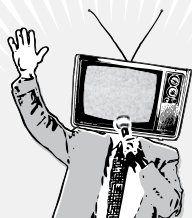


CHAPTER ONE

HOW WE ARRIVED *HERE*



- WE HAVE CREATED A PHENOMENAL SUBCULTURE WITH
- OUR OWN MEDIA, ENTERTAINMENT, EDUCATIONAL SYS-
- TEM, AND POLITICAL HIERARCHY SO THAT WE HAVE THE
- SENSE THAT WE'RE DOING A LOT. BUT WHAT WE'VE REAL-
- LY DONE IS CREATE A GHETTO THAT IS EASILY DISMISSED
- BY THE REST OF SOCIETY.

– BOB BRINER, *ROARING LAMBS*

First, let me start with a disclaimer: I work both sides of the fence. As a commercial television producer, I'm one of three founders of a TV commercial company that produces premiere television spots, including a couple of Super Bowl commercials and a spot during the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Summer Olympics. I've produced programming for major networks including PBS and early in my career I would film anything that moved, including sports, TV specials, and more. But I've also been deeply involved in Christian media for more than 35 years. And it's that side of the fence – the Christian media – where my passion really lies.

My other company, Cooke Pictures, produces and consults with some of the largest media ministries in this country and around the world. We love what we do, and we love our clients. Our passion is about change – navigating the changing media universe for our clients and helping them create programming that connects with an audience.

We don't really consider ourselves a "Christian" production company. We're simply Christians who produce programming and create media. Our faith informs everything we do, and we

want it to be organic within our projects. Jesus didn't give an explicitly religious message every time he encountered people; many times he wove it into a powerful story about the normal details of living.

If you've heard me speak or read my books or articles, you also know I'm a regular and vigorous critic of religious broadcasting. Not from an ivory tower perspective, where I have no skin in the game, I'm speaking out from the trenches. There are plenty of books – usually written by researchers and academics – that criticize various aspects of religious media, church marketing and branding. Some of those books are excellent, and some are quite terrible, but either way, they have nothing to lose because few of the writers have a vested interest in the industry.

But I do – I work in the industry that I'm critiquing. As a result, there is a raging conflict within me, and some of what I'll be discussing in this book represents that tension.

If you currently work in religious media, don't be offended – be challenged.

A few years ago a movie was released called "Galaxy Quest," starring Tim Allen and Sigourney Weaver. The movie website IMDB.com describes the comedy like this:

Eighteen years after their sci-fi adventure show "Galaxy Quest" was canceled, actors Jason Nesmith, Gwen DeMarco, Alexander Dane, Tommy Webber, and Fred Kwan are making appearances at sci-fi conventions and store openings in costume and character. They're wallowing in despair and at each other's throats until aliens known as Thermians arrive and, having mistaken the show for fact and consequently modeling their entire culture around it, take them into space to save them from the genocidal General Sarris and his armada.

Galaxy Quest was obviously a satire on the Star Trek television and movie franchise. The plot, the characters, and the TV show – they were all one continuous joke on the classic creation by Gene Roddenberry. It was a terrific movie, and was loved by both Star Trek fans and critics alike.

The most fascinating aspect of the film was that while it was an outrageous satire and made great fun of the Star Trek franchise, it was also written and produced by people who obviously loved the original series. The inside jokes and outrageous parody worked so well because the creators loved Star Trek and that came through as you watched the film. *In an odd way, this book is my “Galaxy Quest” to the religious media.*

• A TRUE RADICAL MUST BE A MAN OF ROOTS. IN WORDS •
 • THAT I HAVE USED ELSEWHERE, ‘THE REVOLUTIONARY •
 • CAN BE AN “OUTSIDER” TO THE STRUCTURE HE WOULD •
 • SEE COLLAPSE: INDEED, HE MUST SET HIMSELF OUTSIDE •
 • OF IT. BUT THE RADICAL GOES TO THE ROOTS OF HIS OWN •
 • TRADITION. HE MUST LOVE IT: HE MUST WEEP OVER •
 • JERUSALEM, EVEN IF HE HAS TO PRONOUNCE ITS DOOM. •
 • – JOHN A. T. ROBINSON, 20TH CENTURY NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLAR •

I love the media and I love the church. The challenge is to reach the next generation – and the media will be a significant part of that effort. I know people are still debating the role of media and technology in the church and in evangelism, but as far as I’m concerned, we are already behind. For my money, it’s time we moved past that tiring conversation and started working.

