The Media, the Press, and the Church

Part 1 of 4: Cultural Engagement and the Media
with Darrell L. Bock and J. Kerby Anderson
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Welcome to “The Table” this morning. I have Kerby Anderson, President of Probe Ministries International with me today. Our topic is going to be Cultural Engagement and the Media. I’m Darrell Bock, Executive Director for the Center for Christian Leadership here at Dallas Theological Seminary, and we’re glad you can be with us today. Kerby, it’s a pleasure to have you in.

Kerby Anderson: It’s good to be with you, sure.

Darrell Bock: We’ve done this lots of times the other way around, and so I’m paying you back today.

Kerby Anderson: That’ll be good.

Darrell Bock: But we’re glad to have you. Kerby, I think just to launch in and give people a context of what we’re going to discuss, why don’t you talk a little bit about the experience that you’ve had in the media both in print and on radio.

Kerby Anderson: I’m fortunate in some respects because I’ve been on both sides of the microphone, as you well know. Certainly I’ve written quite a number of books, and so as an author oftentimes I’ve been interviewed on various TV and radio programs. But also over the years I’ve had a real privilege to actually be an interviewer, and that started, first of all, right in this very room. We began to do the Probe Radio Program for awhile using this studio. That was 30 years ago. Originally it was a 15-minute program. Then it was down to a five-minute program and now it’s a three-minute program on about 600 stations.

I also began to occasionally be a guest host on Moody Broadcasting Open Line and then later began to be kind of a guest host and now even am the host of a show called Point of View, which is on about 360 stations. So between television and radio, I’ve done a lot of media, been really fortunate to do that. And I’ve been on both sides of those microphones so I, as you, have well been aware there are some times when you get some interviews, which aren’t really very well done.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, exactly.
Kerby Anderson: So we might prepare some of the people watching this today for what they might encounter when they go out there and do a book interview.

Darrell Bock: Exactly right. So now currently how often are you one the air?

Kerby Anderson: I’m on the air every single day with a show called Point of View. The Probe Radio Program is on every day as well, and then occasionally I do some other programs as well. I do things on the Moody Broadcasting Network. Once a month American Family Radio does a program called Fire Away where they can fire any question they want to me. And so quite a bit of media still is part of my life.

Darrell Bock: And then the other half of what you do that is related to cultural engagement, of course, is your work with Probe Ministries. Why don’t you talk a little bit about what they do and how they seek to engage the culture with Christianity?

Kerby Anderson: Certainly. We’re coming up to our 40th anniversary of Probe, and Jimmy Williams, John Buell started it really with a desire to try to engage the culture but in particular the university classroom. They’d been very influenced by Francis Schaeffer and some of his writings and began to realize that there was a real need to try to give a Christian perspective on the campus. So when I first joined Probe, that was a lot of what we were doing. We were speaking on college campuses. First campus I was on was Oklahoma State. I spoke 17 times in three days, and that was because we spoke at 175 classes in three days to 6,000 students. They didn’t have time to kind of let me ease into it, and so we still do some campus kinds of things.

But that’s when I began to say, you know, there are a lot of other issues we’re addressing. The topics we’re addressing on the campus are also in the media. And just as you have written on that and really tried to address that, we began to write books, I began to do some of the radio programs, we began to do more in the media. And still to this very day, we’re all about kind of helping people understand the world from a Christian point of view. It’s kind of a worldview ministry.
**Darrell Bock:** Well, that’s great. Yeah, I remember my experience with Probe. I was a student at the University of Texas, and they came and were in a couple of classes, I think, that I did. You guys moved from class to class so fast it was like, “Hi, I’m John Buell. I’m with Probe Ministries. Our topic is … and I’m now onto the next class.”

**Kerby Anderson:** That’s very, very true.

**Darrell Bock:** Moving and going. Well, to introduce our topic let’s talk a little bit about what cultural engagement is and what a ministry like Probe is seeking to do when they engage the culture. How would you define cultural engagement?

**Kerby Anderson:** Well, certainly we recognize that we live in the midst of a culture and we really need to speak to that. And whether you’re talking about the American culture or culture that’s in Asia or Africa or Europe, we certainly need to understand what some of the key issues in that culture might be and then articulate a responsible biblical perspective. We also have to recognize that culture has changed. I’ve oftentimes used the example that our culture used to be more like an Acts 13 culture. In Acts 13 when Paul goes into the synagogue, what can he assume? Well, he can assume a lot of things: that they’re all Jews, that they are certainly familiar with the Old Testament, probably memorized a great deal of the Old Testament. They believe in one true God. They believe in a coming Messiah. So if you look at the message that Paul gives in Acts 13, he sort of can hit the ground running.

