

Phil Cooke: It's Time to Rethink 'Missions'

"Studying NFL football is like preparing for war on the playing field. Sometimes that war requires you to study your opponent."—sports journalist Jay Bee, *Bleacher Report*

The most successful military generals and athletes ruthlessly study the strategy and tactics of their adversaries. In a similar way, effective pastors and ministry leaders have always studied the enemy. The Bible is very clear about evil, and there's no question the enemy will stop at nothing to destroy God's people. But in my experience, the vast majority of pastors and leaders aren't recognizing a new but remarkably effective tool in the enemy's arsenal: *distraction*.

Today's digital culture has brought great convenience. Who doesn't love their iPhone, Android or iPad? The ability to connect instantly with thousands of people through social media has proven to be a powerful way to share Christianity with the culture.

But along with *convenience* comes something far more sinister than we realize: *distraction*.

The average person today is exposed to 3,000 to 5,000 media messages *every single day*. The cable TV service in our home boasts nearly 500 channels. Last year, 300,000 books were published, with another 3 million self-published. More than 60 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube *every minute*. Hollywood studios released nearly 1,000 movies last year alone. Nearly 40 percent of the average employee's day is spent sending or receiving email. Even more dire, studies reveal the distraction of social media is rapidly destroying the study habits of this generation of students. From radio and TV commercials, billboards, Internet banner ads, magazines,

social media and more, we're literally being overwhelmed.

So what does all this have to do with the church influencing culture?

Let's say the typical pastor teaches a congregation an hour a week. I'll even be generous and stretch that to two hours with a mid-week service or Bible study thrown in for good measure. How do those two hours compare with the impact of TV's Nielsen ratings indicating the average home in America is watching television about 8 hours and 18 minutes a day? (And we wonder why we're losing the battle for the hearts and minds of this generation.)

The simple truth is that we desperately need to re-examine the Great Commission in light of today's digital you think this isn't serious, consider this: A few years ago, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on a Korean mobile phone study that indicated teenagers in that country were making up to 94 cell phone calls per day. While it's inconclusive, some researchers are beginning to link rising rates of depression with high cell phone use. Simply put, this generation values their "digital time" more than their "people time," resulting in fewer personal relationships or real connections with friends and family.

I love the remarkable advances digital technology has brought us, but at the same time we need to be aware of how that technology is impacting our behavior and undermining the influence of the church. And we need to find new and innovative ways to leverage technology to engage a non-believing culture.

Historically, Christianity has always had a love/hate relationship with the culture—particularly the media. Innovation and technology have more likely been perceived as a threat than a friend. Centuries ago, the Catholic church rose up against the specter of the printing press, fearing the

common man's ability to read the Bible for himself would undermine the church's authority. Since that time, the church has learned some important lessons. By 1833 the largest publisher in America, Harper and Company, boasted one horse-powered printing press and seven hand presses while the American Bible Society owned 16 new state-of-the-art, steam-driven presses and 20 hand presses.

Early in the 20th century, the church embraced the mediums of motion pictures and radio, then television and now the Internet and social media. But in the vast majority of cases, we're not using those platforms beyond church walls. Instead, we're living inside a bubble. From our own Christian websites, publishing companies, record labels, TV networks, universities and more, the last 50 years have seen a remarkable withdrawal of the church from mainstream culture and a move back to a cloistered, protective bubble.

Perhaps the church isn't losing its voice; maybe it's giving it away. But this approach is antithetical to the life Jesus lived. He never advocated protective bubbles or retreated from the challenges of the culture around Him. He spent His life where the people were—in the marketplace, social gatherings or the Temple. He wasn't afraid to answer the hard questions. And in Acts 17, the apostle Paul went directly to the pagan philosophers at Mars Hill. He understood their beliefs as much as they did, and they were so intrigued they invited him back. But today, when it comes to the culture around us, the church is far more likely to protest, criticize and condemn, rather than actually engage.

How can we regain our voice in today's distracted culture?

To break through the clutter and get your message heard by your congregation, the greater community or the world, remember these five critical principles:

1. Perception matters. To re-engage today's digital culture,

we need to understand the power of perception. In a digital culture, perception matters, and it happens in the blink of an eye.

The creative team at Cooke Pictures (), our media production company in Burbank, Calif., discovered that in a 300- to 500-TV channel universe, most people only take two to three seconds to decide what channel to watch. It's not much different from deciding the next book you'll read or church you'll attend. In a world of nearly unlimited choices, your initial, split-second perception is critical. The slightest distraction is all it takes to sidetrack people. How often do you meet someone for lunch and put your mobile device on the table just in case you get an important email, text or phone call? We live today in a state of *continuous partial attention*.

As a result, I believe the most valuable commodity of the 21st century will be *undivided attention*. When was the last time you felt that a friend, co-worker or even spouse was fully in the moment in a conversation? This isn't the world I would like, but it's the world we live in. The bottom line is that it doesn't really matter how powerful or anointed your message if you can't get anyone in the door to hear it, or get them to focus once they arrive.

2. In a digital world, word travels fast. Founder Jeff Bezos says that a few years ago if a customer had a bad experience with a company, he would complain to seven of his friends. But today through social media, he can complain to 7,000 friends. In an email and text-messaging world, you can't outrun your reputation. What are people saying about your church or ministry? Find out. Start thinking less about Google as a search engine and more as a tool for reputation management.

