



Pastor, Are You Ready To Confront The Vast Television Wasteland?

A Call to Action for Pastors, Evangelists, Teachers, and Church Leaders

by Phil Cooke

"The most important thing is not success. The most important thing is to be in history bearing the witness."

--Jacques Maritain

In 1897 Charles C. Boycott was a land agent in Ireland who was ostracized for refusing to reduce his rents. Since that time his name has become synonymous with the act of *not doing business with someone as a protest against their political position, business decisions, or other beliefs*. In fact, Webster's Dictionary actually uses Charles C. Boycott's name in its definition of the word along with the phrase: *to engage in a concerted refusal to have dealings with (as a person, store, or organization) or to express disapproval or to force acceptance of certain conditions*.

Lately, in the Christian community, we have certainly become familiar with the term "boycott". On a regular basis, religious organizations have been calling for boycotts on a range of companies that sponsor violence and negative values on television, produce movies with the same lack of values, or take political and social positions contrary to orthodox biblical teaching.

But are boycotts the best way to deal with the direction the media has taken today? Are they the only way to deal with these issues? And when do we stop boycotting, and start taking the kind of action that could turn our society around?

It wasn't long ago that one of America's most critically acclaimed motion picture directors, Martin Scorsese, produced a major motion picture based on Nikos Kazantzakis' novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Although the first amendment certainly guarantees an artist's right to artistic freedom, the film was a blatant slap in the face of most orthodox Christians, and consequently, the outcry from the Christian community was significant. So significant in fact, that a major Christian organization offered Universal Studios, distributor of the film, \$10 million to purchase the film's negative with the sole intent of destroying it.

\$10 million.

The action on the part of the Christian organization was assuredly noble and certainly sincere. Perhaps their attitude was, *"In a free society, we can't stop them from making the film, but perhaps we can at least appeal to their business instinct. We can offer to buy the negative at their cost and then destroy it"*.

But was that the best approach to take? And where do we draw the line as people of faith in trying to stop the world's *destructive* work, and on the other hand, attempting to produce *constructive* work of our own?

I was especially interested in that particular incident, because as a writer and director of television programs and motion pictures, I immediately thought of the vast number of positive projects that could be produced for that \$10 million. But after the movie studio turned them down from buying the film negative, I never heard if that same ministry organization had offered Christian producers \$10 million to counter-produce a quality motion picture.

My thought was, "Why not use it for a good project, instead of purchasing a motion picture, destroying it, and then having nothing to show for the money?"

Both sides of the issue were valid, and as I said, it *did* turn out to be a moot point, since the studio never took them up on the offer. But it *also* pointed out in focused clarity that people

of faith today are more frustrated than ever in wondering how to deal with the accelerated media barrage that's hitting us from all sides.

Looking back, it was much easier when we were kids.

Television was in its Golden Age. Shows like *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Milton Berle*, *Jack Benny*, *Leave it to Beaver*, and *Father Knows Best* ruled the TV world. It was a more innocent time, a time when Andy, Barney, Goober and Floyd sat on the front porch after dinner. A time when the most controversial movies were teenage rebellion flicks like *Rebel Without a Cause*, featuring up-and-coming teen idol James Dean - which seems incredibly naive and juvenile by today's standards.

But today it's vastly different.

The network *Standards and Practices Departments* - the people who supposedly decide what's too risqué and controversial for broadcast television - seem to be there in name only, and with the explosion of cable television, pay-per-view, and satellite distribution, it's hard to distinguish anymore what channels are suitable for family viewing, adult viewing, or simply no viewing at all.

The major motion picture studios readily acknowledge that their prime demographic audience is around the 17-25 year olds, but when you look at the ratings of most movies of today, that can hardly seem possible. Recently, in a highly controversial campaign, the *Mcdonald's* fast food chain made the decision to market their "Happy Meals" (*which are aimed directly at young children*) with themes based on the Warner Brothers' movie, *Batman Returns* - although the movie has a PG-13 rating which means it's too violent and sexy for those very children to even see. Many wonder who at the studio would let a director create a film based not only on a children's comic book character, but set to launch a vast toy merchandizing effort, which can't even be shown to the audience of children it is marketed for?

