The Media, the Press, and the Church

Part 3 of 4: The Need for Evangelicals in Media
with Darrell L. Bock and J. Kerby Anderson
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Now, a lot of what we’ve talked about is related to TV or radio, but of course, there also are other media. I mean, you’ve got the writing that you do for newspapers. I know that you’ve done opinion pieces; so have I.

Yeah.

That’s a different kind of engagement. How is that different than what we’ve been talking about, the radio and the television?

Well, let me again say that – I’m sure you will say the same thing – whenever I’ve written pieces for the <i>Dallas Morning News</i>, <i>Miami Herald</i>, whatever it might be, [I’ve been] very well treated, very professional. Part of that is due to the fact they’re dealing with a lot of other columnists and people, so they don’t go in and change what you’re writing and that kind of thing. So you really have to recognize, number one, who your audience is. If it’s in a newspaper or it’s in a news magazine and they’re going to give you space, sometimes 600 words, which is quite a bit for them to give you.

That’s right.

You have to be able to explain it in 600 words, and if you are used to writing books, it’s real different when you write newspaper columns.

That’s right.

You and I both know that very well. And you also have to assume that they’re not going to edit you, and that’s both good and bad. It’s good in the sense that you get to say it clearly to them. It’s bad if you needed an editor before you turned it in.

That’s right.
And you make a misstatement of fact or maybe a grammatical error. I can remember a few times in the *Dallas Morning News* “Kerby Anderson’s column said such and such” and I’m like okay, well, I missed that one. I’ve had very few of those, but the fact that I can remember them 20 years later tells you that they do have an impact.

That’s exactly right.

So, again, recognize that you in the written form can really communicate that. And the good news is once in the old days when it was in the newspaper, that was it. But now you can take that same piece and you can put it on your blog post or you can put it in your Facebook or you can maybe shop it to others or sometimes people will take it and post it at other venues. So the echo chamber for what you write can be very, very significant.

Yeah, that’s actually something that’s really changed in the last 20 years, I would say. When I used to do a piece, it would go in the paper, be on the opinion page. Someone would say, “Oh, I saw your piece in the paper,” and that would be it.

That’s it.

But now you post it and someone else says, “I really like that. I’m going to let people know about that.” Boom, on Facebook. There it is and it’s going to all their friends, and then someone else picks it and then, of course, the expression that’s become common now, you know, it’s gone viral …

It’s gone viral.
Darrell Bock: … is a phenomenon we didn’t have before. So it does show that if you hit the right nerve or make the right point that you’re actually reaching and touching people you did not have the capability of touching or reaching before. I’ve done both an individual blog for six years on Bible.org, but then I’ve also done – and this has actually been an interesting experience – <i>Dallas Morning News</i> has a religion blog. And every Tuesday (it shows up every Tuesday but they ask us on Friday; in fact I’ll be asked this afternoon) every week they ask us a question and that is a panel of anybody and everybody. If we had a table that reflected all the people, you know, we’ve got Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus. We’ve got, I think, a Wicca. It’s the whole shootin’ match at that party, so they ask us one question and we all weigh in and they just simply put our answers next to one another. There we are. And they want under 300 words.

Right.

Darrell Bock: So now, actually, when I try and answer it, I try to answer it within 150 because in my own thinking, I’m thinking a reader looking at this table full of responses coming from a variety of people, each of whom takes 300 words to say what they’re going to say, you’re going to get lost unless you’re really crisp.

Right.

Darrell Bock: And so that’s another kind of experience and I actually like that kind of engagement because even though the risk is your voice gets lost in the many voices that come to the table, if no one from a Christian point of view speaks into that space, then what do you end up with? You end up with the variety that’s there with no representation of the Christian point of view.

That’s a good point, yeah.
I once had a discussion with Os Guinness about this, who didn’t think it was that valuable to do this, and that was really my response. My response to him was, “If no one comes forward who represents evangelicalism in that space, then evangelicalism is – when that table is presented before the entire public of Dallas, there’s no voice.” And that is, I think, sometimes – sometimes I think we misassess, if I can say it that way, the significance even in a setting in which there is a lot of competing and cacophony in terms of what’s going on.

I was just going to say that very same thing because we have, again, a bias that comes from worldview. And that is, I remember when I first started trying to get my column in first the Dallas Times Herald, later in the <i>Dallas Morning News</i>. I even remember at the time the guy at the <i>Dallas Times Herald</i> who later ended up picking up Cal Thomas’s column, but he was looking out over Dallas and he was saying, “I didn’t even know there is a Dallas Theological Seminary” because I began to talk about Dallas Seminary, talk about the largest seminary, the Southwestern Baptist Seminary. I’d talked about Catholic dioceses. I talked about the number of Baptist churches. He said, “I didn’t even know this existed,” and he said, “Look at all” and he then points to the sports section. He says, “Look at all the people I have covering the Dallas Cowboys and all the sports, and I don’t even right at the moment have a religion editor.” And he said, “You know, truth be told, on Sunday probably more people go to church than actually go to watch the Dallas Cowboys.” And I said, “I think you’ve got it.” But, see, he lived in a world. He knew secular Dallas, but he didn’t know Christian Dallas.

That’s right.

And he certainly didn’t know evangelical Dallas. And yet, the bottom line is we represent a very significant population, and if we’re not represented on the opinion page, if we’re not represented in radio programs, if NPR can do programs day after day after day and never relate to anything like that, if NBC, ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox, MSNBC can cover all this without ever talking about evangelicals, we’re to blame for it because we’re not in there actually culturally engaging the society.
Yeah, I think that’s very, very true and I think that that’s an extremely important point. And what’s interesting is that at least in some cultures there is sensitivity to moving into that space for someone who comes out of a secular background. I’ve found the *Morning News*, generally speaking – I know we’re speaking very locally now –

Sure.

