



Report from Hollywood:

Are Christians Making an Impact in the Movie Industry?

By Phil Cooke

For more than half a century, Christians have been making an serious impact in broadcasting. From small power radio, to the early pioneers of Christian television, the Christian media world has exploded into hundreds of radio and television stations, cable and satellite networks, and even global broadcasting organizations. Certainly we have a long way to go in both content and style, but the fact is, the "pipeline" is finally in place for Christian programming to have some type of impact in nearly every nation on earth.

However, when it comes to the motion picture industry, the impact is much harder to realize. With movies featuring more and more sex, violence, and sleaze, it's hard to imagine Christian producers even making a beachhead, much less occupying enemy territory.

But for those of us who live and work in Hollywood, a much different picture is emerging. There are real signs that a new generation of executives, producers, directors, writers, and actors have a bold vision for creating films with values - *films that celebrate faith in God, rather than ridicule it.*

When I look at the motion picture landscape, I generally see two areas where Christians are starting to make a significant difference. One is within the Hollywood system, and one is outside it.

Those within the system are people who work in the secular industry on a day to day basis, sometimes making small gains for the Kingdom, and sometimes having a breakthrough. Generally, these are Christians who are highly trained professionals, have

the respect of the industry, but realize that their ability to deal with Christian subjects and themes is limited by the secular worldview they face from the movie studios and television networks.

While there are many in this category, I have particular respect and admiration for two friends - Ralph Winter and Dave Johnson.

Ralph is considered one of the top producers in the movie industry today. With producing credits that include *Star Trek* movies, *Inspector Gadget*, and *The X-men*, Ralph is on the cutting edge of the industry, and has won deep respect among the major studios. Currently, Ralph is producing the upcoming re-make of "*The Planet of the Apes*" directed by Tim Burton. It's already slated to be one of the most expensive movies ever made, which indicates the trust the secular industry has in Ralph's values and integrity.

Another example is Dave Johnson. Partnering with his brother Gary, Dave is a highly respected writer-producer for dramatic series television. His programs have won numerous awards, and he creates what some call "multi-generational" stories - movies that can be enjoyed by everyone in the family, from grandma down to small children.

Dave and Gary's most recent accomplishment was writing and producing a television movie for the PAX network called "Doc," starring country music star Billy Ray Cyrus. "Doc" is the story of a young country doctor in Montana who takes a job in New York City. The traditional values of a small town doctor are put to the test when he begins working at an HMO-driven big city medical practice. The setting provides a wonderful opportunity to explore love, compassion, and grace within the context of a gripping story.

Both Dave, Gary, and Ralph are examples of hundreds of Christians in the secular entertainment industry who are quietly but steadily making their mark for the kingdom in an industry growing more and more hostile to Christianity.

Another group in Hollywood are Christians working *outside* the studio system. These are men and women producing and distributing independent projects in a remarkable variety of ways.

This category ranges from men like Roger Flessing, who as former Vice-President of Communication at the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association has taken what we used to call "Billy Graham films" from the category of "church films" to major distribution in

theaters, syndicated television, and even airline and foreign distribution. Roger's vision and experience in the industry is helping transform the future of Christian movies.

Others include the Trinity Broadcasting Network, who produced last year's release "The Omega Code" starring Michael York and Casper Van Dien. The Omega Code's greatest accomplishment as a feature film was its innovative distribution strategy. TBN, working closely with Providence Entertainment mobilized hundreds of churches, as well as the internet, making it the highest grossing movie in the nation on a per theater basis it's opening weekend.

Providence Entertainment itself is another remarkable story. Founded by the Chairman of Interstate Batteries, Norm Miller, and movie production executive Cindy Bond, it's become the first Christian owned company to encompass both feature production and distribution under one roof. With Cindy Bond supervising production and industry veteran David Williams supervising distribution, Providence is positioning itself as the first real Christian entry into the world of the major studios.

But that's not all. Just a quick look around the internet reveals a wealth of sites advertising, promoting, or raising money for Christian movies. Recently, after writing an industry magazine article sharing my concerns over the current state of Christian media, I was deluged with supportive calls and e-mails from Christian college students across the country - young people who are frustrated with the creative limitations and poor quality of current Christian movies and television.

I have the feeling we're experiencing the birth of a Renaissance in the Christian media world. Whether they choose to take the secular route, the independent route, or work within traditional Christian media outlets, I believe a new generation is changing the rules.

Personally, I've always felt that if there is only one reason I'm here on the earth, it's to help take us from the era of *preachers* to the era of *producers*. I love good preaching, and it will always have a place in Christian broadcasting, but I believe the next generation of Christian media will be driven not by *preachers*, but by *creative producers* working behind the camera - *producers who understand how to use the media more effectively, and create a wide range of anointed and powerful programming.*

At this moment, probably the most gleaming example of that vision is the movie industry, where as audiences grow tired of the non-stop flow of filth, Christian filmmakers are ready to fill the void with stories of faith, inspiration, and power.

So what can we do right now?

Pray.

Pray that God will open the eyes of secular studio executives to the vast audience looking for movies with meaning.

Pray that God will open financial doors to fund more films and television programs with values.

Pray for a new generation of Christians who understand the need to develop their media skills to the highest level of excellence.

And perhaps more than anything, pray for those of us out there in the trenches everyday - dealing with the thousands of arrows Satan sends to destroy our efforts. For most of us, everyday is another battle with financial struggles, production problems, or distribution challenges, and discouragement can defeat even the best ideas.

But every time a great movie breaks through and makes an impact in someone's life, it renews our hope, and proves that God really is a God of stories, *and those stories change lives.*

Phil Cooke is President and Producer at *Phil Cooke Pictures, Inc*, in Burbank, California. His current project list includes a feature length motion picture, various television and video projects, an effort to archive a major ministry's video library on DVD, and a consulting relationship with a fast growing Christian internet ISP.

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