A few years ago, I spoke at the national media conference for a major Christian denomination. Afterwards I had lunch with the director of communications for the organization, and when I asked him about his most frustrating challenge, his reply was direct and surprising: “Drums,” he said. “The debate over us-

ing drums in our worship services is so great, it might actually cause a schism in the entire organization.”

I told him I thought we had crossed that bridge in the 1970s and 1980s. “Not in our denomination,” he replied.

In a similar way, *The Boston Globe* recently reported on a local theological seminary who had received a major gift from a foundation to help them train students to use technology in the church. But the money couldn’t be spent because there was a major hold-up – the seminary leadership hadn’t decided if technology should even be used in the church.

Certainly churches and ministry organizations misuse the media and technology, and that’s a significant part of this book, but it’s time we moved past the debate and started making real change happen.

You’re about to read some pretty harsh criticisms but only because I, more than many, know the power of what can be achieved by using media effectively. To be alive in America in the 21st century means living in, what I call, a “media-driven” culture.

With research that indicates we’re being bombarded with advertising and marketing messages, with people consuming media at record levels, with web-based companies dominating global business, if we don’t understand how to share our faith in the digital world, the church will continue its slide into irrelevance in the eyes of the culture.

Media matters, and if we’re going to engage the greater culture that surrounds us today, simply sharing the gospel message inside the walls of the church isn’t enough anymore. We simply have to have a voice in the media.

WHAT EXACTLY IS MEDIA?

In the new digital world, media has become culture. It’s the experiences and information we consume everyday. Media is all

of it: what we watch and listen to, the printed books, magazines, and advertisements we read, the news on cable, network TV, online, and print, and even the products, communications, and things we enjoy, need, and want on a daily basis.

It's the road the culture travels, and the way we connect.

Traditionally, people of faith have been highly engaged in the media of a particular time. From stone tablets to the Gutenberg printing press, for thousands of years, literacy has been driven by the need to know God and understand His purpose for our lives. Today is no different, and as I'll discuss throughout the book, we as Christians have been quite aggressive at sharing our faith through the media in the electronic age. However, while we started with good intentions, our execution has often been less than effective.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS MEDIA

I have been fascinated by the history of religious media for a long time. When it comes to movies for instance, the gap between film and faith for most Christians is wide and historic. But what most Christians fail to realize is that during the birth of the movie industry, the church was actually one of the largest producers of movies in America. In Terry Lindvall's fascinating book, *The Silents of God*, he takes the reader on a captivating journey through the early days of American cinema, when the imprint of the church was powerful and positive. Not only did Christians encourage movie attendance, but Christian organizations produced a massive number of films during the early part of this century.

Few people today know that Hollywood itself was actually built as a model Christian community. According to Lindvall, developer Horace Wilcot, a Bible believing real estate speculator, had a vision of creating a community with no saloons, no liquor, and free land for any Protestant church moving in.

If he could only see his dream today...

By 1900, the historic Tabernacle Church in Long Beach was designed as part sanctuary, part lecture hall and part theater. I visited a church in New Jersey that was built in 1911 and originally designed so the lobby could be used as a movie theater. The projection booth was built above the entrance, making it easy to project the movies on the lobby wall – in 1911.

As early as 1909, in a Nickelodeon magazine article entitled, *Minister Proposes Sunday Pictures*, the writer stated:

The Ithaca (New York) Journal says that a number of saloon-keepers of the city have been approached by one of Ithaca's ministers within the last few days and asked if they would contribute to the expense of putting on a moving pictures show at a local theater every Sunday evening to be followed by a short address. Illustrated songs are also intended to be a feature of the program.

