



A “Voice” in Hollywood for the Kingdom

By Phil Cooke

Phil Cooke is Founder and CEO of *Cooke Pictures*, based in Santa Monica, California. Phil is a successful program producer and director, and also consults with major churches, ministries and Christian television networks, helping them use the media more effectively. He may be the only producer in Hollywood with a Ph.D. in Theology, and as such, has a unique perspective on the role entertainment plays in our lives, and how today’s church can take a message of hope to a culture desperately in need.

“*How can you be a Christian in Hollywood?*” The question still gets asked by well meaning believers, and I’m often stopped at conferences and workshops and asked to share the experience of how I ended up in the entertainment industry. I was raised a “preacher’s kid” so early on in my life, I understood the power of great preaching, and the importance of communicating the gospel effectively - but I never had the slightest desire to be a preacher myself. In high school some friends and I took my dad’s Super 8 movie camera and made little movies, and when I got to college, I discovered they actually had film and television courses, and after the first day in class, I was hooked.

After being raised in church, my parents were a little surprised when I became a film and television major in college, but I have to say they were always remarkably supportive. My family comes from a long line of poor mill workers in North Carolina, and my dad – Bill Cooke - was the first to break out of that cycle. He joined the Marines during World War II, and was one of the first to hit the beaches during some of the bloodiest fighting in the South Pacific. That experience changed his life, so after the war, he enrolled in college and eventually seminary, and became a pastor. Because he had broken out of *his* past circumstances, I think he was supportive in my doing the same thing. He proclaims the gospel through preaching, and I do it through the media – same message, different delivery systems.

The fact is, when I was a kid growing up in the South of the 1950’s and 60’s, the *church* determined the moral climate of this country. Even people who never attended church respected people of faith and understood the importance of Christian principles and morality. But today, in a culture where few attend church anymore, the moral climate of this country is determined by movies and prime time television. I read recently that by the time a typical teenager is 18, he or she has seen more than 100,000 beer commercials alone, and believe me, that makes an impact. The reality is, television

programs and movie theaters are “church” for this generation – sadly, that’s where young people today learn their morals, and codes of behavior. Therefore, if Christians don’t have a voice in the media, I believe we’ll lose this generation.

But in spite of that great need, most films and television programs produced by Christians are poor quality, and don’t make much money at the box office. That’s because for most Christians, the message is everything, and we’ve forgotten the power of a great story. It’s interesting that when you study the life of Christ, just about all he did was tell stories. He didn’t give theological lectures, teach doctrine, or even do much preaching. He simply told stories – stories that changed people’s lives. A great filmmaker once said that *facts go straight to the head, but stories go straight to the heart*. Stories are the most powerful tool on earth, and well written stories have transformed hearts, and even changed the destiny of nations. Most Christian filmmakers spend all their time trying to force a Christian message into the film, and they forget the most important thing – to tell a great story. Some Christians have trouble with that statement, but the fact is, no matter how great the content of your message, if no one watches long enough to see or hear it, you’ve failed. So that’s why I tell preachers, teachers, writers, artists, and filmmakers - tell a great story first – a story that is compelling and powerful. I think it was old time movie mogul Samuel Goldwyn who said: *“If you want to send a message, call Western Union.”* Movies aren’t about sending messages, they’re about telling great stories. Jesus understood the power of a story, and it’s something we need to be reminded of today.

Christians in other nations often have a much better understanding of the power of storytelling. I’ve produced programming in about 40 countries, but I’m also teaching and training their Christian media professionals. I’ve taught media conferences and classes as far away as Central America, the United Kingdom, Africa, and Russia and I’m seeing the Holy Spirit make a significant impact. Traditional missionaries influence hundreds and sometimes thousands of people in their entire lifetimes, but a Christian media professional can influence millions with a single program. Last year, I taught about twenty young Christian media students in Costa Rica, and today, all twenty are working fulltime in the secular media in that country. And it’s amazing to see the different perspectives they have on using the media for Christ. Four years ago, I taught a television class in Russia, and they were so hungry, some of the students traveled three days by train just to be in the class. When the sessions were over, one of the students went back to produce a Christian program in his home city, but the only time slot available was on the X-rated sex channel. So to everyone’s surprise, he bought the time slot, and now, every week on the X-rated sex channel in a major Russian city, there’s a Christian program. Most Christian producers in America would have never been so bold, but I can’t think of an audience who needs religious programming more than those trapped by pornography!

At the close of many of the workshops and conferences where I’m speaking, I’m often asked, *“What can we do to help you and other Christian professionals working in Hollywood today?”* My answer is always the same. First of all, pray. Start thinking of Hollywood as one of the most important mission fields in the world, and encourage your

church to begin praying for Christians in the entertainment industry. The projects Hollywood produces influence millions globally, and we need to pray that God will open doors of opportunity for Christians to have a greater voice in that arena. Most people don't know that the first public buildings to open for business after we liberated Afghanistan from the Taliban weren't the hospitals, schools, or religious institutions – it was the movie theaters, playing American movies. Countries like Iraq may hate us, but they love our movies and TV programs. Today, there are thousands of Christians working on movie sets, at network studios, executive offices, advertising agencies, and other areas on the front lines of Hollywood, and they're often working in a difficult environment of criticism and downright hostility. They are making a difference, and we need to pray for them. Second, as business leaders, we need to support Christian media projects, because our greatest challenge is quite simply, funding. There are Christian writers, directors, and producers working hard to develop mainstream movie and television projects that reflect Christian values, and they need to be supported. Right now, I'm creating a "development company" to find powerful stories, and then hire talented writers to develop those stories into great films. It will be a multi-million dollar effort, but when you consider the impact a single successful film or TV program can make, we have to step out in faith and make the vision happen. If we could bring experienced, well funded Christian businessmen and women to the table who have a vision for investing in these type projects, we would begin to see a dramatic difference in the spiritual and moral values coming out of Hollywood.

