

PAT ROBERTSON: 'Miracles Became the Central Focus of Our Program'

Note: This article appeared in the April 1983 issue of Charisma magazine.

Recently the founder of the Christian Broadcasting Network sat down with his long-time friend Jamie Buckingham and answered some pointed questions which give insight into the philosophy behind America's oldest Christian TV network.

Buckingham: *Recently Christian Century magazine said the problem with Christian TV has been its unwillingness to take seriously the limitations of TV as a means of communicating the gospel. They say you are so enamored with its potential that you are blind to its faults. By its faults they mean you can't present all sides of the gospel, that you need to mix commercialization with the gospel, and that the only way you reach the unsaved is by who they call "stealth, guise and accident."*

Robertson: I don't think *Christian Century* has watched *The 700 Club* very much. We present an incredible array of information. We talk about issues, about people, about theology, about the problems in our society and the answers to those problems. We have had an almost bewildering array of guests speaking on the pros and cons of various issues. I don't think *The 700 Club* can ever be classified as narrow.

I know Martin Marty (noted theologian) likes to think of television as being some kind of media hype. But at CBN we see ourselves as part of the church. We cooperate with 8,500 churches. We send them money, we send them people, and we assist them in their programs where possible.

I really believe it's our critics who have the problem. They expect from Christian TV responsibilities that it wasn't intended to meet. TV deals with the masses. There is no way we can have the close fellowship that people find in a local church. Yet everybody who comes to Jesus on our program is sent to a church. Everybody who calls in for deep spiritual counseling is referred to a pastor. This year we will refer close to 90,000 people to the churches of America.

But we are not a church per se. We are like the gathering end of a huge funnel. Our critics don't understand that. If they would just say "These people are doing their job as part of the body and the church is doing its job as part of the body," then together we could accomplish something. It's wrong to expect television to do it all.

Buckingham: *There is an increasing number of Christian TV preachers asking for money. Assuming that there are only so many Christians in America—and thus a final limitation on the number of Christian dollars to go around—how will you finance CBN when the Christian money reaches its limit?*

Robertson: Your question implies an apriority that I don't exactly agree with. We're making our own Christians as we go along. About four years ago we began to analyze the Gallup study of the Christian marketplace. We determined from our own surveys that there were approximately three million dedicated evangelicals who were supporting all Christian TV. By that I mean all the money for Oral Roberts, Billy Graham, CBN, PTL, Jimmy Swaggart, James Robison, and the rest came from that same pool of 3 million people.

We also perceived that our program was reaching women who were 47 years old, because I was 47. When I turned 48, our audience shifted to 48-year-old women. When I reached 49 the same thing happened. They were tracking me as I grew older. We said, "This is bad. We've got to make a change."

We also perceived that Gallup had shown the No. 1 preference of both Christian and non-Christian was news and news magazine programming. So we shifted dramatically into a different format.

We began to deal with significant issues facing people in the secular world: money problems, banking problems, investment problems, political problems, military problems and the socio-economic problems that are facing the world.

We sent out TV crews to do interviews—documentary pieces like *60 Minutes*. We were hard hitting but fair. And when there was a Christian factor, we told the truth without editing as the secular networks often do.

That led us to discover that people everywhere were interested in the miracle power of God. Christians and non-Christians alike wanted to hear that God is alive, that He actually hears prayers and does miracles. So, miracles became the central focus of our program.

I've just come from a meeting where I learned that our audience has increased by 30 percent this last year. When we started talking about the miracle power of God our male audience increased by 67 percent, our female audience went up by 37 percent and total households watching us increased by 50 percent. Now we are talking to Jewish people, to Catholic people, to non-Christians, to Protestant people, evangelicals, Pentecostals. And we are talking about things they are interested in. As a result our support base has gone up dramatically. In fact, our 1982 income was up 43 percent.

More than anything, we're looking to God, Jamie. We're putting into practice the Law of Reciprocity, which says if you give it will be given to you. In 1982 I wanted to see us give away to the poor of our country at least 2 million dollars in cash. We far exceeded that goal. A good portion of that was funneled through churches on the proviso that they would match it. We

have actually helped churches help those in their own community. As a result of giving to these and many other evangelical organizations, God is prospering us. We're following His laws, and He's giving us wisdom. The future looks very rosy.

Buckingham: *In the past, Pat, you have been stereotyped as either too busy or too exclusive to meet with and dialogue with pastors and leaders around the nation. Is this a true accusation?*

Robertson: When you deal across the nation in 3,200 communities, you obviously can't sit down and dialogue with the clergy of each community. I haven't got the time.

As program chairman for Washington for Jesus—which brought more than 500,000 Christians to the nation's capital—I met with hundreds of evangelical, Catholic and Pentecostal leaders. I've been to the White House on several occasions with various Christian groups. I'm active on the board of the National Religious Broadcasters.