It is the intention of the ministers to cooperate with the local law and order league and provide a place for men to go Sunday evenings, so that they will not be tempted or go to other towns for their amusement.

Other leaders agreed that movies and religion did indeed mix very well. In 1916, Edward McConoughey, wrote an article entitled, *Motion Pictures in Religious and Educational Work*:

Motion pictures have become one of the most important means for effective education. They have revolutionized the form in which narrative, drama, even the subject of religion itself is presented...The motion picture, therefore, should be an important part of the equipment of every religious and educational institution.

But it didn't take long for the divide to begin, and although some of the earliest motion pictures featured classic subjects such as the *Oberammergau Passion Play* (1898) and *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (1898), it wasn't long before the film industry and the Church were at odds with one another.

In that context, many Christians have historically believed that movies, if not sinful, at the very least did not reflect the abundant Christian life. Growing up, my family enjoyed watching movies, but there were plenty of folks in our church who felt that while movie attendance may not be an actual sin, should Jesus return while you were in the theater, all bets were off.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS CONTROVERSY

Whenever I see Christians up in arms about the removal of monuments or statues honoring The Ten Commandments, I'm reminded that during the original production of the epic (and expensive) movie by Cecil B. DeMille, he executed an innovative and ingenious marketing stunt. As University of Florida professor James Twitchell, author of *Shopping For God* describes, DeMille partnered with the Fraternal Order of Eagles, a nationwide organization of civic clubs founded by movie theater owners, to sponsor the construction and placement of thousands of Ten Commandment monuments across the country. The idea was to link a religious notion to a promotional buzz about the upcoming movie, and hopefully drive audiences to the box office.

After all, since DeMille was Jewish, by building the monuments, he wasn't celebrating Christianity, he was promoting his movie.

Many years later, two of the DeMille inspired granite monuments – in Texas and Alabama – became such national controversies that the case for their removal went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Thus, one of the biggest court cases re-

garding Christianity in the public square was essentially born of an entertainment-based promotional stunt.

THE CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

Looking back to the medieval period, the Catholic tradition has always embraced liturgy, music, drama, and pageantry. If you study the architecture of the great cathedrals of Europe, you'll find they were designed around an altar, where a wide variety of religious activities could take place. In fact, what we now call the medieval "miracle and mystery plays" that toured throughout Europe during this period were simply dramatic presentations that grew so popular and expansive they burst outside the walls of the church.

Based on Scripture, the plays and pageants recounted the great stories of the Bible, but soon, many wandered into telling tall tales that were neither remotely historic or biblical. In fact, my wife Kathleen and I had the opportunity to examine a few of the remaining original manuscripts of such plays that are archived in the British Museum in London. We were escorted by historian David Daniell, who wrote what many consider the definitive biography of William Tyndale, the man who translated the Bible into English. David was the curator of the Tyndale exhibition at the British museum and we interviewed him extensively for a film project about the translation of the Bible into English. His expertise on the manuscripts was remarkable.

David showed us that medieval play producers weren't that different from today's Hollywood producers. While their intentions were sound, ultimately, they were more interested in entertainment value than accuracy. While the stories *began* with scripture, they often veered in a different direction in order to tell more compelling and popular stories rather than being concerned with biblical scholarship. They were focused on making the ancient stories of the Bible come alive for their audience.

The Catholic tradition has always had a rich history of engagement with the culture through drama, music and art. Catholic leaders have always understood the power of compelling stories and their ability to reach into the hearts of the people.

Even from the perspective of architecture, the Church expressed a spiritual vision. For instance, Gothic architecture is not just a physical style, but rather a theological system that allows Christian principles to be expressed through design.

But by the time of the Protestant Reformation, a bridge had been crossed. In an understandable effort to reform theology based on the teachings of Martin Luther and his contemporaries, church leaders became a little too eager to discard some of the Catholic perspectives – particularly on the arts. The result had a powerful and extensively negative effect on culture both inside and outside of the church.