A few years ago, I actually had a pastor tell me he didn't want his congregation to know about his yacht. I politely told him he was living under a rock. In a digital world, a

reasonably sharp sixth-grader could download the yacht's title online and, with Google Earth, could print a satellite photo of the boat at the dock. You can't hide anything anymore. In a digital era, Christian leaders have to live more transparently than ever before.

3. In a cluttered world, original ideas stand out. There's a reason Super Bowl commercials capture the public's imagination or blockbuster movies make such an impact. I've always been fascinated that God chose to introduce Himself to us in the first verse of Genesis as a *Creator*. And yet so few Christians really understand the power of creativity to influence the culture.

Throughout history, Christians have led in the arts, letters, science, academia and politics, and today we need creative leaders more than ever. And the most *creative* approach is often the *simple* approach. For instance, I advise our ministry clients that their website design is finished when we've *eliminated* everything we possibly can. Keep your website clean, simple and to the point. We earnestly think that the more information we cram into our sermons, websites and brochures, the more they will help communicate our message. But Jesus didn't overly complicate His stories, and neither should we. I love the quote from jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie: "It's taken me all my life to learn what not to play."

4. It's time to rethink "missions." As I write this, Facebook has more than 1 billion members, which by population makes it the third largest country in the world—somewhere between India and the United States. Who's sending missionaries to that country? Who's planting churches there? To be effective in a media-driven culture, we need to stop thinking of missions solely in *geographical* terms and start thinking *virtually*. This year, my wife, Kathleen, and I are launching a new nonprofit organization called "The Influence Lab" to research and discover new ways the church can

influence today's culture, particularly through media. One of our most exciting initiatives will be a short-term missions program for communication and technology professionals.

While traditional missionaries will always be needed, we receive request after request from mission organizations around the world for a short-term web developer, video editor, photographer, IT professional and more. Funding such an innovative outreach will be a challenge, but it will help shift our thinking about the future of missions. As a result, it's one of my most important personal priorities for the future.

5. We must be strategic. Social media is a far more powerful tool than simply letting your church members know you're at Starbucks. In my book *Unique*, I write about remarkable stories from local churches using social media to create "brand ambassadors" who are sharing their own stories of transformation with their friends and followers. For example, Kristen Tarsiuk, communications director at Oasis Church in Los Angeles, has used social media to minister to women fighting eating disorders; pray with people who have just lost loved ones; share the gospel globally; and help people outside Los Angeles find a local church home.

The key is understanding that social media isn't about "marketing" your church or message; it's about "connecting" with people who want to make *your* story part of *their* story. Making that connection doesn't happen randomly, but rather through an intentional, strategic plan that fosters connection.

In his book *Viral: How Social Media is Poised to Ignite Revival*, thought leader Leonard Sweet writes: "Can you imagine doing ministry the last five hundred years and getting away with 'Sorry, I don't do books'? Can you imagine doing ministry in the next five years and getting away with 'Sorry, I don't do Facebook'?"

The great challenge of the church today is speaking into a culture that more and more simply perceives us as an irrelevant, out of touch museum piece. During my lifetime, living by Judeo-Christian principles was assumed and taken for granted. But in a world where best-selling books are titled *God Is Not Great*, and hostility to the faith is championed by much of the culture, we must react differently if we're to engage the hearts and minds of those around us.

The new rules of communication in the 21st century are about *cutting through the clutter and connecting*. Media today is interactive, and a new generation has grown up understanding it's a two-way conversation. After all, they pick the next American Idol by texting on their cell phone, so they know they have power. That kind of engagement is transforming education, business, politics—and the church as well.

One Ring to Rule Them All

Just as one ring ruled all others in the trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, one principle rules all others in today's distracted and cluttered world: *brutal honesty*. If you're insecure, need to be constantly affirmed or were born with a fragile ego, this task may not be for you. It doesn't take long on Twitter or Facebook to realize that this generation holds back very little when it comes to personal opinions. On my blog, my readers don't care about my feelings and are brutally honest in their opinions. When I contribute to other online platforms such as *The Huffington Post*, or *Fast Company* magazine, it can get even worse.

While it often stings, there's also something refreshing about sharing your faith to an unchurched audience. A generation ago, a local pastor could preach his entire lifetime and never have his message reach farther than the county line. But today my Twitter followers stretch from the United States to Africa, India, Russia, Australia, South America and more. Under that

kind of scrutiny, leaders can't afford to phone it in. We have to share our faith with integrity, truth and honesty. Anything less, and I can guarantee you, someone will call you out.

Two thousand years ago, a tiny, obscure, marginal group following the teachings of Jesus became the dominant religious force in the Western world. They didn't have political power, an army or vast wealth. But they understood how to change the perception of Rome, which allowed them to eventually impact the world.

What about today?

The message is the same, but how we communicate it in today's distracted digital culture will determine if we have the same impact.

Phil Cooke is a media consultant focused mainly on the Christian market, as well as a vocal critic of contemporary American and American-influenced Christian culture. Click [here](#) to visit his website.