

It's Time to Reboot Christian Television

Among the legendary pioneers of Christian broadcasting—a list that includes Pat Robertson, Oral Roberts and Jim Bakker—no one worked harder to establish Christian TV stations around the world than Paul Crouch Sr. In spite of constant controversies over his network's content and finances, the Trinity Broadcasting Network that Crouch founded in 1973 has grown to be the largest and most profitable religious television enterprise in the world.

But Crouch died last weekend, and all is not well at TBN. Crouch's oldest son, Paul Jr., who at one time was the heir apparent of the network, abruptly departed in 2011 and went to work for the Word Network, a predominantly African-American ministry. The Crouch's granddaughter, Brittany Koper, in a lawsuit filed against TBN last year, claimed that millions of dollars of donor funds were misused. The Crouch's grandson, Brandon Crouch, has lamented on a blog that the family is now split apart because his sister was fired for blowing the whistle on what she considered fraud.

And as Christian friends and colleagues mourn Crouch's passing (there will be no public funeral, but TBN plans to air a tribute on Dec. 8 and 9), the wider Christian public is asking a lot of questions about TBN—and about Christian broadcasting in general: Why is televangelism so prone to scandal? Why have so many Christian broadcasters insisted on living lavishly? Why is our most visible outreach to the world so embarrassing?

Some people might say this is not the time to have this discussion. But I think Paul Crouch's passing signals the end of an era—and it is time for a reformation. Crouch's generation built monolithic organizations with autocratic leadership, and broadcasters who began their networks in the

1970s created a showy, bigger-is-better style that included endless telethons, sensational preaching and celebrities in spotlights.

That may have worked in 1975—and it still appeals to a segment of the market. But my generation and my children's generation tuned out long ago because Christian TV came off as fake, campy and spiritually out of touch.

If I were asked to suggest ways to improve Christian television in this new era, I would list the following:

1. Support it with advertising, not donations. Who said Christian programming has to be donor-funded? I'd rather watch ads for steak knives or dietary supplements than endure two hours of begging—especially when the slick-haired evangelist running the telethon reminds you of a used-car salesman.

2. Prosperity preaching shouldn't be allowed. Networks need to declare a moratorium on sermons that promise magical monetary benefits to people who "call now" to give a credit card donation. This type of merchandising of the anointing of the Holy Spirit grieves God and drags Christian TV down to the level of scam artists.

3. Preachers—and their doctrines—should be more carefully screened. Christian networks should not air programs by ministers who have questionable morals. If we wouldn't allow that person in our church's pulpit, why would we let them preach in front of millions on the air?

4. Donors should never be manipulated. If there is an appeal for donations, there should be no hanky-panky allowed. Don't tell people that if they give tonight, God will give them a house. Don't promise that God will heal their bodies if they sow a "\$1,000 seed." And don't tell viewers that if they give in this special "Day of Atonement offering," God will forgive their sins. This is witchcraft! Shame on any broadcaster who has allowed this garbage to deceive audiences.

5. Money should never be misused. TBN makes millions in donations every year—and the network has donated some of the funds to charitable causes. But why is it that broadcasters like Paul and Jan Crouch had to purchase lavish homes, a private jet and an enormous trailer for their dogs? Donors should demand more accountability for financial contributions.

6. It should be relevant to today's culture. Young Christians today care about justice, world poverty and community transformation. They also want teaching on relationships, sexuality and practical discipleship. Christian TV must move beyond the talking-head style of the 1980s. If we want to appeal to young viewers, the false eyelashes, pink fright wigs and “Granny hootenanny” music will have to go.

7. Network owners should not set up broadcasting kingdoms. Some leaders in the past generation believed that ministries are like dynasties—that God expects the founder's son to run it when he dies. But there is nothing in Scripture that even hints at ministries being passed down through family lines. God entrusts His work to faithful people—and He expects us to manage ministries with integrity, humility and accountability. Many of the disasters we have seen in American televangelism occurred because men thought they could take ownership of the work of God.

My prayer for TBN—and every other Christian television network in this country—is that ministry leaders will take their hands off of God's work and let Him use broadcast technology in new and creative ways to reach the world for Christ.

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