Building a Climate of Righteousness: Religious Television Networks in American Culture

by

Kayti Lausch

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Yeidy Rivero, Chair
Associate Professor Stephen Berrey
Associate Professor Daniel Herbert
Professor Victoria E. Johnson, University of California, Irvine

Kayti Lausch

kalausch@umich.edu

ORCID iD: 0000-0001-7176-9069

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ABSTRACT

Building a Climate of Righteousness: Religious Television Networks in American Culture examines Christian television networks as primarily industrial organizations in order to understand how these broadcasters have fundamentally shaped American culture and politics. This project mixes analysis of archival material from Regent University's Special Collections and Archives and the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives with national and local newspapers, magazines, books, and trade journals, as well as textual analyses of networks' programs and schedules. Drawing upon media industry studies, television studies, and cultural history, this dissertation explores how different evangelical media companies, including the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), the American Christian Television System (ACTS), The Family Channel, and the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), built alternative spaces that were parallel to, but distinct from, the traditional Hollywood industries. I explain who these Christian broadcasters imagined their alternative spaces to be for, and how these broadcasters each constructed their audiences. I argue that these networks created and nurtured a new demographic of television viewers, identified by their religious and moral values, by encouraging them to define themselves in opposition to the mainstream. These networks and their viewers became important players in the culture wars and the growth of the Religious Right, and this oppositional rhetoric continues to play an important role in American politics.

Chapter 1 reconstructs the first twenty years of the history of the Christian Broadcasting Network, which Pat Robertson founded in 1960. By 1980, CBN had emerged as a serious

competitor to the commercial cable channels, and I argue that Robertson and his team built this viable alternative space by balancing their spiritual goals with a dedication to mastering the industrial intricacies of television production and distribution. Several challengers to CBN's dominance emerged in the 1980s, including the American Christian Television System, which was founded by the Southern Baptist Convention's Radio and Television Commission in 1984. Chapter 2 examines how ACTS re-theorized religious television's potential to be a positive cultural and spiritual force by focusing specifically on using their network to support local churches and communities by promoting local programming and a non-commercial broadcasting model. Chapter 3 returns to CBN to consider its transformation from CBN to The Family Channel, the first cable channel explicitly devoted to a family audience. The Family Channel played a vital role in defining the "family audience," as television viewers fragmented across a rapidly increasing number of channels. The channel proposed a socially conservative definition of "family," one that was rooted in the midcentury imaginary of the white, mild-mannered, middle-class, suburban, patriarchal, Christian family. Chapter 4 explores how TBN's dozens of national and global networks and the Holy Land Experience theme park work synergistically together to ensure that Christian audiences never need to turn to secular spaces for their entertainment needs, nor risk encountering people or ideas to which they are opposed. TBN encapsulates religious media organizations' desire to build an entire alternative entertainment system outside of Hollywood while adopting Hollywood's own strategies of media conglomeration. The conclusion considers how Donald Trump's presidency and the rise of Christian streaming services like Pure Flix suggest new evolutions in evangelical media-makers' ongoing ideological project.

INTRODUCTION

In the last six decades, religious television networks have emerged as a powerful cultural and political force in the United States. American evangelical broadcasters, in particular, have developed their own alternative media industry, one which pushes back against Hollywood's secular content while simultaneously adopting many of its industrial strategies and tactics. Networks like the Christian Broadcasting Network, the American Christian Television System, and the Trinity Broadcasting Network have continually told their audiences that mainstream television is corrupting the nation, and have played a critical role in the perpetuation of the culture wars, the emergence of the Religious Right, and America's general turn toward conservatism. Their influence was made possible in part by a series of deregulatory moves that cleared the way for theologically conservative preachers to dominate the airwaves. They have survived tumultuous, disruptive change in the television industry, from struggling to survive during the network era, to embracing satellite and cable technologies in order to grow their national and global operations, to adapting to the contemporary digital moment by forming their own media conglomerates. Much like their mainstream counterparts, religious broadcasters have had to negotiate television's shift from a national medium seeking a mass audience to a demographic-driven marketplace with audience shares shrinking every year. Through all of these changes, these broadcasters produced Christian and "family" programming designed to appeal to an audience of viewers distinguished by their Christian values. They have created and nurtured a

new demographic of television viewers, the "Christian" and "family" audience, and have repeatedly told those viewers that mainstream culture excludes or dismisses them because of their spiritual beliefs.

This dissertation examines religious networks as primarily industrial organizations, rather than religious ones, in order to understand how these broadcasters have fundamentally shaped American culture and politics, despite their supposedly marginal status as TV industry outsiders. I have chosen to focus on evangelical networks because they are by far the largest and most successful religious networks in the United States. Their success is partly due to the large population of evangelical Christians in the US,[1] but has more to do with their enthusiasm for adopting new technologies and televisually exciting methods for spreading the gospel and promoting family values. Evangelical Christians are, in short, the best at making television. My case studies, the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), the American Christian Television System (ACTS), the Family Channel, and the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), collectively capture the breadth of evangelical broadcasting in the US, and demonstrate clearly that evangelical broadcasters were not personally united in their mission to transform the broadcasting industry. Broadcasters like Pat Robertson, Jimmy Allen, and the Crouch family (Paul, Jan, Matthew, and Laurie) all had very different visions for what Christian broadcasting could and should be, and those visions evolved, sometimes dramatically, over time.

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[1] In a 2015 poll, over thirty-five percent of all American adults self-identified as evangelicals, and twenty-five percent attended denominationally evangelical churches, according to the Pew Research Center. As I will discuss later, the definition of "evangelical" is fuzzy, but their numbers have been growing since the 1960s. Danielle Kurtzleben, "Are You an Evangelical? Are You Sure?," *NPR*, December 19, 2015, https://www.npr.org/2015/12/19/458058251/are-you-an-evangelical-are-you-sure.

One of the goals of this project is to bring religious television into television studies. There is a tendency, particularly among media scholars, to dismiss or overlook the presence of media produced by and for religious purposes, either because they assume it is artless, obvious propaganda or because they imagine what is happening in and around those media texts to be straightforward. It, emphatically, is not—and that assumption has conveniently obscured how religious television became one of the key avenues through which evangelicals acquired their tremendous cultural power. The history of religious television is a more contested history rife with difficult negotiations between the sacred and the secular and a more fraught transition to the digital age than one may assume. As this dissertation shows, even from its early days, evangelical broadcasting was never limited to traditional televangelism, with big-haired Southern women and charming preachers using their charismatic (in both senses of the word) powers to reach through the television and convert people to Christianity. It was also, always, about creating a conservative model for entertainment television, with strict guidelines about what secularly-produced content could be deemed appropriate for Christian audiences.

Evangelical broadcasters defined both the "Christian" and "family" audience and declared what that audience wanted—and their declarations were largely taken as fact, despite the incredible diversity of beliefs and desires within the Christian community. The oft-repeated notion that the Christian audience was and is inherently conservative, and automatically disdainful of sex, violence, drugs, and other "bad behavior" portrayed on television, circulated constantly as part of the larger discourse of the culture wars, but that idea was, in reality, based largely on the ruckus raised by conservative media activists and the powerful evangelical broadcasters who shared their views. Christian broadcasters therefore created their own version

of "industry lore"[2] about what Christian audiences wanted and the best ways to create alternative spaces in which they would feel comfortable. These spaces were labeled as "Christian" far more frequently than they were as "conservative," even though they certainly qualified as both.

The way that we, as television scholars and as historians, conceive of "conservative" television is entirely too limited. Fox News is the most famous and frequently cited example of conservative television, and scholars of many disciplines have considered the ways in which that channel's tactics work to pull its viewers into increasingly polarized conservative political stances.[3] This dissertation suggests, however, an alternative history of conservative television. Television did not start producing Republicans (to the extent that television can do so) with the birth of Fox News—Pat Robertson and his team at CBN had been working for at least 15 years *before* Fox News's debut to pull Christian viewers to the right. Beyond Robertson's more overtly political attempts to bring viewers over to his side of the aisle, the ideological work that CBN, ACTS, the Family Channel, and TBN were doing also constantly emphasized to viewers the correctness of conservative values. "Faith and Family" television was never neutral, and the evangelicals leading these networks recognized how that label could be weaponized to protect and promote nostalgia for America's imagined (white, middle class, suburban, patriarchal) past.

Given that, as Daniel Herbert, Amanda Lotz, and Aswin Punathambekar remind us, media industry studies focuses on "how individuals, institutions, and industries produce and

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[2] Timothy Havens, *Black Television Travels: African American Media around the Globe* (New York: New York University Press, 2013): 3-5.
[3] See, for example, Natalie Jomini Stroud, *Niche News: The Politics of News Choice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jeffrey P. Jones, "Fox News and the Performance of Ideology," *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 4 (Summer 2012): 178-185.

circulate forms in historically and geographically contextualized ways," this project centers on an examination of the religious television network as an industrial entity.[4] Rather than analyzing individual programs, personalities, or reception, I focus instead on the networks and the decisions made by those network executives who ultimately controlled what kinds of programming each network aired and who they imagined their audience to be. I have always been interested in networks, because they control not only what programming gets on the air, but how it gets framed and discussed among viewers. The network's promotional team tells viewers what they are selling and how it should be understood within its broader cultural context. Viewers are by no means required to go along with this framing, but it does nevertheless set limits on who new programming is understood to be for. Examining these networks *as* networks, rather than as religious organizations, reveals how secular media logics informed their strategies for expansion, commercialization, and adjusting to a constantly changing media landscape.

I situate evangelical television networks within their broader industrial and cultural context in order to reveal how these networks have worked, often below the radar, to challenge the mainstream television industry and create so-called safe spaces for Christian viewers. In this dissertation, I answer the following questions: how did religious networks such as CBN, ACTS, and TBN cultivate their audiences, and how did their efforts to carve out space in the channel guide reverberate across the television industry and in the realm of politics? In what ways has their conception of the "Christian" and "family" audience changed over time? How were the

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[4] Daniel Herbert, Amanda D. Lotz, and Aswin Punathambekar, *Media Industry Studies*, (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020), Introduction, Kindle edition.

strategies employed by religious networks shaping and shaped by the secular television industry and the US's political landscape?

Through an analysis of archival material (including local newspapers, internal memos, press releases, newsletters, and promotional materials) as well as other journalistic coverage (including newspapers, magazines, and secular and religious trade presses), in this project I argue that CBN, ACTS, the Family Channel, and TBN created and nurtured a new demographic of television viewers, which was identified by their religious and moral values. Through their programming, promotional strategies, and industrial maneuvering, these networks encouraged their viewers to define themselves in opposition to the mainstream. This dissertation explores what happened when the "Christian" and "family" audience both became marketable identity categories, and how evangelical media companies built alternative spaces for those viewers that were parallel to, but distinct from, the traditional media industries. The emergence of the "Christian" and "family" audience is crucial to understanding how and why Americans think about themselves (and others) as they do. These viewers are encouraged to identify, first and foremost, as Christians, and the successful interpellation of these viewers has had profound cultural and political effects. As I discuss below, preachers and churches worked steadfastly to keep American Christians engaged and invested in a highly mediated world, and often turned to media to do so.

A Note on Terms: American Christianity in the 20th and 21st Centuries

Christianity in the United States is diverse, complex, and constantly changing—something with which all of these religious networks have had to grapple. I should pause briefly here in order to define some of the key religious terms used throughout this dissertation, both by me and by the Christians working in, around, and against these networks. First, a very

rudimentary church history.[5] The primary division in American Protestant Christianity is between mainline Christians and evangelical Christians. Mainline churches are many of the oldest in the United States, including the American Baptist Church, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church, Quakers, Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church. There are major and minor theological differences between these denominations, but they are all generally more moderate in their theology than evangelical Protestants are. The work of this dissertation is largely concerned with evangelicals, because they were the religious group that most successfully took up broadcasting.

The word "evangelical" has historically come in and out of popular usage in the US.[6] In the 20th and now 21st centuries, "evangelical" has become a catch-all to encompass a large swath of conservative denominations and independent churches, including many non-denominational megachurches. Evangelicalism is a loose network of churches with a range of beliefs and with different degrees of theological conservatism. As religious historian George Marsden succinctly explained:

> Evangelicalism today includes any Christians traditional enough to affirm the basic beliefs of the old nineteenth-century evangelical consensus: the Reformation doctrine of the final authority of the Bible, the real historical character of God's saving work recorded in Scripture, salvation to eternal life based on the redemptive work of Christ, the importance of evangelism and missions, and the importance of a spiritually transformed life.[7]

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[5] This history is incredibly complicated and stretches back centuries; for the purposes of this introduction I will contain these definitions to the period of time covered in this dissertation: the 1960s through the present.
[6] Its current iteration emerged after beloved revivalist preacher Billy Graham used it to distance himself from the fundamentalists, who were viewed by many as too backward in their views to be as mainstream as Graham strove to be. Frances FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Save America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017): 5.
[7] George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991): 4-5.

Biblical inerrancy is a key tenet of modern day American evangelicalism, as is being "born again" and developing a close, direct, and personal relationship with God. It is important to note that when political pundits and commentators refer to "evangelicals" as a demographic, they almost always mean white, politically conservative evangelicals. Evangelicals are racially diverse group, and many predominantly Black, Latino, and racially integrated churches belong in this category as well.[8]

Throughout this dissertation, I reference both "liberal" and "conservative" theology. These terms do not map as neatly onto the US political spectrum as their names suggest—"liberal" theologians are not necessarily Democrats, for example. There is a lot of theological diversity within the evangelical community, but the belief that the Bible is the final authority and unerringly historically and morally correct is the hallmark of conservative theology. Liberal theology, on the other hand, allows the interpretation of parts or all of the Bible as a metaphor or as a jumping off point for faith, rather than the final destination. A classic example would be evolving attitudes about homosexuality, which theological conservatives believe is expressly forbidden by passages in the Bible—in Leviticus, for example—while theological liberals increasingly condone (or celebrate, in the best cases) same-sex marriage. The most liberal churches will even allow queer clergypeople to minister to their congregations—although many so-called liberal churches still scoff at the prospect of an LGBTQ person leading their worship

[8] This dissertation focuses primarily on white evangelicals, because for decades they were the only ones with enough capital and power to develop their own networks. Religious broadcasting is an incredibly, disproportionately white space. There were several preachers of color with their own popular programs throughout the years, but it was not until 2010, with the launch of the Detroit-based Impact Network by Black husband-and-wife team Bishop Wayne T. and Dr. Beverly Y. Jackson, that a person of color owned their own Christian network.

services. The liberalness or conservativeness of doctrine can vary from church to church, from pastor to pastor, and from denomination to denomination. For the sake of simplicity, suffice it to say here that mainline churches tend to align with liberal theology, while evangelical churches align more closely with conservative theology.

Both fundamentalists and charismatics fall within the broad category of "evangelicals." Charismatics include Pat Robertson (in his early days on *The 700 Club*) as well as many other popular televangelists. Charismatics are a sort of hybrid group that emerged as a significant force in American Christianity in the 1960s by taking the principles of Pentecostalism and bringing them into mainstream churches.[9] Televangelists and tent revivalists like Oral Roberts fell into this category, and they were famous for speaking in tongues during their revivals and on their television programs. As I will discuss further in Chapter 2, charismatics represent a small percentage of Protestants in the US, but were disproportionately represented on television because their style of preaching was more televisually exciting than traditional sermons from the pulpit.

Fundamentalists were similarly overrepresented in the world of televangelism, because their strictly conservative, dogmatic views made for fiery, controversial radio and television programming, and changing regulatory policies cleared the way for them to fund their programming through viewer donations. Michele Rosenthal has explained the "paradox" of religious broadcasting, which is that the most conservative branches of Christianity were both the

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[9] Pentecostalism is a form of Christianity that privileges an experiential faith, and emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit and believers' direct experiences with presence of God.

most eager and the most successful adopters of new technologies.[10] Mainline churches approached TV broadcasting with great trepidation and concern about the medium's effects in the 1950s, and they never caught up to the fundamentalists who had wholeheartedly embraced television. Fundamentalists were and remain a subset of evangelicals, and they are the most theologically conservative of the bunch. Religious historian George Marsden wrote in 1980 that "a fundamentalist is an evangelical who is angry about something," a pithy explanation that Jerry Falwell himself often borrowed while promoting the Moral Majority's agenda.[11] Fundamentalists are often defined by their anger—specifically, their vehement opposition to liberal theology in churches and to any changes to "traditional" cultural values. In the 1980s, fundamentalists returned with a vengeance from their decades-long exile after the humiliation of the Scopes trial in 1925 (during which fundamentalists were characterized as backwards and anti-science and routinely mocked by the mainstream press) and reentered the cultural arena in full force in order to lead the way in the battles that defined the culture wars. They funneled their anger into politics, where church leaders would increasingly dare to tread. Gone were the days in which those speaking at the pulpit demurred from commenting directly on contemporary political issues—many fundamentalists were now happy to do so, often with their camera crews in tow.

As the end of the 20th century approached, another crucial change transformed American Christianity across the United States: the rise of the megachurch. Megachurches are typically defined as any Protestant church that has more than 2,000 attendees each week. Although large

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[10] Michele Rosenthal, *American Protestants and TV in the 1950s: Responses to a New Medium* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2007).
[11] George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980): 235.

churches have existed since the 19th century, they were exceedingly rare until the 1980s and 1990s, when megachurches exploded in popularity across the US. They have since become a staple of suburban and exurban spaces, and their runaway success is, as Justin Wilford has argued, inextricably linked to their ability to imbue those entertainment-deficient towns and cities with spiritual meaning.[12] Megachurches have become central to their communities, particularly those that are located in areas where other types of "community centers" are sparse. They are not just churches, but gathering places for their members. There are currently over 1,650 megachurches in the United States, and over seventy percent of them preach and put into practice an evangelical theology.[13] In 2015, one in ten people who attended a religious service on a given weekend in the US went to a megachurch to worship.[14] A significant majority (over seventy percent) of megachurches are located in the "Sun Belt" of the United States, but they are changing how people worship, and how they understand the church's role in their life, across the US.

The largest megachurches, like Joel Osteen's evangelical, non-denominational Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, with over 52,000 attendees each weekend across various services, are built specifically so that their worship services will translate well to television. This impulse to build televisually appealing churches began in 1958 with Rex Humbard in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, who became the first pastor to explicitly design his sanctuary—a circular, space age, marble-and-

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[12] Justin Wilford, *Sacred Subdivisions: The Postsuburban Transformation of American Evangelicalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).
[13] Hartford Institute for Religion Research, "Megachurch," http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html.
[14] Cathy Lynn Grossman, "The Megachurch Boom Rolls On, But Big Concerns Are Rising Too," *Religion News Service*, December 2, 2015, https://religionnews.com/2015/12/02/megachurch-evangelical-christians/.

glass space capable of seating 5,400 people—around having a favorable TV camera setup.[15] Megachurches are typically quick to embrace new technologies or cultural objects and absorb them into their worship services, as we will see in the discussion of Australia's Hillsong Church in Chapter 4. That includes bringing television cameras into the sanctuary—and many megachurches broadcast their church services, as well as other programming, regularly. Many worship services in megachurches are highly mediated, with worship leaders giving rock-star-style performances and screens designed to keep worshippers engaged.

