

What's the Future of Television for Sharing the Christian Message?

Is television still a relevant tool for sharing the Christian message? In a world where most churches, ministries and nonprofits are moving to the Internet, why think about TV anymore? *Charisma* magazine caught up with media maven Phil Cooke to discuss these and other issues in this exclusive interview.

Charisma: Charismatics have often been pioneers in virtually every form of media, yet today most people tend to jump on the Christian-bashing bandwagon and assume we're lagging behind cultural trends. How would you assess where **charismatics** are today in the media world? What needs to change?

Cooke: Being there first doesn't necessarily mean being there best. In my book *The Last TV Evangelist*, I wrote that I'm extraordinarily proud of an earlier generation of **charismatic** believers like Oral Roberts who helped pioneer religious broadcasting. Although Christian radio began as early as the 30s, in 1955 Oral partnered with NBC to create what would become one of the longest-running and most-watched nationally broadcast weekly Christian TV program called *The Abundant Life Program*.

However, in most cases, while these leaders were passionate about the message, they weren't so passionate about how it was delivered. As a result, much of Christian broadcasting over the years has been low quality, corny and very cheesy. Today, while there's still much of that around, we've improved dramatically. There's no question that a new generation of pastors and ministry leaders understand the need to package the message in a creative and compelling program. Certainly

there are still too many talking-head preachers and low-budget interview programs for my taste, but we're definitely moving in the right direction.

Charisma: What are the biggest challenges facing media **charismatics**? Are there other examples, other than the ones you mentioned in your recent blogs, of "legacy" media ministries (still charismatic) successfully making the necessary transition?

Cooke: Too many of the most successful media ministries of the past became locked in a rut of their own making. They forgot that while the **Bible** never changes, everything else does—people, trends, culture, styles and more. They believed that because something worked for them in 1985, it should still work today. As a result, the very culture they were trying to reach left them in the dustbin of history. That's why so many media ministries that were enormously significant and influential a decade or two ago are either bankrupt, heavily in debt or forgotten about today.

The good news is that there are some "legacy" ministries that kept up with a changing culture. **Joyce Meyer** is a perfect example. Once she realized how rapidly her audience and donors were changing, she was willing to take a hard look at every aspect of her ministry from that perspective. As a result, she's more successful and influential today than ever. **Joel Osteen** is probably the greatest success story of a media leader who's transitioned well to the second generation.

Charisma: What are some of the positive elements and trends you see developing among media charismatics?

Cooke: There are many, but probably the most important is the understanding of the media itself. The first generation of Christian media leaders were mostly pastors or evangelists. As a result, they saw everything through the lens of preaching. That's why for decades, preaching programs dominated **religious**

media—both radio and TV. I love great preaching, but when it comes to the media, it's not always the best method of sharing our message. That's why I've spent my life educating pastors and ministry leaders about media platforms and how they work. As a result, today we're seeing more Christians producing feature films, documentaries, music programs, short films and more. Plus, many Christian organizations are doing remarkable things online through websites, short videos and social media.

Another fantastic development is the rise of Christian media professionals in Hollywood. Today, there are literally hundreds of strong believers working at major studios and production companies who are making a difference from the inside. In fact, right now, there are three \$100 million+ movies in development on Christian themes: one on Moses, another on Noah and a third based on John Milton's epic poem, "Paradise Lost."

Charisma: Who are some of the names, faces and players in the "charismatic media" realm that people should be paying attention to these days?

Cooke: If you would have asked me that 10-20 years ago, my list would have been filled with pastors or ministry leaders. But today, that list would include many dedicated "behind the scenes" professionals, who have been instrumental in creating more creative and compelling programs. From a "famous leader" point of view, in the next few years I would keep my eye on people like **Jentzen Franklin**, Benny Perez, Stovall Weems, Gary and Drenda Keese, Ron Carpenter, Kyle Searcy, David McGee, Judah Smith, Mark Crow, **Rich Wilkerson Jr.**, Carl Lentz, Jordan Wagner, David McGee and a few others. Some of these leaders aren't very visible right now, but within a few years, will be making an impact nationally.

Charisma: Why are charismatics still so prominent on Christian TV (as opposed to mainstream evangelicals)? And on the flip side, why does "charismania" often pose such problems

onscreen?

Cooke: I've often joked that **charismatics** produce much more interesting programs than mainstream evangelicals, but charismatics also have a higher rate of ending up in court or in jail. Sadly, the same creativity, boldness and openness to risk that helps create interesting media also pushes some people into ego, outlandish behavior and sometimes outright crime. What frustrates me the most is the excess we've seen in Christian media—especially among the charismatic community. A new generation of pastors and ministry leaders look at that and think, “If that's **Christian broadcasting**, then I don't want to have anything to do with it.” So they turn their back on traditional radio and television, which are still incredible tools for reaching today's culture.

Charisma: Where do you feel the **Holy Spirit** is moving most today in the charismatic media community?

Cooke: My answer may seem strange, but what I'm seeing is a new generation of pastors and ministry leaders who are **Spirit-filled**, but not strange. A generation ago, many of the charismatic and **Pentecostal** figures you'd see on Christian TV may have been sincere, but they were just plain weird. Why does a charismatic leader have to have weird hair, wear odd clothes or act like a Hollywood celebrity? Fortunately today, people consider the few of those guys who are left as fringe, and are moving toward new charismatic leaders who are more dedicated to biblical truth, don't live a lavish lifestyle, and are simply normal folks like you and me. Between you and me, as a media producer and consultant, I'm looking for the pastor or ministry leader who will define for a 21st Century culture what it means to live a **Spirit-filled** life without being wacky.