Particularly in countries where new “reformed” styles of worship became the rule, churches were often violently and crudely stripped of paintings, statues, and other religious ornamentation. If the artifacts could be burned, such as vestments, paintings, choir books, carved choir stalls, and other artistic expressions, they were added to the fire and if not, they were often painted over, whitewashed, or otherwise trashed.

Some of what survived destruction was only spared because doing so would have caused grave structural damage to the buildings themselves. As described by Peter and Linda Murray in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Art and Architecture*, between the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution, the arts suffered through a long period of decline for which the Church is still trying to recover. Before the Reformation, churches were designed around an altar where liturgy, music, and drama flourished, but post-Reformation churches were transformed into auditoria, where the main emphasis became the pulpit.

In other words, churches that had previously been designed for the full expression of worship, including music, drama, and

the arts, were now transformed into little more than an auditorium. It was a great advance for preaching and teaching, but other types of spiritual expression were easily discarded.

Manuscripts for plays were burned, musical compositions were lost, and paintings and statues were destroyed. It was indeed a dark time for the historic connection between the Church and the arts.

Since that time, the Church has been slow to reintroduce the dramatic arts and use them as tools for reaching a particular culture. A new generation, however, weaned on television, popular music, and films, has shown that drama can indeed be used by the Church to present a powerful witness to the eternal story of redemption, which is all about saving grace.

By comparison, common grace teaches that God can be found in the most unlikely of places – even the movies and other media. Catholic novelist Andrew Greeley effectively argues that God reveals Himself to us through the experiences, objects, and people we encounter in our lives. He states that “grace is everywhere.” Certainly, we must be concerned for the poor but we must never forget the arts, for potentially, the artist is a sacrament maker – one who exposes and reveals the presence of God throughout creation.

A COMPLETELY RADICAL IDEA

When it comes to more contemporary media like radio and television, the story takes a different turn.

When Christians first began to embrace radio as early as 1921, and television around 1940, it wasn't the producers and directors that were the early adopters – it was the preachers.

Men like Paul Rader, Donald Grey Barnhouse, and William Ward Ayer pioneered radio for the church. Network radio powerhouses like *The Lutheran Hour* with Walter A. Maier and

The Old Fashioned Revival Hour with Charles E. Fuller had audiences in the millions. By 1942, Maier was receiving more mail than Amos 'n' Andy, and Fuller was the most popular program host on the Mutual Broadcasting Network. It's fair to say that in those days, the voice of Christians were some of the most popular and influential on national radio.

According to Mark Ward, Sr. in his book *The Air of Salvation*, it was Maier who actually preached the first non-denominational worship service featured on television. It was 1948, when he broadcast *The Lutheran Hour* locally over KSD-TV in St. Louis. During that time, a young evangelist named Oral Roberts was traveling the country with a custom-designed tent that could seat 10,000 people. At that time in America, the number of facilities that could accommodate a crowd of that size were few, so Oral and his technical team led by Collins Steele had to be inventive. With advice from Steele, his friend and associate, he designed a tent so large that it took multiple tractor-trailer rigs to carry the canvas, poles, and ropes, and based on sheer size, the caravan of an Oral Roberts Evangelistic campaign in those days must have looked pretty similar to the circus coming to town.

Honestly, few can imagine today what it would have been like in the 40s and 50s to see 10,000 people pouring into a tent in city after city across America. From a secular perspective, it would have been similar to the acclaim and influence of a rock star today. Not long after, a young pastor from Akron, Ohio named Rex Humbard suggested Oral begin filming his popular meetings for television.

It was a completely radical idea – but it made sense, so Oral packed his bags and headed west for a network introduction. A few years ago, Oral told me how nervous he was when he first visited the NBC network offices in Los Angeles in 1954. He told me that NBC welcomed him – especially considering the size of his audience, and lined him up with three national sponsors to pay for the program. But in those days, advertisers had

a significant influence on the programs they sponsored, and in many cases exerted final approval over the content of the show, the producer, director, or cast.