In a world where traditional family and Christian values are being questioned every day on television, motion pictures, print, and in every aspect of our culture, what position can a

person with religious conviction take, and more important, how do we increase our knowledge so we can be in a *better* position to make intelligent decisions about our changing culture?

The first step is to *change our thinking*, and that is what this endeavor is about. Only when we begin to change our thinking about the confusion that's happening around us, can we begin to discover solutions for this eroding cultural landscape.

The Extremes

First of all, it's important to realize at the outset that there are two extremes to this issue. On one hand, there are Christians that feel we must be a part of the culture at any cost, and that the opportunity to spread the Gospel is too important to worry about the compromises that present day technology and culture impose on the message.

This extreme is most easily recognized by their shallow efforts to offer religion as simple entertainment. They purposely keep away from programs and books of any depth and substance, thinking that it's more important to *blend in* with the current cultural landscape than to offer any real challenges for the reader's, listeners, or viewers.

This has created an entire generation of Christians more concerned about *success in life* than discipleship, and *instant gratification* rather than personal growth and faith. They spout simplistic phrases, and teach distorted theology. Their ministry comes almost pre-packaged for television, and perfectly fits the "sound-bite" style of broadcasting.

On the other hand, there is the other extreme where people of faith have completely turned their back on culture and the media. This segment of the Christian community feels that it's more important to avoid the temptation completely rather than take a chance on participating in something the world holds tightly in it's grip.

This extreme is most easily recognized by little or no presence at all in culture outside of traditional print, or at best, poorly produced programs which present boring, negative diatribes against everything from new technology to modern culture. At one time or another, they have preached against music, dancing, movies, and most other entertainment.

I've always found it interesting when certain people criticize the lack of Christian influence in today's culture, because decades ago we turned that culture over to the side of darkness and simply walked away. Growing up, I'll never forget the genuine and sincere preachers who roared mightily against theater, movies, music and all the other *things of the devil!* So today, I'm not surprised that television networks, movie studios, record companies and others are rampant with moral vacuity - *it's the price we must pay for vacating the property in years past.* Now, the battle to reclaim our inheritance will be twice as bloody and vicious.

The Middle Ground

But fortunately for us, ***there is an important middle ground*** - a place where tragically few have ventured - but a place nevertheless where I believe God would have us be *salt and light* to an otherwise bland and darkened world.

But how do we get to that place?

Throughout this article, I will use television as a main source of commentary since television has become the communications pivot point of our society. Statistics show that most people now get their news from television, children are watching television at alarming levels, and television has become the key decision-making factor in determining cultural status for everyone from celebrities, sports heroes, presidential candidates, and even religious leaders.

Technology - *The Ultimate Two Edged Sword.*

"They could not drive out the inhabitants of the lowland, because they had chariots of iron."

--Judges 1:19

First of all, it's important to understand some important elements about the technology that has allowed this cultural and media explosion to take place. This is not the place for an in-depth look at technological breakthroughs, but we do need to start with a few simple thoughts about the particular impact technology itself brings to our lives.

In 1964 Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian academic and commentator on communications technology wrote a landmark book called *Understanding Media*. In it, he coined the famous phrase, "*the medium is the message*", which simply means that *the actual medium you use to send your message has as much impact as the content of the message itself*. In a basic example, a sermon preached on television is a significantly different experience for the viewer than the same sermon preached to a live audience.

Remarkably, this is a fairly simple concept that has almost entirely eluded the Christian community.

I have worked for years with major Christian leaders - pastors, evangelists, teachers, etc... who believe with all their heart that television and radio are just extensions of the pulpit.

Nothing could be more incorrect. McLuhan called that thinking "*rear view mirror*" thinking - *the idea that a new medium is just an extension or amplification of an older one*. For instance, a car is just a fast horse, an electric light is just a brighter candle, a television is just a radio with pictures.

