

Media Matters

At the Connect Christian Media Conference in 2013, Peter Bentley spoke with Phil Cooke, media consultant and film producer. Phil is a prominent leader in media and film consultancy in the not-for-profit and Christian organisation arena in the USA, generally working with Protestants. The Salvation Army, Mercy Ships, and Media Ministry International are among the many groups he has advised. As well as media qualifications, Cooke has a PhD in theology which has given him an unusual profile in Hollywood.

Phil Cooke first came to wider Australian attention through the Andrew Denton documentary *God on our Side* which was set at the 2006 National Religious Broadcasters Convention in the USA. The documentary premiered at the Sydney Film Festival in 2007 and is now available on DVD. Phil was one of just three people with whom Denton conducted extended interviews.

Phil Cooke explained that Andrew Denton was at the convention for political purposes: to develop an exposé on elements of the beliefs and philosophy of George Bush and conservative religion, but when Denton started to interview people he found much more of interest in this particular American Christian scene. As Cooke commented:

The thing about Andrew is, he does not set people up – he lets them talk and they indict themselves – I think it is brilliant. After a couple of days of interviewing people my name came up a number of times and he called up and asked to interview me and we sat down and we had a great interview.

For anyone with an interest in evangelical and conservative Christianity in the USA, the whole documentary is illuminating and Phil's analysis and reflective comments provide insights into the wider context.

Cooke is the author of a number of books related to cultural and media changes in our western world. Among his early works are books about evangelical Christianity and tele-evangelism including *The Last TV Evangelist: Why the Next Generation Couldn't Care Less About Religious Media and Why It Matters* (Conversant Media Group, 2009).

Jolt!: Get the Jump on a World That's Constantly Changing (Thomas Nelson, 2011) is aimed at a broader market. It addresses the impact of technological change which has become a significant dynamic in the church as well as in wider society.

One Big Thing: Discovering What You Were Born to Do (Thomas Nelson, 2012) is aimed at helping a person consider their place in the world of ministries and missions today.

Cooke also achieved more prominence in Australia

through a book on branding: *Branding Faith: Why Some Churches and Non-Profits Impact Culture and Others Don't* (2008). The book was revised recently as *Unique: Telling Your Story in the Age of Brands and Social Media* (Regal, 2012).

The word 'branding' is not popular in the church context, but the book contains an interesting approach and discussion of these issues and provides some practical advice for church leaders. Of particular concern to Cooke is the need for consistency in the brand image that is presented, something which is increasingly not occurring, mainly because some para-church and Christian organisations are using multiple platforms of communication without co-ordinating them and linking together. In the revision published under the title *Unique* is an account of the rapidly changing social media context.

In the interview with Phil Cooke, a number of areas that are helpful for Christians to consider in this media-saturated world were raised and I include some reflections and comments on these areas.

Convergence of media and technology and information

Cooke highlighted the point made in the book *Abundance* (Diamandis and Kotler, Free Press, 2013) that through a mobile phone a Maasai warrior can have access to the same amount of information or even more than the President of the USA had fifteen years ago. We are constantly receiving information in a variety of media forms. Cooke referred to the fact that one often attends meetings today where no-one looks at each other because everyone is checking their emails and social media. Now people are using multiple devices to access information, social media and technology, as well as undertaking other activities at the same time. He has drawn attention to the need to re-think the ways we are using social media and the instant nature of 'relationships' formed this way.

Cooke described the work he did on 'Disconnect to re-connect.' For Fathers' Day, two years ago in the US, he encouraged fathers to take 24 hours to re-establish personal face-to face relations with their kids – real time, rather than the part-time relationships in which one eye is focussed on email and social media. He said he was staggered to see how this went 'viral' and the number of media interviews which arose from this simple idea. Other ideas he has encouraged include companies having an email-free Friday, where one day a week they communicate by phone and face.

Cooke said that our greatest enemy today is clutter and that we need to be much more intentional about protecting our time and focussing. We should set times to undertake certain tasks like emails, rather than attending to them when they come in, and allowing them to interrupt other tasks.

Changes to worship?

Phil elaborated on how worship times had changed and how technology was so prevalent during worship including use of social media and digital Bibles. While much of this can be helpful or useful, there is a need to understand the need for intimacy as well, he said. He noted that we do not know the role and impact of technology on worship yet as there is so much experimentation going on. He commented though that when it comes to the more intimate moments of worship such as celebrating the Eucharist, many people put away their mobile devices.

While social media needs to be used sparingly, Cooke argues for a renaissance in terms of recognition of the importance of the arts in Christian faith and communications. In earlier times, many churches patronised the arts. Indeed, this was true in the early period of film. He argued that Christians should be taking a leading role in all areas of the arts and in arts-related new technology. Christians would be a powerful influence on culture if this happened.

Future for Christian publications in print

Cooke pointed out that the church has always been at the forefront of change, from the printing press to early forms of mass media. Each generation has thought that the current main form of communication would replace the 'older' one. People thought when television was invented it would replace radio. What generally happens in the mass media world is that everything finds its own level. However, he suggested that we are in a different overall environment today with young people being predominantly a visual generation. Phil related how when he came to write *Jolt*, (first book from a major publisher), the publishers said that email had changed how people read so much he needed to write short sections and use more headlines. People are reading but in shorter snippets.. For those over 50 now, there are still many years of printed material ahead. He said until people can "zap it directly into my brain" he (and others) will use print as well as other forms of communication.

Given the change of culture from a Christendom model to our present environment which can sometimes be hostile to the Christian faith, I asked Cooke for his thoughts on presenting a Christian message today, particularly on controversial issues.

Phil explained that this topic was one he was looking at for a new book as recent decades had brought significant change and challenge. He gave the example of his father who was a pastor back in the 1960s. People respected him as a pastor because he was the pastor and the church was seen generally in a positive light.

He suggested that if we are going to impact culture in a more hostile environment we needed to actually serve more. "One can learn from studying the early church, how it went from being a despised and ragtag group to a powerful influence," he said. He noted that people wondered why early Christians did things that were of no personal benefit such as caring for orphans and the dying. We need to look again today at ways of Christian service and outreach, rather than a focus based on criticism of the culture around us, Cooke suggested. He gave the example of a church in the USA that had 12 dentists, so they started an outreach for dental health. Another area of service was helping with foster children.

Cooke highlighted the recent TV series *The Bible* (created by Roma Downey and Mark Burnett). As a Christian media commentator he has been approached by dozens of news and entertainment programmes because the wider media was baffled why anyone would watch a TV series on the Bible. He argued that we have an increasing biblically illiterate generation, which was being seen now in the failure of students to connect major works of literature, and even speeches like Martin Luther King's 'I have a Dream' speech, with the biblical tradition. He mentioned 'The Bible and Its Influence' project, designed in America to help public school teachers teach the Bible as a great book (not as theology), as a way of connecting again to a culture which was increasingly removed from it.

Cooke was part of a group of 75 media professionals invited to attend the Lausanne Global Consultation on the Gospel and Media in Los Angeles (November 2013). They considered:

- how to educate and equip Christians for media awareness, media critique and media engagement,
- how to be salt and light as Christian media professionals in an increasingly global and pluralistic world,
- how to effectively engage culture through the use of various media in ways that draw non-believers toward spiritual truth and that communicate Jesus Christ in culturally relevant ways.

More information about this gathering will be on the Lausanne website, and for an overview and other commentary on contemporary culture and media matters from Phil Cooke: see his Blog – The Change Revolution:- philcooke.com/

Peter Bentley