But dealing with the entire nation means I must delegate certain responsibilities. We have now 80 counseling centers in key cities. Ben Kinchlow oversees a staff whose job it is to dialogue with the pastors to see how we can help them and assist them. My job is to do a television show. There is no way I can go jetting around the country and still fulfill my primary duty. But I can delegate to key people, like Ben, and he in turn can find out what is going on and assist the pastors.

We are listening, Jamie. We're trying to help. I have a very fine relationship with a number of local pastors. I often have them to lunch. We talk about real issues. I recently met with the clergy of the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Virginia and dialogued with them. I'm not inaccessible—just busy.

Buckingham: *Recently a group in Texas started a live teaching*

program for churches via satellite. Using this medium they do everything but set up the chairs and turn on the lights. They even take the offering by TV. Is this part of the overall use of the media you encourage, or does it add to the danger of impersonalization?

Robertson: I have hoped for more innovation. Too many programs copy *The 700 Club*. God has more ways of doing things than the way I do them.

I also believe the need in America, more than anything else, is a knowledge of the Bible. We are biblical illiterates. Too many make a profession of faith but don't understand what they are professing. We believe in belief—and in a vague kind of God. Christians desperately need more expository preaching of the Word. Thus I applaud those who are filling that gap.

However, Jamie, I believe God wants us to be professional broadcasters. I am a Christian and an ordained minister. But I am also a professional. We have a group of pros here at CBN. They are good communicators. They would be good communicators for CBS, NBC or ABC. Many of them used to work in commercial broadcasting networks. They think "major market television." Very few Christian broadcasters think "communications to the mass." They just don't do it. They think within the confines of their own church. They think within the dialogue of their own theological issues. But we are trying to talk to the world about the things that make the world hurt—and how to bring healing.

As a result, I do have a problem with a lot of religious broadcasting because it isn't professional. It doesn't really fulfill the needs of the people on the mass marketing basis.

I frankly feel good Bible teaching would be better used in a cassette format, where small groups in homes can sit around, watch a video cassette, and discuss it with a qualified leader. That would leave major broadcasting for the mass

market.

Buckingham: *I know you have been combating pornography on TV. But is it not true that Christian TV itself, while uplifting, is still basically impersonal and dehumanizing? It calls for spectatorism rather than participation. It seems that if I am busy serving the Lord I'm not going to have much time for TV.*

Robertson: Whether we like it or not, people spend more time watching television than any other human activity—including sleep. The mass of people in the United States watch television probably 30 hours a week. Much of that is dehumanizing. But through *The 700 Club* we have turned TV into a two-way communication. We can talk, and they can call back and express themselves. If they have a need for a job, for food, for clothing they can call in and ask. We will then put them in touch with a church through one of our 80 counseling centers across the nation.

Also, using our 900 number, we can have an immediate poll of the nation on any given issue.

I don't think *The 700 Club* is cold or impersonal. Our audience is very responsive. If we want questions, they will call questions. If we want finances, they will call in pledges. If we ask for commitments to Jesus, they respond—by the thousands.

Buckingham: *How do you justify the glamour and sophistication of the television approach when held up against the Son of Man who had no place to lay His head? Is the accusation true, that Christian TV has married God to mammon?*

Robertson: Jamie, you and I wrote a book together which we called *Shout It from the Housetops*. You carefully noted the early struggles of CBN. It was anything but glamorous. I started with \$70. I was beaten, kicked, spat upon and despised for 10 years. As a result, the book is full of tears as well as laughter. But it was anything but glamorous.

I don't consider TV glamorous now. I go into a studio, they turn on some hot lights, turn on the camera, and I pray, praise Jesus, and talk to people in an informal manner about various things. That's not glamorous. It's a job. It's a job for Jesus. And it's very effective.

Besides, it's what God has called me to do. As such, I am determined to do it well, as a professional.

The problem you are referring to, though, is very real. There is a tendency to make of religious leaders some type of demigod or hero, and to invest them with power, wisdom and glamour they don't have. I don't like that. Neither did the apostle Paul when people tried to sacrifice to him.

I am a servant of Jesus. I do follow the One who didn't have a place to lay His head and who was crucified. So I have to stay before the Lord on my knees, on my face, asking Him to give me a realistic appraisal of who I am. He has done that for me. The 10 years of anguish and trial were a preparation for what we are now experiencing. But God allowed us to have a cup of sorrow for many years in order to put the whole thing into perspective.

Buckingham: *Have you felt less or more antagonism by evangelicals concerning your charismatic position as the years have gone by?*

Robertson: Oh, much less. I have deliberately, over the years, built bridges. I've felt that God wanted me to serve all the people. You'd be interested to know that our audience polls show we have more Baptists in our viewing audience than any others. The second group are Roman Catholics. Methodists are third and Pentecostals fourth.

As you know, Billy Graham came for our grand opening and gave a magnificent message of endorsement. He's been on the program with us. The president of Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, has been our guest. We've had

Methodists, Catholics and Jews. The old criticism against the charismatic position, with few exceptions, is almost gone.