The rise of the megachurch must be understood alongside the rise of the prosperity gospel as a popular theological belief system. Many (although certainly not all) megachurches promote the "prosperity gospel," which assures Christians that God will reward their steadfast faith with health, wealth, and happiness.[16] For many televangelists, particularly those who fundraised during their shows, this interpretation of the gospel enabled them to amass incredible wealth for their organizations and for their own personal use.[17] Of course, not all televangelists promoted the prosperity gospel as, well, gospel, but many of the most famous TV preachers did (including The PTL Network's Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and TBN's Paul and Jan Crouch). Embracing the prosperity gospel paved the way for megachurches and televangelists alike to celebrate the wealth they had acquired. It also, importantly, provided televangelists with a spiritual imperative to expand their networks, beyond the assumed necessity of evangelizing to as many unchurched

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[15] Mr. Humbard's television program, also called *Cathedral of Tomorrow*, ran from 1953 to 1999. Michael Pollak, "Rex Humbard, TV Evangelist, Dies at 88," *New York Times*, September 23, 2007, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/23/us/23humbard.html.
[16] Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[17] This led to dozens of scandals over the last 40 years, with many spiritual leaders accused of either misusing church funds for personal gain or spending so lavishly and conspicuously that it called their commitment to helping the impoverished into question.

people as possible. Religious media organizations have similarly heeded the call to expand, and as a result evangelical Christians have amassed a significant amount cultural and political power over the last sixty years.

Religion and Television in American Popular Culture

This dissertation brings together the fields of media industry studies, television studies, and cultural history. Part of this project's intervention is to insist that it is imperative for each of these fields to pay much closer attention to how Christian media organizations have shaped US culture and politics, and that doing so will enrich and potentially change the histories we write and the industrial analyses we produce. Each of these fields has, for different reasons, been skittish about investigating the impacts of evangelical media systems. This has left significant gaps in the literature, the reasons for which I will briefly illuminate here. During televangelism's heyday in the 1980s, television studies was still coalescing as a field and was focused primarily on analyzing mainstream television. Media industry studies, which emerged as a distinct subfield much later, typically focuses on Hollywood and other national industries, and has tended to leave cultural studies concerns aside in favor of political economic ones.[18] Cultural historians have largely ignored religious television as well, perhaps considering it to be the purview of media scholars and religious studies scholars.

There is one field that has paid relatively close attention to religious television: communication studies. Televangelism in particular elicited enormous interest from communications scholars, and the body of literature about televangelism represents the bulk of

[18] Herbert et al, "Introduction," Kindle ed.

the literature on religious television. This scholarship was primarily concerned with how the televangelism phenomenon would change Christianity. Some scholars expressed grave concern that televangelism (or what was then often called "the electronic church") would pull people away from brick-and-mortar churches. Quentin Schultze, for example, argued that televangelism was transforming American Christianity from a church to a business, with disastrous spiritual consequences, and that it did so by absorbing unsuspecting viewers into "shallow pop faith."[19] Schultze's concerns were shared by many observers. Others, like Stewart Hoover, who interviewed producers and viewers of *The 700 Club*, pushed back against alarmist critiques of the medium, and argued that televangelism was a more complex phenomenon and that its effects on viewers and churches were decidedly uneven and unpredictable.[20] Most of this work demonizes television's particular power over viewers (often with methodology inspired by the traditions of media effects) and compares it unfavorably to more traditional modes of promoting religious messages. Scholars of televangelism did take questions of medium specificity and theology into account, but rarely considered the broader industrial conditions that shaped televangelism or its larger cultural impact beyond its effect on religion.[21]

Occasionally, scholars of marketing examined the larger structures that made televangelism's explosive growth possible in the 1980s. Razelle Frankl was the first to argue explicitly that the men and women leading electronic churches were acting as entrepreneurs first,

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[19] Quentin Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 19.
[20] Stewart Hoover, *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1988).
[21] One exception is Peter Howley, who argued in 2001 that televangelist programming, or what he calls "Prey TV," stokes fear and anxiety within its viewers in order to promote a socially conservative political agenda. Peter Howley, "Prey TV: Televangelism and Interpellation," *Journal of Film & Video* 53, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2001): 23-27.

and spiritual leaders second, as they skillfully built their brands behind the efforts of particularly effective marketing teams.[22] The success of megachurches further encouraged televangelists to expand. As Mara Einstein has shown, religious groups have only grown more savvy since the 1980s, and the "super-sizing" of religious institutions and the growth of evangelical political power can be attributed, at least in part, to how well-crafted the marketing pushes for these churches and organizations are.[23] Evangelicals were not the only savvy marketers, however, and Hollywood eventually took notice of the Christian audience as a potentially lucrative demographic.

Although televangelism and other media forms produced by religious groups largely escaped television scholars' notice, some television scholars have examined how representations of Christianity changed in the post-network era. As the Family Channel's popularity grew and the mainstream networks panicked about their shrinking audience shares, Hollywood's longstanding reluctance to engage with programming that spoke explicitly about religious faith decreased. The most famous example of this phenomenon is PAX-TV. As Victoria E. Johnson has argued, PAX aspired to become the "seventh network" by appealing to an audience of "'real Americans' with core, traditional values: home, the nuclear family, and belief in God" with Christian and family-oriented programming.[24] Representations of Christian characters and practices also became more explicit in the 1990s, as the Christian audience became more

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[22] Razelle Frankl, *Televangelism: The Marketing of Popular Religion* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986).
[23] Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age* (New York: Routledge, 2008): xiv.
[24] Victoria E. Johnson, "Welcome Home?: CBS, PAX-TV and "Heartland" Values in a Neo-Network Era," in *Velvet Light Trap* 46 (Fall 2000): 46.

valuable to TV networks who were seeing their ratings share drop every year.[25] Programs like *Touched by an Angel* or *7th Heaven* were no longer considered too overtly "Christian" to succeed. Representations of Christianity also became more overt in genre programming, as the risk-taking required for God or Satan to be become a character on shows like *Supernatural* or *Lucifer* was significantly reduced, in a world where over 200 television programs are produced every season.[26] The outrage about so-called blasphemous representations of Biblical events has died down, I would contend, because Christians have largely conceded their decades-long battle to force broadcast television to be more conservative. They have instead focused on creating their own programming (or repackaging older, acceptable Hollywood properties) and building alternative spaces for Christians to view them. Historians have taken up the project of examining the material "stuff" of religious practice in these spaces.

Religion and/in Cultural History

Until relatively recently, cultural historians were reluctant to include religion in the study of culture. As R. Laurence Moore has noted, historians considered religion as something distinct from culture, and left religion out of their grand histories of American culture.[27] However, beginning in the mid-1990s, as cultural products like "What Would Jesus Do?" bracelets became hugely popular and the Christian bookstore industry boomed, historians began to pay more attention to the cultural and material products produced for consumption by Christians. Moore

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[25] Jorie Lagerwey, "Are You There, God? It's Me, TV: Religion in American TV Drama, 2000-2009," (Ph.D. Diss, University of Southern California, 2009): 26.
[26] Charlotte Howell, *Divine Programming: Negotiating Christianity in American Dramatic Television Production 1996-2016* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
[27] R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994): 8.

led this charge by insisting that religion does not exist outside of cultural systems and that it is, in fact, deeply embedded within those systems.[28] While Moore was concerned with correcting the historical record, Colleen McDannell shed light on how Christians actually used Christian products. She argued that analyzing the material artifacts of religious practice is crucial to understanding how religion functions in people's lives and in society more generally. She points out that theologians ignored mass culture for decades because they assumed that only "weak" Christians would participate in materialist, impure religious practices.[29]Although she does not examine media directly in her work, she argues that mass-produced objects are vitally important to the faith of many American Christians. *Material Christianity* serves as a vital framework for thinking through the commodification of Christian music, movies, objects, and, I would contend, television.

Several historians have since heeded Moore and McDannell's call to include religion in cultural history, and have examined industries that produce religious media.[30] Religious historians have also recuperated the lost history of early Christian film history, specifically films

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[28] Moore traces the relationship between religion and commercialism in the 20th century, and examines how religious leaders and organizations reconciled the consumerist ethos and the demands of the commercial marketplace with their own desire to spread the gospel. These concerns animated the decision-making of evangelical broadcasters as well.

[29] Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1995).

[30] Lerone A. Martin has argued that the phonograph shaped the development of African American religion in the early 20th century, while Matthew Hedstrom credits the popularization of religious liberalism to the explosive growth of book culture in the 1920s. Tona J. Hangen has excavated early Christian radio history through listener letters in order to argue that religious radio had a larger cultural impact on popular culture and national identity than previously acknowledged. See Lerone A. Martin, *Preaching on Wax: The Phonograph and the Shaping of Modern African American Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Matthew S. Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Tona J. Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, and Popular Culture in America* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2002);

produced by and for churches since the 1930s, and shown how Christian filmmakers built an industry alongside Hollywood during its golden years.[31] All of this work has focused on the early 20th century, and the religious media industries of the latter half of the century have been largely neglected by historians and media scholars alike. One exception to that rule is Heather Hendershot's *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture*. Hendershot's intervention is her analysis of the economics of evangelical media production and distribution.[32] *Shaking the World for Jesus* is comprised of six case studies bound by the argument that evangelical media has, since the 1970s, become more "ambiguous" and diluted its message in order to broaden its reach. Hendershot's study examines the types of products that you can regularly find in a Christian bookstore. Seeking to avoid the "propaganda" model, which focuses on how religious media objects influence their viewers, Hendershot instead concentrates on how people use evangelical objects in their everyday life, arguing that much of evangelical-produced media is not made for specifically political purposes. As I argue in this dissertation, however, the act of creating an alternative space like a Christian bookstore is itself a political act, and one which serves to remind Christians that their spirituality and the morals distinguish them from the secular mainstream.

The Conservative Turn and Its Media

Many historians have, in the last fifteen or so years, focused their attention to the conservative turn (and specifically the rise of the Religious Right) in the United States,

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[31] Terry Lindvall and Andrew Quicke, *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).
[32] Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

identifying its causes and considering its wide-ranging effects. In this literature, the role of the media, and television specifically, is starkly absent. Religious television rarely merits more than a brief mention in most historical work on this period despite religious television's close ties to many of the conservative organizations that have worked in the decades since to consolidate power for the Republican party.[33] There have been brilliant examinations of the role of the suburbs[34] and the role of evangelical Southerners' migration to the West in the 1930s,[35] while others have framed the conservative turn as a response to the economic policies of the New Deal[36] and the social progress of the 1960s and 1970s.[37] Even those who consider the Religious Right itself often discount the media's importance.[38] The prevalence of religious (and conservative) broadcasting from the early days of radio through the present day suggests that the media have played, at the very least, some sort of role in the conservative turn.

There have been a few historians who have gestured toward this point in their work. Kevin Kruse, for example, cites the influence of Walt Disney, Cecil B. DeMille, and advertising executives as pivotal to promoting the conflation of piety and patriotism that characterized the

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[33] Pat Robertson, for example, parlayed the success of CBN into creating the American Center for Law and Justice in 1990, which was envisioned as a way to push back against the American Civil Liberties Union, and which has become a powerful legal force in the fight for "religious liberty" in the decades since.
[34] See Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern American Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sun Belt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).
[35] See McGirr and Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: Norton, 2010).
[36] Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).
[37] Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2013).
[38] See Robert Wuthnow, *Red State Religion: Faith and Politics in America's Heartland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012) and Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

1950s.[39] For the most part, however, media, and television specifically, has been left out of these histories. The Religious Right was not without its own media outlets, as the history of CBN and the Family Channel attests. Their audience of Christian and later "family" viewers closely aligned with their political goals. This dissertation makes the case that religious television should factor more seriously into the history of the conservative turn, because much of the cultural work that propelled the conservative turn happened on and around television.

The lines between conservative media and religious media are blurry, and several media scholars have considered the impacts of conservative media on American culture. Susan Douglas, in her work on radio, argues that those liberals who listen to NPR and those conservatives who listen to talk radio (Rush Limbaugh, Don Imus, etc.) all see themselves as "outside of the mainstream" and turn to radio to hear "a public articulation of a different kind of truth."[40] She sees in radio a space where the like-minded can feel as though they are a part of a community. While Douglas focuses on contemporary radio, Heather Hendershot chronicles the radio careers of four influential, extremist conservatives of the 1950s and 60s (two secular and two fundamentalist Christians) and understands them as media producers, rather than simply propagandists.[41] Hendershot argues that, although right wingers were not a united movement, their ideas circled and overlapped each other quite frequently on the radio, creating the illusion of cohesion. She positions these "ultras" as the key precursors to contemporary conservative

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[39] Kruse, *One Nation Under God.*
[40] Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 19.
[41] Heather Hendershot, *What's Fair on the Air?: Cold War Right-Wing Broadcasting and Public Interest* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2011).

media and argues that they played an important role in the formation of the Religious Right. Nicole Hemmer's work also considers the "first generation" of conservative media activists in the 1940s and the political legacy of their efforts to popularize the idea of "liberal media bias."[42]

Those early conservative media activists laid the groundwork for what would become Fox News, which implemented an openly partisan and political approach to news programming. By creating what Reece Peck has described as a "compelling political identity" and tabloid-inspired aesthetic style for conservative viewers,[43] Fox News shares many similarities with what evangelical broadcasters strove to achieve. It has also attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly around questions of media bias and media effects. As Natalie Jomini Stroud has shown, frequent Fox News viewers and their habit of consuming like-minded news ultimately influences both their political and social behavior and their understanding of current events, eventually pulling them further into their own ideology.[44] This body of scholarship on conservative television demonstrates that the conservative impulse to demonize or otherwise other the "mainstream" has been happening for decades, and this dissertation brings to light the gentler, subtler ways in which religious broadcasters employed the same logic.

Blessed Archives: Methodology

My approach to this project is very much informed by Benedict Anderson's framework of "imagined communities," and the television studies scholarship that that framework has

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[42] Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).
[43] Reece Peck, *Fox Populism: Branding Conservatism as Working Class* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 9.
[44] The same is true, she argues, of liberals watching liberal outlets like MSNBC. Stroud, *Niche News.*

inspired.[45] Scholars like Michele Hilmes exemplify this method.[46] Her work considers the importance of radio to American life in the early 20th century, and argues that the medium critically shaped listeners' ideas about the nation. Radio played a key role in defining what it meant to be an American, and who could be regarded *as* American. This project similarly begins with the belief that television does critical cultural, political, and ideological work within American society, and the assumption that the decisions made by TV network executives have shaped American culture in profound ways.

In *Heartland TV*, Victoria Johnson considers television's role in shaping Americans' understanding of the "Heartland," an invented geographic area tasked with carrying the burden of both nostalgia and disdain for a nation perpetually anxious about its future.[47] Johnson's work considers television throughout its history, from its position as the predominant mass medium to the later days of narrowcasting, and argues that television strategically used the Heartland in order shore up its status as a "national" medium. Johnson contends that television has the power to shape America's understanding of itself, while others, including Laurie Ouellette and Ron Becker, argue that the nichification of television has fostered important divides between different audiences. Ouellette's work on PBS argues that, although that network never ascended to full cultural prominence, the way that PBS characterized its viewers as a sophisticated public (and, by extension, its non-viewers as indiscriminate and passive) illuminates the contentious cultural

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[45] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
[46] Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
[47] Victoria E. Johnson, *Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for U.S. Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

tensions that characterize the US after the 1950s.[48] Becker also considers the tensions inherent in broadcasting in his examination of the simultaneous rise of "straight panic" and increasing representation for gay men and lesbians on primetime television in the 1990s.[49] As Becker argues, gay content was ultimately about defining "straight America." All of these authors serve as models for my work because of their attention to the interplay between how networks construct their audiences and the cultural and political context of the time.

The development of my methodology was also inspired by TV and media industry studies work that focused on the power that television networks have to reshape and constrain larger cultural conversations. These scholars all adopt the methods of media industry studies through a discourse analysis of the trade press and networks' branding and promotional practices. Katherine Sender's work on Bravo[50] and Ben Aslinger's essay on the early days of Logo[51] both address what happens (and what it means) when women and the LGBTQ community, respectively, are the targets of gay-themed programming. Beretta E. Smith-Shomade's examination of BET[52] and Sarah Banet-Weiser's analysis of Nickelodeon[53] both argue that buying and selling audiences has a fundamental impact not only on what you are selling, but the people to whom you are selling programs and advertisements. All of these

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[48] Laurie Ouellette, *Viewers Like You?: How Public Television Failed the People* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
[49] Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).
[50] Katherine Sender, "Dualcasting: Bravo's Gay Programming and the Quest for Women Audiences," in *Cable Visions: Television Beyond Broadcasting*, eds. Sarah Banet-Weiser et al (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 302-318.
[51] Ben Aslinger, "Creating a Network for Queer Audiences at Logo TV," *Popular Communication* 7 (2009): 107-121.
[52] Beretta Smith-Shomade, "Target Market Black," in *Cable Visions: Television Beyond Broadcasting*, eds. Sarah Banet-Weiser et al (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 177-193.
[53] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Kids Rule!: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

scholars argue emphatically for the larger social/cultural significance of what these networks are doing and what they can tell us about society beyond the screen.

As I have developed this project, I have felt increasingly pulled into the archive, more so than I anticipated at the outset. This pull arises from the desire to recover how the people who worked at these networks thought about themselves, their networks, and their mission as they sought to build national and global evangelical media systems. I began the archival research for this project in earnest in 2017 with a visit to Regent University Library's extensive Special Collections and Archives. Regent was founded and is still led by Pat Robertson, and was designed to create pipelines for evangelical students to join the media industries, politics, and the law. This archive therefore lacks any material that would cast CBN and its sister organizations in a bad light. Despite its disinterest in appearing objective, Regent's archive contains incredibly rich material that made it possible for me to reconstruct the early years of CBN through local newspaper coverage (most of which was from *The Virginian-Pilot*, which was not digitized elsewhere) as well as national journalistic coverage. This archive also contained internal memos, press releases, and promotional material, all of which proved crucial to my analysis of the network's practices.

Many failed religious networks disappeared into the ether, archivally-speaking, so it is very fortunate that the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) preserved many materials from its own attempt to break into television in the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives (SBHLA). Here, I discovered that the SBHLA had preserved seemingly all official documents as well as much of the media coverage that the network received, particularly from small, local, as-yet-un-digitized newspapers. The archive included internal reports and memos, official committee and commission reports, newspaper clippings, magazine articles, newsletters, and

press releases. I read thousands of pages of official and unofficial documents in order to reconstruct how ACTS developed and the continuous negotiations between the SBC, local affiliates, and viewers over what the network could and should be.

While working in these archives, I was keenly aware that I was only getting one side of the story. Because these archives were so closely affiliated with my object of study, it was necessary to supplement their contents with as much outside material as I could. This was somewhat complicated by the fact that both CBN and ACTS flew under the national radar for some time. Nevertheless, I turned to national and local journalistic coverage whenever possible, as well as trade magazines, which began to pay much closer attention to what televangelists were building in the 1980s. I also drew from religious broadcasting trade magazines (primarily *Religious Broadcasting*), which were designed to serve all Christian broadcasters, and which helped to fill in some of the gaps in the narrative, particularly with regard to unflattering scandals, evangelicals' concerns about changing federal media regulations, and thwarted, what-could-have-been business transactions.

