with an attitude "of (almost calculated) disregard." The magazine was dismissive of televangelists and saw television as ultimately more of a "vice that needed to be personally regulated by each individual viewer" than a useful strategy for mainline denominations to reach the public. This line of thinking was pervasive among post-World War II critics of televised religion and in mainline organizations, and, in this respect, when the CSEC decided to go on television in 1956, it was going against prominent trends in understandings of the medium among many of its peers.[35]

To its leadership, the CSEC had a vital role to play in postwar Chicago, and television offered a way of remaining a significant part of public life. As Executive Director Alton Motter stated, "Chicago needs the Sunday Evening Club as badly today as it did in 1907. The spiritual hungers of people for the best in religious thought and great sacred music have not ceased to exist." The CSEC's mainline message, Motter believed, ought to be represented on television not only to compete with evangelicals but also to bolster the institution's public presence at a time when physical attendance was declining. In his report to the club trustees at the end of the 1952–1953 season, Motter expressed a great deal of concern about the continually declining attendance at Orchestra Hall. Motter attributed some of the decline to the movement of many city dwellers to the suburbs, but he highlighted television as an even greater challenge for the club. Television, Motter argued, was "affecting the cultural pattern of people more seriously than any other invention in the history of mass communications." Motter confessed that he

did not know whether these trends meant the end of the CSEC as an organization or whether it should take the opportunity to go on television. "Are we at the bottom of an attendance cycle . . . or does television mark the beginning of the end? Obviously we do not yet know the answer. Perhaps our solution is to utilize the medium of television to bring our program to the masses." Soon, CSEC leadership came to believe that the club had to go on television to remain vital to Chicago in the face of declining attendance. As new club president Joseph Hanson noted in 1955, "Some times our speakers are embarrassed and we are too, when the main floor is less than half full," and the *Chicago Daily News* remarked that the "halcyon days of the late 20s, when big crowds regularly overflowed Orchestra Hall, are apparently over."[36]

Part of the reason that the CSEC was having so much trouble as a downtown institution was that many Chicago residents were moving to the suburbs. There and elsewhere, as Alton Motter had noted, many were also reconfiguring their domestic entertainment around the television instead of the radio. As Thomas Doherty points out, "In 1949 television was a luxurious indulgence in one out of ten American homes; in 1959, television was essential furniture in nine out of ten American homes." As the club contemplated going on television in the early 1950s, it was hoping to use the new medium to follow its audience. What it would find in this chase was that its audience demanded more from television than it had from radio. Where radio required only auditory perception and left it to the listener to create the mental pictures, television beckoned its audience members to do something different: they had to listen and to look. In turn, audience members came to demand something appealing to hear and to see. Many early television critics noted the new challenges of television as they tried to understand the new medium and its effects at this moment of encounter. As Irving Fiske wrote in *Harper's*, "Television, like the motion picture or the stage, and unlike the radio, requires complete and unfaltering attention." If television was to be less engaging of the imagination than radio since it provided the pictures, the audience demanded that the pictures be aesthetically pleasing and visually stimulating.[37]

Taking advantage of its historic and continuous presence in Chicago, the CSEC found a television home on WTTW, a prominent local public station, and broadcast its first meeting from the Loop in March 1956. The broadcast was the first telecast from Orchestra Hall, and it was WTTW's first remote broadcast. In preparation, WTTW sent a memo to the CSEC with suggestions for tailoring its message to the new demands of television and highlighted the different focus

that it demanded. "Know what you want to accomplish and make everything you do relate to this purpose. Choose a single topic that will stand the test of summarizing in a sentence or short paragraph. . . . Choose a subject capable of visual interest and visual variety. Because people watch television as well as listen to it, they will grow impatient if the picture becomes monotonous. If you can show something, do so instead of talking about it, and if possible show it in motion." After these practical tips, WTTW officials gave instructions that, in many respects, fit nicely with the approach that the CSEC had taken with radio, as they suggested a measured, intelligent presentation. "But don't go overboard looking for visual gimmicks," the memo continued. "There may be sufficient pictorial variety in a format which allows camera shots to change frequently from one subject to another—or in the expressive personality of a good performer. Open up to the viewers and respect their intelligence. Don't talk down to them. Don't sermonize." For some CSEC speakers, this may not have been that radical of a departure, as WTTW was simply pointing out the need for focused and well-presented oratory. However, the recognition of the potential impatience of the viewer demonstrated an early consciousness of the demands of television. This was not a medium that called for the same sort of imaginative engagement as radio, but rather one that had to engage the viewer actively with both the message and the visuals.[38]

