

# Engaging beliefs

## AN INTERVIEW WITH HOLLYWOOD'S PHIL COOKE

INTERVIEW BY REBECCA GRACE

Take a close look at the entertainment industry, and it's clear to see there is more than meets the eye when it comes to the influence Christians can have and are



having in Hollywood. But according to industry insider Phil Cooke, a respected producer and director and a creative media consultant and advisor, this impact doesn't come about without cultural engagement and a new mind-set.

Although Cooke and AFA differ on the best ways to impact Hollywood for the sake of Christ, Cooke ([www.philcooke.com](http://www.philcooke.com)) willingly shares his views. *AFA Journal* hopes that considering his thoughtful perspectives will add to our understanding of Christianity and the entertainment industry.

Some of Cooke's comments have been edited for cohesiveness.

**AFAJ:** Describe your work in the entertainment industry.

**PC:** Cooke Pictures ([www.cookepictures.com](http://www.cookepictures.com)) is a production company and consulting company that primarily works with some of the larger churches and ministries involved in media around the country. Our goal is to raise the quality level of Christian television and help people use the media to reach the culture more effectively.

I'm also a partner in a secular commercial company [called Thomas Winter Cooke] that works with everybody from Mercedes to McDonald's to Snapple to Snickers. I have one foot in the explicitly Christian media world, and one foot in the explicitly secular media world. So it gives me a kind of unique perspective on the industry and trying to make an impact for the Kingdom of God.

**AFAJ:** So how do you consistently live as

an effective Christian in Hollywood?

**PC:** Really, it's about authenticity. It's just being who you are. People respect you if you're good at what you do. So I think, as Christians, we've got to be really good [at our craft]. The world respects excellence. So if you want to get Hollywood's attention, you have to be worthy of it.

**AFAJ:** What is the general perception of Christianity in Hollywood?

**PC:** Certainly there are people in the entertainment industry who don't like Christians, [those] who are hard-core secularists that don't think much of Christianity. However, that is not true of the vast majority in this industry. While they may not be Christians, they're respectful of what you think, what you feel, what you believe – if you're, first, good at what you do.

**AFAJ:** Do you ever verbalize your faith to people in the industry?

**PC:** Oh, absolutely! Your actions open the door. I realized long ago that it's about relationships. Some people have said it's not conversions. It's about conversations. So it's developing a dialogue. It's engaging people.

**AFAJ:** Have you been asked to work on a project that compromises your faith?

**PC:** [Yes, by] more Christians, oddly enough, than secular people. To be honest, [it's] probably because I deal in that world a lot. One of the big rules of being a Christian in Hollywood is [to] understand early on what boundaries you are willing to cross and which boundaries you're not.

**AFAJ:** Where do you draw the line?

**PC:** It's kind of a personal thing because every situation is a little different. I'm not going to do pornography. I'm not going to do explicit sex. One of the things that Christians need to realize, I think, is we want to do accurate portrayals of the world. [But] if it's gratuitous – forget it. I'm the first to walk away. But we do need to be accurate in the way we do it.

**AFAJ:** So how might a Christian come to terms with a film's immorality for the sake of its reality?

**PC:** Every believer has got to make that

decision. I'm never going to tell you what to see and what not to see. That is a decision you need to make. As a filmmaker, that's the same way. You have to decide what level you want to go for, and go with that.

**AFAJ:** So what about Christian movies as acceptable alternatives?

**PC:** Here's the criticism the secular world has of a lot of Christian projects, and that is, they're not realistic. What we need to think about is dealing with more realistic things. The power of stories is remarkable, and the thing that bugs believers in Hollywood is that so many Christians are not willing to let stories do their thing. We don't have to be explicit about everything we do. People get it.

**AFAJ:** How can industry insiders, like you, help bridge the gap between secular and Christian storytelling?

**PC:** The fact that there's a believer in the middle of this [filmmaking] guiding little decisions in movie after movie after movie actually makes a huge difference. As a believer, we try to do everything that we can to make the kind of decisions that we believe honor God and are going to impact people's lives in a positive way.

**AFAJ:** You are described as a "catalyst for change." What does this mean?

**PC:** Oh, a couple of things. Number one, I'm trying to get the church to look at media differently. You look at Christian television. You don't see drama very much. You don't see music specials very much. You don't see intense high-level documentaries very much. It's [got to be] more than just putting the preacher on TV if we're going to impact the culture.

I [also] want to change our [Christian] movies from having an altar call at the end. That's great for showing at church, but it's not going to work at the Cineplex. So I think there are a number of different ways that we as Christians and we as the Church need to change our thinking.

**AFAJ:** Why do you believe that engaging the culture is more effective than disengaging yourself from a world of sin?

**PC:** This is probably where I butt heads with the AFA from time to time. I'm not big on boycotts. I would never take boy-

cotts off the table, but I think they have to be incredibly strategic. When **The Da Vinci Code** came out, we could have boycotted it. In fact a number of Christians did call for a boycott. But instead, most believers chose to engage.

Instead of boycotting and protesting, [we said] let's talk to people about this movie. What happened out of that was that pastors and ministry leaders and Christian writers started creating materials, books, DVDs, TV programs [and] documentaries on the real truth behind **The Da Vinci Code**.

**AFAJ:** Could boycotts not be seen as an act of good stewardship?

**PC:** If there's a movie out there that's a bad movie, absolutely don't go. One of the things that AFA does that I really like is supplying information about sponsors of television programs. Don't call for boycotts or criticize the networks, but let people know that this razor company or this soft drink company or this pharmaceutical company is sponsoring that show that ridicules Christianity. That's going to affect me purchasing those products for sure. Informing people - I'm all for that!

I would never advocate that we're becoming friends with Hollywood by buying tickets to movies we don't like. However, a protest is far more than not going to a movie. A boycott is the last effort when you've tried everything else and nothing works.

**AFAJ:** So how do we engage Hollywood without silencing our faith?

**PC:** Instead of constantly complaining about things we don't like, we need to start promoting the things we do like. The power of buying a ticket is amazing. We saw it with **The Passion [of the Christ]**. It got Hollywood's attention.

**AFAJ:** What are other ways?

**PC:** Number one: Pray for the industry. Number two: I think the church should encourage young people to go



Cooke directs action on a set.

into entertainment and media. Let's flood Hollywood with Christians. The other thing is I would encourage pastors to talk about entertainment and media in the church.

**AFAJ:** Why is it so important for the Church to speak to the issues of entertainment and media?

**PC:** Nothing impacts our life more than media. Absolutely nothing. A pastor may preach for an hour on Sunday, maybe an hour on Sunday night, maybe an hour on Wednesday night. That's three hours a week at the most. But the average American family now is watching three to five hours of television a day. Media has become pervasive in our lives, and I think one of our greatest weaknesses is we bad-mouth media. I want to teach Christians how to engage it more effectively.

**AFAJ:** Does Hollywood need changing?

**PC:** Well, of course it does. I'm not a defender of the status quo. Just because there are Christians in the industry doesn't mean we agree with everything that goes on. Most of us are here because we don't. We've just chosen rather than standing in the grandstand and criticizing, to get into the game and try to make a change from the inside. I love these people!

The people who run Hollywood are not out to destroy American values or the Christian faith. They are just ignorant of it. They are sinners who are not saved by grace. They are no different from us, except God has graciously reached out and saved us. The best thing we can do is love them. If we can show them God's grace in the lives that we live, that's what's going to make a difference. They're not going to change until we love them like Jesus did. ☺