My primary research concluded with a three-day site visit to the Holy Land Experience, which rounded out my investigation into TBN's efforts to become a media conglomerate in the 21st century. So much of this dissertation is an exploration of alternative spaces that it was imperative that I visit TBN's park in order to understand how that strange, disjointed, now-likely-defunct space functioned. I spent two and a half days in the park, the first with a friend so that I would be less conspicuous and have someone to talk through the experience with. I attended every show the park was offering that season, and generally tried to follow the typical park schedule. As much as possible, I tried to experience the park space as the park's managers intended. Interacting with media, and particularly immersive, mediated attractions like the Holy

Land Experience, is an embodied experience. Seeing firsthand the traces of the park's evolution from a biblical museum/recreation to a day of spectacular pop-rock musicals was vital to my understanding of that alternative space as one that was still being contested.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter One reconstructs the first twenty years of CBN's industrial history, from 1960 to 1980, in order to explain how the network grew from a single, failing station to a global behemoth of religious broadcasting. CBN's rise was helped significantly by the development of new television technologies (including cable and satellite) and changing regulations. It was, however, Pat Robertson's acumen for the television industry and his employment of the telethon funding model that put CBN far ahead of its competitors. During this early period, CBN struggled to negotiate between its spiritual goals (evangelizing to the entire world) and the demands of the commercial television system (making money). Robertson's desire to build an alternative to the major networks (CBS, NBC, and ABC) drove much of his thinking in this period, and this chapter explores why CBN executives thought that entertaining, rather than evangelizing to, Christian audiences (and would-be Christian viewers) was absolutely vital to their mission. CBN was a pioneer in Christian broadcasting, and the model it adopted would be copied and borrowed many times over.

By the 1980s, many Christians were becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the rise of televangelism. Chapter Two details what happened when a powerful Christian denomination, the Southern Baptists, endeavored to create their own alternative to Christian television. The American Christian Television System (ACTS) built a new kind of infrastructure for religious television which prioritized the growth of local churches and the production of local programming. ACTS adopted an alternative fundraising model and refused, unlike its most

popular competitors, to solicit donations from viewers. Their network was a commercial and critical failure, but it is the *attempt* that demands further examination. ACTS was a significant moment in broadcasting history—one which has been overlooked for too long. The Southern Baptists' attempt to break into the television industry—and their failure to do so—illustrates how and why the structures of the US television industry were not conducive to the success of theologically or politically moderate voices. The Southern Baptists fought relentlessly to secure themselves a berth on television, because they believed that television was central to the promotion of the Christian message in the mass media moment. This chapter tells the heretofore untold story of ACTS: why the Southern Baptists built it, how they attempted to revolutionize Christian broadcasting, and what happened when they tried to build local television on a national scale.

For both CBN and ACTS, "family" television was vitally important to their mission, and they believed that they could best convert doubters to Christianity by drawing them to their channels with innocuous, inoffensive, and "positive" family programming. The third chapter explains how CBN capitalized on those previously drawn connections between "faith" and "family" and transformed itself into The Family Channel, which became the first cable channel explicitly designed for a family audience. The Family Channel played a vital role in defining the "family audience" in a moment when television viewers were fragmented across a rapidly increasing number of channels. The channel proposed a particularly conservative definition of "family," one that was overwhelmingly white, committed to reinforcing traditional, patriarchal gender roles, and rooted in the midcentury imaginary of the mild-mannered, middle-class, suburban, Christian family. This chapter examines the Family Channel's branding, promotional

materials, and the public statements made by its executives in order to reveal how the channel constructed and sold the family audience to advertisers and viewers.

The final chapter explores how TBN conceptualizes the contemporary Christian consumer and TBN's efforts to build a Christian media conglomerate. The Trinity Broadcasting Network began, like CBN, as a single station, before expanding into the (self-proclaimed) biggest Christian network in the world. After TBN's founders, Paul and Jan Crouch, died, their son, Matthew, took over the network and sought to expand its influence and reach. He did so by launching new cable channels (including TBN Salsa and the Hillsong Channel) and by dividing the "Christian" audience up into even smaller demographics. Crouch attempted to build multiple alternative spaces for Christian consumers to escape mainstream entertainment, including a literal physical space in the Holy Land Experience. Across all of its media properties, TBN emphasizes the importance of entertaining its viewers with arena-rock style bombast. Much like CBN before it, TBN has borrowed its tactics and strategies from mainstream Hollywood, and their commitment to defining their audience in demographic terms speaks to the power of industrial logics to inform how even those outside of Hollywood operate. Crucially, TBN continues the legacy of CBN by promoting Christianity as an oppositional identity, and by assuring Christians that only they can provide them with a wholesome, values-first alternative.

This dissertation demonstrates how the fragmentation of television audiences caused by the rise of new television technologies, particularly satellite and cable, created space for more conservative programming to flourish. Evangelical network executives capitalized on fragmentation at every turn, and embarked on a decades-long ideological project to promote conservative values. The results of their efforts were not contained only to those who watched their programs. The "industry lore" that evangelical media-makers had created— about who the

Christian and "family" audience was, what programming standards they demanded, their desire to be "entertained" rather than preached to—slowly but surely made its way to mainstream broadcasters and influenced their own decision-making with regard to programming, promotional, and scheduling decisions. The fact that it was conservative evangelical media-makers who ultimately imagined who the Christian and "family" audience was, and their insistence that that audience should define themselves in opposition to the mainstream, has had implications beyond just the television industry. Those ideas also circulated as part of the larger cultural and political discourse of the culture wars and helped to galvanize evangelicals against secular media and culture. This dissertation offers a new way to think about the conservative side of the culture wars and the structures that evangelical media-makers built in order to challenge the so-called liberal mainstream and guarantee themselves a platform from which to promote their own ideology.

CHAPTER 1

"Our Slingshot Against the Three Goliaths": How Pat Robertson Built the Christian Broadcasting Network

In 1978, shortly after the successful launch of the CBN Satellite Network, Pat Robertson and his team at the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) wholeheartedly believed that they could create a new "fourth network" in the United States. Privately, CBN officials believed that the network could be a one-billion-dollar operation by 1990.[54] A short seventeen years after launching his seemingly inconsequential Christian television station in Virginia Beach, Robertson had become one of the most powerful independent broadcasters in the United States. Robertson's belief that he could propel his small network of stations into a national force was not unearned. CBN, built from donations of loyal viewers, had become a potential TV powerhouse fueled by years of practically exponential growth. While Robertson did not achieve his dream of building a true fourth network, he did ultimately build one of the most successful early cable channels after starting his network with only seventy dollars in his pocket.

CBN had emerged as a major player in the television industry after years of flying under the radar while its executives slowly and methodically built a following for their network and its programming. Robertson had been buying television stations and recruiting affiliates for more

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[54] Margaret Scott Edds, "Robertson Empire Reaches Heavenward," *The Virginian-Pilot and The Ledger-Star* (Virginia Beach, VA), August 6, 1978, CBN Newspaper Clippings (1976-78) Folder, CBN Information File, Regent University Library Special Collections and Archives (RULSCA).

than a decade, but his efforts had gone largely unremarked upon. The press finally began to take notice of Robertson's network as the phenomenon of televangelism became an object of fascination and trepidation for mainstream journalists, and as satellite opened up new possibilities for televangelists' business models. As a result, CBN attracted more and more national attention in the 1970s, with a *TV Guide* profile and coverage from the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* confirming that CBN had arrived as a player in the American television industry that warranted serious consideration from the press and the public.[55]

Despite the phenomenal success and national prominence that CBN ultimately achieved, the network's early history has largely become a footnote in American broadcasting history.[56] Religious broadcasters do not figure prominently in the traditional narrative of television history, but they merit as much attention as other middle-of-the-pack cable channels and faltering independent networks have received.[57] Christian broadcasters like CBN were often early adopters of new technologies, proponents for advantageous regulatory changes, and protesters against cultural shifts that threatened their value system. Networks like CBN have played an important role in American television and American history more generally, and their cultural significance should not be underestimated. In this chapter, I write CBN back into broadcast

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[55] See, for example: Edwin McDowell, "Religious Networks Blossom," *New York Times*, July 23, 1978, https://nyti.ms/1LYdwtB; William Martin, "Video Evangelism," *Washington Post*, June 4, 1978; Paul Hemphill, "Praise the Lord—and Cue the Cameraman," *TV Guide*, March 12-18, 1978, 6.

[56] Michele Hilmes's brilliant history of broadcasting in the United States, for example, mentions CBN only once. Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2011), 302.

[57] Failed networks like Dumont and cable channels like MTV and Nickelodeon have all received their own book-length examinations, for example. See David Weinstein, *The Forgotten Network: Dumont and the Birth of American Television* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2004); Andrew Goodwin, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

history by placing it front and center. I examine CBN not as a religious organization but as a broadcaster, and argue that Robertson and his team at the Christian Broadcasting Network built a viable alternative space within the US television industry by mastering the logics of TV and maintaining a delicate balance between their spiritual goals and the demands of broadcasting.

CBN may have largely escaped the notice of television scholars, but it has not gone unremarked upon by those studying religion in the US. Sociologist and management expert Razelle Frankl and communications scholar Quentin Schultze have both wrestled with the moral implications of CBN's business model and Pat Robertson's particular brand of televangelism,[58] while others have used CBN as one example of the larger effects of televangelism's emergence onto the national scene in the late 1970s.[59] It is, of course, important to consider the ethics of televangelism and how CBN navigated the fraught practice of providing a spiritual service on a highly commercialized medium. However, those analyses do not tell the whole story. One must also consider how CBN operated as a media organization negotiating the complex structures of the US television industry. It is only when we contextualize Pat Robertson's network as part of the larger television industry that we can truly understand how and why CBN was successful.

This chapter takes the case study of CBN and uses it to place Christian broadcasters within the larger narrative of television history. Other religious networks, including the Trinity Broadcasting Network and the Praise the Lord (PTL) Network, also built loyal followings from a

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[58] Razelle Frankl, *Televangelism: The Marketing of Popular Religion* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986); Quentin Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI 1991).
[59] See Peter G. Horsfield, *Religious Television: The American Experience* (New York: Longman Inc., 1984); Steve Bruce, *Pray TV: Televangelism in America* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Stewart M. Hoover, *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1988).

scant number of stations and certainly deserve further consideration. However, I have chosen to focus on CBN because they were true pioneers in religious broadcasting, and because they ultimately proved to be the savviest about how to navigate the television industry. Robertson was the first broadcaster to buy a station, start a true network, and launch a satellite network. In this chapter, I reveal how new technologies, changing regulations, and larger cultural shifts impacted CBN and trace how CBN built a sustainable and influential alternative space for Christian viewers within the confines of the American commercial television industry. As CBN grew, Robertson's vision for his network shifted accordingly. While he always hoped to use CBN as a platform to evangelize around the world, his vision for how best to achieve that goal changed as his circumstances did.

In the following pages, I reconstruct CBN's early history from archival materials, including press releases, newspaper clippings, and promotional materials, in order to trace how Robertson built CBN from the ground up. By doing so, I demonstrate how difficult it was for independent broadcasters to succeed in the US television system in the 1960s and how it was that Robertson managed to succeed against seemingly impossible odds. This chapter covers the first twenty years of CBN's history, from 1960 to 1980, beginning with Robertson acquiring his first station and ending with the launch of the CBN Cable Network. I chronicle how Pat Robertson and his team built the Christian Broadcasting Network and examine how they rationalized their expansion at every critical inflection point in the network's history. I begin with CBN's earliest years, when it was a single station struggling to stay on the air, sometimes literally. Once the station stabilized as a result of Robertson's successful fundraising telethons, it began to expand rapidly. The second section of this chapter details CBN's motivations for expansion, during this period in which CBN's production capabilities increased dramatically and Robertson set out to

acquire more stations in popular markets. The third and final section addresses CBN's turn to cable and satellite technologies, which finally created the opportunity for the network to become truly national. In less than twenty years, CBN grew from one station with a potential audience of a few thousand Tidewater residents to an international powerhouse capable of reaching 700 million people across the globe. Its journey from a single station with one camera to a cable network was fraught with tension between the secular aspects of the television business and CBN's evangelical mission.

WYAH-TV: The Early Years (1960-1968)

The story of the Christian Broadcasting Network's earliest years demonstrates how incredibly difficult it was for independent broadcasters to break into the television business in the 1960s. The odds of success were stacked against them, and the majority of independently-owned UHF (ultra high frequency) stations went under. UHF outlets faced numerous obstacles, as the result of the concentrated power of the Big 3 networks (CBS, NBC, ABC), the limited availability of stations, and the prohibitive expense of owning and operating a station. The major networks had practically monopolized the country's VHF stations (very high frequency, which had a wider range and superior picture quality when compared to UHF stations like CBN's), making it difficult for non-network-affiliated stations to compete with the big boys of broadcast television. Producing original programming was also incredibly pricey—even the lowest-grade equipment cost thousands of dollars. Those disadvantages compounded and made it challenging for UHF stations to attract advertisers given their limited range, lower quality programming, and their visually inferior transmission. It cost an inordinate amount of money to start a station, and even more to sustain it.

There were many moments in CBN's earliest days in which the fledgling potential network almost died before it had even had its first broadcast. CBN could have easily joined a long list of UHF stations that failed to stay on the air. Pat Robertson was the first to admit that he started the Christian Broadcasting Network with little more than a directive from God, as he frequently recounted the plucky network's origin story in interviews. The story goes like this: in 1959, Marion Gordon "Pat" Robertson, a graduate of Yale Law School and New York Theological Seminary, visited his family home in Lexington, Virginia. His father was longtime Democratic senator Willie Robertson, and Pat had spent the last few years with his own young family in New York City. During this visit, Pat Robertson happened across a letter from a man in Tidewater, advertising an abandoned television station that was valued at 250,000 dollars and being offered for a mere 37,000. After much praying and deliberating, Robertson claims that God directed him to buy the station, and he came to Portsmouth, Virginia, with only seventy dollars in his pocket to start what he envisioned as the nation's first religious television station.[60]

The station, of course, was heavily discounted. Robertson and others described the state of the station (which still had outstanding debts abandoned by the previous owner) as "a mess."[61] The station had been vandalized, its already outdated equipment had been broken or stolen, and the vandals had had what Robertson quaintly called a "beer party" in the studio, leaving behind "a foot of trash" in some rooms.[62] Robertson eventually rounded up volunteers to clean up the

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[60] Stanley W. Mooneyham, "Adult Power: Christian TV for Tidewater," June 16, 1963, "Beginnings of CBN" Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[61] Mal Vincent, "TV on a Prayer and $3," *The Virginian-Pilot*, November 5, 1967, "News Releases 1967" Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[62] Ibid.

mess, but the station then faced the larger problem of finding sufficient funding to purchase equipment and finance their productions. To address this problem, Robertson printed up 10,000 prayer cards and distributed them to residents in the area, asking them not for a donation, but to pray for the station.[63] CBN's first donation was a three-dollar contribution from a man in South Carolina, and additional funds soon began to trickle in. However, CBN was certainly not on a strong financial footing. In fact, the CBN venture almost ended before it even began. In a story that was not as widely publicized as the "$70 in my pocket" tale, CBN faced mounting debt as Robertson worked to get the station in working order. Eventually, a much-needed pledge of 31,000 dollars for the station was revoked, and the whole operation almost came crashing down. Robertson strongly considered selling the station to the Norfolk school system, even meeting with the school's directors to begin negotiating a sale. During that meeting, though, Robertson received a five-hundred-dollar donation that he ultimately determined to be a sign from God, and decided against selling. This decision was announced with a triumphant headline in a local newspaper: "God's Decision: No Sale," which was distributed to 30,000 homes in the community.[64]

The small Tidewater station (with the call letters "WYAH," chosen to invoke "Yahweh," one of the Hebrew names for God) had a new lease on life, and Robertson worked toward the launch date of October 1, 1961. There were additional financial obstacles along the way, but the station eventually premiered on that date. Airing on Channel 27 locally, CBN broadcast for three

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[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.

hours each evening, with an additional five hours of programming on Sunday afternoons.[65] All of the channel's programming was religious—it was the first TV station to be granted approval by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to feature more than fifty percent religious programming. When WYAH premiered, it was an extremely low budget operation: the studio had only one black-and-white camera and just a few staffers. Robertson once recalled to *Christianity Today* that "there were lapses as the cameraman changed lenses and location [and] mice on occasion got fouled in the transmitter and blacked out the station."[66] The inexperience of WYAH-TV's crew and the limited production capabilities produced many such technical glitches in the station's early years and hurt the station's ability to build an audience. During one early show, the audio failed in the middle of the program, and the show was finished using sign language.[67] While other local stations produced much more technically and aesthetically sophisticated programming, CBN struggled, sometimes literally, to keep the lights on.

In its early years, CBN was truly a small business. WYAH's range was quite limited, especially for a high-quality picture, and the channel only reached the people of the Tidewater area, which includes the cities of Virginia Beach, Norfolk, Chesapeake, Hampton, Newport News, and Suffolk, altogether a population of about one million people. Most employees were locals, with only a few hires coming from other areas of the country.[68] Press releases about new hires did not just explain their credentials; they also typically concluded with a line about the

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[65] Mooneyham, "Adult Power: Christian TV for Tidewater."
[66] Edward E. Plowman, "Evangelical TV: A Decade on the Tube," *Christianity Today*, March 17, 1972, 40, News Releases 1969 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Of the many press releases announcing hires in Regent University's (RULSCA's) archive, I found only one hire from outside Virginia in WYAH's early years.

man's wife and children.[69] CBN press releases would even inform readers what Tidewater neighborhood the new employee resided in. For example, a 1966 news release announcing that George Bunn had been hired as CBN's new Community Relations Director concluded by declaring that "Bunn and wife, the former Yvonne Harris of Newport News, reside at 511 ½ Chesapeake Ave on the peninsula."[70] WYAH-TV was a local operation, run and watched almost exclusively by locals. Its focus was quite narrow, and CBN sought to elevate its stature in the community through local charity work. They also worked hard to assure local ministers that their operation would not pull people away from their churches, and would, in fact, use their counselors to direct those who called CBN for spiritual advice back to their local parishes.[71] In WYAH-TV's earliest years, its sphere of influence was quite small, so the station needed the local community's support in order to survive in a competitive marketplace.

Robertson soon came up with a novel plan to bring more money into the fledgling station. CBN operated on a shoe-string budget, produced seventy percent of its programming in-house, and had very few revenue streams. The station did air other televangelists' syndicated programs and collected a fee for that air time, but not nearly enough to cover their costs. WYAH-TV rejected a traditional advertising model and relied instead primarily on contributions from viewers who were grateful for the alternative programming that the station provided. However, given the limited reach of the network, it was difficult to count on those donations to cover the

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[69] All managerial positions at CBN were held by men. Robertson's wife, Dede Robertson, eventually became the only woman given a seat on CBN's board. For more on how evangelical Christian doctrine about gender roles and the family structures workplaces outside of the church, see Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Walmart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 49-66.
[70] "Untitled News Release," October 18, 1966, News Releases 1967 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[71] Shirley Winters, "New TV Studios Previewed," *The Virginian-Pilot*, April 30, 1968, News Releases 1968 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

station's operating costs. In the fall of 1963, Robertson hit upon a new idea for how to raise money for CBN: he hosted a telethon. It was during this first telethon that Pat Robertson coined the name "The 700 Club" for his own program, because he asked viewers to cover the station's 7,000-dollar monthly operating budget, explaining that he needed a monthly donation of ten dollars a month from 700 viewers in order to keep the station afloat. While the first telethon did not quite hit that target,[72] the telethons in 1965 and 1966 marked significant turning points for the network's financial solvency. The telethon in 1965 produced pledges totaling 115,000 dollars, and the 1966 telethon garnered pledges for 150,000 dollars.[73] Clearly, CBN was gaining momentum in the Tidewater area—and the station's outlook was rosier than ever before.