Oral questioned that model – especially when those sponsors could potentially tell him how and what to preach – or at the very least, have editorial control over the finished program. After all, he was preaching the gospel, so how could he be influenced by a secular advertiser? After serious consideration, he reluctantly passed on the offer and traveled back to his hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma to figure out an alternative approach.

AN IDEA THAT WOULD CHANGE EVERYTHING

Over the next few months, Oral had an idea that forever altered the relationship between Christians and the media. If a company that makes razor blades, soap, or hand cream could sponsor a program, why couldn't he? Why couldn't he just raise the money and buy the network time slot himself? And back to NBC he went.

It had never been done before, but according to Oral, NBC decided to give it a shot. In 1955, the *Abundant Life Program with Oral Roberts* debuted on selected NBC stations across America. I've seen the original films myself, and they did capture the raw, unplanned nature of Pentecostal evangelism back in those days. Beginning with that first program, Oral would remain on the air with very few breaks for more than forty years, generating massive national audiences at his peak in the 1970s. Oral even ventured into feature filmmaking with the production of a major dramatic movie called *Venture into Faith*, which told the story of a young boy's healing at – you guessed it – an Oral Roberts tent crusade. The movie was produced by Hollywood professionals, and by an incredible chance, early in my career I attended a film directing seminar and coincidentally, took a film class from Herb Lightman, the

man who directed *Venture into Faith*. I still have an original poster of the movie in my office today.

Back in those days, when radio and television – and even movies – were embraced by Christians, it was usually the preachers like Oral Roberts and Billy Graham that jumped into the deep end first. They didn't really debate about the technology so much from a *theological* perspective, they just saw it as another opportunity for sharing the gospel. It was their vision for reaching mass audiences for evangelism that drove them to embrace radio and television with little hesitation. And for that, we have to give preachers of that era a huge amount of credit. They took the risk, and it's allowed the Christian message to reach literally hundreds of millions of people over the years.

While the positive side of the story is about preachers seizing the moment, the negative side of the story is about, well, preachers seizing the moment.

SERMON-DRIVEN MEDIA

For a preacher, the answer to every problem is a good sermon. Preaching is what they are called and trained to do, and it is the lens through which they view the world.

As a result, for the most part, religious radio and television have become sermon-driven media. Turn on religious radio or television today at random, and chances are you'll hear somebody preaching.

Is this a bad thing? Not necessarily. Having grown up as a preacher's kid, I still enjoy hearing a good sermon, and I'm a great advocate of religious teaching for religious audiences. In Los Angeles, on our local cable TV system we have about 500 channels, among which are what I would call *lifestyle specific channels*. We have multiple sports channels, cooking channels, music channels, home design channels, and gay and lesbian channels. There's a channel for every conceivable interest these

days, to the point that I often joke about creating the “Trampoline Channel” – all trampoline, all the time.

SO WHY SHOULDN'T WE HAVE A CHRISTIAN CHANNEL?

The truth is, I don't find anything wrong with a TV channel for Christians who want to watch teaching, preaching and music just for them. I'm even prepared to defend what's right about religious media. True, as a Christian who is a producer and consultant in the media industry, I am often calling the religious media to a higher standard; but on the other hand, as a critic, it's easy to overlook the great things Christian media is accomplishing. That's why before we jump into the deep end of the pool, I should balance the scales a bit and look at what I consider to be some of the high points in Christian media:

Distribution

The truth is, it's tough to find a city or town in America that doesn't have a religious radio station, TV station or cable channel. The pioneers of Christian media were strong in the “business” of media, and today, the giants like Salem Communications, Trinity Broadcasting, Daystar, and others have covered the country with Christian broadcasting. Even overseas, God TV, HCJB Radio, the Far East Broadcasting Network, and others have taken a message of faith, literally, to the ends of the earth. The value of Christian broadcasting facilities and networks is in the billions of dollars, and the global reach is significant. Regardless of what you think of the programming or theology of specific networks and programmers, it is hard to deny that these organizations have grown to international proportions, and are truly significant players from a business perspective.

Likewise, religious recording and publishing have grown to major magnitude as well. Some have become so popular they've been acquired by successful secular publishing houses and record labels. If their acquisition by secular companies

has been a positive or negative issue is another book, but there's no question that religious media – specifically Christian media – now reaches vast global audiences.