But I suggest now our culture is more like an Acts 17 culture where here instead Paul is on Mars Hill. He can’t assume any of the things I just mentioned: that they believe in one true God, that they know the Old Testament, that they believe in a coming Messiah. We have to sort of back off.

Likewise, I know when you’ve been on ABC, when I’m on secular talk shows, when I’ve been on McNeill-Lehrer, whatever it might be, I cannot assume that the host or the audience is familiar at all with some of the basic kinds of ideas that we would be talking about in a typical classroom at Dallas Theological Seminary, so I sort of have to back up.
So as I engage the culture, I still engage it, but it isn’t necessarily with Bible verses first. I sort of have to argue to my biblical presuppositions rather than argue from my biblical presuppositions. And so, really, cultural engagement is much more difficult, not only for those of us in America, but think about the secular world that many of our listeners inhabit in other parts of the world. You have to engage the culture by maybe sometimes defining more terms, help them understand what a biblical worldview might be because that would be foreign territory for them.

**Darrell Bock:** In fact I just came from Australia/New Zealand this summer, spent two months there, and only two percent of the population is really actively Christian, and there’s a lot of people who don’t know very much about the Bible at all, and so you really are starting from square one.

Isn’t it the case – and you’ve alluded to this – that really in one sense to talk about culture almost misleads people as if it’s a singular monolithic thing that is the same everywhere. We really are talking about cultures: national cultures, local cultures, regional cultures, et cetera. And that also complicates the discussion to some degree because being sensitive to culture means that you have to have some awareness of how the culture that you live in in one place may not be like the culture that exists in another. Isn’t that the case?

**Kerby Anderson:** Sure. If we could use a big word, there’s the word pluralization, and we live in a world where we have a plurality of worldviews. Probably best illustrated by the title of a book by Jim Sire called *The Universe Next Door* because in a sense you have to recognize that where you’re living right now you have a universe of worldviews next door. I mean, you can go up and down the street where you live, and you can probably find Baptists and Presbyterians and Catholics, but you can also find Buddhists and Hindus and Muslims and atheists and agnostics.
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And so it’s very important to recognize that in this culture of pluralism and the pluralization, the process that has taken place, you really have a multitude of different cultures, which means again if you’re going to communicate to the culture, if you’re going to engage in cultural engagement, you really have to understand a little bit more of the audience. And so you have to not only sort of exegete God’s Word, but you have to exegete the culture as well. And that’s going to be, I think, much more important as we move further into the 21st century.

Darrell Bock:  Well, you know, you’ve just raised something that actually was where I was going to go next, which is the whole idea of when we engage with culture, it isn’t just a matter of our putting forth our own ideas and our own perspective although we’re coming in part to represent God and to reflect Him when we do that. But there really is a dimension in which we have to understand the person we’re having the conversation with.

And this is one of the areas where I think the church has struggled a little bit. We’re pretty good at our – I like to say we’re pretty good at our own message and we’re pretty good at what we want to say. And we do a good job oftentimes of going from a Bible to a topic, but if you flip that around and make us go from a topic to a Bible or interact with someone who is coming at us from a little different perspective, our ability to understand how to reach out and touch them because of where they are – oftentimes we’re not so strong at.

Kerby Anderson:  Well, I think we need to work at that a lot more, and maybe that’s some of the kinds of things we teach at a seminary to help you read that. But even back to the issue of worldview, because Probe is a worldview ministry. Matter of fact, we pulled together a summit years ago of all the worldview ministries, so that’s Break Point and Worldview Matters and Worldview Academy and Worldview Weekend and all sorts of different groups coming together.

I think the advantage of a worldview, Darrell, is that you can begin to say well, what is the worldview of the person I’m talking to, whether it’s a television talk show host, whether it’s a radio show host, whether it’s a radio person or maybe an individual that’s a religion editor for a newspaper or whether it’s just somebody you’re talking to at Starbucks. Where are they coming from? What are their presuppositions? What are some of their ideas and values? And then as you’re communicating to a culture, what are those values? What are some of the hot buttons? What are some of the key points?
And if we’re going to be really effective, I think in the 21st century, no matter where we find ourselves, whether it’s in the United States or other places around the world, we’re going to have to understand a lot more of the worldview of the audience that we’re speaking to, the worldview of the people that we’re engaging.