By 1966, CBN had experienced considerable growth. Between its radio station, WXRI-FM, and the television station, CBN boasted sixteen full-time and nine part-time employees.[74] CBN's income had grown from an estimated 7,000 dollars in 1961 to 200,000 in 1966, and its operating budget had increased to between 12 and 15,000 dollars each month. WYAH-TV's technical disadvantages helped to shape its self-perception as a scrappy underdog working slowly but surely to chip away at the major networks' successes. This is perhaps best exemplified by Jim Bakker's cheekily defiant interview with a local newspaper, in which he laughed at critics who told him that his well-loved children's show (co-hosted with his wife, Tammy, and a merry band of puppets) would never succeed while airing on a UHF outlet. Bakker declared that "our critics laughed at us when we went on the air. They said we couldn't

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[72] I have not found a record of exactly how much money was pledged during that first telethon.
[73] Vincent, "TV on a Prayer and $3."
[74] "He Builds TV Station to Spread Gospel," *The Virginian-Pilot*, 1966, Beginnings of CBN Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

possibly reach an audience with our UHF outlet. The mail comes in now [and] it speaks louder than the critics."[75] Bakker's show, initially titled *Come On Over* before becoming *The Jim and Tammy Show*, often ranked as WYAH's most popular show. Bakker here articulates a key part of CBN's fundraising pitch and identity: the network's mission was to push back against the mainstream media and provide its viewers with an alternative to the programming that typically aired on what FCC Commissioner Newton Minow had once called "the vast wasteland" of network television. CBN embraced its position as an outsider, and often celebrated how fervent their fan base was. The station did not draw big ratings numbers, but it had built a small and devoted following in its first seven years on air.

CBN's TV-Radio Complex

How did WYAH-TV manage to survive in a marketplace where so many others faltered? The passage of the All-Channel Receiver Act in 1962 was absolutely critical to WYAH-TV's survival. The bill mandated that all television sets produced after 1964 were required to receive UHF stations as well as the established VHF stations that the major networks had largely monopolized. Most early UHF stations failed because their signal was weaker than VHF and many viewers' TVs could not pick up their signal, even if they were within range. This is one of many instances of fortuitous timing that facilitated CBN's improbable rise to national prominence. Robertson was lucky or savvy enough to purchase a UHF station at a bargain-basement price shortly before the new law made it much easier for him to build an audience large enough to sustain the station. CBN's success is the twin result of fortuitous timing and

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[75] Larry Bonko, "Home Viewers Have Best Laugh as Critics Cringe," 1967, News Releases 1967 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

Robertson's incredible acumen for the television business. For a man who didn't own a television set before he bought a station,[76] Robertson quickly figured out how to succeed in a medium that was resistant to outsiders.

Pat Robertson understood that the message alone would not ensure success—it was imperative for the small-town operation to keep up with its better-funded and bigger competitors in terms of its technological capabilities. As the network slowly expanded its audience and brought in more donations, it invested a significant portion of those donations into improving the station's infrastructure. WYAH-TV would not be able to compete with the mainstream networks if its picture quality and production values remained inferior. On television, the visual was just as important as the message.

To that end, Robertson announced in 1966 that CBN would spend one million dollars upgrading their facilities, dramatically expanding the scope of the network in terms of both its reach and its production capabilities. CBN's 1965 and 1966 telethons had proven surprisingly successful, giving Robertson the confidence to undertake the project. Construction on CBN's TV-Radio Complex began in the summer of 1967, with a new office building and color television studios completed in 1968. While it provided additional office space, the TV-Radio Complex's raison d'être was its two new 50x75 foot color television studios, which would have the latest in color television technology[77] and would allow CBN to produce and record its own

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[76] Robertson frequently pointed out that he had not owned a television before he bought the WYAH station, which helped to support his assertion that mainstream television was an unsavory entertainment option for the pious. Mooneyham, "Adult Power: Christian TV for Tidewater."

[77] In this case, the latest quartz lighting to give constant color value for four RCA TK-44 color cameras. "The Parent," Christian Broadcasting Network Brochure, n.d., page 9, Beginnings of CBN Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

programming for distribution across the country. Pat Robertson was quoted in a CBN press release extolling the virtues of color television—particularly its perceived ability to close the gap between VHF and UHF stations:

> Color is the area where U.H.F. really excels V.H.F. television. We plan to program some of the most beautiful color travel adventure films available in the country. A Saturday night hunting and fishing program will have breathtaking color shots from Alaska, India, Africa, the Pacific Ocean, and the American West.[78]

Color television provided WYAH-TV with the opportunity to wow its viewers with its visuals—something that was previously impossible for the station.

This, of course, was a massive financial undertaking. As Robertson explained to the *Virginia Ledger-Star*: "we feel it is necessary to go to color now, both on film and live, since all other area stations plan to go full color by next year."[79] Here, Robertson frames CBN's upgrades as necessary in order to keep up with the proverbial Joneses—justifying the exorbitant cost to his donors and conveying the station's commitment to providing a real alternative to the networks. Robertson fundraised aggressively in order to finance these upgrades, and assured viewers that they would help the station more effectively communicate the Gospel to more people around the country. One could not tell people about the Gospel if they did not tune in, after all, and CBN's inferior picture quality may have caused potential viewers to bypass the channel's offerings.

The addition of two new studios, one designed for live broadcasts and the other for filmed and taped programs, also allowed WYAH to expand its daily programming window from three and a half hours each night (from 7 to 10:30 pm) to six hours a night (from 6 pm to

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[78] "Press Release," October 1, 1967, News Releases 1967 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[79] "Christian Broadcasting Plans Wattage Boost and Color TV," *The Ledger-Star* (Virginia Beach, VA), May 12, 1966, CBN Newspapers 1964-67 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

midnight) in October of 1967. This expanded programming window made space for shows like those color adventure and wildlife shows mentioned above, as well as more news programming.[80] More importantly, the new studios made it possible for CBN to tape its productions (and rent studio time to outside groups), greatly extending its potential influence.

The upgrades also included an FCC-approved boost to the station's transmitting power, up to 175,000 watts transmitting from a 1,049-foot-tall tower.[81] The power boost increased the WYAH tower's range from Williamsburg, VA to the north and Elizabeth City, NC to the south, giving WYAH about a 50-mile range in each direction—improving significantly upon its previous reach.[82] After another successful telethon in 1967, Robertson announced that the station would invest in a transmitter with ten times that power—by 1969 the station transmitted at 2.3 million watts.[83] Similar upgrades were made to CBN's radio station, WXRI, which ran 24 hours a day and was understood by those within the organization as a mere supplement to the television station.[84] In interviews at this time, Robertson professed his desire to eventually be able to reach the entire Eastern seaboard, specifically the cities of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC, explaining that he felt God called him to deliver his message to those cities.[85]

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[80] CBN began testing the waters for less explicitly religious programming in this period.
[81] "Press Release," October 1, 1967, News Releases 1967 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[82] "WYAH-TV Announces Power Boost," July 31, 1967, News Releases 1967 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[83] "The Parent," Christian Broadcasting Network Brochure, n.d., page 9, Beginnings of CBN Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[84] WXRI's programming largely consisted of CBN programs rebroadcast from the television station.
[85] "He Builds TV Station to Spread Gospel," *The Virginian-Pilot*, 1966, Beginnings of CBN Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

By the time the upgrades were complete in 1968, Robertson had built a station that could rival any other with the technology in its production studios. As one glowing report in *Christianity Today* breathlessly declared:

> According to many TV people, [WYAH-TV] is also the best-equipped facility on the east Coast outside of New York City. It boasts four of the latest RCA cameras ($75,000 each) and several videotape machines ($125,000 each), as well as many thousands of dollars' worth of film cameras, projectors, switchers, audio boards, and other sophisticated gadgetry. It even has a computer-like animation programmer that can create cartoons. Two large studios have dimmer capability, something a lot of big secular stations lack. A waterfall comes tumbling out of a mountain scene at the flick of a faucet.[86]

CBN had made it. It could reasonably compete with the local, network-affiliated stations, despite its lower UHF status and limited reach. CBN could now produce programming and distribute it to affiliates and other organizations across the country. By investing in top-of-the-line technology, Robertson had expanded the reach of his once-small station in Portsmouth, Virginia. CBN was not yet a true network, but it had become the most powerful station in the country whose offices were structured around a Prayer Room. Once the TV-Radio Complex was complete, Robertson set to work on his next goal: expanding his network to include more television stations across the country.

Building a Network: Expansion (1968-1977)

The opening of CBN's new TV-Radio Complex heralded a key moment of transition for the network. In January of 1968, CBN had one television station and one radio station to its name. In the next nine years, the network would expand far more rapidly and successfully than many could have predicted. By 1977, on the eve of the network's first nationwide satellite

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[86] Plowman, "Evangelical TV: A Decade of the Tube."

broadcast, CBN owned and operated four television stations, six radio stations, a production company, a construction company, and its own advertising and publicity agencies. Robertson adopted a multi-tiered strategy for CBN's expansion in order to keep the organization sustainable as he took on riskier ventures. CBN's growth occurred during a tumultuous period in American history. The battles over racial discrimination and systemic racism of the Civil Rights movement, the sexual revolution and the growing prominence of second wave feminism, the Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade decision, and destabilizing economic recession all contributed to the belief among many conservatives that American life was changing for the worse in fundamental ways. This social and cultural upheaval of the late 1960s and 1970s served as the backdrop for CBN's expansion, and Pat Robertson frequently invoked the ongoing spiritual "crisis" in America in order to justify his network's expansion.

Expansion in this period happened on several fronts within the network. CBN's home station, WYAH-TV, started incorporating secular, Hollywood-produced programming in its line-up in the early 1970s, broadening its appeal to local audiences as well as the length of its broadcast day. CBN also set its sights on the goal of acquiring additional stations in new markets, fulfilling the promise of the name "Christian Broadcasting Network." CBN bought stations in top markets and assembled an extensive network of affiliates across the United States. Finally, expansion in this period also entailed a broadening of the network's spiritual mission. In the 1970s, other religious networks tried to eclipse CBN's status as the foremost religious network, but they failed because they lacked the production facilities and material resources to do so. CBN marched forward and, by the launch of its satellite network in 1977, CBN was a force to be reckoned with, with substantial influence and reach.

Robertson frequently reassured reporters and readers that CBN *had* to expand in order to stem the ongoing social, moral, and spiritual crisis in American life. A twelve-page press release detailing every feature of CBN's TV-Radio Complex (down to the carpets and furnishings) concluded by stating that these facilities were ultimately built in order to help the nations of the world decide between "Christ or Chaos."[87] In 1969, in a CBN press release describing its annual telethon's success, Robertson predicted that "the 1970's [sic] will usher in tremendous social problems and great pressure is upon us to expand into most communities across our nation."[88] While there were many televangelists who warned their listeners and viewers of coming crises, Robertson believed that his network was powerful enough to intervene on America's behalf.

CBN's rapid growth in the 1970s ensured that, by 1976, Robertson was capable of bringing his message and his concerns about the country to the vast majority of Americans. CBN broadcast a nationwide special, "It's Time To Pray, America!" in September of 1976 that featured both presidential candidates (Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter), as well as other popular Christian celebrities. The event was heavily advertised, and the promotional material promised that the special would reach "over 90% of U.S. households on 218 TV stations."[89] More importantly, the advertisement promised "a TV-Radio Special that is so special it may change the course of American history!"[90] Robertson had effectively built himself a platform capable of confronting the country's so-called crisis head-on. More importantly, Robertson was able to

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[87] This kind of apocalyptic rhetoric was very common among televangelists. "Untitled Press Release," 1968, 11, Press Releases 1968 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[88] "Peninsula Pledges $87,840 To CBN," 1969, News Releases 1969 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[89] "It's Time To Pray, America!" advertisement, *Broadcasting*, Sept. 13, 1976, 39.
[90] Ibid.

continually reiterate his belief that there *was* a spiritual crisis in the US to larger audiences than ever before.

For the leaders at CBN, television was both a contributing factor in the American "crisis" and America's best chance for salvation. Robertson and other CBN executives continually attacked mainstream television throughout this period, arguing that its sex, violence, and "secular humanism" was corrupting the country. In an interview with an Indianapolis-area newspaper, Robertson declared that "the American home has too long been bombarded by a steady diet of violence, sex, and unreality" and that CBN sought to provide an alternative to that type of programming.[91] CBN was not alone in its concerns; in fact, it was part of a much larger chorus protesting television content. Activist campaigns from all parts of the political spectrum were waged against television in the 1960s and 1970s—with marginalized groups demanding more and better representation, while conservative and religious groups demanded that TV be less violent, less sexy, and less profane.[92] Politicians and other leaders could often gain political capital attacking the so-called idiot box, and lawmakers were eager in the early 1970s to find ways to change the Big 3 networks' behavior.

Political leaders and activists adopted several different strategies to address concerns about diversity, sex and violence, and the state of children's programming. After Robert F. Kennedy's assassination in 1968, President Lyndon B. Johnson formed the National Commission

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[91] "Plans to Buy TV Channel 40," *Noblesville Daily Ledger*, October 3, 1969, News Releases 1969 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

[92] Kathryn Montgomery details the efforts of some of these campaigns, including Catholic organizations' protests against *Maude* in the wake of its controversial abortion episode in 1972. See Kathryn Montgomery, *Target Prime Time: Advocacy Groups and the Struggle Over Entertainment Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, which concluded that violence on television must be reduced because of its deleterious effects on society, particularly on children.[93] While the networks temporarily reduced the amount of violent programming featured, the commission's inability to enforce content changes ensured that those changes were short-lived. All of the networks faced staunch criticism in the 1970s amidst alarmist coverage of crimes committed (often by teenagers) that were inspired by things the criminals had seen on television.[94] This was especially true for children's television, which drew much ire for its cartoonish violence. As Heather Hendershot has shown, the children's television industry often self-regulated in order to avoid the kind of outside interference for which activists advocated, with decidedly mixed results.[95] While discussions about how best to stem the tide of television violence continued, other policymakers turned to the problem of diversity (of programming and voices) in television.

Many activists and policymakers hoped that cable would usher in a new age of diverse voices and educational, public affairs programming that could uplift viewers.[96] Even in the 1970s, it was clear that the future of television would hinge on cable and the policies created to regulate it. Prominent journalists, lawmakers, and activists saw the potential of cable television to open up new possibilities for local, independently produced programming. In 1967, for example, FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson explained that he believed that cable could

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[93] Jack Rosenthal, "TV Violence is Assailed, but Drop is Seen," *The New York Times*, Sept. 25, 1969, CBN Newspaper Copies 1964-1967 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[94] See, for example: "Ending Mayhem," *Time*, June 7, 1976, 63; "Did TV Make Him Do It?," *Time*, October 10, 1977, 87-89.
[95] Heather Hendershot, *Saturday Morning Censors: Television Regulation Before the V-Chip* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).
[96] Megan Mullen, *The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003), 68.

foster localism, especially if it was regulated properly.[97] Ralph Lee Smith's series of pieces for *The Nation*, later published in book form as *The Wired Nation*, hoped that cable could be used "for social good."[98] Activists for marginalized groups sought to create standards requiring that public access channels and locally produced programming become a requirement for cable systems. The formation of PBS was also reflective of the general sense that television needed to be improved. As Laurie Ouellette has argued, PBS represented a liberal mission to bring "quality" and "enlightenment" to an otherwise "crass" popular culture.[99] The debates about cable in the 1970s acknowledged that something was wrong with American network television, a sentiment that Pat Robertson and his fellow religious broadcasters shared. Cable ultimately disappointed many of the people who wanted it to intervene in the so-called emptiness of network programming, but the optimism it engendered indicates that Pat Robertson and his compatriots were not wrong about some viewers' desire to see an "alternative" form of television.

CBN Productions

Robertson and those at CBN endeavored to bring interested viewers alternative television as efficiently as possible. Given the geographical reach and financial resources of WYAH-TV, CBN's ability to provide what Pat Robertson called a "satisfactory alternative to rock and roll music and the vast wasteland of commercial television" was still limited.[100] However, with the

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[97] Mullen 69.
[98] Ralph Lee Smith, *The Wired Nation: Cable TV, the Electronic Communications Highway* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 98.
[99] Laurie Ouellette, *Viewers Like You?: How Public Television Failed the People* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 4.
[100] Harry Nash, "Gospel Outlet to Russians, Arabs Sought," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, May 11, 1969, News Releases 1969 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

new capabilities of the TV-Radio Complex, CBN could now tape its programming and distribute it across the country. Thus, in the early 1970s, much of CBN's focus was dedicated to bolstering CBN Productions. As CBN's Production Manager Jerry Horstmann explained in *RCA Broadcast News*, the biggest differences between local and network production were the lighting, sets, and audio quality.[101] By investing in top-of-the-line equipment, CBN put itself in the position to provide a credible alternative to programs produced by the networks and network-affiliated stations.

A shifting regulatory climate also aided CBN's production efforts. New rules, including the Financial Interest and Syndication Rule and the Primetime Access Rule, opened up space for independent producers on network-owned stations. The FCC enacted both of these rules as attempts to make television "better" by encouraging independent production and more voices. CBN's efforts to break into the programming business were also made feasible by the FCC's 1972 requirement that cable operators must purchase independently produced programming.[102] The result of lots of finagling between different interested parties about when and if cable should be allowed to expand into markets already served by traditional broadcast television, this requirement caused cable operators little inconvenience, since they had the ability to carry many more channels than over-the-air television did. These rules were not designed to help religious broadcasters specifically, but CBN certainly benefited from them.

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[101] "Faith Television Makes Its Mark," *RCA Broadcast News*, February 1974, 8, Magazines Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[102] For more on all of these regulations, see Hilmes, 260-285.

Once completed, CBN's TV-Radio Complex quickly became an incredibly busy place. By 1973, CBN's offices were busy producing programming eighteen hours a day, six days a week.[103] CBN produced twelve shows weekly (some of which produced five shows a week) by 1974, and viewer donations covered the majority of these costs as CBN entered more and more markets. That meteoric growth was made possible by CBN successfully recruiting a large network of affiliated stations and cable systems willing to purchase their locally produced, independent programming. CBN signed its first affiliate station in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1972, and many others soon followed.[104] CBN was aggressive in recruiting affiliate stations with its syndication packages, and after one year of effort CBN had 30 or 40 affiliates in cities like Houston, Detroit, Baltimore, Roanoke, Hartford, Greenville, SC, and regions like central California.[105] By 1977, CBN had 130 television affiliates and over 150 radio affiliates across the country.[106]

In addition to the opening of the cable market, CBN's productions were also very appealing to independent stations that had time to fill on their schedules. Unlike typical syndication agreements (in which the station pays for the right to broadcast a series, and then keeps the profits from ad sales for that program), CBN instead paid stations for time on their schedule, and CBN counted on donations made by viewers to cover those costs. In 1977, CBN spent a reported 8.9 million dollars to place *The 700 Club* and its syndication packages on

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[103] "Faith Television Makes Its Mark," 8-9.
[104] "'The 700 Club': Television That Cares," *The Virginian-Pilot Special Edition*, n.d., P10, CBN Newspaper Clippings 1976-1978 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[105] "New Dallas TV Station Okayed," *The Arlington Citizen-Journal* (Arlington, TX), March 27, 1973; John Huey," DeKalb T.V. Station Is Atlanta Home of 'Big Time Religion'," *The DeKalb New Era* (Decatur, GA), December 27, 1971, CBN Newspaper Clippings 1971-75, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[106] "Pat Robertson and CBN: The Man, The Mission, and the Medium," *Broadcasting* 94.10, March 6, 1978, 56.

stations across the country.[107] This arrangement was obviously beneficial for station owners, who could easily schedule CBN programs in non-prime-time slots and make a nice profit. It also suited CBN, whose prerogative was to spread the Gospel and other alternative programing as widely as possible while bringing in more donations to CBN and *The 700 Club*. Unlike other religious broadcasters, who only syndicated individual programs, CBN also curated four- and six-hour programming blocks for interested affiliates.