While many other religious broadcasters on television did this, at Orchestra Hall it was particularly problematic for the CSEC, as the Sunday afternoon symphony concerts left little time for WTTW cameramen to set up, and the building did not have permanently installed cameras. The challenges of producing these early remote broadcasts resulted in a visual product that many viewers noted almost immediately as distractingly poor. Club trustee James Hammond remarked that the "light bathing all the participants and the choir was tending to make everyone pallid and lifeless because of its uniformity," and he believed that this was not inclined to spark and hold a viewer's interest. Additionally, Hammond asserted, "in seeing the show on television," it was obvious that "the front rows are almost always quite empty and give the feeling of poor attendance." This was something fundamentally different than radio, which would have left all of this information to the imagination of the listener. At the same time, on other channels, viewers also had the choice of watching the polished studio presentations of people like Fulton Sheen. Regardless of the content of the ideas, the context of television forced them to be presented in a new way and within a fundamentally different aesthetic context than radio. Despite Hammond's

reservations, CSEC leadership was initially satisfied with the move to television, as estimates from the 1956 season indicated that the club had some 200,000 weekly television viewers.[39]

By the early 1960s, the CSEC found itself not only faced with aesthetic and technical challenges on television but also subject to new and increasingly stiff competition from charismatic television preachers, a situation brought about by a change in Federal Communications Commission (FCC) policy. In 1960, the FCC stopped considering whether a station's "public interest" programming was done on time that the station had sold or given away, a shift that created a direct inducement for stations to begin selling time to fulfill their public service requirements. Prior to 1960, the FCC required that each station provide a certain amount of free airtime (known as "sustaining time") to organizations for educational, religious, and community affairs programming. In this environment, mainline broadcasters held an advantage, as the mainline Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America had close relationships with local stations and the networks, which often worked directly with the council to dole out the free airtime to groups that it approved. Once the FCC allowed paid programming to satisfy the public interest requirements of their licenses, many stations began selling time to religious organizations instead of giving it away. The Chicago Sunday Evening Club was insulated from this to some degree as its program was on a local public station, but, in commercial broadcasting, the better organized and more zealous evangelical and fundamentalist broadcasters soon took over the airwaves. The FCC's 1960 policy was, Tona Hangen argues, an unfortunate "cultural milestone . . . [for] mainline churches in mass media."[40]

This shift helped create the modern televangelist, and it was in this environment that preachers such as Jimmy Swaggart, Jerry Falwell, Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, and Rex Humbard flourished as they adapted to and embraced the conventions and demands of television. Though not all went as far as Humbard, who built a television studio complete with a revolving stage, many of these televangelists eagerly embraced the new medium and sought to present programming that was as visually appealing as anything on television. As Quentin Schultze notes, "Like their counterparts in secular broadcasting, televangelists have pushed strongly for the best possible visual appeal in their programs. The electronic church has attempted to beat the competition at its own technical game rather than focusing only on its broadcast message."[41]

With this competition, the Chicago Sunday Evening Club's broadcasts from Orchestra Hall seemed to many viewers to be of comparatively poor visual quality, and complaints began to pour in

from viewers about the meager aesthetics of the broadcasts and about how the visuals did not fulfill their expectations or their demands. Almost to a person, the dissatisfied letter writers commented on technical matters rather than the content of the programs. One viewer wrote to "report the poor service we get. Last Sunday night TV was so poor, we could not make out personalities. You must have a very poor TV set or something must be wrong." Another commented on the fact that the camera work was detracting from the overall experience of the program, suggesting, "I think the camera man is not accustomed to a religious service for he moves the camera at a most inappropriate time. Last evening it was taken off the quartet to 'shoot' members of the choir and others on the platform. When I wish to get the message of a religious song, I wish to give full attention to the singers." The viewer said nothing about the content of the broadcast but instead focused on how the visual presentation did not meet expectations. "I believe the purpose of the broadcasts is to present a religious message to the watchers through song and the speaker's words. Anything taking away from this purpose lessens the good of your T.V. work. This switching about of the camera takes away from this purpose in my thinking." With the addition of visuals to the broadcast, audiences came to demand something that looked like what they expected it would, whereas radio would have left the picture up to the individual's imagination.[42]