Quality

While there are certainly far too many churches, ministries, and stations using out-of-date equipment, with facilities that are in bad shape, the major media organizations and ministries have made a real commitment to quality. Today, many major religious networks as well as local churches are completely digital. Many local radio stations can boast state-of-the-art studios and facilities.

I'm proud to say that Cooke Pictures has been a part of this movement, helping churches and ministry organizations move into the High Definition world. HD is the standard format for a growing number of religious media organizations. Today – especially with advancing technology and lowering prices – even small churches and ministries have begun to understand that quality technology can broaden your reach and impact.

Visual Liturgy

Churches are realizing the power of using video as a companion to worship. A new generation of innovators is helping pastors understand how to incorporate powerful images and graphics into the worship experience. You don't have to search long on the web to find a multitude of resources to help churches use visual media more expressively. And I'm not just talking about pictures of crosses on video screens or lyrics printed over nature scenes. Churches are using short films, music videos, scenes from mainstream movies, and other sophisticated media to enhance the worship and teaching experience.

Education

The first Christian media workshop I attended more than 20 years ago featured a TV station owner teaching us how to persuade

our brother-in-law to help us build studio sets for free. I walked out. But today, the National Religious Broadcasters, The Reach Conference, Biola Media Conference, Technologies for Worship, Compass Academy, Echo, and others are training a new generation of Christian communicators. I've lectured on the subject of religious media at major universities including the University of California at Berkeley, and UCLA. As I write this chapter I just returned from speaking at Yale University for a symposium on how religious media is impacting the world. There is a hunger for this content and it is being addressed, in an increasingly sophisticated way.

Media Savvy Pastors

As I mentioned before, while an earlier generation of pastors and ministry leaders pioneered radio and TV, most of them didn't really understand how to use it effectively. They were often great preachers, but were limited by their lack of knowledge of the media itself. But today, new generations of pastors and ministry leaders have embraced the media, and are pushing the boundaries of what it can accomplish. Rather than create another typical religious television program, Pastor Erwin Rafael McManus created "Crave" – a series of short films based on his bestselling book, *Soul Cravings*. The project has been distributed – not by a religious media outlet, but a major Hollywood film studio. Pastor Mark Crow in Oklahoma City created an online TV network at vc.tv. Joel Osteen's podcast is one of the most popular downloads on Apple's iTunes platform. More and more pastors and ministry leaders are breaking out of the box of traditional media, and as a result, reaching a new (and younger) audience.

Independent Producers

While some of the major networks are making change happen on a limited scale, most of the flood of change in the industry has been at the hands of independent, faith-driven producers. With

limited funding, and inadequate resources, a new generation of producers is moving in new directions with short films, feature documentaries, interactive DVD's, branded content, and other integrated media. For instance, they recognize that a significant platform for tomorrow's TV will be the cell phone, and to reach the next generation, we have to penetrate at that level. The next instrumental Christian media pioneer is probably working away right now on a computer in his or her dad's garage.

THE CHRISTIAN MEDIA BUBBLE

So there are plenty of good things happening in religious media, and for those seeking religious instruction, compelling preaching, children's programming and more, Christian broadcasters and programmers are improving. Through its wide availability the existing religious media is making an impact. At the same time, I have a problem with people who live 24/7 in what I call the "Christian Bubble." By Christian Bubble, I simply mean people who live so deep inside the influence of Christian radio, publishing, TV, or music that they have no other perspective. For an earlier generation, people of faith actually interacted with the culture around them, but 30 to 40 years ago, it was discovered that the Christian audience was a *buying* audience, at which point, *we stopped preaching to the world, and started preaching to each other*. As a result, entire industries were built around "Christian" radio, television, publishing, or recording.

Is this a bad thing? Not necessarily. The problem is not really with the media itself but rather how it is consumed. The problem occurs when Christian media becomes one's only source of influence. I have friends who only buy Christian music, watch Christian TV, or listen to Christian radio. They'd rather watch a poorly produced, mediocre *Christian* movie than an excellent, well-made *secular* film.

