



The Next Horizon

A Look at the Future of Faith-Based Media

By Phil Cooke

In spite of the changes happening today in technology, I think the next big step in Christian media will be *quality* - the understanding that to compete for the hearts and minds of this culture, we have to compete on the playing field of *quality*. Quality that shows both in the content and production value of a program.

I was working recently with a Christian television station to re-structure their production and management team, and we remarked that in the early days of Christian television, about all you needed to qualify for a staff position was to show up.

But today, things are different.

In a recent issue of an industry magazine, the cover story was an update on Christian movies and their impact in the marketplace. It was an in-depth article that commented on the swell of new Christian films such as *The Omega Code*, *Left Behind*, *The Ride*, *Apocalypse*, *Tribulation*, and *Revelation* (*it's interesting that all but one are end time stories*). But in spite of the massive marketing efforts and national promotion these and other Christian films have been receiving, the consensus among most people is that the majority of these and other Christian films are *just not well made movies*. In most cases, the writing, directing, acting, and/or other aspects of the films are still not up to common standards of filmmaking, causing many people to continue looking for the "breakthrough" Christian film that has both box-office and critical success.

Yes, these films are a great improvement on Christian films of the past, and I hope they help inspire a new generation of Christians to continue, but the fact is, we still have a long way to go.

If you've worked with me, taken one of my workshops, or read my articles, you're well acquainted with the statement: *"We have to produce programming in a language and style this culture understands."* Most of that statement has to do with *quality* - knowing how to tell a story, and using the writing, acting, producing, and directing techniques to make it come alive on the screen.

Christian media has come a long way in the last 50 years, but in terms of quality, we've only begun. For the first time, people are realizing that "recorded sermons" aren't necessarily the best way to make effective television or radio programs, telethons aren't the only way to finance Christian television, and a film doesn't have to have an altar call to make it "Christian."

We're finally exploring new techniques and possibilities, and searching for ways to make our programming interesting to a wider audience.

However, many Christians still believe that we have to support anything that is produced in the name of God just because it's "Christian." They feel that we shouldn't criticize each other's work because it would hurt the cause. So we say nothing about how poorly some people are running Christian stations, networks, or media ministries, even though hundreds of thousands (and even millions) of dollars are being wasted. And we turn a blind eye to the sin of some Christian media leaders because to expose it would "hurt the gospel." After all, we think if a Christian media leader was called on the carpet because of sin in his or her personal life, the TV or radio station, network, or ministry might collapse, and a great vehicle for the Christian message could be destroyed.

But oddly enough, throughout history, God has done quite well without these things.

A French philosopher once said: *"God hasn't called us to be successful, He's called us to be faithful."*

At the numerous Christian media events this year, such as the National Religious Broadcasters Convention, Christians and Media Conferences, or Inspiration Conferences, you'll have a chance to see the "trappings" of Christian media. Booths that promote TV and radio stations, networks, equipment dealers, publishers, and the host of other physical manifestations of this industry. These are all wonderful things, but as we walk the aisles, and attend the workshops, let's not think so much about how "more stuff" will help us tell

our message of hope. Let's think about how our *excellence* and our *quality* will make the difference.

The Mel Gibson film, "*The Patriot*" reminded me of a fascinating aspect of the Revolutionary War. Based loosely on the life of Francis Marion, - *The Swamp Fox* - it brilliantly showed how faced with an overwhelming enemy, the rag-tag American army couldn't possibly fight head-on, but was forced to use guerrilla tactics. Guerrilla armies don't have great weapons or size, so they resort to smaller, more effective attacks in areas the enemy doesn't expect - and to do that, they have to always *stay one step ahead of the adversary*.

That's the strategy I'm going to use in this new millennium. I certainly don't have the money, the equipment, or the studios of Warner Brothers, Disney, Sony, or the many other major studios and television networks in Hollywood. But instead of attacking with equipment and money, I'm going to attack on the fronts of creativity and quality.

We've already had one skirmish that proved this strategy can work. While shooting a music video for a major secular record label this fall, the record executive in charge pulled me aside about two hours into the shoot. He whispered: "*I have to tell you, I love being on your set. I don't understand it - you use fewer people, less equipment, and less money. But everyone here really works as a team - they're passionate about what they're doing, are remarkably creative, and do great work!*"

We need studios, transmitters, and equipment of all kinds to make the dream of Christian media a reality. But more than anything, we need *quality* - the desire to be excellent. Let's make a commitment together that we're going to start producing Christian TV and radio programs and movies with quality. Quality that will pierce the heart of the culture, and draw them closer to the ultimate Creator.

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