Letter writers never mentioned the possibility of attending a meeting at Orchestra Hall in order to transcend these problems of transmission, demonstrating the degree to which the CSEC's presence had shifted from a physical meeting place to a spot on the television dial. Most troubling to CSEC leadership was the increasing number of letters suggesting that, if the quality of the broadcasts did not improve, the viewers would cease watching. One viewer wrote, "Our reception on T.V. of the Sunday night sermons has been so very poor, so difficult to watch" that she might have to "forego the joy" of them. A retired couple commented that "we cannot understand why the Sunday Club picture is so much worse than anything on TV. We watch Channel 11 other nights and also sometimes the educational program that follows on Sunday, and it is always much better! Maybe it is just not possible to do a good TV job from Orchestra Hall. . . . Please don't think us complainers, it is just too bad that the best program on TV has to be the worst picture." Though they loved the program, the couple expressed concern because "my husband's eyes bother him when watching your program, and I feel that we will have to stop watching next season unless they can get a better picture from the Hall."[43]

These sorts of comments greatly troubled the CSEC, but the club still did little to alter its programs to fit the demands of the new medium. Instead, it continued with virtually the same format it had used since 1908 and, through its first ten years of television broadcasting, gave no thought to abandoning Orchestra Hall for a television studio. As CSEC president Joseph Hanson told WTTW president John Taylor, "The Sunday Evening Club and Orchestra Hall are associated in the minds of our speakers and the public generally. Its good location and beautiful interior suit our purposes very well, and the Trustees are loathe to leave it." The club did make some efforts to improve the technical quality of its broadcasts, and this brought the CSEC into conflict with both WTTW and Orchestra Hall management. At an Orchestra Hall Board of Trustees meeting, for example, there was serious discussion of the recent "tempestuous experiences with the Sunday Evening Club officials," whom some trustees felt were beginning to make impossible demands on the Hall's staff, including asking them to start their concerts earlier to give more time to set up cameras or perhaps to install cameras on a permanent basis. John Taylor later told Joseph Hanson that there was little the station could do about the quality of the Orchestra Hall broadcasts, as they would always be done "under conditions which we can never make ideal." It was "impossible to put on an excellent program out of Orchestra Hall due to the lack of light and the lack of adequate facilities for staging a television program," Taylor argued. The CSEC's tenure as a downtown institution was simply over, and, in his opinion, "the Chicago Sunday Evening Club program has become a television presentation as a result of having been on WTTW for more than a decade." By June 1968, the issue had been put directly to the CSEC: either move to a studio or lose WTTW as a broadcaster. The "lack of sharp clear pictures or any other recently reputed technical deficiency is directly related to the amount of set up time which is available before the show," Taylor claimed, and there were "really only two good alternatives. One is to remain in Orchestra Hall at the 8:00 p.m. hour and the other is to come to the studio. Anything else is really unsatisfactory."[44]

The club began considering alternative venues for its meetings, though it clearly wanted to remain in Orchestra Hall. Citing the WTTW studio's "commercial atmosphere, large high ceilinged hall, bare walls, with cameras and other equipment hanging from ceiling," some club officials felt that a studio did not have the spatial and locational significance that Orchestra Hall did, but, by this point, it had little choice. Attendance was abysmal, and, among the younger trustees, sentiment was building for making the move. Trustee Kingman Douglass wrote to Joseph Hanson, "It is clear to me that . . . our very existence today is

justified by the large number of people" who know the club through its broadcasts and "never actually witness a service in person." Regardless of Hanson's desire to stay at Orchestra Hall, Douglass argued, he needed to realize that times had changed. Douglass suggested that, "if we direct our efforts solely to the building of a TV audience, we can gear ourselves to this single purpose rather than constantly trying to serve two masters, as we have these past few years."[45]

