

The Mission of Journalists

It was Fox News that first broke the story of an infuriated Ted Turner, founder of CNN, berating some of his staff at a party on Ash Wednesday, Feb. 28, because they wore the mark of ashes on their foreheads (a Lenten tradition among many Catholics and Episcopalians). "I realized you're just Jesus freaks," Turner was quoted as saying to them. "Shouldn't you guys be working for Fox?"

This style of bigotry was vintage Ted Turner, who has honed Christian-bashing into a sort of kitsch art form throughout his network. Christianity, he said in another rant, was a "religion for losers."

One of the top CNN staffers who resigned directly in response to the Ash Wednesday outburst was Stuart Varney, CNN's talented and highly visible business correspondent. Former CNN staffers have told journalistic colleagues of mine that anti-Christian boorishness by Turner has aroused resentment among CNN staffers over several years.

But Turner is not alone in his Christian-bashing. There are other forms of casual bigotry against Christians by senior and respected U.S. journalists that escape the attention of otherwise vigilant editors almost daily.

In The New York Times on April 21, Chris Hedges, former Balkan bureau chief for the Times, has a four-column article on the Rev. Hezekiah Walker, the Grammy-winning Pentecostal pastor of Love Fellowship Tabernacle in Brooklyn, N.Y. The piece digs

away at Walker as—if not exactly a black Elmer Gantry—at least someone who lives too well to be serious about his Christian faith.

Then comes the utterly gratuitous swipe: “Evangelical preachers, like the Rev. Billy Graham or Reverend Ike, also built empires and became rich on the notion that if you lead a pious life and shower the church with donations, God will reward you with material possessions and happiness.”

This is not just patently false, it is sheer bigotry. Journalists are certainly entitled to dislike evangelicals, including widely admired figures such as Billy Graham. But are they entitled to make wildly inaccurate assertions about public figures simply because they dislike the individual?

I don't think so. It's not only poor judgment, it's poor professionalism. As a sometime chronicler of Graham (*Great Souls: Six Who Changed the Century*), I can say that Graham has never even hinted that donations to his ministry would bring donors prosperity and happiness.

So why would a distinguished paper like *The New York Times* make such a gaffe? Well, I think it is a form of genteel prejudice. Christian-bashing is the last respectable bigotry for journalists who are too lazy to report accurately or too shallow to do any hard thinking.

At Gegrapha, our global fellowship of journalists, we are working hard to combat this climate of prejudice in several ways. We want to restore to journalism courageous, truthful and, above all, fair reporting. We believe that Christians must sometimes be willing to report unflattering stories about

other Christians—as long as those stories are true—because truth is always more important than reputation.

But we also believe that Christians have considerable advantages in journalism. Christians have a very high view of truth, and their view of human life is simply more realistic than most others'. We want to encourage younger Christians from Christian colleges to change mainstream journalism from within.

If you want to see a change in the nature of journalism, please pray—and get your church to join in—by name for secular journalists, especially those you know are Christians.

Pray for Gegrappa and for our conference, Washington 2001, Aug. 10-13. We are praying for 250 professional journalists, all Christians, from 50 countries, and we will need financial support to bring them here.

Above all, make a change in your thinking. Journalism is a wonderful, God created profession, and He wants to use it to bless the world. Think about that.