The truth is, each medium - from print, to live drama and the arts, music, radio, television, motion pictures, - is a distinctly different arena, and to think that each technology is merely an extension of the other, is to completely miss the point. (*And needless to say, often render your message worthless.*)

One of my greatest challenges in working with both Christian and secular clients is to convince them that whatever their message, it needs to be tailored specifically to the particular medium they need or want to use. For instance, in preparing a television program, the client needs to be aware of both the *power* and *limitations* of the television camera.

Take for example a Public Television production of a theatrical play.

The director has two choices:

1) He can put a single static camera in a seat near the center of the theater, set it on a wide shot, and hopefully give the viewer the same experience as the live audience member. *Or,*

2) He can use current television techniques - *multiple cameras, editing, blocking and staging* - and by using close-ups, different camera angles, and cutting between cameras, he can create an entirely new and different performance the live audience member can't possibly see.

The point isn't to decide which experience is the best. They each have their own merits. What the live theatergoer loses in close-ups and multiple camera coverage, he more than makes up in feeling the power of the live performance, experiencing first hand the lights, the sounds from the stage, and perhaps most important of all, enjoying the play with a group of real live people that make up the audience.

The point is that *each experience is different*, and to gain maximum enjoyment from the play, the viewer needs to perceive the difference, and understand what makes each experience unique. The key is the awareness that there are established techniques that make a television program different from a motion picture, a radio program, or a live presentation. And to make each production most effective, you have to be well-versed in the appropriate techniques. Otherwise, a powerful "live" sermon, becomes a boring "talking head" on television, or a visually exciting basketball game becomes a confusing, disoriented mess if it's soundtrack is merely broadcast on the radio.

I have trekked deep into the game preserves of Africa and filmed an amazing array of wildlife. Although I shot some fantastic footage, I was amazed later how watching the scenes on a television set was nothing compared to the actual (*and potentially dangerous*) experience of the actual filming. After that discovery, watching even the best wildlife programs on television seems empty and unsatisfying.

Understanding the differences in technology makes the experience more gratifying and meaningful.

In working with clients, it's also important to make them realize how people *use* the medium as well. A few years ago a film by one of my favorite filmmakers had just been released on home video, and I desperately wanted some of my friends to see it. Shortly thereafter, my wife and I invited a couple over to watch the movie with us. We were all sitting in the living

room, but when I put the videocassette into my VCR I was amazed at what happened. My wife *immediately* went into the kitchen to get everyone coffee, my friend starting reading the newspaper, and *his* wife got up to get a slice of pie.

To say the least I was furious! Here was a film that had really meant a great deal to me, and they were completely ignoring it! Then the truth dawned.

That's exactly the way people watch television!

In a movie theater, we are surrounded by darkness, while our attention is focused on a brilliantly lit white screen directly in front of us. In the same way, in a church or auditorium we are sitting with a large audience, and we can't get up, read a magazine, or talk to our neighbor. But at home, people don't really "watch" television - *they frequently use it for room noise*. Ask them later if they watched a specific program, and they will *promise* they did, when in fact, they were also probably being distracted by something else at the same time.

How often have you caught yourself walking into the house, and the very first thing you did was to turn on the television? You had no intention in the world of sitting down and actually watching a program, but you continue to turn it on as if it were a bizarre, mechanical, one-eyed friend.

Therefore, when we produce television programs for example, we have to be aware of the viewing habits of our audience. Is there no wonder then, that modern day commercials are so visually outrageous and striking? Madison Avenue understands the importance of cutting through the clutter of interruptions and distractions to get our attention.

Because of these and other limitations of the television medium, producers tend to use every aspect of television technique to get their message across. Playing on the viewer's difficulty in distinguishing fiction from reality is one of the most common. In fact, the term *docu-drama* is a perfect example of the blurry line between truth and fantasy that makes up most television movies today.