The 700 Club served as the anchor for all of CBN's programming blocks—it was Pat Robertson's platform and the organization's primary moneymaker. Prior to the debut of the TV-Radio Complex, *The 700 Club* was recorded live and had a variable run time. This allowed Robertson to bring a revivalist energy to the program, extending the program as long as he wanted. Once CBN secured deals to distribute *The 700 Club* beyond Virginia Beach, however, the production had to become more routinized. The show was limited to two hours, with edited 90-minute and 60-minute versions available to outlets that did not have the time or desire to purchase CBN's full programming package. *The 700 Club* sacrificed some of its spiritual, Pentecostal spontaneity in order to be able to sell the show to affiliates, but still remained a very popular program. *The Jim and Tammy Show*, a children's program featuring puppets, games, and children's stories with moral lessons, also built a significant local following.[108] *Jim and Tammy* was the first CBN show to be syndicated, with CBN securing a deal with the US military to air

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[107] CBN reportedly paid 500,000 dollars a year for a *700 Club* time slot on New York City's Channel 1. "Pat Robertson and CBN: The Man, The Mission, and the Medium," 58.
[108] According to host Jim Bakker, the program regularly pulled 2,000 letters a week. Plowman, "Evangelical TV: A Decade of the Tube."

the program at 83 military installations around the world.[109] CBN interpreted *Jim and Tammy*'s local success and the Army's interest as a sign that audiences, particularly parents, were anxious for alternative children's programming. In a 1968 press release, CBN announced that they hoped that *Jim and Tammy* would be picked up by independent stations and slotted into the early Saturday morning time slots in order to serve as "an alternative to the current crop of bizarre cartoons which now are tumbling in rapid succession from our home television screens."[110] CBN's wish eventually came true, and Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker became popular enough to leave CBN and start their own version of *The 700 Club* (called *The PTL Club*) on Ted Turner's Charlotte station.[111]

While *The 700 Club* and *The Jim and Tammy Show* were CBN's marquee shows in the early 1970s, the network produced more than fifty hours of religious programming each week and syndicated thirty of those hours.[112] CBN's other programming was primarily Christian talk or panel shows, music variety shows, and children's programs. Programs like *Charisma,* which featured Christian personalities, sports stars, and businessmen, proved a popular hybrid of entertaining and spiritual content. CBN's musical programs included *Right On*, a Black gospel music program with high ratings in several big markets, and *The New Directions,* a colorful half-

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[109] "Puppet Show Syndicated," *The Virginian-Pilot* (Virginia Beach, VA), March 9, 1969, News Releases 1969 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[110] "Tidewater Network Expands to Atlanta," n.d., News Releases 1968 Folder, CBN Information Archive, RULSCA.
[111] The Bakkers debuted *The PTL Club* in 1974, and launched the PTL ("Praise the Lord" or "People That Love") satellite network in 1977. Their network was quite successful and expanded to include a massive production complex and a theme park/resort, before the enterprise was ultimately undone by scandal. In 1987, Jim Bakker's former secretary came forward and revealed that Bakker had coerced her into sex and then paid her 115,000 dollars in hush money. That scandal was compounded by the later revelation that the Bakkers had used their ministry's resources to fund their opulent lifestyles. Lloyd Grove, "Scandal Shakes Bakkers' Empire; Followers Fear Widespread Impact on Evangelicals," *Washington Post*, March 21, 1987, A1.
[112] "Faith Television Makes Its Mark," 8-9.

hour program featuring vibrant young entertainers bringing "Jesus music" to a wide television audience.[113] Its preacher-driven programming included shows like *The Bible with Pat Robertson* and *Minister's Forum*, a panel show with local reverends that addressed pressing questions for the church like "what is the church's attitude for admitting all races?" and "what is the Christian view of sex?".[114] CBN's outreach efforts included *The Deaf Hear*, a program designed to include hearing-impaired viewers. CBN's had several children's programs, including a WYAH-TV produced version of *Bozo the Clown* that invited audiences of schoolchildren to enjoy the clown's antics.[115] Finally, CBN's syndicated programming blocks also included public service announcements (PSAs), a priority for the network.[116]

CBN's practice of packaging larger programming blocks of Christian television was innovative for its time, and very successful. CBN's donations grew as its network grew, and partnering with affiliates required far less spending than establishing owned-and-operated stations did. The start-up costs for stations alone could be astronomical, particularly if the station's equipment was in disrepair or hopelessly outdated. Acquiring affiliates was economically much more efficient and gave CBN a way to reach more people than had once seemed possible. By 1976, *The 700 Club* could be seen in twenty-two of the top twenty-five U.S. markets, and CBN programming was available to over 60 percent of viewers in the United

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[113] Ibid 14.
[114] Unfortunately, there is no extant record of how the participants answered those questions. "For Immediate Release: Minister's Forum," n.d., News Releases 1968 Folder, CBN Information Archive, RULSCA.
[115] Bozo's creators franchised the character so that individual stations and producers could create their own Bozo shows.
[116] CBN also ran PSAs on Sundays on its WYAH-TV station in lieu of producing new programming and requiring employees to work on Sundays. It was network policy on WYAH and CBN's other stations to air one PSA every hour. "Faith Television Makes Its Mark," 14.

States.[117] CBN's affiliates proved to play a critical role in CBN's mission to reach as many Americans as possible with their spiritual message.

The Stations

The business of paying affiliates to broadcast your programming was fairly straightforward. Owning a television station, however, was another matter entirely. Robertson's ambitions for his network included owning and operating television stations across the country, and he set about accomplishing that task as the TV-Radio Complex neared completion. For years, the "Christian Broadcasting Network" had been more of a hope than a reality, since a single television station and radio station did not amount to much of a "network." The year 1968 marked a turning point in CBN's expansion, as the network began to add stations beyond Virginia Beach. That winter, Continental Telephone donated its network of five radio stations in upstate New York to CBN. That year also brought FCC approval for CBN to take the last channel allocated in the Atlanta area. It was not until 1971, when CBN's Atlanta station WHAE-TV finally began broadcasting, after years of delays, that Robertson's network dream became a reality.[118] Realizing that dream, however, required a complex negotiation between promoting a Christian message and competing in the capitalist marketplace of commercial television.

Unlike CBN's international stations in Bogota, Colombia and Jerusalem, CBN's American stations were not built solely to evangelize. They were, instead, designed to evangelize

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[117] "'The 700 Club': Television That Cares," *The Virginian-Pilot Special Edition*, n.d., 10, CBN Newspaper Clippings 1976-1978 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

[118] There is no record of what exactly caused the various delays, but it is most likely that building the TV-Radio Complex had significantly depleted CBN's funds, forcing them to delay their plans for the Atlanta station until they brought in more donations.

and entertain. Reconciling those two goals proved to be a challenge for CBN, which struggled in this period to maintain its evangelical fervor while also drawing large enough ratings to compete. In the 1970s, CBN bought three stations in top markets that significantly broadened the network's reach.[119] Atlanta (WHAE-TV) was a logical choice for CBN's second owned-and-operated station (O&O). The city was a top-ten media market with a strong tradition of evangelicalism. Firmly ensconced in the Bible Belt, Atlanta's location was ideal. WHAE-TV reached two million people in Georgia and Alabama, and improvements to its equipment in 1974 expanded its reach even further.[120] The station had a 50,000 dollar operating budget in 1972, which was hardly enough to produce any top-notch local programming.[121] Instead, WHAE-TV relied on WYAH-TV for practically all of its programming, essentially serving as a "repeater station" for CBN.

CBN's third station, KXTX-TV, went on the air in 1973 as Channel 33 in Dallas. This station's origin story was similar to WYAH's—the original studios were set up in an abandoned and vandalized building, requiring CBN to make significant improvements to the facility and its equipment.[122] A year later, Doubleday Broadcasting decided to get out of the broadcasting business in Dallas, and gifted their channel allocation (Channel 39) and superior studio space to

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[119] Not every effort to acquire UHF stations was successful for CBN. In 1969, CBN announced its intention to purchase a station in Noblesville, Indiana (outside of Indianapolis), but that deal fell apart and a different local preacher ended up buying the station. CBN also applied for a UHF license in Richmond, VA, in 1978, but the organization's move to cable and satellite likely made CBN withdraw that appeal. "Pat Robertson and CBN: The Man, The Mission, and the Medium," 58; "Plans to Buy TV Channel 40 Announced," *Noblesville Daily Ledger* (Noblesville, IN), October 3, 1969.

[120] "Atlanta," The Christian Broadcasting Network Brochure, n.d., 21, Beginnings of CBN Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

[121] Plowman, "Evangelical TV: A Decade on the Tube."

[122] "Atlanta, Dallas: Partners in CBN Network," *The Virginian-Pilot Special Edition*, n.d., P11, CBN Newspaper Clippings 1976-1978 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

CBN in order to receive a valuable tax break.[123] This gift was ultimately worth millions of dollars to CBN, which quickly became a scrappy competitor in the Dallas market. CBN's Dallas station ultimately emerged as the most successful of CBN's O&Os, and by 1975 was the most successful Christian television station in the world.[124] While CBN's success in Dallas was certainly encouraging, Robertson had loftier goals in mind.

As early as 1968, Pat Robertson professed his desire to build a television network that spanned the East Coast of the United States. As he explained to reporters,

> Though our principal ministry right now is to the million or so people in Tidewater, Virginia, I have a particular burden eventually to reach the heavily populated East Coast of the United States with the gospel of Christ. Key cities would include Washington, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, which form with Norfolk what is called Megalopolis.[125]

In order to realize that dream, Robertson forged ahead and acquired FCC approval for a station in Boston in 1972. However, the Northeast posed a particular challenge for CBN. As one Boston reporter explained, there was a strange juxtaposition between the "staid New England, with its starched Protestants and strait-laced Roman Catholics" and CBN's brand of evangelicalism.[126] The station, WXNE-TV, did not go on air until October 1, 1977, after five years of delays caused by CBN's struggles to find a transmitter and suitable studio space.[127] CBN ultimately spent two million dollars just to get WXNE-TV ready to broadcast, and the station struggled mightily to

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[123] "Nonprofit Group is Given Doubleday's UHF," *Broadcasting*, July 2, 1973, 28.
[124] William Martin, "Heavenly Hosts," *Texas Monthly*, March 1979, 124, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[125] "Million-Dollar Gospel TV Facility Is Sought," *The News-Dispatch* (Michigan City, IN), January 6, 1968, News Releases 1968 Folder, CBN Information Archive, RULSCA.
[126] Craig Waters, "God, Man, and Channel 25," *Boston*, n.d., 114, CBN Newspapers Photocopies (General) Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[127] Robert A. McLean, "Hub Getting 8th Channel," *Boston Globe*, July 23, 1977. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

gain traction in its early years.[128] WXNE-TV was CBN's first station located outside of the Bible Belt, and the station manager himself noted that he had encountered more skepticism from journalists than he had anticipated.[129] While Boston's station struggled the most in its market, all of CBN's O&Os operated at a loss in this period, which exempted them from paying taxes.[130] Nevertheless, all three of these stations eventually proved to be solid investments for CBN.

Purchasing O&Os was not a financially-driven decision for CBN. It was not strictly necessary for CBN to own more stations in order to be successful, especially since their stations were far less likely to be lucrative ventures than the major networks' were. CBN bought stations because they desired complete content control. When CBN's blocks of programming aired on its various affiliate stations, CBN itself had essentially no say in when the block was scheduled or what it preceded and followed. The network's programming frequently aired in the less popular hours, often in the Sunday morning so-called "ghetto time block," where CBN's shows' proximity to other religious programming limited their potential to reach viewers who could enjoy a Christian talk show but not straightforward hours of "preaching and teaching."[131] It could easily be sandwiched between two programs that did not meet CBN's strict programming standards.[132] CBN had strict rules for the type of content that was allowed on the channel, as I discuss in more detail in chapter 3, but CBN had no way to enforce those standards when it aired

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[128] Waters 163.
[129] Station manager Bill Knight was wary of Craig Waters's questions because he had had "very bad press with most of the media in Boston." Ibid.
[130] Ibid 164.
[131] "The Great Alternative," *The Saturday Evening Post,* May/June 1977, 72, CBN Newspaper Photocopies (1976-1979) Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[132] WYAH-TV once censored an episode of *The Brady Bunch* because it included "a Tiki god statue that brought bad luck," for example. "Family-Oriented Programming Is Aim," *The Bee* (Danville, VA), August 1978, CBN Newspaper Photocopies (General) Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

its programming on other stations. In order to truly counteract the sex and violence that Robertson and other CBN executives so frequently objected to, it was necessary to control every aspect of a station's schedule.

However, owning stations in competitive, top-ten US markets exacerbated one of the tensions inherent in the US's commercial television system: making money is an absolute imperative. CBN pulled in more and more in donations every year, but even that was not enough to cover the network's ballooning costs. In order to offset the cost of buying a station, upgrading its equipment, and hiring experienced staff to run it, CBN's O&Os had to start incorporating commercial advertising. Even though those advertising profits only amounted to twenty percent of CBN's income, accepting any advertising at all fundamentally changed how the network did business. Suddenly, it became more difficult to tell CBN apart from the major networks' affiliates. On the one hand, this was a sort of victory for CBN, and a sign that they had achieved some sense of parity with their competitors. On the other hand, CBN had abandoned one of the principles that its executives had once used to argue for their superiority over its mainstream competition.

WYAH-TV, in the beginning, had resisted any intrusion from advertisers, and the decision to begin to use commercial advertising in 1970 muddied the waters between the network's Christian mission and its capitalist imperative. Some programs remained without advertising, including *The 700 Club*, but most other shows on these stations started encouraging viewers to spend money on goods and services. CBN had to compromise its ideals by advertising in order to achieve its ideal level of ideological control over its stations' content. For Robertson and CBN, the trade-off was well worth it. CBN was not a top ad buy by any means, but the additional income from commercial advertising helped support the network's efforts to expand,

and CBN could use decades-old reruns of secular shows to build their credibility as broadcasters who understood the importance of entertainment that was safe for the whole family.

This significant strategy shift did not go unnoticed by CBN partners, viewers, and even CBN's newer employees in the Norfolk area; in fact, their complaints and questions about the changes to WYAH-TV provoked a response from CBN's Vice President of the Television Group, Bob Johnson. In an article meant to soothe CBN loyalists' concerns, Johnson first explained that "secular programming is an important arm of the ministry" because of its ability to bring non-Christians into the CBN fold.[133] Johnson further explained why commercials had become a part of the CBN viewing experience:

> Let's talk about commercials first. The license fees to acquire rights to play our religious programs are quite expensive and, naturally, we are in competition with other secular stations in the market to acquire these rights. In order to pay for the programs without being a drain on the ministry's other sources of income, we sell commercials. The Lord appears to be blessing this effort also, because as we acquire more viewers our commercials become more valuable. Thus, the owned and operated stations will soon become more valuable. Thus, the owned and operated stations will soon become a very viable factor in putting considerable dollars back into the ministry for further outreach of the gospel.[134]

Johnson here works to connect every business decision back to the ministry of CBN and building the organization's ability to spread the Gospel. Commercials on CBN's O&Os essentially serve to counterbalance the high fees that CBN paid to distribute its religious programming across the country. By Johnson's calculation, CBN had to compromise its ideals in order to be able to continue its ministry across the country and around the world. As the economics of running the

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[133] Bob Johnson, "On the Subject of Secular Programming and Commercials," typewritten reprint, 1976, Continental WYAH Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[134] Ibid.

network became more and more complicated, the decisions that CBN faced became less and less clear-cut. CBN's mission was much more clear in its early days as one station with all-religious, low-budget programming—but keeping up with their competitors proved to be a drain on their resources and their moral authority.

With the acquisition of stations in major markets and the ballooning growth of CBN Productions, CBN had embraced many of the logics of commercial broadcasting in order to ensure their own survival and extend their influence. While CBN would frequently present itself as the friendlier, more morally upright alternative to mainstream television, that image was tarnished by a noteworthy scandal in 1977. CBN's Boston station (WXNE-TV) came under fire almost immediately upon its debut for an ad that the station circulated in trade magazines in order to attract advertisers. This controversy demonstrated very clearly how difficult it was to balance a Christian ethos with the need to build a station that could attract advertisers.

WXNE's scandalous ad featured a young, white boy holding his dog and wearing a baseball uniform while smiling widely and holding one fist triumphantly in the air. The ad copy loudly states "Kid Power is coming to Boston" before continuing:

> If you're selling, Charlie's Mom is buying. But you've got to sell Charlie first. His allowance is only 50¢ a week but his buying power is an American phenomenon. He's not only tight with his Mom, but he has a way with his Dad, his Grandma, and Aunt Hariett, too. When Charlie sees something he likes, he usually gets it. Just ask General Mills, McDonalds or Mattel.[135]

The ad's copy continued by reminding potential advertisers that "Charlie" would love watching the reruns available on the Boston station. By encouraging advertisers to target children directly,

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[135] "Kid Power Is Coming to Boston" advertisement, *Broadcasting*, August 29, 1977, 75.

CBN became embroiled in a national controversy. The consumer protection chairman of the Federal Trade Commission, Michael Pertschuk, publicly reprimanded the network and warned that TV advertising that was possibly harmful to children would be strictly limited, if not banned outright, adding that "there is a basic question whether an ad directed at a 3-year-old is acceptable."[136] The ad copy, which was drawn up in the Virginia Beach offices, demonstrates how cynical branches of CBN had become about its position in the television hierarchy. Activists pushing for "kidvid" regulation designed to protect young consumers seized upon this ad as a perfect example of the ways that advertisers knowingly seek to manipulate young consumers.[137] For its part, CBN responded to Pertschuk's complaints by pointing out that they had met the minimum legal standard for keeping its broadcast license and refused to apologize.[138] Even as the network maintained that it was morally superior to its competitors, it nevertheless pushed its boundaries by leveraging its carefully cultivated family audience to make gains with advertisers. Ultimately, CBN's bid for station ownership and control over content ended up shifting the network's priorities steadily toward commercialism.