Club leadership soon concluded that it should just make the transition to the studio. With little fanfare or ceremony, the CSEC held its last meeting in Orchestra Hall on February 9, 1969, stating briefly in the program that, starting the following week, "the Chicago Sunday Evening Club will leave Orchestra Hall. . . . We welcome an audience in the studio but admission will be by ticket only. Our office will be glad to supply tickets on a 'first come' basis. Please phone or write for tickets." The immensely popular downtown club of the early years of the century simply had no place downtown anymore. Lacking a building like the Art Institute, the club had no physical center of its own and, thus, rested its appeal on the sort of community setting it created and the ideas it presented. Radio had been an easy extension of this project, and the mainline and intellectual message of the club worked well over a new aural medium that offered an experience to listeners that ranged from pleasantly spiritual to something approaching the miraculous. In the 1950s, the CSEC's audience increasingly moved not only from the city of Chicago to the suburbs but also from radio to television for their religious programming, and the CSEC suffered on both fronts. For those Chicagoans who remained part of the Sunday Evening Club's public—a significant number compared to the club's early days—their relationship with the organization was structured through a televisual experience. In many cases, the expectations that audience members developed in the 1950s and 1960s from watching other programming (sacred and secular) simply could not be met because of the practical circumstances of broadcasting from Orchestra Hall. As Philip Goff notes, "The wall that separates the sacred from the secular is a low one, indeed, and is probably less important than the one that fences the two in the same media yard together." To survive as an institution in 1969, the Chicago Sunday Evening Club was forced to acknowledge the difficult fact that it had become more of a television program than a metropolitan institution.[46]

Conclusion: The Varieties of Mediated Religious Experience

In recent years, the Chicago Sunday Evening Club has celebrated its one hundredth anniversary as an organization, passed the

fifty-year mark on television, and continued to use new media to reach the public. As it had used radio in the 1920s and television in the 1950s, the CSEC today operates a website with a variety of multimedia religious content. After one hundred years, it also retains the nonsectarian and ecumenical spirit that motivated its creation during the Progressive Era. In terms of its message, the Chicago Sunday Evening Club has been a very consistent organization. As journalist Lynn Taylor remarked in 1974, "The message has stayed the same since the club was founded in 1908." And, Taylor noted, even though the CSEC's television audience was "small, by network standards," it was still "20 times the crowd that came to hear William Jennings Bryan in the club's earlier heyday, and far larger than Clifford Barnes, who died in 1944, possibly ever dreamed." While the audience was still relatively sizable, Taylor noted, the CSEC was no longer the major urban institution that it used to be, nor did it attract the same kind of audience. The audience, Taylor discovered, had "changed radically. Many of its present viewers and listeners live in small towns," and she concluded that, though the club remained steadfast in its vision and practices, the "audience has changed because the city and the times have changed."[47]

Perhaps even more important, the mass media changed, expanding the ways that religious organizations could reach the public. Evangelicals and fundamentalists took to television in great numbers and with great energy and used it to enhance their public presences dramatically. Ben Armstrong, director of National Religious Broadcasters (NRB), recalled in 1979 how he had an epiphany about using media while looking out the window on an airplane flight. "Even in today's spiritual darkness, I thought, religious broadcasting is beaming the true light of the gospel." Looking down at the lights below, Armstrong saw "millions of religious broadcasting listeners and viewers . . . members of a great and new manifestation of the church created by God for this age—the electric church." Armstrong was an acolyte of Marshall McLuhan and later convinced the media theorist to address (while waiving his usual honorarium) the annual NRB convention at the height of his fame in the 1970s, challenging him to help "get religious broadcasters out of the nineteenth century." In ongoing broadcasting projects, evangelicals fervidly embraced the mass media and sought to create programming with the widest possible appeal.[48]

Over time, these visually appealing broadcasts garnered large audiences. By 1984, Robert Wuthnow notes, some thirteen million Americans regularly watched religious television, much of it evangelical or fundamentalist in character, and this number roughly

equaled the total combined membership of the mainline United Methodist, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian denominations. This large audience generated significant revenues for religious broadcasters. Some, like Jimmy Swaggart and Oral Roberts, made so much money that they were able to found universities, and Jim Bakker earned enough to build a religious amusement park. In the early 1980s, Pat Robertson's cable network became one of the five largest of any kind in the country.[49]

