

Lost in La-La Land

Much of Christian TV needs extreme makeover.

You might be shocked to know that I don't watch much Christian television. With my hectic schedule I don't have time for talk shows. I do enjoy broadcast news, PBS documentaries and an occasional movie on AMC. When I am in total couch-potato mode I've been known to watch reruns of Boy Meets World and America's Funniest Videos with my kids.

But my children aren't too fond of religious broadcasting, and I don't blame them. I would rather sit in traffic and listen to my favorite worship music than watch a group of slick-haired evangelists gab about the importance of tithing.

I know there are great Bible teachers on the air today, and TV pioneers Marcus and Joni Lamb of Daystar Television Network are making remarkable strides to improve the image of Christians in the media (see our story on page 36). But let's be honest: Christian broadcasting today is a vast wasteland of missed opportunities.

I'd like to offer a few suggestions on how Christian TV executives could stop turning off viewers.

1. Get real. People are looking for authenticity, not hokum. When unbelievers see Christians on TV they need to know we have real human problems as well as practical answers. They don't need to see hypocritical masks, hear pat answers or be forced to decipher sappy, religious lingo.

We must be as professional as possible to reach the masses. National television is no place to be cheesy, flamboyant or weird.

2. Reset the clock. This is 2006. Much of Christian TV needs an extreme makeover. The gospel is timeless, but that doesn't mean we will attract big audiences without new packaging.

My generation is not going to watch a Christian version of Hee Haw or The Lawrence Welk Show. I know of one prominent pastor who refers to typical Christian television as a "granny hootenanny" because the sets, music and preaching don't appeal to anyone under 75. Christian networks need to hire some people under 30 and let them invent a new broadcasting formula.

3. Give us some substance. I realize that some people watch Christian TV instead of going to church. (That is actually a very scary thought.) But since many of us already attend a worship service at least once a week, Christian programs should not be like church services beamed from La-La Land. We need more than an inspirational song, canned applause, a sermon and a lengthy offering appeal. Help us apply the Word of God to everyday life!

4. Tone down the begging. Some Christian programs remind me of those mindless infomercials that air at 3 a.m. to entertain insomniacs. Except in this case, instead of movie stars from the 1970s selling face creams, diet shakes or vegetable storage systems, Christian leaders gather on the same set night after night to preach their favorite prosperity messages.

They jostle to the music, slap one another's backs and remind the audience that God will free them from debt if they charge a \$1,000 love gift on their credit cards. Meanwhile, for effect, studio technicians play the sound of ringing telephones in the background. (Do phones still sound like

that?)

Someone please make them stop! This is bad advertising for the gospel. These people make it sound as if God is constantly running short on cash. Here's an idea: Why couldn't Christian stations have commercials? I'd rather hear from the local car dealer every 15 minutes than endure an hour of telethon torture.

5. Have some integrity. What really grieves me is that a network will put any old preacher on the air if he can wow a crowd. Never mind that his theology is toxic. Never mind that he left his wife and married another lady a week later. He can sure get the people to shout—and to open their wallets!

I won't be a guest on many Christian talk shows as a result of this article. But I hope someone out there in TV land is listening—and is willing to make today's programming relevant to mainstream viewers who certainly are not going to find Jesus while watching HBO. I believe that if we get back in touch with reality, people will tune in by the millions.

J. Lee Grady is the editor of Charisma and author of 10 Lies the Church Tells Women (Charisma House). His ministry, The Mordecai Project, focuses on empowering women in ministry and confronting abuse.