Throughout CBN's history, any time they made a decision that they predicted could be unpopular with their devoted Christian viewers, CBN executives cited their ratings in order to ward off potential critiques. For example, Robertson explained WYAH's embrace of Hollywood-produced reruns by claiming that ratings for the station had jumped four hundred

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[136] Robert McLean, "Kid Ad Issue About to Boil," *Boston Globe*, October 26, 1977. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
[137] Larry Kramer, "TV Ads Aimed at Children Not a Sugar-Coated Issue," *Washington Post*, February 20, 1979.
[138] William A. Henry, "Television & Radio: One Station's Programming," *Boston Globe*, January 5, 1978. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

percent in two weeks.[139] CBN executive Bob Johnson similarly reminded concerned employees and viewers that WYAH was now viewed by 55 percent of households in its market, rather than the 10 percent it had captured during its all-religious programming phase.[140] Atlanta's WHAE-TV saw a strikingly similar ratings jump of four hundred percent when it began airing popular reruns.[141] Clearly, family-friendly reruns of golden oldies were more popular with viewers than CBN's homegrown programming. This line of argumentation was deeply ironic, however, since the major networks used similar logic to defend their inclusion of edgy and controversial series. Boston's WXNE-TV's station manager, for example, lamented that the famously controversial *Charlie's Angels* drew more ratings in a single episode than CBN did in its entire day.[142] The Big 3 networks were also quick to point out that, while lawmakers or concerned citizens may complain about their programming, the ratings did not lie.[143]

The period of expansion between 1968 and 1977 shaped CBN's future in critical ways. While the company continued to produce high volumes of Christian programming for its own stations and its affiliates, Christian programming was no longer CBN's bread and butter. Instead, building a network required that CBN embrace certain aspects of commercialism, particularly secular programming produced by their Hollywood nemeses and advertising designed to make children and adults spend money on material things. In other words, CBN had learned how to be

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[139] Waters 164.
[140] Bob Johnson, "On the Subject of Secular Programming and Commercials," typewritten reprint, 1976, Continental WYAH Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[141] John Huey," DeKalb T.V. Station Is Atlanta Home of 'Big Time Religion'," *The DeKalb New Era* (Decatur, GA), December 27, 1971, CBN Newspaper Clippings 1971-75, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[142] Waters 163.
[143] For more on how the networks' justified their programming decisions, see Elana Levine, *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 18-19.

good at television. Its stations were relatively small operations, but in order to compete and draw eyeballs away from the bigger stations, CBN had to adopt, and occasionally adapt, the strategies of its competitors. It was clear by 1977 that Pat Robertson's ambitions for CBN had grown beyond what anyone could have imagined in 1960. With new technologies on the horizon, CBN took the lessons it learned in this expansion period and astutely applied them to its next venture: satellite broadcasting.

Serving 700 Million: Satellite and Cable (1977-1980)

The late 1970s were a moment of explosive growth for CBN, as the advent of satellite technology and the deregulation of cable television transformed the network's strategies. The emergence of satellite and cable as television delivery systems fundamentally changed the scale and scope of CBN's mission. Satellite made it financially feasible to reach millions more people around the world, and satellite and cable together made it possible for CBN to imagine itself as a serious alternative to the Big 3 networks in the US. All religious broadcasters benefited from these new technologies, but the Christian Broadcasting Network was best positioned to capitalize on their potential to reach new audiences across the country and around the world. Between the launch of their satellite network in 1977 and their cable channel in 1980, Robertson's vision for his network changed several times. Robertson was determined to make CBN into a viable alternative to the mainstream television industry, and he experimented in this period until he struck upon the best way to counter the insidious influence of sex and violence on television.

CBN wasted no time jumping into satellite broadcasting. In the summer of 1976, the network experimented with a West Coast telethon that was transmitted from CBN's newly installed equipment to earth stations in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Tacoma. Those earth stations then fed signals to nine stations scattered across California, Oregon, Washington,

Nevada, and Arizona. CBN claimed that the potential audience for the telethon was 30 million people, and the network ultimately brought in 2.6 million dollars in pledges to *The 700 Club*.[144] This telethon was also made available, free of charge, to all cable systems that had satellite receivers. Five cable systems (in South Dakota, Kentucky, New Jersey, and Alabama) picked it up.[145] The telethon's success bolstered Robertson's belief that the new fundraising possibilities satellite offered would be transformative for CBN. For the first time, Robertson could realistically imagine broadcasting live across the country.[146] The telethon also established an important precedent for CBN—the network would happily provide its programming to local cable operators for free.

The economics of satellite were much friendlier for televangelists than the traditional method of building a network, even though installing satellite technology required substantial initial investment. Under the previous model, religious broadcasters had bought time on affiliate stations, which could cost as much as $500,000 for an hour-long slot.[147] Now, CBN and other religious broadcasters had the option of offering their satellite networks free of charge to cable operators desperate for additional programming. Happily, for Robertson and his team, CBN was in a strong financial position, courtesy of its ever-increasing viewer donations. Unlike other, smaller networks, CBN could afford to sign a six-year, six-million-dollar lease with RCA to

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[144] Ethel A. Steadman, "Religious Show Via Satellite," *The Virginian-Pilot* (Virginia Beach, VA), August 2, 1976, CBN Newspaper Photocopies 1968-70 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[145] "Religious Telethon Takes Heavenly Path," *Broadcasting* 91.7, Aug 16, 1976, 41. ProQuest.
[146] This telethon was the first that aired live on the West Coast, as previous telethons had appeared on affiliate stations on tape delay. *The 700 Club* and its telethons would often air days, and sometimes even weeks, later. Given that part of the show was dedicated to Robertson speaking directly to the viewers at home and acknowledging their problems, healing their illnesses, and supporting their desire for a closer connection with God, a tape delay significantly stifled the show's affective potential.
[147] "Pat Robertson and CBN: The Man, The Mission, and the Medium," 58.

secure access to a transponder on the company's first commercially available space satellite station. CBN spent as much as 400,000 dollars on each of its first earth stations, which were strategically located in Philadelphia, Washington, Chicago, Atlanta, Dallas, Los Angeles, and Norfolk.[148] While the price of earth stations dropped as the technology became more readily available, CBN paid close to 200,000 dollars to build additional earth stations across the country, investing twelve million dollars to purchase sixty additional stations in 1978.[149] Even with those prohibitive costs, satellite technology was still a much cheaper way to broadcast live across the country than the landlines that the major networks had paid to lease for decades.[150]

After the ink dried on their six-year contract with RCA, CBN immediately announced their new satellite network. The CBN Satellite Network officially launched on April 29, 1977, with forty-seven hours of religious and specialty programming a week, and quickly upgraded to 24/7 service four months later. The CBN Satellite Network was an entity unto itself; while CBN's O&Os continued to broadcast a mixture of secular and spiritual programming, the satellite network's early schedule was comprised entirely of shows designed to tell the world about Christ, including *The 700 Club*, *The Ross Bagley Show,* and Robert Schuller's *Hour of Power*. CBN produced a number of shows for the channel, but the bulk of its schedule in the satellite service's first few years was made up of programs from outside producers, namely, independent televangelists like Jerry Falwell, Oral Roberts, and Jimmy Swaggert.[151] The CBN

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[148] M.G. "Pat" Robertson, "Technology for Christian Communicators," *Religious Broadcasting*, October/November 1978, 29, Magazines Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[149] CBN planned to lease the majority of these earth stations back to their affiliates, while owning others outright. "Pat Robertson and CBN: The Man, the Mission, and the Medium," 57.
[150] Before satellite, CBN bicycled tapes of their programs to their affiliates rather than leasing landlines. Mullen 117.
[151] "CBN Satellite Services Continues Meteoric Rise with Recognition of Five Millionth Cable Household," February 9, 1979, "News from CBN" April 1978-Feb. 1979 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

Satellite Network was built, in other words, as a religious network, and it aired a steady stream of inspirational series. Robertson initially wished to promote CBN, particularly *The 700 Club* and its telethons, to the larger audience satellite promised.

CBN also offered its satellite network for free to cable systems across the country—with the hope that viewers would donate to CBN to offset their costs. Cable operators, even those who did not necessarily approve of CBN's ideological stance and religious views, were eager to have as much programming on their systems as possible in order to convince people to subscribe. CBN's satellite network had another advantage as well, which was that local cable operators could point to the channel as an example of the kind of "public service" and diversification of television that their cable systems provided, in their continuing bid to convince regulators that allowing cable to spread would ultimately benefit the public and the consumer. One cable operator in Arlington, Virginia, for example, claimed to the *Washington Post* that CBN was available to address their customers' "spiritual needs."[152] There was pushback against this notion, especially since the most successful religious networks were all run by evangelical Christians, but CBN nevertheless became an early staple of basic cable packages.

CBN officials loved to say that their network was capable of reaching more people in one hour than were even alive during Jesus's time.[153] They were also quick to point out that their use of technology made their method of evangelizing more efficient than that of traditional missionaries spreading the gospel in foreign lands. For Robertson, CBN's size was commensurate with the network's mission:

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[152] Sandra G. Boodman, "An Unexpected Coup for Cable Television," *Washington Post,* July 10, 1980. LexisNexis.
[153] "Pat Robertson and CBN: The Man, the Mission, and the Medium," 56.

> The issue is not success or size, but service. How many people do you want to serve? If you want to serve a hundred, your budget will be very modest. If you want to serve 700 million like we do, then your budget will be larger. The per capita expenditure won't be any more, but the total expenses of reaching those people will be.[154]

CBN's satellite network was designed to reach as many people as humanly possible. By the end of 1979, the CBN Satellite Network reached the second most households across the US (at seven million, trailing only Ted Turner's WTBS) and was broadcast by over 1,000 cable systems.[155] CBN programming was available to over eighty percent of the United States.[156] In a scant few years, Robertson and his team had assembled what the *New York Times* rightly called "one of the most modern satellite broadcasting systems in existence."[157] CBN was able to keep up with, and often surpass, independent broadcasters like Ted Turner who launched their own secular satellite services in this period.

To commemorate the debut of the satellite network, CBN produced a special celebrating the network's history and its future as a satellite-powered global powerhouse. The broadcast featured live telecasts from five continents before closing the celebration with a symbolic live shot of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.[158] CBN proudly announced that this first broadcast had a potential audience of 700 million people—and proclaimed its desire to reach each and every

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[154] Phyllis Mather Rice, "Interview with Pat Robertson," *Your Church,* May/June 1979, 11, Magazines Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[155] Les Brown, "From the Air: Programs by Satellite and Cable," *New York Times*, February 17, 1980, CBN Newspaper Clippings (1980) Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[156] "CBN Announces Joint Venture with KTLA-TV for Installation of Satellite Earth Station," February 8, 1979, "News From CBN" April 1978-Feb. 1979 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[157] McDowell, "Religious Networks Blossom."
[158] Many evangelicals believe that Jesus is prophesied to return to the Mount of Olives. Martin, "Video Evangelism."

one of them.[159] This moment captures the essence of Robertson's philosophy in the first moments of satellite: he wanted to use this new technology to reach places around the world that had simply been inaccessible before. In order to use satellite most effectively, however, CBN would need to once again upgrade its headquarters.

International Communications Center

Less than ten years after the debut of CBN's renovated studios, satellite technology and the infrastructure necessary to run a satellite network necessitated yet another upgrade to CBN's facilities. To that end, on December 31, 1975, CBN purchased 142 acres of land in Virginia Beach and announced its plan for both a new International Communications Center (ICC) and the campus of the newly announced CBN University.[160] CBN broke ground on the project on June 5, 1976, and construction began exactly one year later.[161] When the project was finally completed on October 6, 1979, over 6,000 people flocked to the dedication ceremony, which featured a keynote address by Billy Graham and videotaped messages of support from world leaders.[162] The dedication was, of course, broadcast across the country and around the world via CBN's satellite system.

The International Communications Center itself cost a reported twenty million dollars, and the entire complex cost a whopping fifty million dollars. Its design invokes the architecture

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[159] "CBN Dedicates Production Complex with Advanced, Satellite Technology," *Religious Broadcasting,* October/November 1979, 5-6, Magazines Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[160] According to Robertson, he was inspired to build the complex while eating lunch at the Disneyland Grand Hotel. Robertson founded CBN University (later renamed Regent University) with the express goal of producing Christian media makers to challenge "mainstream" approaches to media production. "CBN Center: Profile of a Prophecy," (CBN University Press: Virginia Beach, VA, 1979), International Communications Center Dedication and Ground Breaking Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[161] Ibid.
[162] "CBN Dedicates Production Complex with Advanced, Satellite Technology."

of Colonial Williamsburg and it is built in the shape of a cross, with a television studio at the end of each wing of the building. Its construction was far from economical, as multiple architects tried and failed to dissuade Robertson from using the impractical cross shape.[163] The 170,000 square foot building includes four television studios, a recording studio, 54 telephone counseling booths, offices, and a prayer chapel. The prayer chapel sits at the heart of the Center, with a large wooden cross suspended from the domed ceiling, where many staff members gather every day at noon to pray together. CBN officials declared that the new Center was the "most lavish broadcasting facilities outside of New York and Los Angeles," a statement that was difficult to dispute.[164]

The ICC's cavernous studios were designed to play to a worldwide audience, with CBN planning to produce more original and live programming than ever before. Each studio was built to accommodate a live audience of 300 people, and the studios' size was comparable to those at NBC and CBS.[165] Understandably awestruck as he toured the facilities, reporter Larry Bonko, who had chronicled CBN's rise via his television column in the local newspaper, wrote that:

> Studio 7 is a cavern. It is the Grand Canyon with a roof. You could lose a herd of elephants in there. Studio 7 is enormous. Studio 6 is enormous. Studio 8 is just plain big. So is Studio 9. Overwhelming. The Christian Broadcasting Network's brand spanking new $20-million center in Virginia Beach…is overwhelming.[166]

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[163] Larry Bonko, "Slickest TV Studios This Side of Heaven," *The Ledger-Star*, (Virginia Beach, VA), September 28, 1979, CBN Newspaper Photocopies (1979-1982) Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[164] I visited the Center recently, and it is still quite impressive, thirty years after its debut. Karlyn Barker, "Christian Broadcaster Dedicates University in Virginia," *Washington Post,* October 2, 1980.
[165] "CBN International Center Fulfills Dream of First Colonists," *The Virginian-Pilot Special Edition*, n.d., CBN Newspaper Clippings 1976-1978 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[166] Larry Bonko, "Slickest TV Studios This Side of Heaven," *The Ledger-Star* (Virginia Beach, VA), September 28, 1979, CBN Newspaper Photocopies (1979-1982) Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

The sheer size of the complex spoke to Robertson's ever-growing ambitions for the network. For a ministry with a fifty-eight million dollar operating budget in 1978, the Center was a tremendous financial gamble, but one that Robertson was confident that viewers would support.

While the ICC kicked off a new era for evangelization with its new satellites and potential worldwide reach, Pat Robertson understood his evangelical mission as deeply connected to America's early history. After finding out from a CBN staffer that the Jamestown colonists had dedicated North America to God in 1607 a mere twelve miles from the new Center's proposed site, Robertson interpreted God's directive to build the Center as a continuation of America's legacy as a Christian nation.[167] Robertson, who could also trace his family tree back to Jamestown, believed that CBN was meant to become America's beacon to the world, bringing Christianity to new lands just as the Jamestown settlers had.[168] This was an obviously problematic, colonialist interpretation of the United States' early history—and Robertson's vision of America as a positive force for global Christianity informed his efforts abroad.

CBN understood its outreach abroad to be closely connected to its efforts in America—both financially and ideologically—and the elaborate construction of the ICC boldly declared CBN's desire to be both a national and global force. Satellite's ability to reach hundreds of millions of people around the world made it possible for CBN to dream of true worldwide

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[167] Ibid.

[168] Robertson is the direct descendant of Dr. John Woodson, and believes that America was destined to be a Christian nation and to spread Christianity around the world. "CBN Center: Profile of a Prophecy," (CBN University Press: Virginia Beach, VA, 1979), International Communications Center Dedication and Ground Breaking Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

influence. CBN had, in fact, already started countering "Red China" by broadcasting *The 700 Club* in Taiwan, the Philippines, and Japan.[169] They had made their first inroads in Africa by broadcasting Robertson's program in Sierra Leone,[170] had established a presence in Jerusalem and Lebanon,[171] and had distributed *The 700 Club* across most of South America.[172] These efforts revealed the deeply political nature of CBN's international outreach, as CBN concentrated its early international efforts on those countries that CBN felt most urgently needed spiritual intervention, not those countries that would prove most profitable in terms of viewer donations.

If Robertson wanted to achieve his dream of evangelizing to the entire world, he would first need to ensure that CBN continued to thrive financially. The money required to support CBN's international outreach largely came from CBN's US operations, with about eighty percent of that revenue coming from donations.[173] Before satellite made the dream of a fourth network possible, CBN spent a lot of its money in order to guarantee CBN's signature programming nationwide exposure. The stations that CBN owned were also costly investment,

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[169] CBN frequently framed their international outreach as designed, in part, to counter communist influence across the globe, and *The 700 Club* frequently featured guests from non-Christian-majority countries advocating for the liberating power of evangelism. Frank Roberts, "CBN—The Fourth Network," *Logos Journal*, Sept/Oct 1977, 11, Magazines Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

[170] "Brazilians Discover Universal Appeal of Christian Broadcasting," Feb. 27, 1979, "News From CBN" Apr. 1978-Feb. 1979 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

[171] CBN hoped that the Jerusalem station would reach those under Communist rule in Eastern European and southwest Russia, as well as potential would-be Christians in the Middle East. Larry Bonko, "He'll Ask Israel to Help Arabs," *The Ledger-Star* (Virginia Beach, VA), April 8, 1969, News Releases 1969 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

[172] The radio station in Bogota was CBN's first international station of any kind—and Robertson hoped it would eventually become a "super station" capable of reaching a huge swath of Latin America. Shirley Winter, "Tidewater Group Expanding: Religious Station in Bogota," *The Virginian-Pilot,* July 20, 1968, News Releases 1968 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

[173] The other twenty percent largely came from revenue from their O&O stations. Waters 115.

particularly because of CBN's decision to air Christian programming in prime time, rather than programs with a wider appeal. That philosophy aligned with the organization's spiritual goals, but it also made it considerably more difficult to charge advertisers rates high enough to offset the costs of running those stations. Once the network was successfully launched, it quickly became apparent that CBN would need a different strategy to keep American audiences sufficiently engaged with their programming and balance their budgets.

The Fourth Network

The success of CBN's investment in satellite technology kick-started a moment of incredible optimism at the network. For the first time in their almost-twenty-year history, CBN executives felt as though they had the resources and tools necessary to compete with major broadcast networks. Satellite technology emboldened Pat Robertson to believe that CBN could compete seriously with the Big 3 networks and offer a viable alternative. Robertson proclaimed to all who would listen that he planned to make CBN America's fourth network, because God had instructed him to do so, and he was confident that he would succeed.[174] Robertson plainly laid out CBN's bifurcated goals to the *New York Times*, explaining in 1978 that CBN's "ultimate goal is to tell the whole world about Jesus and to help establish the climate of righteousness that is absent from commercial television—our immediate goal is to become a strong fourth U.S. television network."[175] In this somewhat starry-eyed moment, Robertson imagined CBN as a legitimate competitor with the Big 3 networks, a network powerful enough to turn the spiritual

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[174] Bob Geske, "Assets of $93 Million, Christian Network Says," *The Virginian-Pilot* (Virginia Beach, VA), August 18, 1979, Newspaper Clippings 1979 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[175] Ibid.

tide in America. The heady combination of new technology, the desire to evangelize, and the belief that America was in the midst of a spiritual crisis produced a profound moment of optimism at CBN that significantly impacted the network's trajectory.