**Darrell Bock:** Yes, and I think in the midst of that kind of engagement and thinking through how to be sensitive to that, where that person is coming from and where to start from. Oftentimes part of the issue is determining, “Where do I even begin to have this conversation if it turns in a direction that deals with spirituality?”

I think, again, our ability to know the variety of ways in which people assimilate things, which you’ve called worldview, and the lens through which they look at it – and the problem for a lot of people is that the person that you’re talking with sometimes doesn’t even think about themselves as having a worldview.

**Kerby Anderson:** That’s true.

**Darrell Bock:** They’ve just absorbed what they’ve absorbed in life, formed a way of negotiating their way through life, and they’re just there articulating oftentimes what they’ve just absorbed as opposed to what they’ve really thought through or studied, but it has formed convictions for them. And so how do you begin to work that through for the person who has a view and has a worldview, but they may not even be aware of what their own worldview is?

**Kerby Anderson:** Well, and I think there again, Darrell, maybe brings us back to asking questions. Think of the number of times that Jesus asked questions – sometimes to make a point, sometimes to elicit a response from the Pharisees, the Sadducees or the woman at the well or whatever it is. And I’ve learned quite a bit from a number of people that have written about this. Greg Koukl in his book *Tactics* is a good example of really saying, “Well, have you ever thought about this or what about this?” Sometimes you can ask a question so that you’re really trying to maybe understand a little bit more. Other times you might ask a question so that you can help them see the logical consequences of their view because a lot of people very quickly will just throw out a phrase or something they’ve heard, but they really haven’t thought it through a great deal.
Islam is a good example. Almost every time you get talking about Islam or you talk about Christianity, usually especially on a college campus I’ll have kids say, “Well, what about the Crusades?” and so I’ll say, “Okay, what about the Crusades? There were nine of them. Which ones do you have a problem with?” And you kind of get this, “Well, I really don’t know anything about it.” I didn’t think so but that’s a favorite line. What about the heathen in Africa? You get all sorts of things. How could a good God allow evil in the world? I mean, these are sort of perennial questions or comments that come up, but you get them to think a little bit more.

Or you have a young person. And I’ve had many of them say, “Well, I believe that all truth is relative.” And so I ask, “Is that truth that you just expressed relative?” “Well, I don't know.” “Well, what you seem to be saying is you don’t believe in absolutes.” And I had one student say, “Yeah, absolutely.” I said, “Let me understand this. What you’re basically saying is that you absolutely believe that there is no absolute truth except the absolute truth that there’s no absolute truth.” And he smiles. “Okay, okay, you got me on that.” I said, “No, I’m not trying to play a game here. I’m helping you understand that somewhere along the line there are some first principles. There are some basic things that you believe.”

And when you engage in maybe even sort of a lighthearted kind of back and forth, it helps them sometimes understand yes, I have all sorts of assumptions I’ve made. I haven’t really thought them through. They’re part of my worldview. They’re part of the lens through which I view the world. And so in kind of a gracious sort of way you can begin to get them thinking about some of the ideas that they hold dear and help them maybe see that the biblical truth answers more questions than what they thought was true.

**Darrell Bock:** Yeah and I think this idea of asking questions and engaging someone in a conversation and just kind of ... I like to tell people sometimes you ought to just let a person tell their story of their religious experience, whatever it is, just so you can locate them on a map so that you have a sense of this is where this person’s coming from. They’ve had a bad experience at some point or something like that that’s colored the way they’re looking at things. It gives you a place to land in your conversations if you do more listening sometimes than telling. There’ll come a time when you have the more substantive conversation, but getting there sometimes is as important as “getting there.”
Kerby Anderson: And people love to tell their story anyway, so they will be I think much more willing to listen to you if you’ve already shown your willingness to listen to them. So I think there’s a lot to be said about asking questions, getting to know the person. Obviously, it takes some time, and in this sort of drive-by culture, that’s the biggest challenge I think for some of us.

Darrell Bock: That’s right, that’s right.