

The Contemporary Text: Media and Preaching

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Throughout human history, music has existed as a powerful vehicle of expression. While musicians and philosophers often hold conflicting definitions of music, none can seriously deny the influence of music on human society. In the course of anthropological research, musical instruments have been unearthed “dating back almost 30,000 years.”¹ Music has been referred to “by many non-Western cultures and some Western writers as...an inherently mystical or occult force, able to unlock elemental truths or principles that cannot be otherwise translated into written or graphic form.”² Music possesses a remarkable evocative power to epitomize a feeling, era, mindset, or even political orientation. For instance, listening to the Big Band music of the 1930s and 1940s can help capture or recapture the mood of the era with its hopes, fears, and powerful patriotic feelings, while the music of Buffalo Springfield or Joan Baez can evoke the sights and sounds of the Vietnam era and its conflicting, often raging, emotions. Combine this evocative power of music with the immediate power of the visual image and the result is Music Television.

To examine the influence and content of Music Television is a daunting task for several reasons, not the least of which is the fact that the musical genres are not appealing to many adults—perhaps ministers in particular. Beyond the specific styles of music, simply keeping up with the frenetic pace of one new music video after another is taxing in itself. Add to these factors the incessant challenges to public and religious morals, and one can easily be repulsed by much of the programming of MTV. However, through some effort, MTV can become an entree into the mindset and orientation of much of the younger generation. Although one must wade through the trappings, glitz, and shock-value appointments of contemporary music styles as reflected by MTV, there are some definite and genuine messages (or cries) that can be heard from this medium. Too often in ecclesiastical circles, the reaction to MTV is to dismiss it as a negative influence or simply a diversion for youth. But to discount MTV as having no social importance may be tantamount to forfeiting both the ability to hear clearly the MTV generation’s concerns and the opportunity to respond to those needs with the Christian message.

Music Television was founded in the early 1980s by Michael Nesmith, an original member of the 1960s rock group, “The Monkees.” From its inception, MTV has confounded conventional forms of television and has continually evolved. Early in MTV’s history, the content was almost exclusively songs performed by their artist, sometimes dramatizing the song’s story. Today’s MTV features videos which are productions that take on a life of their own in which the performing artists may appear in almost cameo roles. The medium of MTV itself has evolved to the point that videos are only one facet of its program. MTV features its own games shows, dramatic programs, sporting events, “Rockumentaries” and its infamous animated offerings such as “Beavis and Butthead” and MTV Oddities.” The national networks have acknowledged the power and appeal of MTV by broadcasting the annual MTV awards during prime time. MTV’s agenda is thinly masked—it wants to sell products, and it uses sex, violence, a materialist ideology, and a resurgent paganism to do so. It is

consequently not so different from the rest of TV except perhaps in the effectiveness of its appeal to a youth culture. The conflict of MTV's relaxed sexual mores with its campaign for AIDS awareness and prevention is a bitter irony. While condom use is promoted, almost nothing is portrayed or mentioned about sexual abstinence, monogamous relationships, or the effect of promiscuity on the spread of AIDS.

MTV is full of religious imagery, much of which is hostile to Christianity. Several contemporary examples are the use of "gird your loins" for action in MTV's "Sandblast," a beach sport contest; Madonna's use of crucifixion motifs and religious symbolism in "Papa Don't Preach"; the use of the cross by many groups in unflattering (if not blasphemous ways); and references to God and Christianity in ways that can confuse and deter faith. One current video which is not very controversial asks "What if God was one of us; just a slob like one of us?" The subtle bombardment of "What ifs" can signal not only a disregard but also an honest questioning of young people concerning faith.

Thus MTV can be a useful tool for glimpsing the world of today's youth and for coming face to face with the economic and cultural forces shaping that world. One method of attempting to hear the messages of MTV and the challenges they pose is to examine the periodic Top 10, 20, and annual Top 100 Video Countdowns. To be sure, most adults will not care to watch hours of MTV. However, videotaping the countdown and then selectively viewing (and fast forwarding) the selections can give an overview of what MTV is about. Depending on the tastes of one's youth membership, the same can be done for CMT (Country Music Television) or VH-1 (Video Hits One), clones of the MTV concept.

One warning, the content of MTV is not sanitized. Drugs, sex, alcohol, violence, crime, and immorality are often part and parcel of the videos. Profanity is common but many videos are "bleeped" versions of the artist's original creations. Despite these problems, one can decipher some honest struggles with moral issues at the root of some music videos. One video, for example, which has been popular in 1995 is "Fantastic Voyage" by an artist who calls himself Coolio. His rap song and video poignantly describe the plight of many African-Americans caught in the quagmire of inner-city violence. The lyrics of the song tell of fear and despair and the quest for survival as Coolio repeats the rhythmic refrain, "Sly, sly, slippity slide, when you're livin' in the city it's do or die." A subsequent phrase posits the hope for the children to be able to "play in the yard without worrying 'bout a drive-by (shooting)." Coolio's "Fantastic Voyage" expresses a hope for peaceful coexistence in life's journey, but affirms that he "must do what I do just to survive."

Another example of MTV's moral/ethical agenda is reflected in the 1995 world premiere of Van Halen's video "Don't Tell Me (What Love Can Do)." The images of this video are quite graphic as an antiviolence theme is promoted across the screen showing the scars of victims as the lead singer, Sammy Hagar, sings "Don't tell me what love can do." This particular spin on the problem of urban violence fits well with MTV's ironic "Stop the Violence" campaign.

In reviewing the content of MTV, one must acknowledge the diversity and scope of the issues and cultures/subcultures addressed in this music. There are the intense messages espoused by Rap, Acid Rock, and Heavy Metal as well as the despair and social concerns of Grunge, as articulated by groups such as Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and the Stone Temple Pilots. Add to these the surreal music and nihilism of Soundgarden's

“Black Hole Sun” and Coolio’s “Fantastic Voyage” and one can see another aspect of the MTV spectrum. Combine these with the feel-good music of “The Sign” or the virtual reality of Aerosmith’s “Amazing” and one can begin to grasp the appeal of MTV to the young viewer and the economic and cultural agenda of those who sponsor MTV. In a generation of the thirty-second sound bite, the young viewer can find something appealing or someone to identify with in one or more of the myriad video creations.

In light of the power and magnetism of MTV youth, what can the minister learn in relation to the contemporary culture? Without a doubt, MTV and its videos both reflect and are seeking to shape youth culture. The church must engage this culture with the good news of the gospel. Cries of despair and hopelessness abound on MTV and the church must listen carefully to these cries, seek to understand their origins, and respond in graceful ways. Whether the problem is in social interaction, environmental issues, or AIDs awareness and prevention, a feeling of despair sweeps across many videos as evidenced by the music of Nirvana and the suicide of its lead singer Kurt Cobain. While MTV can express and promote a hedonistic culture of despair, it is impotent to offer answers to that despair or to assuage the fears it identifies. In the midst of such a culture, the task of Christian ministers is to engage vigorously this culture, its worldview and assumptions, and in loving and caring ways to transmit the hopeful, faithful message of the gospel.

NOTES

¹ “Music” in *The New Grolier Encyclopedia*, (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 6:2

² Ibid.