While Robertson had always sought to counter the influence of mainstream television with CBN's stations and affiliates, satellite offered him his first real opportunity to launch a true national alternative to the titans of network broadcasting. However, as CBN focused on promoting spiritual programming abroad, Robertson quickly realized that winning the hearts and minds of Americans would require more than Christian variety programming and prime-time preaching. As Robertson himself explained it, "a church service during prime time will kill an audience quicker than any other program."[176] Reaching those Americans who did not already subscribe to Robertson's value system required different tactics—namely, commercially produced, secular programming that promoted the "good values" CBN wanted to see in the marketplace. CBN therefore placed its religious programming alongside sitcoms, decades-old Westerns, and adventure shows in order to (hopefully) preach beyond the already-converted.

Robertson's objections to the Big Three stemmed from their programming, which he accused of glorifying sex and violence, promoting secular humanism, and glamorizing immorality. Objectionable shows included *All in the Family* and Norman Lear's other "relevant" sitcoms (which had disrupted traditional family sitcoms) as well as "jiggle" TV like *Charlie's Angels*.[177] Cop shows also weren't immune to criticism from conservative Christians, who

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[176] Phyllis Mather Rice, "Interview with Pat Robertson," *Your Church,* May/June 1979, 5, Magazines Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

[177] For more on how Norman Lear's stable of shows and the "quality" feminist programming of Mary Tyler Moore Productions disrupted the traditional family sitcom, see Kirsten Marthe Lentz, "Quality versus Relevance:

objected to the high murder rates and increasingly dramatized violence on these shows.[178] Robertson sought to build on the success of his O&Os and revive the pleasant and supposedly inoffensive television that was popular in the 1950s and 60s.

Robertson was not leading a one-man brigade against mainstream television. He was just best positioned to *do* something about it. There were many in the conservative Christian community who expressed increasing concern about the content that was available on the Big 3 networks. Groups like Christian Life Ministries and protests like Reverend Donald Wildmon's "Turn Off the TV" arose to combat the increasing "edginess" of the Big 3, and they looked to broadcasters like Robertson as their potential saviors.[179] One group, for example, praised the democratic potential of satellite before pointing out that "Satan has quite a few channels as well. Many communities have an X-rated channel often known as the "Midnight Blue." We don't want to surrender the airwaves to Satan."[180] The trade magazine *Religious Broadcasting* regularly featured columns lamenting the state of modern television and imploring religious broadcasters to fight back against the tide of secularism in American culture.[181] These activists

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Feminism, Race, and the Politics of the Sign in 1970s Television," *Camera Obscura* 15, no. 1 (2000): 44-93; Ella Taylor, *Prime Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 65-109. For more on the explosion of sex on 1970s television, see Levine.

[178] For example, one *Time* article noted that "Americans will have watched 18,000 murders by age 18—v. having spent only 11,000 hours in school" and alarmist statistics like this circulated regularly during this period. "Did TV Make Him Do It?," *Time*, October 10, 1977, 87-88.

[179] Tom Berry, "Cable TV: Channel of Blessing," *LOGOS Journal*, May/June 1977, 23, Magazines Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

[180] *Midnight Blue* was a risqué show that aired on public access television in Manhattan—and represented what many activists feared would happen to cable and satellite television. Ibid.

[181] One particular column even suggested that Christian children's programmers market their shows as "wholesome" rather than "religious" in order to reach the unchurched. Ruby Peckford Johnson, "The Unchurched: Train Up A Child with Television," *Religious Broadcasting*, June/July 1979, 24, Magazines Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

surveyed the television landscape and found little of value—a finding that Robertson would work to exploit.

To combat television's failings, Robertson hired several Hollywood producers and creators to develop original content for his satellite network. Robertson announced in 1978 that CBN would invest 50 million dollars in developing and producing this programming. His hires included the former head writer of *Happy Days* and top producers of shows like *Flipper, Kojak*, and *The Waltons*.[182] Robertson recruited talent from series that passed his standards for good, family fare and tasked these men with creating a new soap opera, new comedies, and other programming that would be a "decent" and "wholesome" version of beloved Hollywood genres that would appeal to a mass audience. Robertson did not hesitate to praise the new hires or to proclaim that they had previously worked on "very good shows on the regular networks."[183] "Good" here, of course, did not just signify the quality of the series; Robertson also meant that these new employees had worked on shows whose content he deemed acceptable. Robertson wanted CBN's programming to "project a climate of decency and wholesomeness"[184] and to produce television that families could watch "without fear."[185] Ironically, Robertson needed Hollywood-caliber talent to challenge Hollywood itself.

In 1978, with CBN's satellite network adding more cable systems and households each week, executives at CBN were remarkably optimistic about the network's future while still

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[182] The hires included Joseph Glauberg, the head writer for *Happy Days*, Joe D'Agosta, who was "instrumental" in *Barretta*, Ivan Tors of *Flipper* and Mike Mullins of *The Waltons.* McDowell, "Religious Networks Blossom."
[183] Phyllis Mather Rice, "Interview with Pat Robertson," *Your Church,* May/June 1979, 5, Magazines Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Stephen Shaw, "Video Programming Via Satellite," *Satellite Communications*, May 1978, 24, Magazines Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

acknowledging the reality that their financial success paled in comparison with the kind of money that NBC, CBS, and ABC raked in every day. As Robertson himself explained:

> The satellite is our slingshot against the three Goliaths. The resources and the power of the networks are unbelievable. They can spend $600 million a year or more on programming alone—pilots, canceled programs, talent—and we can't come anywhere near that. We're small, but we can turn faster and adjust just like small ships.[186]

Satellite was, potentially, the great equalizer, and Robertson was confident that his particular brand of television would resonate with enough Americans to compete in the ratings. CBN's ambitious plan to produce its own "alternative" programming and build a true fourth network ultimately fell short of Robertson's lofty goals. However, the fact that Robertson believed, even for a moment, that he could truly put up a fight against the behemoths of network television was hugely significant for the development of CBN. Unlike their religious network competitors like PTL and TBN, CBN had the resources and the desire to carve out an alternative space in the television industry that was not populated entirely with overtly Christian doctrine. Robertson believed that CBN could provide an alternative to the major networks that could be entertaining instead of didactic, just without the sex, violence, and immoral behavior. As a result, he explicitly built a network designed to compete in the mainstream space, rather than the niche market of Christian or evangelical television.

Continental Broadcasting Network

CBN's financial reality was not as rosy as Robertson predicted in 1978, and the network's budget outpaced its donations significantly that year. As a result, Robertson had to

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[186] Paul Hemphill, "Praise the Lord—and Cue the Cameraman," *TV Guide*, March 12-18, 1978, 6.

abandon or postpone many of his plans. He had to reduce CBN's productions in order to balance the budget, and put plans for a daily Christian soap opera on the backburner for two years. It is not difficult to understand why, for the first time since CBN was just a single station, CBN's goals were overly ambitious and somewhat blind to the limitations of their financial model.[187] Robertson had not somehow lost his TV industry chops overnight. Rather, the issue was that Robertson recognized a golden opportunity to disrupt American television industry and could not resist the chance to compete.[188] However, once CBN became a notable player in the satellite and cable business, their unique financial situation drew more scrutiny.

As satellite exploded and CBN's owned-and-operated stations continued to grow their audiences for family-friendly and spiritual programming, the Christian Broadcasting Network and its revenues could no longer fly under the radar. As a result, the network had a few scuffles with local authorities over its unwillingness to publicly disclose its finances and its tax exempt status.[189] The first such dispute took place in 1974, when the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission reprimanded CBN for its failure to disclose its "deteriorating financial condition" with prospective lenders.[190] While Robertson denied any wrongdoing, he nevertheless signed a consent decree and agreed to improve the organization's financial disclosure practices.

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[187] The budget shortfall was caused in part by the ongoing recession, as well as increased competition from new Christian networks, several of which debuted in the late 1970s.
[188] Even though Robertson's plans to produce programming were delayed, his vision of creating alternative programming would ultimately be realized in the 1980s and 1990s, as discussed in Chapter 3.
[189] I should note here that despite multiple journalistic and governmental investigations, no one ever uncovered anything amiss about CBN's finances. While the ethics of CBN's funding model and its brand of Christianity can (and have) certainly been debated, there is no evidence that CBN did anything with its donations other than re-invest them in the larger CBN organization. For more on the ethics of televangelism, see Schultze; Frankl; Bruce.
[190] David Strack, "Soap Operas For Jesus," *Richmond*, February 1979, Magazines Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

The second legal clash emerged after CBN debuted its long-delayed Boston station, WXNE-TV. The station was quickly sued by Massachusetts Attorney General Francis Bellotti in order to compel WXNE-TV to register as a public charity and file annual financial reports.[191] Station manager William B. Knight, with CBN's backing, claimed that the station should be exempt from public disclosure laws because of its status as a religious group. However, WXNE's solicitation of commercial advertising significantly complicated its legal status as a religious organization.[192] CBN fought doggedly against the suit, because establishing a precedent of public disclosure could imperil the network's fundraising strategies. It is more difficult to convince your viewers you need money if they know how much money you already have.

The third tax fight erupted in CBN's hometown when city assessor Clyde Merritt ruled that Virginia Beach would tax the commercial aspects of CBN's new International Communications Center, then under construction.[193] In an letter responding to Merritt, Robertson asked why he would even consider "taxing a Santa Claus" and threatened to leave Virginia Beach altogether or severely downsize CBN's Virginia operations should these new taxes be assessed.[194] Robertson walked back his comments four days later and agreed to pay taxes. However, his initial disdain for the city's suggestion spoke to a larger ethical and public relations

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[191] William A. Henry, "Bellotti Files Ch. 25 Suit," *Boston Globe*, March 31, 1978, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
[192] Massachusetts law included exemptions for three types of religious groups—educational groups, those who maintained buildings and grounds of religious institutions, and those who furnished "services to any group of human beings with special needs." CBN's claim to any of those categories was tenuous, which is why they became entrenched in a long legal battle. Henry, "Bellotti Files Ch. 25 Suit."
[193] "Business & Finance: Network Threat," *Washington Post*, November 4, 1978. LexisNexis Academic.
[194] Bob Geske, "CBN a Ministry on the Move," *Virginian-Pilot* (Virginia Beach, VA), n.d., International Communications Center Dedication and Ground Breaking Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

problem for CBN—the network was bringing in more and more money every year, and a growing percentage of that revenue was from commercial ventures.[195]

In order to resolve the disputes with the Massachusetts attorney general and Virginia Beach's city government, Robertson and the CBN board decided to spin off CBN's television and radio O&Os into a new stock corporation, the Continental Broadcasting Network, in November 1978. Robertson described Continental as a natural outgrowth of CBN designed to keep the organization's finances in order and he assured the public that "the aims and goals of Continental Broadcasting Network will be identical to those held by the Christian Broadcasting Network. The only change is the corporate vehicle."[196] Separating the O&Os from CBN's productions of Christian programming and their fundraising and charitable efforts made financial and legal sense. In October 1978, each of CBN's television stations' revenues exceeded 1 million dollars, and CBN projected that revenues would double by 1979.[197] The O&Os were appraised at 43 million dollars collectively, and they had finally become too successful to escape notice.[198] Spinning off Continental also opened up new lines of financing that were unavailable to tax exempt religious organizations, including equity financing. Continental's holdings ultimately accounted for forty-five percent of CBN's net worth, all of which would now be subject to

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[195] CBN's WYAH-TV studio was already taxed as a commercial operation (because it sold advertising and aired commercially produced and acquired programming alongside its televangelist programming), but this was the first time that CBN itself was levied with a tax bill.
[196] "CBN Spins Off O & O Stations, Forms Commercial Network," *Religious Broadcasting,* Dec/Jan 1979, 44, Continental Broadcasting Network Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[197] Ibid.
[198] "CBN's Growth Patterns Bewildering," *The Virginian-Pilot*, October 7, 1979, International Communications Center Dedication and Ground Breaking Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

taxation. More importantly, however, the move to spin off CBN's stations marked the moment that CBN saw itself as a viable competitor against the major networks.

CBN Cable Channel

New programming efforts were put on the back burner until their financial situation resolved and, in that time, Robertson realized that building a traditional national network was not feasible. He was still intent upon taking on the Big 3 networks, however, and this time he turned to cable to build a challenge to the sex, violence, and secular humanism that had flooded the airwaves. By 1979, it was increasingly clear that cable would become the dominant television delivery system in the US, rather than satellite. Federal deregulation had finally cleared the way for cable to spread unimpeded, and quickly, and its lower costs ensured its victory.[199] CBN was quick to recognize this shift—their internal reporting concluded that by 1979, one in five American homes had cable, while only one in ten were satellite capable.[200] Cable was clearly going to be king, so CBN once again shifted focus. The recent budget crisis necessitated CBN taking a step back from original programming, but the network still wanted to bring more family-friendly programming onto its schedule in order to broaden its appeal with Americans. CBN had already been quite successful at getting their satellite network included on local cable systems. Now, Robertson sought to adopt the narrowcasting strategies that were quickly becoming cable's calling card.[201]

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[199] For more on how cable regulations eroded over the 1970s, see Mullen 94-127.
[200] "New Report Cites Cable Industry Growth Through April," May 1, 1979, "News From CBN" Mar. 1979-July 1979 Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[201] For more on how narrowcasting became one of the defining strategies of the early cable era, see Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 2nd ed, (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 25-32.

Robertson announced the debut of the CBN Cable Network in the fall of 1980. This new network featured different programming than the satellite network, which was still populated by Christian programs, with a dash of news and evangelically-affiliated sports thrown in for good measure. CBN Cable Network, on the other hand, focused on "wholesome" and "family-friendly" programming. Populated by reruns of *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*, for much of the day the programming on CBN Cable was unrecognizable as belonging to a Christian network—until *The 700 Club* and other religious programming aired in the primetime hours (and Sunday mornings and afternoons). In fact, the CBN Cable Network looked a lot like CBN's O&Os, which also used reruns of popular programming during the early evening hours as their primary way to attract advertisers.

Launching the CBN Cable Network was a strategic maneuver designed to keep CBN relevant in the emerging cable industry. It was both an acknowledgment that CBN would never achieve the fourth network status of which they had once dreamed, and a recognition of a new opportunity to provide a family-friendly environment for those who felt alienated by the major networks. CBN had once again refined its ambitions, and this time it had struck upon the best way to challenge those reviled Big 3 networks--- by cultivating a niche audience of those viewers who also rejected their immoral and indecent content. CBN had embraced the cable industry logics of narrowcasting while still ostensibly targeting what they believed *should* be a mass audience, namely, those who found network programming distasteful.

Conclusion

CBN's move into cable proved to be incredibly successful, with the channel ranking consistently in the top ten for all cable channels by the end of the 1980s.[202] Robertson had hit upon a successful formula for a narrowcast cable channel: a mixture of family-friendly reruns, "wholesome" original programming, and Christian variety programming. In 1982, CBN started incorporating a new slogan, "The Family Entertainer," into its marketing materials in a bid to establish themselves as the go-to destination for family viewing. I pick up the story of CBN's transition from The CBN Cable Network to the Family Channel in Chapter 3, but it is important to note here that the CBN Cable Network and CBN's embrace of a specific type of "narrowcasting" for family audiences was the culmination of decades of success in the television business. Pat Robertson did not operate with a typical secular business model, but he took advantage of new technologies and changing regulations and managed to build a popular cable network by the end of the 1980s.

Pat Robertson built himself a television empire, but he was never a pure businessman. His decisions were influenced not just by the dictates of capitalism, but by his conversations with God and his desire to bring people to Christ by adopting television as a new tool for evangelization. CBN and religious networks like it are therefore anomalies in an industry driven almost entirely by the search for profits. They relied upon viewer contributions to support their work, and the ethics of collecting donations from viewers in order to build what eventually became a money-making enterprise were, and still are, decidedly murky. CBN's early history, and the network's struggle to reconcile its spiritual and capitalistic goals, illustrates a tension that

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[202] Michael Burgi, "Database," *Channels,* January 1990, 76.

runs throughout the larger Christian media industries. It was possible for Christian media makers to build alternative spaces within those industries, but they had to compromise some of their ideals in order to do so.

CBN began incorporating secular programming into its line-ups in 1970, and how those at the network framed the relationship between its secular and religious programming speaks to the complex ways that texts circulate on American television. Robertson and his team at CBN consistently reminded concerned viewers that secular programming was necessary to keep their stations alive—not only economically, but spiritually. If CBN did not want to preach merely to the converted, they *had* to entertain the masses with the hope that they would stay tuned for a spiritual message. This formula of mixing secular and religious programming, which undergirded CBN's most financially successful ventures, proved to be hugely influential as the television landscape expanded. Several networks and cable channels ultimately adopted the formula that Pat Robertson had first proven could be successful, cementing CBN's legacy as the most influential religious network in the United States.[203] One of those networks, Pax, even briefly became the "seventh network" in the 1990s by copying CBN's tried and true strategies.[204]

Unlike its religious network competitors like PTL and TBN, CBN had the resources and the desire to carve out an alternative space in the television industry that was not populated entirely with overtly Christian doctrine. Robertson believed that CBN could provide an alternative to the major networks that could still entertain, just without the sex, violence, and

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[203] Examples include the Inspiration Network (now INSP), the Gospel Music Channel (now UP), and FamilyNet (now the Cowboy Channel).
[204] For more on Pax's brief run, see Victoria E. Johnson, "Welcome Home?: CBS, PAX-TV, and "Heartland" Values in a Neo-Network Era," *Velvet Light Trap* 46 (Fall 2000): 40-55.

immorality. As a result, he explicitly built a network designed to compete in the mainstream space, rather than the niche market of Christian or evangelical television. He spared no expense purchasing the best technology available. CBN made religious broadcasting's first serious attempt at joining the mainstream by becoming good at the television business, something that its competitors would struggle to master.

CHAPTER 2

Putting Electronic Arms on the Local Church: The American Christian Television System, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the Struggle for Decentralized Television

On May 12, 1984, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) became the first Protestant denomination in the United States to launch their own religious television channel: the American Christian Television System, referred to primarily as ACTS. The channel was the brainchild of Jimmy Allen, a former SBC president who had taken over the Convention's Radio and Television Commission (RTVC) in 1980. By that time, Southern Baptists had become the largest single denomination in the United States, and the SBC counted more than fourteen million people among its congregants. The Southern Baptists, then, were theoretically well-positioned to succeed. Allen and the team behind ACTS were dissatisfied with the state of modern television, and particularly religious television, and sought to create an alternative that would reimagine what Christian television could be. The network was a small, grassroots operation that the SBC's Radio and Television Commission designed primarily to bolster local churches and communities by providing spiritually fulfilling religious and family programming. Unlike CBN, which eventually became a significant player in the television industry, ACTS never broke through. The channel faced an uphill climb from the beginning, and never overcame the series of obstacles created by its unique organizational structure and the demands of the commercial television industry.