Because the CSEC remained committed to broadcasting from Orchestra Hall before 1969, it was never able to provide the kind of visually appealing program that viewers were coming to expect as they grew accustomed to television. As other religious broadcasters embraced wholeheartedly the conventions and demands of television, the CSEC simply could not meet them. To many viewers, the dim and blurry pictures from Orchestra Hall disrupted the flow of information, drowned out the message, and contributed to an unsatisfactory experience. It is possible that, even if the CSEC had been able to improve the visual appearance of its program in the 1960s, it still would have found that its mainline message would not have appealed widely to a more evangelical or fundamentalist audience. Some scholars have suggested that, because radio and television make it difficult to communicate complex ideas adequately, the mass media have proven inhospitable to liberal theology. As sociologist Steve Bruce argues, "Liberal Protestantism was hampered by elements in its own character which made it unsuited to mass media." The "narrow, well-defined product of the conservatives—'Ye must be born again'—carries better than the hesitations of liberalism." In this view, the audience for religious programming expected content providing confirmation of beliefs that were increasingly doctrinally conservative, and, consequently, mainline Protestantism had little appeal to them. The CSEC's history does not fit this narrative. Over the radio, the dominant form of mass media from 1920 to the mid-1950s, the CSEC had great success. This was not the case on television, but the response from viewers shows that a significant reason for this had to do not simply with doctrine but with aesthetics. At a key moment in the 1950s and 1960s when the audience for religious programming was getting used to television, the CSEC could not meet their expectations of what that programming should look like, and this significantly hampered the organization.[50]

Over the long term, as fundamentalists and evangelicals became more prominent on television, much of the audience for religious broadcasting drifted to programs that were more strategic and polished in their use of visuals. The radio experience of the 1920s was

rich without pictures, and this experience can be better understood in historical perspective by looking at the response to a program like the CSEC's that attempted to add pictures in the 1950s and 1960s. To "make the word flesh," to paraphrase Bishop Fulton Sheen, was a difficult and risky process. In religion as in many elements of American culture, new media created new expectations as readily as they satisfied old demands, and, as the CSEC's slide out of the mainstream of Chicago's cultural life shows, mainline Protestantism faced many challenges attracting and retaining an audience through television.

In 1985, media theorist Neil Postman (also a member of the Commission on Theology, Education, and the Electronic Media of the ecumenical National Council of the Churches of Christ) argued that "there are several characteristics of television . . . that converge to make authentic religious experience impossible."[51] Postman makes a provocative point, the acceptance of which hinges on how one understands what an "authentic religious experience" is. The viewing habits and attitudes of many Americans after World War II demonstrate a mass disagreement with Postman, as many in the twentieth century grew increasingly comfortable understanding a "religious experience" as something structured through broadcasting rather than churchgoing. As sociologist Robert Wuthnow points out, for many viewers and believers, televised religion "was no less genuine to those who experienced it because it was transmitted via communication satellite than if it had been created in a local revival meeting." In cultivating this new sense of the "religious experience" in their living rooms, media audiences began to demand more from broadcasters, and, put simply, conservatives fulfilled these demands better. This contributed greatly to the conservatives' success and to the struggles of mainline Protestantism in the mass media.[52]

Notes

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1. Cecelia Tichi, *Civic Passions: Seven Who Launched Progressive America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), chap. 6; James Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 209–12.

2. The literature on religious broadcasting is extensive and multidisciplinary. In addition to works cited throughout, the following works have been particularly useful for this essay: Hal Erickson, *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921–1991: The Programs and Personalities* (Jefferson, N. C.: McFarland and Co., 1992); John Ferré, ed., *Channels of Belief: Religion and American Commercial Television* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990); Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, eds., *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); William Fore, *Television and Religion: The Shaping of Faith, Values, and Culture* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987); George H. Hill, *Airwaves to the Soul: The Influence and Growth of Religious Broadcasting in America* (Saratoga, Calif.: R&E Publishers, 1983); Peter G. Horsfield, *Religious Television: The American Experience* (New York: Longman, 1984); Wm. David Sloan, ed., *The Media and Religion in American History* (Northport, Ala.: Vision Press, 2000); Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, eds., *Religion and Media* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001); and Mark Ward, *Air of Salvation: The Story of Christian Broadcasting* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984).