The fact that to make a 2 hour motion picture of a real event a producer often has to re-arrange facts, condense the action, and eliminate or add characters is not in itself a problem. It's

been done in theatrical performances since the early days of theater. How else could you portray the last 24 hours of Jesus' life within the confines of a 2 hour movie? Even the famous director Cecil B. DeMille only took a matter of hours to tell the story of Moses' entire life that eventually culminated in leading the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage in the classic film *The Ten Commandments*. Compressing time or altering details of the story is not the problem. The difficulty in my mind is the fact that most audience members don't know the difference between the real event and the event *dramatized* on television - *and more importantly* - don't care.

I have been amazed at the number of people who have said that they believe the Oliver Stone film *JFK* was the actual true-to-life story of the Kennedy assassination. In spite of the fact that Stone has acknowledged he purposely changed events, characters, and sequences to make to film work better as *drama*. Any experienced director understands exactly what Stone did. It's impossible to be completely and factually correct in filming *any* real event, although Stone seems to have a reputation for altering facts in the extreme. The tragedy is when people take a film like *JFK* as *complete fact*, without questioning or understanding that the film happened to be his personal interpretation of events.

British philosopher and journalist Malcolm Muggeridge makes the point most clearly in his book: *Christ and the Media*. As both a Christian and an experienced journalist, Muggeridge knew the extreme limitations of television's ability to tell the truth, and therefore he questioned how we can justify our often poor attempts at using the medium to portray the Gospel message. He relates an incredible story:

"The most horrifying example I know of the camera's power and authority, which will surely be in the history books as an example of the degradation our servitude to it can involve, occurred in Nigeria at the time of the Biafran War. A prisoner was to be executed by a firing squad, and the cameras turned up in force to photograph and film the scene. Just as the command to fire was about to be given, one of the cameramen shouted 'Cut!';

his battery had gone dead, and needed to be replaced. Until this was done, the execution stood suspended. Then, with his battery working again, he shouted 'Action!', and bang, bang, the prisoner fell to the ground, his death duly recorded, to be shown in millions of sitting rooms throughout the so-called civilized world. Some future historian may speculate as to where lay the greatest barbarism, on the part of the viewers, the executioners, or the camera. I think myself that he would plump for the cameras."

Throughout Muggeridge's book his central theme is "*Can Christ properly be portrayed through a medium that is by its very nature a lie?*" He even goes so far as to offer two interesting propositions: *What if Satan had offered Jesus a fourth temptation - that of making him a media celebrity?* And secondly, *would the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls have been as significant if they had been instead **the Dead Sea Videotapes?*** In the case of a fourth temptation, I know Christ still would have prevailed, even in spite of these provoking questions, but tragic recent events have taught us that many of our human Christian leaders wouldn't have survived quite so well.

I know from personal experience that even the most honest attempts at creating religious television programs are fraught with peril - *the capacity to edit, adjust time, rhythm and pacing, use powerful music and special effects*, - all of these allow producers to say or do almost anything, regardless of the accuracy or lack thereof. And in a desperate financial climate, with the need to pay huge bills incurred by the high cost of media time and production, the temptation even for those with great integrity is often hard to resist.

In fact, there's an interesting phrase - *evangelistically speaking* - that is used to describe the universal tendency of pastors and evangelists to exaggerate the size of their audiences, the sales of their books, and the impact of their ministries. I find it sad that the phrase wasn't named after *used car salesmen, auto-mechanics or con-men* - but after ministers of the gospel, particularly those on television.

Another fascinating aspect of the nature of television technology is its reliance on an almost cultic worship of personality. Viewers want to identify with their favorite characters, therefore a popular program isn't called *The Story of a Gynecologist*, it's called *The Bill Cosby Show*. Another popular program wasn't called *Fun with a Television Writer*, it was called *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, and it goes on and on - *The Barbara Mandrell Show*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, *The Arsenio Hall Show*, *Geraldo Rivera*, *Oprah Winfrey*, etc. Is there any wonder then that hosts of major religious television programs fall victim to flights of egotistical delusion and financial scandal, when the very nature of the medium proclaims them the focal point of the airwaves?

One of the most important things we can do as Christians is to begin to understand the media and how technology is changing the way we communicate. Of course it's going to be difficult. I remember how difficult it was for me to toss out my ancient manual typewriter and learn to use a computer. I wanted to fly in the face of change and stick with what I was most comfortable with. But the fact was, the world was flying right by me. Other writers and directors were becoming more efficient, their quality was improving, and I was getting left in the dust of old technology.

