



# *A Television Director Looks at a Typical Church Service*

by  
Phil Cooke

*Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain...*  
-- The Wizard of Oz

*I make a living watching church services.*

Although I create numerous television and motion picture projects for secular studios, networks, and other sources, I also produce and direct television programming for a wide range of churches and ministries in America. That task enables me to watch hundreds of church services, crusade meetings, and other evangelistic efforts and work with pastors, evangelists, teachers, and other ministry leaders to make their programs more powerful and effective.

I'm especially fascinated by watching *church services*, many of which are filled with believing prayer, heart-felt worship, and life-changing teaching and preaching.

*But despite their best efforts, many church services are exercises in agony.* Why does it have to be? Why is it that in some churches, (even Spirit-filled ones), worshipping the Creator of the universe is boring, frustrating, and sometimes a showcase for bad music, inept preaching, and poor taste?

Recently, while visiting some relatives and going to their Sunday service, the thought occurred to me that many of the techniques we use in making a Christian television program more effective would also increase the interest and participation of the local congregation as well.

Keep in mind, I'm a television producer - a "behind the scenes" guy - a teacher, or coach. My comments don't necessarily come as a prophetic word straight from

heaven. Rather, they deal with the practical everyday, but important aspects of ministry. Many of these ideas will be completely new, and others will be things you already know, but from time to time need a gentle (or not so gentle) reminder.

My own father is a pastor, so I remember very well how he labored to increase attendance, preach a potent sermon, and create a worshipful atmosphere for the congregation. Behind the scenes, I mowed the grass, swept the floor, carried the guest speakers luggage, Xeroxed bulletins, and was even the backup piano player, so from almost day one, my life has been caught up in the desire to make church services more relevant and compelling to people.

No mortal can bring the anointing into a dead situation. But through a lifetime of watching thousands of services, I *have* discovered a number of important principles that if put into practice, will allow the Holy Spirit to work more effectively, and dramatically change the way the audience reacts to the service.

But before you dismiss these ideas as "worldly science" outside the realm of the Holy Spirit, let me counter the most common arguments.

-- ***"I don't worry about the service, I just let the Holy Spirit take over"*** - Theoretically, that's a wonderful statement, and we all hope that happens at every service. But the fact is, there are important things that we need to do in preparation for the Holy Spirit to work. You wouldn't have a major operation by a Christian surgeon who preferred not to prepare for the surgery, but wanted to just let the Holy Spirit work. I'm glad he's open to the Spirit, but I also want him to have the right equipment, a trained support team, a keen understanding of my condition, and great skill.

Today's pastor, evangelist, or teacher needs no less.

-- ***"I just preach the old fashioned gospel"*** - Preaching the *old fashioned gospel* is fine - using *old fashioned methods* isn't. If by the old fashioned gospel, you mean uncompromising preaching, anointed prayer, and powerful ministry, I'm all for it. But be relevant to today's needs, problems, and concerns, and speak in a language today's culture understands.

-- "*I don't go in for all this marketing stuff*" - Actually, in the advertising world, marketing can be defined as *the science of positioning your product in a way most people will respond*, and that's not so terribly different from your job as a minister of the gospel. Of course we need to draw the line at unscrupulous techniques and questionable tactics, but as much as possible, we need to constantly be developing new ways to present the gospel message to a hurting world in ways they will understand and receive.

Therefore, with these thoughts in mind, let me introduce you to *Phil Cooke's Top 10 List of "How To Ruin a Great Church Service"*. (*You have my permission to cut this out and hang it on your bathroom mirror for future reference*).

### **1) Don't Concern Yourself With The Congregation's Point of View - *After all, it's you who has the anointing, right?***

In a theater, a television studio, or motion picture stage, the single most important person to the success of the production, is the *director*. The director has the creative vision for the entire project, and it is that vision that guides the writers, actors, camera people, and other crew members. Truth is, most people don't know that the role of director is a fairly recent one. In fact, it was developed in the theater during the late 1800's and up until that time, the actors themselves staged the play.

But apparently, an actor finally asked "*What would the audience think?*". So, it was decided that one of the actors would sit in the audience watching the rehearsal and make comments based on how he would react as a member of the audience.

Thus, the role of "director" was born - essentially, *a person who represents the audience*. Since that time, every commercial, play, TV program, or film has had a director - to stand back and shape the presentation from the perspective of the audience.

We could do very well to learn from that tradition. How long has it been since you went out and just sat in the audience. (*Not from the front row, but say, 15-20 rows back*). How is the lighting? How is the music? How loud is the speaker system? Is the pulpit area appealing? Do the flowers and/or plants get in the way? Are there any physical distractions?

*But there's more to it.* How often do you *really* try to identify with the *needs, hopes and dreams* of those in your congregation? I know pastors who are "escorted" on stage to preach, and then "escorted" off stage to their waiting private garage. They never shake anyone's hands, hear their hurts, or feel their hugs.

Small church or large - *don't ever lose touch with the perspective of the people sitting in those seats.*

## **2) Never tell stories - *just preach the Word.***

Want to put people to sleep?

*Never tell a story.*

This Sunday, preachers all across America will preach sermons devoid of a single story. In every case, it will be a mechanical, dry, and boring exercise.

But look at the ministry of Jesus. Storytelling was just about all he ever did. He put the most profound and deep concepts into simple and compelling stories that captivated people and changed their lives.