3. "Chicago Sunday Evening Club, About Us," accessed December 18, 2009, http://www.csec.org/about.htm.

4. Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 1.

5. Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 45, 40; Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 10. See also Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and William Hutchison, Catherine Albanese, Max Stackhouse, and William McKinney, "The Decline of Mainline Religion in American Culture," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 131–53.

6. Richard Wightman Fox, "The Culture of Liberal Protestant Progressivism, 1875–1925," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23 (Winter 1993): 640; Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, 51. See also William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New*

American Culture (New York: Vintage, 1993); T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994 [1981]); Henry May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912–1917* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992 [1959]); and Christian Smith, ed., *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

7. Quentin J. Schultze, *Christianity and the Mass Media in America: Toward a Democratic Accommodation* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2003), 80; Dennis Voskuil, "Reaching Out: Mainline Protestantism and the Media," in *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900–1960*, ed. William R. Hutchison (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 89, 72. On mainline Protestant broadcasting, see also Judith Buddenbaum, "Mainline Protestants and the Media," in *Religion and Mass Media: Audiences and Adaptations*, ed. Daniel Stout and Judith Buddenbaum (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1996), 51–60; and Kimberly Neuendorf, "The Public Trust versus the Almighty Dollar," in *Religious Television: Controversies and Conclusions*, ed. Robert Abelman and Stewart Hoover (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing, 1990), 71–84.

8. Schultze, *Christianity and the Mass Media in America*, 77

9. William R. Hutchison, "Protestantism as Establishment," in Hutchison, *Between the Times*, 3.

10. Bartlett was a leading Chicago retailer, while Nuveen and Harris were prominent bankers. Hutchinson was the president of the Chicago Board of Trade, and McCormick the president of International Harvester. Pirie was an executive at the department store Carson, Pirie, Scott. Shedd served as president of the department store Marshall Field and, in the 1920s, founded the downtown aquarium that still bears his name today. See Paul Henry Heidebrecht, *Faith and Economic Practice: Protestant Businessmen in Chicago, 1900–1920* (New York: Garland, 1989), 249–70.

11. Clifford W. Barnes, "Reminiscences of Clifford W. Barnes," unpublished manuscript, 42, 48, Box 1, Folder Reminiscences and Articles, Clifford W. Barnes Papers, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois (hereafter CHM). On Barnes's civic activism, see "My War on the Mayor: Barnes Hints at Political Comeback after Slur on Committee of Fifteen," *Chicago Daily News*, October 21, 1913, 3; Clifford W. Barnes, "The Story of the Committee of Fifteen of Chicago," *Social Hygiene* 4 (April 1918): 145–56; "U.S. Leaders Hit Crime Here: Committee of 1,000 Begins Super-Drive," *Chicago Tribune*, January 15, 1925, 1; and "Religion Only

Cure for Crime, Barnes Avers," *Chicago Daily News*, October, 13, 1930, 8. On Chicago philanthropy during this period, see Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Culture and the City: Cultural Philanthropy in Chicago from the 1880s to 1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

12. Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (New York: Signet Classics, 1961 [1910]), 82. Addams's remarks had originally been given in 1892 as "The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements," and she noted that she reproduced them in *Twenty Years at Hull-House* "because I have found it impossible to formulate with the same freshness those early motives and strivings." Ibid., 74.

13. "Religion to Rival Theater," *Chicago Tribune*, February 5, 1908, 1.

14. Steven Vitrano, "The Chicago Sunday Evening Club: A Study in Contemporary Preaching" (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1966), 79; Steven Vitrano, *An Hour of Good News: The Chicago Sunday Evening Club—A Unique Preaching Ministry* (Chicago: Chicago Sunday Evening Club, 1974), 143–77; Lynn Taylor, "An Hour of Good News," *Chicago Tribune*, April 7, 1974, sec. 9, 43.