But when I finally decided to change, it was remarkable how much the technology had an effect on my creativity and productivity. By taking over the mundane and repeated tasks associated with typing, checking spelling, and filing, the computer left me more time and energy for creativity. It's an excellent example of the direct connection between technology and creativity. They're forever interlinked, and we must understand that linkage in order for our voice to continue to be heard.

Take the time to learn more about media technology and the cultural changes that surround us.

At the end of this article, I've included a short bibliography and reading list that will start you on that road. Take the time to increase your understanding - it will vastly change your perspective.

Knowledge - *Staying One Step Ahead of the World*

"...God gave them knowledge and skill in all literature and wisdom."

--Daniel 1:17

Next, get involved with organizations and ministries who are keeping abreast of what's happening in the media and how it affects us as people of faith. For all the criticism and ribbing they have taken from the national media, a number of outstanding Christian organizations have done a remarkable job in keeping track of the companies who are sponsoring much of the pitiful and sorry programming on television today. These organizations have viewers who constantly monitor the airwaves and stay aware of incidents of not only excessive violence, gratuitous sex, profane language, and other potentially offensive programming, but keep the Christian community aware of programs that seem to go out of their way to take slaps at Christianity and organized religion of all types.

I don't always agree with the opinions expressed by these organizations and ministries, but the important point is that someone is out there keeping us in touch with what's happening in the media, and we should support their efforts and take advantage of their work.

Furthermore, those of us with Christian convictions certainly can exert our power as a large segment of the population by using our economic influence to make our opinions known. Perhaps if we *did* stop buying hamburgers at ***Mcdonald's*** and watching ***Warner Brothers*** movies, they would finally get the picture.

In the past, the television networks have criticized boycotting efforts by saying they had little or no effect on corporate sales. Sometimes they were right, and sometimes they were wrong. But the fact is, if the Christian community were more informed about these issues, and used techniques like boycotts sparingly and with focused precision, there's no question that our economic strength would be awesome.

Taking Action - *Moving in the Power of the Spirit*

"Do not be afraid of this vast army, for the battle is not yours, but God's."

2 Chronicles 20:15

Finally, and perhaps most important, we should begin to look for our own opportunities to take action in the media. This is the key point, and one most of us have never explored. Criticism has its place, boycotts have their place, demonstrations have their place, and even civil disobedience has its place. But there comes a point where if all we do is criticize, the world will just stop listening. Sooner or later, we need to set an example of what we believe is the alternative path.

Perhaps instead of spending great sums of money just to criticize, boycott and destroy, we should also be spending great sums of money to create, write, and produce. It's important that we actively seek out those who are producing quality television programs, movies, books, art, and support them in every way we can.

Perhaps you're not a writer, actor, director, musician, or other artist yourself. But you can certainly be on the lookout for those other young and pioneering talents and support and encourage them. Being an artist with moral and religious conviction will be one of the toughest battles they will ever face in their lives. You can't imagine the difference when another believer takes someone of great talent under their wing and helps them realize their dream.

Some movie critics, instead of simply criticizing movies, have written guides to those same movies from a religious and family perspective. Explore your local Christian bookstore, and you'll find such volumes available. You don't have to agree with all their opinions - *I don't either* - but at least it's a fantastic starting point, and thousands of people have a better understanding of the world of motion pictures thanks to these books. In the additional reading guide offered at the end of this article, you'll see examples of these and many other works by fine authors who are *reporting from the front* of this important conflict.

Many of the most popular writers, from Dr. James Dobson, to Francis Schaffer, to H.R. Rookmaaker, to Charles Colson, to Malcolm Muggeridge, R.C. Sproul, Ken Myers, and many

others have analyzed different aspects of our popular culture and given us scriptural and theological insight into understanding this cultural explosion.