--but I’ve found the *Morning News* to be very willing to have a seat at the table that represents evangelicals, to make sure that they’re represented fairly and to learn about what it is, the thinking is, that kind of thing. Those engagements have been very, very healthy and very, very positive, and they’ve been healthy for me because what they have done for me is, of course, I end up interacting with people who normally I don’t get to interact with. If I wasn’t in that space, I wouldn’t be having those conversations with those people with that background. It enhances what I do because I’m able to learn from the interaction that I have with them.

And I would say, again, to some of the people watching this that maybe your local newspaper has a place for you. Now I know that there are some pastors out there that might write a column or things of that nature, but just again, don’t see the media as your enemy. They have a very large megaphone whether it’s the local television program or the radio program, newspapers or other things. There are just some great ways that you can interact. And it is going to be tough to get into the *New York Times*, The Washington Post* or even *LA Times*, but the reality is most of the other newspapers in the country are probably looking for good stories and information. And maybe there’s an opportunity for you to write an opinion piece, so I would encourage people to go for it.
Yeah, I compare the media to – now, when I’m in the Middle East or in Turkey, I’ll say the bazaar. But I think maybe the model here is a mall. It really is a mall. You’ve got a variety of stores. They all have their own niche and what they’re doing, that kind of thing, and you want to step in and engage. And my exhortation’s very much the same. You know, people who end up being pastors in churches, particularly in somewhat smaller communities, actually have a lot of potential to have access to this kind of thing if they’ll cultivate those relationships and pursue them. And there’s something of value in engaging with people who otherwise might not have an encounter with people of Christian faith and with the church because they have lived a very secularized life. And in the process of developing those relationships, there may be an opportunity for open doors as a result.

You know, you also mentioned one other thing I want to come back to real quickly before we move on and that is how it helped you to interact with people with very different viewpoints. Your experience of the <i>Dallas Morning News</i> was mine. A number of years ago, the <i>Dallas Morning News</i> was moving from having a religion page to a religion section, and I was invited into some of those meetings. And let me just introduce some of the people who sat around my table. I mean, to the left was a man who was American Indian, smelled of leather, was very much involved in animist studies and research and various kinds of ceremonies. The man to my right was someone whose parents grew up during the Holocaust and had a Jewish background but converted to Mormonism. Don’t ask. Long story. Across from him was a woman that actually is the pastor of the church that had the largest number of AIDS-infected people in Dallas because it’s a homosexual church. Next to her was a Tibetan Buddhist monk. Next to him was the local imam from the mosque. That’s a pluralism that we rarely encounter in our churches and in our community.

And that’s the world in Dallas.

That is the world. And so I think it’s very helpful for us to interact with those people to understand some of their ideas and to recognize that this pluralistic culture that we live in is probably even more pluralistic. Because we were talking about how the media lives in a bubble…
Darrell Bock: We Christians live in a bubble too, don’t we?

Darrell Bock: Absolutely. Well, that’s why we’re back to the point about there are cultures, and these cultures together exist side by side, and sometimes they’re mixed together like a stew, and sometimes they’re each in their own enclave. And part of the calling of a Christian is to be sure that they’re not just in the enclave but that they actually are engaged in the commission of taking the message of the Gospel out to people.

There’s one other thought before I turn to a new topic and that is I’m thinking about what caused the *Dallas Morning News* to do a religion section or what caused Peter Jennings to hire a religion reporter at one time. And that is, there was this awareness on the part of the secular media, at least those who came out of the secular worldview – that religion does impact the way people make decisions and that they couldn’t ignore it. They had to cover it, if they really were going to do their job.

And this goes back to the idea I was talking about earlier, which is there is a heavily properly professional strand in the media that is simply trying to do their job as they see it. Their job is, you know, the church didn’t hire the people who do our news. They aren’t in the church. They are designed to communicate to the society the variety of things that are going on in society and to be a mirror. When they’re doing their job right, that’s what they’re trying to do.
And, again, as we came back to it, it really comes back to just the bias that comes from worldview. They don’t live in this world. They don’t go to church or synagogue. They don’t know people that do. And whether you look at the Lichter-Rothman report for the news media or for television or movies, yes, God’s people are in every one of those arenas. But they oftentimes tend to be segmented. You have certain studios, for example, in Hollywood that are more Christian-friendly than others, which means the other studios maybe never thought about that. Some television programs have hired a number of Christians so that they tend to be more Christian-friendly. But then others don’t maybe even know Christians. And so this, again, is incumbent upon us to educate them because they just don’t live in that world. And so when they try to understand religion or the impact that religion has, it doesn’t maybe affect many of them, but if they’re going to be fair and honestly reflect the world, you need to explain to them why it does affect the lives of many other Christians.

Particularly for younger people who might be interacting with this and watching us, I think it raises the question of the fact that there are many healthy callings that a person can have. And the idea of being a Christian who is a professional journalist and who moves in the media direction and who can operate in that kind of world, that’s a very worthy calling to be thinking about doing. I mentioned that my daughter trained as a journalist, and so she went into that world in the hopes that she would – she’s ended up in the church – but she went into that world in the hopes of studying the media and being the voice that would be part of the conversation, and I think that’s a very worthy goal as well.

I would agree as well.