Through the centuries, the power of a story has held generations captive, and it's curious that instead of the Bible being a book of theological arguments and lessons, it's nearly a continuous book of *stories*.

You'll never preach an effective sermon without using *the power of stories*.

## **3) Become obsessed with "Special Music" - *What, no choir number?***

Pastors, stay with me here. *The success of your Sunday service doesn't depend on having "special music"*. Look at the competition you face. Everyday, the members of your church can turn on a local Christian radio or television station and hear the finest music the Christian world has to offer. So let's face it... when they hear Brother Ralph and Sister Ruby singing "The Church Triumphant" on Sunday morning, they probably won't be weeping for joy.

And don't feel you have to have a choir number each week either. I'm reminded of John Osteen's 8,000 member Lakewood Church in Houston. Although he pastors one of the great churches in America, it's only been little more than a year since he's had a choir at all! Why? He's waited until he was sure he had a choir that was both musically qualified *and* Spirit led, and would make a positive and anointed impact on the service.

*Music is wonderful, but don't let it make you a slave.*

#### **4) Don't Question Anything - *Keep doing the same old stuff.***

Why do you take up the offering the same way each week? Why do you always sing the same hymn of invitation? Why do you always make announcements? Why... why... why?

Have a solid reason for every single thing you do during a typical service (and "*just because we've always done it that way*" doesn't count!).

#### **5) Keep the Same Jokes - *If they laughed once they'll laugh again.***

*"I like the King James Version - if it was good enough for Paul, it's good enough for me!"*

*"How many of you would rather be here than the finest hospital in town?"*

Please... please... please... find some new jokes. Your congregation is starting to laugh out of *pity*... not from *humor*.

#### **6) The Old Sermons Are The Best - *I don't need new material.***

Evangelists are especially guilty of this one. It used to be that since an evangelist traveled around the country, he could preach the same sermons and tell the same stories over and over and it wouldn't matter, since his audience was always changing. But now that television, radio, and recorded tapes have entered the picture, that's not true anymore.

The headlines, issues, and problems we face are constantly changing, and our sermons should be developing too. The message of the gospel never changes, but the way we present it should always be updated and strengthened.

I would especially caution against using "sugar sticks" - those old standby messages that you can pull out of your pocket at the drop of a hat. (*You know the ones - the sermons that will always get a rise out of the audience*). The danger here is that the more you preach the same sermon, the more difficult it is to preach it with conviction, originality, and excitement.

Although new material may be unproven and a little shaky, there's a wonderful spontaneity and excitement about breaking new ground.

### **7) Dismiss The Surrounding Culture - *I hate their music anyway.***

Jesus always understood the culture that surrounded his ministry. He framed powerful sermons with stories that were filled with cultural and social perspectives. Your messages will always be more effective when you tie your points to issues that your audience is facing everyday - drugs, abuse, AIDS, finances, violence, etc...

### **8) Don't Learn About Your Audience - *So what? They're just people.***

Don't take for granted that everyone you're preaching to is your age. Of course you realize they're not, but how often do you wonder about how a child will understand the message, or a teen, or a senior? *Demographics* is the science of understanding everything you can about your audience - their ages, their backgrounds, their habits, their needs, etc... Madison Avenue spends billions of dollars each year tailoring their ad messages to very individual age groups. Make sure you're targeting your audience as well.

### **9) Stop Learning - *All I need is a pulpit and a Bible.***

Believe it or not, I actually had a pastor friend recently give me the worn out adage, "*I'm glad I never went to cemetery... oh, I mean seminary*". There are still pastors, evangelists, teachers, and Christian leaders who believe higher learning is for snobs, elites, and those not concerned about "real ministry". Nothing could be further from the truth, especially during this period when there are wonderfully anointed Christian colleges, Bible schools, and training centers all across the United States and the world.

I've always valued the energy and passion of those who had a dramatic conversion experience and felt called directly into the ministry. But now, when the battle for truth is more desperate than ever, we need to know how to defend our calling at every level, and have the academic background to avoid theological error and ministry mistakes.

We'll never make an impact on our society without brilliant men and women who can preach the message of the gospel and answer the world's questions with intelligence, authority, and compassion.

**Take the time to find a good Christian school and get the training you need, no matter how late in life you start.** And don't go to a diploma mill for convenience just to have a diploma hanging on the wall.

### **10) Never Be Open To The Spirit - *Stay with the bulletin.***

As you can tell by now, this is not an excuse to skip your homework. I've worked with too many people who failed to study and prepare on the hope that the Holy Spirit would show up and do their work for them. When you talk with the really gifted and anointed pastors, evangelists, and teachers out there, you'll find that although God works in sovereign ways, He will always honor preparation.

Many television and film directors refuse to do their homework because they prefer to rely on the "spontaneity of the moment". But what happens when they arrive on the set and that spontaneity doesn't happen? I always believe in having a plan, and if I get a creative spark on the set, that's wonderful, but if not, I can always fall back on my original plan.

Prepare your message the same way. If God shows up (and I hope he does!) toss you plan and flow in that Spirit. But just in case He decides to work thorough your preparation, be sure you have something well planned.

Constantly remind yourself that ministering to people is the art of understanding the fine line between speaking the Word in boldness, and being sensitive to the needs and hurts of your audience. There's a time for each, but *effective* ministry is more often a delicate combination of both.

And finally, **keep looking at those faces out there.**

*Learn to distinguish between the Holy Spirit breaking hearts as a result of His work, and faces contorted in agony as a result of your work!*

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