So what's the problem? People are free to enjoy whatever they want, right? The problem with living "in the bubble" is

the occasional breath of fresh air. Full-time immersion in *anything* can screw up your perspective about life. Jesus was concerned about fishing, weddings and building tables and chairs. His friends and disciples weren't religious leaders, they were a fascinating cross-section of the culture of the time. Avoiding interaction with the culture wasn't an option for the early church, and it shouldn't be for us either.

Second, protect the kids.

Don't do it by saying "no" or shutting off the outside world. *Take the time to teach your kids about life.* Watch TV with them, see movies together, and help them discover how to navigate their place as a Christian in the culture. Believe me, if you tell them no, chances are, they'll watch it at a friend's house. My wife Kathleen and I raised our two daughters during a time when sex, violence, and profanity skyrocketed in television and movies. Music videos were not exactly "cultural treasures."

As traditional notions of the family were taking a beating in the media, we didn't shelter them – we walked them through it. If they really wanted to see a movie, television program, or concert that we thought was morally questionable, we would go with them, and discuss the choices the characters or performers made, and why they made them. I still remember those "after the movie talks" as some of the most memorable times we spent with Kelsey and Bailey. As a result, today they have a vocabulary with which to encounter the culture and the media. Plus – because we didn't actively keep them away from many of these movies and television programs, or make a big deal about it, they often lost interest. We didn't make it more desirable by restricting it.

Now I don't want to give the impression that we let them watch anything. We did have restrictions, but because we allowed them wide latitude and talked to them frankly about our reasons, they rarely questioned us when we drew a line in the sand.

Third, understand that culture happens.

We're never going to be "family safe" – especially if you're committed to sharing God's message of hope with the world. Just ask the house church pastors in China, or Christian leaders in the Sudan. Following Jesus is costly and involves a risk. Frederica Mathewes-Green criticizes Christians who constantly talk about "changing the culture." As she wrote in *Christianity Today* magazine:

The culture, then, is like the weather. We may be able to influence it in modest ways, like seeding the clouds, but it is a recipe for frustration to expect that we can direct it. Nor should we expect positive change without some simultaneous downturn in a different corner. Nor should we expect that any change will be permanent. The culture will always be shifting, and it will always be with us.

God has not called us to change the weather. Our primary task as believers, and our best hope for lasting success, is to care for individuals caught up in the pounding storm. They are trying to make sense of their lives with inadequate resources, confused and misled by the Evil One and unable to tell their left hand from their right (Jonah 4:11). They are not a united force; they are not even in solidarity with each other, apart from the unhappy solidarity of being molded by the same junk-food entertainment. They are sheep without a shepherd, harassed and helpless (Matt. 9:36). Only from a spot of grounded safety can anyone discern what to approve and what to reject in the common culture.

Culture is not a monolithic power we must defeat. It is the battering weather conditions that people, harassed and helpless, endure. We are sent out into the storm like a St. Bernard with a keg around our neck, to comfort, reach, and rescue those who are thirsting, most of all, for Jesus Christ.

Fourth, we're not "taking America back."

We're not going back to the picket fence era of the 1950s and I'm sure quite a few African-American believers and working women are fine with that. The culture is moving forward, and we need to do the same. Media ministries have wasted far too much money in fundraising campaigns focused on returning America to some idyllic state, rather than dealing with the America that exists today.

The disciples may have dreamed about going back to a day when Israel was a free nation, but they also knew that they had to act based on the reality of the moment, which was Roman occupation.

Finally, popping the bubble will deepen your own faith.

Listen to a little rock and roll, opera, or jazz, go to an art museum, read a good classic novel, go see an action movie or a love story. Remember the concept of *common grace* and start looking for God in the most unlikely places. You'll be shocked to find that Jesus shows up in places we wouldn't normally think are very "Christian."

Jesus spent his time where the people were – in the marketplace, social gatherings, on the road, and in the homes of friends.

So what are we doing in a bubble?