15. Vitrano, *An Hour of Good News*, 6, 69; Vitrano, "The Chicago Sunday Evening Club," 335. In carrying out his quantitative content analysis to assess the religious character of CSEC addresses, Vitrano read the addresses and tallied the number of times that Jesus or Christianity was mentioned, the number of times biblical examples were used, and the frequency of references to Christian precepts. The detailed results of Vitrano's research are in "The Chicago Sunday Evening Club," 215–336.

16. Chicago Sunday Evening Club Program, 1918, Box 13, Folder Miscellaneous, Chicago Sunday Evening Club Records, CHM (hereafter CSEC-CHM); Bruce Barton, "Chicago's Sunday Evening Club," *Home Herald* 19 (November 18, 1908): 5; Richard Fried, *The Man Everybody Knew: Bruce Barton and the Making of Modern America* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005), 93. On the early popularity of the CSEC, see also Wallace Dodge, "The Chicago Sunday Evening Club," *Saturday Times*, October 2, 1909, 3–5; Roy Randall, "The Twentieth Century Church," *Morrison's Chicago Weekly*, January 12, 1911, 5, 29; and George Anderson, "Clubbing the People to Church," *Congregationalist*, January 8, 1914, 48–49.

17. Heidebrecht, *Faith and Economic Practice*, 4; Publicity Committee Report, October 10, 1913, 1, Box 1, Folder Minutes 5/9/13–10/9/13, CSEC-CHM; Minutes of the Trustees Meeting, January 25, 1924, Box 2, Folder Minutes 5/25/23–5/27/26, CSEC-CHM.

18. Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 284–92.

19. Erik Barnouw, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, vol. 1, *A Tower in Babel, to 1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 88–90; Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922–1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 44, 51–54; George Stone, "Radio Has Gripped Chicago," *Radio Broadcast* 1 (October 1922): 508; W. W. Rodgers, "Broadcasting Church Services," *Radio Broadcast* 1 (August 1922): 321–29; H. A. Fall to Clifford Barnes, September 29, 1926, Box 2, Folder Minutes 10/12/26–1/4/28, CSEC-CHM.

20. Letter excerpted in CSEC General Report, December 9, 1925, 2, Box 2, Folder Minutes 5/25/23–5/27/26, CSEC-CHM; Robert Hilliard to CSEC, quoted in CSEC General Report, January 9, 1923, 2, Box 2, Folder Minutes 5/26/21–4/27/23, CSEC-CHM.

21. John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 7, 96–101; Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004 [1999]), chap. 2; Edward Miller, *Emergency Broadcasting and 1930s American Radio* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

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23. "The Sunday Evening Club," *Chicago Tribune*, October 22, 1928, 23.

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ABSTRACT This article analyzes the broadcast activities of the Chicago Sunday Evening Club (CSEC), a mainline Protestant organization founded in 1908 and still active today. The CSEC began broadcasting its weekly meetings on the radio in 1922 and on television in 1956. Drawing on archival organizational records from the CSEC and from listener correspondence, this essay traces how the club's use of the new media of particular historical moments shaped its history as a public entity.

This study makes two claims. First, it argues that, though evangelicals and fundamentalists took to radio and television broadcasting with greater vigor, mainline Protestant groups did as well, and the persistence of a group like the CSEC offers a way to understand the challenges that broadcasting presented to religious organizations. Second, this article shows how audience expectations for religious programming evolved from radio to television. For many listeners, radio offered what they told the CSEC was a spiritual and even miraculous experience, and they marveled at being able to tune in to religious services from their homes. Television, however, prompted remarks often focused on visual style, and the club found itself struggling to compete with the newly emerging group of religious television programs not only on denominational terms (many were evangelicals and fundamentalists) but also on aesthetic terms. In contrast to radio, as many viewers wrote to the CSEC, television seemed to provide not a singular "experience" but rather spectatorial access to events taking place elsewhere. In the context of competition from the more telegenic programming of evangelicals and fundamentalists, these shifting audience expectations shaped both the history of the CSEC as a public entity and the broader history of mainline Protestantism in the mass media.

Keywords: Chicago, new media, radio, religion, television