Voice Interview With Phil Cooke

Recently, writer Bob Armstrong of *Voice Magazine*, had the opportunity to talk with Phil Cooke.

Bob Armstrong: When did you realize that God was calling you into the entertainment industry?

Phil Cooke: I was raised a "preacher's kid" so early on, I understood the power of great preaching, and the importance of communicating the gospel effectively - but I never had the slightest desire to be a preacher myself. In high school some friends and I took my dad's Super 8 movie camera and made little movies, and when I got to college, I discovered they actually had film and television courses, and after the first day in class, I was hooked.

BA: Did your father prefer you go into the ministry?

PC: I have to say that my mom and dad have always been remarkably supportive. My family comes from a long line of poor mill workers in North Carolina, and my dad – Bill Cooke - was the first to break out of that cycle. He joined the Marines during World War

II, and was one of the first to hit the beaches during some of the bloodiest fighting in the South Pacific. That experience changed his life, so after the war, he enrolled in college and eventually seminary, and became a pastor. Because he had broken out of *his* past circumstances, I think he was supportive in my doing the same thing. He proclaims the gospel through preaching, and I do it through the media – same message, different delivery systems.

BA: How important is the media to this culture?

PC: The fact is, when I was a kid growing up in the South of the 1950's and 60's, the *church* determined the moral climate of this country. Even people who never attended church respected people of faith and understood the importance of Christian principles and morality. But today, in a culture where few attend church anymore, the moral climate of this country is determined by movies and prime time television. I read recently that by the time a typical teenager is 18, he or she has seen more than 100,000 beer commercials alone, and believe me, that makes an impact. The fact is, television programs and movie theaters are “church” for this generation. That's where young people today learn their morals, and codes of behavior. Therefore, if Christians don't have a voice in the media, I believe we'll lose this generation.

BA: But you have to admit – most movies made by Christians do very poorly at the box office, and frankly, just aren't well made. What's the problem?

PC: That's because for most Christians, the message is everything, and we've forgotten the power of a great story. It's interesting that when you study the life of Christ, just about all he did was tell stories. He didn't give theological lectures, teach doctrine, or even do much preaching. He simply told stories – stories that changed people's lives. Facts go straight to the head, but stories go straight to the heart. Stories are the most powerful tool on the earth, and well written stories have transformed hearts, and even changed the destiny of nations. Most Christian filmmakers spend all their time trying to force a Christian message in the film, and they forget the most important thing – to tell a great story. Some Christians have trouble with that statement, but the fact is, no matter how great the content of your message, if no one watches long enough to see or hear it, you've failed. So that's why I tell preachers, teachers, writers, artists, and filmmakers - tell a great story first – a story that is compelling and powerful. I think it was old time movie mogul Samuel Goldwyn who said: “*If you want to send a message, call Western Union.*” Movies aren't about sending messages, they're about telling great stories. Jesus understood the power of a story, and it's something we need to be reminded of today.

BA: Are you involved in the media in other countries as well?

PC: Absolutely – I've produced programming in about 40 countries, but I'm also teaching and training their Christian media professionals. I've taught media conferences and classes as far away as Central America, the United Kingdom, Africa, and Russia and I'm seeing the Holy Spirit make a significant impact. Traditional missionaries influence hundreds and sometimes thousands of people in their entire lifetimes. But a Christian

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BA: What can we do to help you and other Christian professionals working in Hollywood today?

PC: First of all, pray. Start thinking of Hollywood as one of the most important mission fields in the world, and encourage your church to begin praying for Christians in the entertainment industry. The projects Hollywood produces influence millions globally, and we need to pray that God will open doors of opportunity for Christians to have a greater voice in that arena. Most people don't know that the first public buildings to open for business after we liberated Afghanistan from the Taliban weren't the hospitals, schools, or religious institutions – it was the movie theaters, playing American movies. Countries like Iraq may hate us, but they love our movies and TV programs. Today, there are thousands of Christians working on movie sets, at network studios, executive offices, advertising agencies, and other areas on the front lines of Hollywood, and they're often working in a difficult environment of criticism and downright hostility. They are making a difference, and we need to pray for them. Second, as business leaders, we need to support Christian media projects, because our greatest challenge is quite simply, funding. There are Christian writers, directors, and producers working hard to develop mainstream movie and television projects that reflect Christian values, and they need to be supported. Right now, I'm creating a "development company" to find powerful stories, and then hire talented writers to develop those stories into great films. It will be a multi-million dollar effort, but when you consider the impact a single successful film or TV program can make, we have to step out in faith and make the vision happen. If we could bring experienced, well funded Christian businessmen and women to the table who have a vision for investing in these type projects, we would begin to see a dramatic difference in the spiritual and moral values coming out of Hollywood.

Have you signed up for the Cooke Pictures e-mail newsletter? It's a monthly journal filled with media research, creative concepts, production resources, and great ideas.

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