But don't make the mistake of assuming that anything that calls itself Christian is noble and worth supporting. Great Christian art isn't necessarily plastic crucifixes, 3-D pictures of Jesus, or photographs of a sunset with a scripture verse in the corner. ***Great Christian art*** is work of significance and depth that uplifts, provokes, inspires, causes us to take action, and takes us to higher levels of thinking.

Sadly, much of what passes for religious art, writing, music, radio, television, and movies today is unprofessional, poorly produced, bland work that does little for the Kingdom of God. In her book ***Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art***, Madeleine L'Engle says, "...*much so called religious art is bad art, therefore, bad religion*".

Have you ever wondered why most Christian television programs look alike? Why are so many Sunday morning programs simple pulpit sermons? Why are so many other programs mundane interview shows?

Talk awhile, sing awhile, ask for money awhile...

Where is the invigorating power of documentaries, dramatic motion pictures, live special events, concerts, and other innovative forms of programming? There's no question that there's an important place for preaching and interview programs, but most would agree we've taken that to the extreme at the expense of some of the most effective and exciting television formats.

After all, I love a good sermon, but if *teaching and preaching* were so effective on television, then the secular networks would toss out sitcoms in favor of teachers speaking on a multitude of subjects. And although interview shows are certainly popular, why don't the networks put them in prime time? Those same secular networks spend millions of dollars on audience research to find out what people want to see, and they rarely insert preachers and/or interview shows into the best programming slots.

Can't we learn something from that?

And why are these other formats so important? Take for instance the drama - the ancient art of storytelling. When I look at the scriptures, especially at Jesus' life, I don't see a theologian, or a television talk show host, I see a God who told stories. The ability to experience the power and the majesty of storytelling is a central aspect of our nature that goes back to the beginning of time.

I'll never forget as a child listening to my father's endless stories. Many times, when friends would come over for the evening and I was supposed to be in bed, I would sneak out into the hall and listen as my father told the stories of his past, stories of his war experiences, and stories from the Bible.

I remember trembling as Abraham held the knife over a terrified Issac, afraid for my life as Daniel was thrust into the horrifying den of hungry lions, and thrilled as a blind and desperate Samson pulled down the heathen temple into a pile of churning rubble.

The power of storytelling is the key to understanding scripture, and yet how few stories and dramatic presentations exist on Christian television?

The important thing is, the community of faith should support creative, innovative, and effective projects in every aspect of the media. And that means turning away from some presentations even though they *seem* on the surface to be of a religious nature. I return to the words of writer Madeleine L'Engle, when a young college student asked her how she should go about being a Christian writer. Madeleine replied, "*I told her that if she is truly and deeply a Christian, what she writes is going to be Christian whether she mentions Jesus or not. And if she is not in the most profound sense Christian, then what she writes is not going to be Christian, no matter how many times she invokes the name of the Lord.*"

Stop supporting the same old Christian television programs, radio shows, book authors, and artists, *just because they're supposed to be Christian*. Instead, look for the programs and projects that are breaking new ground - the programs that take chances, the radio shows that explore new territory, and the writers and artists whose books and art challenge and inspire.

Instead of always griping and grumbling about the state of our culture, we could actually bring about a thrilling new wave of committed writers, artists, thinkers, TV and movie producers, and others who won't take no for an answer, and who are committed to a new and different direction. And although I love and appreciate the great numbers of Christian bookstores, television and radio networks, and other media outlets across this country, I believe this new breed of Christian artist will often turn from the relative safety of *Christian* bookstores, *Christian* record companies, and *Christian* television networks, and will set his or her sights on the major secular networks, record companies, bookstores, and movie studios.

In all honesty, we also have to understand that this new wave of artists will often disappoint us, make us angry, and challenge our expectations, but that is exactly the nature of their gift. Flannery O'Connor, the brilliant Catholic writer said of Christian artists: *"Unless we are willing to accept our artists as they are, the answer to the question, 'Who speaks for America today?' will have to be the advertising agencies."*

Perhaps the greatest contribution that O'Connor made to literature was the exploration of a new vocabulary to reach those in today's society who have no understanding of Godly things. In a letter to a friend she wrote: *"It is easy to see that the moral sense has been bred out of certain sections of the population, like the wings have been bred off certain chickens to produce more white meat on them. This is the generation of wingless chickens, which I suppose is what Nietzsche meant when he said God was dead."*

In a lecture she once explained why her unique writing style leaned toward the violent and grotesque: *"The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision*

apparent by shock - to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures."