Buckingham: *Have you purposefully shied away from coverage of theological controversies among Christians?*

Robertson: Remember, we are a mass media. We are talking to Jewish people, to unbelievers, to the man on the street. I don't want to get those people involved in the internal disputes of religion. I would rather define those areas where there is unity, than try to pick apart the areas of disagreement.

Buckingham: *Has your obviously pro-Israel stance caused trouble with other Christians who are not necessarily pro-political-Israel?*

Robertson: A lot of problems I cause I don't hear about. I get an occasional letter from somebody who will say, "I disagree with you. The Israel of today is a creation of the czars of Russia," or something like that.

I imagine the Arab countries are not enamored with us. Jordan, I understand, has a file on me in its Washington embassy that says I'm an Israeli agent. That, of course, is not true.

Recently I was in Lebanon where I met with the president. He agreed that our coverage of the Middle East has been accurate. But while I am pro-Israel, I am also pro-people. I believe Israel has a unique place in God's scheme of things and that this current nation is a fulfillment of prophecy. But God's love is for all—Jew and Arab. We must always remember that.

Buckingham *One of the longstanding questions that many have of various parachurch leaders—men such as Oral Roberts, Rex Humbard, Jimmy Swaggart, Billy Graham—and especially leaders of Christian TV is: To whom do you submit? To whom does Pat Robertson submit his life and ministry?*

Robertson: I submit it first of all to the Lord, which is where I think submission ought to be. I also submit to the general public, because without the public we cannot function. I submit to my board of directors. Every major decision is made on our knees before God.

In a sense, I submit to our staff. We have a number of executive vice presidents and a staff of about 1,300 people. We do meet for prayer together as a body. I'm open for criticism from the janitor.

As a matter of fact, the mail boy came in not too long ago and chewed me out in the name of the Lord for something he thought was wrong. It turned out his facts were wrong, but I listened. I'm a fool if I don't.

The Bible says he that is great is the servant of all, so I consider myself the servant of all.

Buckingham: *Your board of directors does have full authority—even to firing you, doesn't it?*

Robertson: They have full legal power. However, their biggest contribution is as a prayer board. Together we submit things to the Lord. I don't do as some corporate executives do and manipulate the board. I need them to help me find the will of God. We've had some multimillion dollar issues come up, and I didn't know what the answer was. The board meets, prays, then we go around the room asking: "What has God shown you?" We always get our answer.

The regents of our university have a standing rule that we adopt no policy without unanimous vote. That means seeking His will and waiting on Him to speak.

Buckingham: *Several years ago you withdrew to the mountains for a period of solitary prayer and fasting. You returned saying God had told you to launch a major assault against the powers of darkness in various nations in the world. What has*

happened since?

Robertson: Prior to that we had programs in several overseas countries with results less than gratifying. God said to me clearly, "You were wrong in what you did previously.

"You went to those nations with inadequate resources. You didn't have enough people and didn't spend enough money." In other words, as the Marines would say, I hit the beach with too few troops.

God told me to make Japan a prime target. He told me to spend the money necessary and prepare the programs that would change the thinking of an entire nation.

I met with my staff and we set some goals. "In Japan the Bible is going to become the most popular book. Jesus is going to be the most desired person in the country. We will spend whatever it takes to accomplish that."

Phase One was to get the Bible into the hands of the Japanese people. That called for a "Bible blitz." We would use our entire repertoire of marketing skills, advertising skills, television skills and other modern means of communication. We then took the Bible, held it before the Japanese people, and said, "This is a wonderful book."

In association with Kenneth Taylor of Living Bibles, we created a Japanese Bible called *Alive Again*. We also created a series of promotional ads. We used subway cards, carried newspaper ads, radio ads and ran television commercials. We then did a test marketing and discovered the Bible had become one of the top-selling books in Japan.

Phase Two called for continuous television programming. We went to the top marketing agency in Japan. "How do you reach the Japanese people?" we asked. In all history there had been no regular prime time Christian television program in Japan. Only Rex Humbard, who had a Saturday morning preaching program

with Japanese words dubbed in. The marketing people suggested animated stories. We took it as a word from God and put the Bible into animation.

We retained one of the best animation houses in Japan. We then bought the 6:30 p.m. time slot on a national network. That gave us access to all Japan.

Our first series on the Old Testament was a big success. We then ran a New Testament series, featuring Jesus Christ and His miracle power. It is now being viewed by 5 million people every Tuesday night in Tokyo alone, and probably another 3 million all over Japan.

Remembering there are only 500,000 Christians in Japan, our Tokyo program alone is talking to 10 times as many people as there are Christians in the country. The entire nation is being saturated with the concepts of the Bible and Jesus Christ.

They like it so much they have invited me to come over and do a series on the principles of the kingdom of God based on my new book, *The Secret Kingdom*, published by Thomas Nelson Publishers.

You see, God said do it, and it was our task to obey. It costs us 3 million dollars a year, but the success far outweighs the cost. That's using the media for the glory of God.

We trust God, we give and God supplies the funds.