Perhaps this new vocabulary of expressing our faith is the key. We live in a *Post-Christian Age* when most of the normal symbols, words, and sacraments of the Christian faith have lost their meaning. It is time we either re-invigorated those symbols with renewed meaning, or learned to express our faith in terms this post-modern society can understand - while always vigilant to never compromise their meaning or power.

Only then, will the message of redemption and hope get to the **mainstream** audience - *the same audience that sits zombie-like through endless movies filled with violence, profanity, and moral stupidity* - simply because they've become conditioned, and have lost all hope of finding anything better. I'm reminded of Isaiah's words about a people who were:

*"Ever hearing, but never understanding;
...ever seeing, but never perceiving..."*

But the choice lies in the hands of we the audience.

When we realize that all movies don't have to end with an altar call to make them *Christian*, when television programs don't have to contain a sermon, or *Christian* books can be powerful and moving *fiction* stories, then we will begin to see past the tip of the cultural iceberg that we face.

Finally, one of the most important realizations that we as people of faith can make is that we are ultimately fighting a ***cultural*** battle and not a ***political*** battle. Especially during the last decade, there has been an explosive struggle going on between rival value systems that have clashed over issues such as school prayer, abortion, and sex education. Many find it encouraging that the faithful are rising up to take an active part in the political rhetoric that surrounds these skirmishes. But although more Christian people in Washington may be a wonderful thing, it's

important to realize that political changes alone won't have the final determining impact on our society.

The battleground where these issues will ultimately be fought is in the cultural arena, because that's where the hearts and minds of America are won. It's at this stage where changes are most linked to our deepest ways of thinking, and it's at this stage where real, dramatic turnabout will occur.

In this war, demonstrations, sit-ins, direct mail campaigns, press conferences and the like aren't very effective. And it's *certainly* not a war where youth groups, revivals, conferences, and crusades will have much impact. This is a war of television programs, movies, novels, art, and other forms of cultural expression. This is a war where each and every Christian artist, writer, actor, musician, television & film producer and all the rest will have to work every day, to answer his or her calling to produce creative projects that point in the direction of the sacred and transcendent.

I'm reminded of a conversation I once had with a major evangelist about the tendency of so many pastors and other evangelists to constantly criticize so much in society. He replied, *"I honestly don't know why they do that. I find too many **good** things in the Bible to preach **for**. I don't ever have time to preach **against** anything"*.

It's interesting that the Bible constantly uses the metaphor of **light** to describe Jesus and His message. Perhaps if we began creating works of light, their combined intensity would be so great that it would begin attracting society like so many moths to a flame.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3:6 - *"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase"*. If every aspect of our culture reflects our faith, then people will naturally be turned in the direction of God. When novels, TV programs, magazines, movies, and other media celebrate the incarnation, their effectiveness will build one upon the other and then we won't have to hit people over the head, or feel such pressure to make everything we do win the lost at that very moment.

Of course the challenge is difficult, but the only alternative is our present course, and at present, we're losing the battle.

Only when we take the time to learn both the power and the limitations of technology, only when we cast aside shallow simplistic, "TV" style teaching and actively seek a deeper walk with Christ, and only when we decide to focus our giving and resources toward writers, artists, and producers of innovative programming, literature, and art, will we ever deserve a change.

Many years ago, in preparing a national television broadcast for a client who was a major Christian figure, I attempted to create a program that would have that kind of innovation and depth. But in spite of my efforts, my client finally looked at me and said: *"You've got to put it in the trough where the pigs will eat it"*.

The tragedy is, he was right. By all indications, his shallow, simplistic teaching was all his audience wanted.

Perhaps its time we knocked over the trough, and demanded to be served at the table.

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