The American Christian Television System was not the Southern Baptists' first foray into religious broadcasting. In fact, the Southern Baptist Convention had been devoted to producing programming for television and radio that would promote Christianity and the Convention's missions through the RTVC for decades. The RTVC was founded in 1938 as the Radio Commission, and began producing radio programming to distribute to stations across the country. By 1962, the RTVC produced eight weekly programs for radio. Some of those programs, like *The Baptist Hour* and *MasterControl*, were quite successful and widely syndicated, with *The Baptist Hour* claiming over twenty million weekly listeners.[205] The RTVC regularly worked with the major networks, particularly NBC, in this period as well.[206] In December of 1964, for example, the commission aired three separate programs on NBC—a concert special ("Voices of Christmas"), a documentary special ("Walk Beside Me," which retraced the Apostle Paul's path as a missionary in full color), and a half-hour drama ("The Legacy," which explored how faith and spiritual values are passed from one generation to the next). The RTVC also produced *The Answer* for NBC that year, a weekly program which provided "scriptural solutions" to contemporary problems. The RTVC worked closely with the major networks to provide religious programming, particularly one-off specials, for a mass audience. Funded primarily by the Southern Baptist Convention, these productions spanned a

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[205] Clarence Duncan, "Radio Television Commission Has Evangelism As Its Purpose," *Baptist Standard,* January 24, 1962, Baptist History File, Radio and Television Commission Folder, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives (SBHLA).
[206] "Radio and Television Commission," *Baptist Digest*, December 19, 1964, 5, Baptist History File, Radio and Television Commission Folder, SBHLA.

range of topics, but always pointed back to the Commission's mission to bring people to the church and to Christ through the airwaves.

The Southern Baptists were therefore not exactly new to television, but there was a steep learning curve between producing occasional television programs and launching a new network. The RTVC took on this project because they felt it was absolutely necessary to ensure that Southern Baptists still had regular access to the airwaves after a wave of federal deregulatory moves in the 1970s and 1980s threatened their previous avenues to allotted broadcast time on the major networks. Fortunately for the RTVC, the growth of cable and satellite technology made establishing ACTS a less daunting prospect than it would have been even five years earlier. ACTS emerged during a decade in which cable television spread rapidly across the country, aiding the efforts of those religious broadcasters who sought larger, national audiences. Religious cable television grew exponentially in the 1980s, with subscriptions to religious channels jumping from 17.3 million in 1982 to 77.4 million in 1987.[207] ACTS was coming on the scene at a moment of tremendous growth, but it was also entering a very crowded marketplace. Unlike their fundamentalist competitors who dominated the ratings, including CBN, the PTL Network, and TBN, ACTS wanted to be an ideologically moderate network, one which featured a variety of theological perspectives and interpretations within an acceptable framework.

For a brief moment, the Southern Baptists behind the RTVC imagined a new paradigm for television predicated on a decentralized model of broadcasting. The original vision for ACTS was radical. It was the first major television network to be directly affiliated with an established

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[207] Ben Armstrong, "The Gospel in a Wired Nation," *Religious Broadcasting*, July/August 1987, 24-27, Box 275, Newspaper Clippings 1987 Folder, SBHLA.

church organization. ACTS was designed to be a grassroots-driven project—with local churches taking the lead at almost every step of the process. ACTS challenged the traditional, profitable televangelists (who dominated the airwaves while relying on financial support from their viewers) by coming up with a new, church-based funding model. ACTS fought back against the increasing de-localization of television by prioritizing the development of local production cultures and giving their affiliates a significant percentage of their broadcast hours expressly for local programming. For the Southern Baptists, ACTS was merely a "delivery system" of programming for those churches. This was a crucial re-theorization of television's potential—one which drew inspiration from the previous decades' discourse about the potential for cable and community access television to make the medium more democratic and accessible. The most popular televangelists frequently talked about the power of television in terms of its ability to reach huge audiences in the US and around the world. For the RTVC, television's power lay instead in its ability to bring increased attention to the local church and elevate communities through locally produced programming. The RTVC certainly hoped that ACTS would eventually expand and reach a national audience, but their first concern was centering the brick-and-mortar church. Unfortunately for the RTVC, the deck was stacked against them—and it proved practically impossible to build a sustainable, locally-driven religious cable channel.

This chapter focuses on the period from 1980 to 1992, when ACTS operated as an independent broadcaster, before they teamed up with VISN. In this twelve-year span, the team behind ACTS tried earnestly to revolutionize religious broadcasting. ACTS never made a sizable

dent in the ratings, nor did it produce any particularly notable programming.[208] A brief glance at the typical ACTS schedule, which was comprised of a mix of family and Christian programming, would suggest that the network was just a markedly less successful version of CBN. Other than its locally produced programming, ACTS's slate was largely unremarkable. ACTS's uniqueness instead lay in the decision-making of the RTVC executives. By examining how the channel was built and how the RTVC understood television's potential, I explain how those behind the RTVC sought to create a new paradigm for religious television.

I argue that ACTS re-theorized television's potential by building an organizational structure that revolved around the local church and community and by crafting a non-commercial funding model which did not rely on on-air solicitation of viewer donations. I focus particularly on how the RTVC structured ACTS, how and why they valued local, grassroots involvement in the network's operations, and what their barriers to success ultimately were. I begin by outlining the state of religious broadcasting in the 1980s, paying particular attention to the role of deregulation in shaping its parameters and the subsequent decline of public service and local broadcasting. The next section details what the original vision was for ACTS; what the RTVC hoped to achieve with the network and how they theorized television's potential. I then explain how they executed that vision, focusing particularly on the role of local programming and grassroots involvement. I later turn to the obstacles that prevented ACTS from achieving greater success; particularly, the financial barriers that the network repeatedly encountered, before

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[208] One exception to this is Mike Huckabee's locally produced ACTS show *Positive Alternatives,* which journalist Hanna Rosin searched unsuccessfully for during Huckabee's 2008 presidential campaign. Hanna Rosin, "What's Huck Hiding?," *Slate*, Feb. 21, 2008, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2008/02/my-search-for-the-lost-huckabee-tapes.html.

chronicling the RTVC's internal debates about whether or not to give up and sell the channel. Finally, I examine the grand compromise ACTS made with the interfaith channel VISN, and what principles ACTS had to sacrifice in order to stay on the air.

During its tumultuous twelve-year run, ACTS struggled to realize its vision in the face of a television marketplace that was structurally inhospitable to independent, non-commercial broadcasters. As a result, the RTVC was constantly faced with choices that asked them to relent on their carefully established principles. They would yield to some market demands over the years, but they, for the most part, remained committed to their values even when they obviously impeded the channel's growth. The RTVC wanted ACTS to be the ideologically and theologically moderate alternative to the most popular religious networks, all of which promoted a conservative, fundamentalist Christian perspective, by raising money ethically and keeping its operation decentralized. By making these choices, however, the RTVC ultimately set ACTS up for failure in a thoroughly capitalistic US television system.

The Doors to Free Television Have Closed: Underdog Broadcasting in the 1980s

The team behind ACTS saw their network as a critical corrective to what had gone wrong with religious broadcasting. By the 1980s, there was a long history of far-right, fundamentalist religious broadcasters outpacing more theologically moderate churches in the United States in terms of ratings, reach, and donations. This dynamic was established in the days of radio, when mainline preachers struggled to keep up with the popularity of ultra-conservative preachers. As Tona Hangen has demonstrated, conservative, evangelical radio preachers succeeded because they tapped into listeners' desire for a return to "better times" while simultaneously galvanizing

evangelicals to change the world around them.[209] This trend continued with television in the 1950s, as conservative religious broadcasters embraced the possibilities of the new medium and more liberal theologians viewed it with deep suspicion.[210] The success of conservative radio preachers came despite the fact that they were barred from using "sustaining time," the free air time reserved by the FCC for religious programming, because they were deemed too dogmatic or controversial to qualify. Those preachers who openly tried to convert listeners to a specific faith could not use sustaining time, so they turned to relying on viewer donations instead. This dynamic, of far-right broadcasters thriving while more moderate preachers faltered, would only grow more obvious as new regulations reshaped the industry.

In 1960, the FCC loosened its rules with regards to religious programming time and, in a significant policy change, declared that they would no longer distinguish between sustaining-time and commercial programs for television stations' public service requirements. This resulted in many stations eventually dropping sustaining-time programs (typically produced by more moderate religious groups) in favor of commercial, more conservative programming (which netted the station a tidy profit). This policy change was followed by additional deregulatory moves which further cleared the path for charismatic and fundamentalist preachers to dominate the religious broadcasting industry. As a result, by 1977, ninety-two percent of all religious broadcasting in the United States was paid-time programming.[211] Those conservative

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[209] Tona J. Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, and Popular Culture in America* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 9-12.
[210] Michele Rosenthal, *American Protestants and TV in the 1950s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1-5.
[211] Peter G. Horsfield, *Religious Television: The American Experience*, (New York: Longman Inc., 1984), 89.

televangelists who had built followings in the 1960s and 1970s had a huge head start on any potential upstarts, and they took over the airwaves on the strength of their viewer donations.

Scholars at the time noted how these developments had led to a remarkable homogeneity across the most popular religious programs.[212] Most adopted either a talk show/variety format or a more traditional mix of sermons and music. The theology expressed across these programs was consistently fundamentalist and evangelist as well, with no moderate or theologically liberal voices able to break through in the ratings. As Razelle Frankl has described, these televangelists, many of whom began as small-time preachers, became entrepreneurs in their own right, and they organized their electronic churches like corporations.[213] Most of these popular TV preachers established their own charitable missions, but the proceeds from their donations more often went toward expanding their media empire or, in the case of some like Jim and Tammy Bakker, lining their own pockets.

The Southern Baptists behind ACTS mounted a last stand against televangelism as the dominant model of broadcasting. Deregulation had significantly reshaped what was feasible for religious broadcasting by the mid-1980s, when ACTS premiered. For decades, religious broadcasters had counted on public service and "sustaining time" requirements to guarantee them free air time on the major networks. As those regulations were rolled back, with the logic that the market should dictate what types of content were produced, religious broadcasters were faced

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[212] See Horsfield; Steve Bruce, *Pray TV: Televangelism in America* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 40-48.
[213] For more, see Razelle Frankl, *Televangelism: The Marketing of Popular Religion* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987).

with a world in which it would cost them an exorbitant amount of money, sometimes tens of thousands of dollars per airing, in order to secure time on the major broadcasters' stations.

More moderate religious broadcasters could have potentially used public access/public service requirements to their advantage to access discounted or free airtime. Instead, it was clear that those churches without a strong foothold in the media would face an uphill climb for airtime. The Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984 officially dashed hopes for a widespread, government-supported infrastructure for public access television. The law did not require cable franchisers to reserve channels for public access; instead, it required cable operators to include public access channels only if their franchiser required it.[214] The Southern Baptists behind ACTS further realized that their previously fruitful relationship with the major networks would break down as public service requirements were further dismantled and the major networks shut down their religious programming divisions.[215] As one prominent Baptist observer declared in 1984, the "doors to free television have closed."[216] And the Southern Baptists were panicked enough about losing their access to the airwaves to undertake the daunting task of starting their own network.

What ACTS sought to do, in the wake of deregulation and the dominance of televangelism, was to create local television on a national scale. ACTS took a very optimistic view of the potential of television technology to be a force for pluralism within religious

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[214] Laura R. Linder, *Public Access Television: America's Electronic Soapbox* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999), 26.
[215] CBS was the last major network to shut down their religious programming division, in 1989; NBC and ABC folded their divisions several years earlier.
[216] Lynn P. Clayton, "Dream Became Reality as ACTS Hits Airwaves," *Baptist Message*, November 15, 1984, Box 275, News Releases Newspaper Clippings 1981-1984 Folder, SBHLA.

broadcasting. ACTS was a significant moment in the much longer history of efforts to create alternative television, particularly local or public access television. Since the birth of television, activist groups have demanded that the public should have greater access to the airwaves. As Allison Perlman has shown, in the 1950s this fight was waged particularly around educational television, and activists worked to convince the federal government that declining to allocate licenses for educational stations and instead giving television over to commercial interests would have deleterious effects on the public interest.[217] There was a tremendous energy for media activism focused on television in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly on issues of fairness and representation. Chon Noriega and Devorah Heitner have both chronicled how Chicano and Black activist groups, respectively, took advantage of public airtime to produce their own programming, creating space for themselves on the television screen.[218] Laurie Ouellette has shown how PBS prided itself on promising "something for everyone," as the public outlet tried, and sometimes failed, to implement a pluralistic philosophy of programming to counter the homogeneity of commercial broadcasting.[219] These fights boiled down to the same belief in the power of television to change society and the importance of nurturing public or local television in order to enrich the lives of viewers, a belief that the RTVC's executives shared.

ACTS's faith in the potential of cable television to foster local production was not unfounded—it had, in fact, been the dominant discourse around cable technology in the previous

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[217] For more, see Allison Perlman, *Public Interests: Media Advocacy and Struggles over U.S. Television* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 13-45.
[218] See Chon Noriega, *Shot in America: Television, the State, and the Rise of Chicano Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 75-99; Devorah Heitner, *Black Power TV* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
[219] Laurie Ouellette, *Viewers Like You?: How Public TV Failed the People* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 141-174.

decade. As Thomas Streeter has shown, in the 1960s and particularly the 1970s, there was a "unified religious faith" in the potential of cable to resolve television's shortcomings among several different interested parties, including liberal activists, journalists, and corporations.[220] People spoke of cable rapturously, and celebrated how its higher channel capacity could correct previous inequalities in the broadcasting system, including the relative lack of local programming. By the 1980s, however, it was becoming increasingly clear that cable would not live up to its highly lauded potential as the great equalizer. There are precious few instances of local television being successful in the long term, and ACTS was one in a long line of projects which failed, at least in part, due to unfavorable industrial structures. Public access television was clearly not a priority of the FCC, which closed down one of the few avenues for upstart broadcasters. While most hopes for cable TV as a champion of the underrepresented and of marginalized communities had dwindled by the 1980s, ACTS's leaders still believed that cable could promote the voices of the underrepresented—in this case, Christians dissatisfied with television's offerings. ACTS was not a public access channel, nor did it use public airwaves. It did, however, operate with similar logics to those activists who had so believed in the power of local and public television to correct the medium's imbalances. From the RTVC's perspective, those inequities were centered around the disproportionate representation that conservative religious broadcasters received, at the expense of more moderate Christians.

"High Tech and High Touch": The Vision for ACTS, 1980-1985

[220] Thomas Streeter, "The Cable Fable Revisited: Discourse, Policy, and the Making of Cable Television," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 4, no. 2 (1987): 174-200, *EBSCOhost*.

Jimmy Allen and the RTVC conceived of and pitched ACTS as a necessary alternative to what was already available on television. The team behind ACTS expressed concern about the state of modern commercial television, particularly what they believed to be too much sexually explicit and violent programming. Allen summed up what he perceived to be the networks' major problem: "the networks say they do what gets the numbers (audience). No network has tried to be too different for too long. [They] have pandered to the lowest taste of our society for so long that we might not be able to get them back."[221] Although Allen gestures toward concern that many viewers had already been "lost" to secular content, those at the RTVC were generally optimistic that, if their programming's quality could approach their competitors', ACTS could compete and provide an alternative that would promote "positive social and moral undertones."[222] ACTS determined that the best way to bring people to the network was to mix family and religious programming, in roughly a 3-to-1 ratio. When Allen lamented the state of secular television, he echoed the sentiments of many other religious broadcasters, including Pat Robertson and CBN. Allen took his frustration with the state of television a step farther, however, when he criticized the most successful televangelists of the period.

Allen pitched ACTS as a counterbalance to the popularity of charismatic and fundamentalist broadcasters, whose politically right-wing statements and constant on-air pleas for donations alienated some viewers and potential religious converts. In internal planning documents for the network, the RTVC explicitly blamed the fundamentalists, who paid for their

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[221] Dan Martin, "A Home in the Sky," *Religious Broadcasting*, November 1981, 48, Box 275, News Releases Newspaper Clippings 1981-1984 Folder, SBHLA.
[222] Lynda Stevens Tarwater, "Launching Christian Cable," *Fort Worth*, August 1984, 48, Box 275, News Releases Newspaper Clippings 1981-1984 Folder, SBHLA.

air time with viewer donations, for sullying the image and potential of religious broadcasting.[223] While Allen never openly criticized individual televangelists, he often spoke publicly in a pointed but veiled manner about ACTS' top competition. When asked what ACTS would bring to the television landscape, Allen responded that "we're building back into television that which had been lost," a combination of "high tech and high touch."[224] Allen here implies that those religious broadcasters who had gotten to television first were not using the medium in the right way. They had the tech (including a significant advantage over ACTS in terms of production facilities and programming budgets), but their touch had been compromised by their unscrupulous fundraising tactics like promising healing in exchange for monetary donations or claiming financial instability when the coffers were actually full. It may not have been a direct repudiation, but the stone had nevertheless been cast.

He may have played nice in public in order to avoid creating publicity that could hurt ACTS, but Allen had a reputation for pushing back against the fundamentalist strain inside his own denomination. When asked if ACTS sought to compete directly with the giants of religious broadcasting (CBN, TBN, and the PTL Network), Allen would demur and emphasize that the market for religious broadcasting was big enough for everyone to co-exist. Allen was one of the most prominent moderate voices in power in the Southern Baptist Convention, at a moment when the Convention itself was in the midst of a conservative takeover. During his tenure as president of the Southern Baptist Convention, which directly preceded his role as the leader of

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[223] Tommy Joe Payne, "The ACTS Network: How Will It Work?," Radio and Television Commission, n.d., Box 275, News Releases Newspaper Clippings 1981-1984 Folder, SBHLA.
[224] Jim Galloway, "Baptists to Launch TV Network," *The Atlanta Journal*, April 16, 1984, Box 275, News Releases Newspaper Clippings 1981-1984 Folder, SBHLA.

the RTVC, Allen pushed for progressive reform within the convention and openly resisted the growing influence of the conservative faction of Southern Baptists.[225] Allen carried that attitude over to his work at the RTVC, and worked throughout his time as president to ensure that ACTS was an ideologically moderate force on the religious television spectrum. By the mid 1980s, all of the top-ten highest-rated religious programs in the United States were headlined by fundamentalist preachers.[226] Those within the RTVC hoped that ACTS could eventually break the camera-savvy fundamentalists' stranglehold on the religious television industry. Allen fought this battle on two fronts—by pushing back against the conservatives within his own denomination as well as those highly conservative fundamentalists who dominated the airwaves.

The Southern Baptists recognized that they would need to think beyond their own denomination in order to build a viable alternative to the most popular televangelists. Early in the planning stages, the RTVC revealed its intention to build a network that welcomed mainline churches, inviting them to produce their own programs and access the airwaves at a much lower rate than the bigger outlets offered.[227] In fact, it was a crucial aspect of their business plan. Mainline church membership had been trending down since its peak in the 1920s, but its decline accelerated after the 1950s. By 1985, mainline churches represented only fifty-three percent of

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[225] Allen supported integrating racially segregated churches and made elevating women within the denomination a priority, and selected several women to fill key positions within the Convention during his presidency. Larry L. McSwain, *Loving Beyond Your Theology: The Life and Ministry of Jimmy Raymond Allen* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2010), 23-28.
[226] Horsfield, *Religious Television*, 91-92.
[227] Mainline churches are some of the oldest in the United States, including the American Baptist Church, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church, Quakers, Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church. There are a lot of theological differences between these denominations, but they are all generally more moderate in their theology than evangelical Protestants are.

the American Protestant population. Many mainline leaders had noted that the drop in mainline church attendance had coincided with the success of fundamentalist and evangelical broadcasting.[228] During the 1980s, there was a lot of concern about the cultural and political impacts that the decline in mainline Protestantism would have, and the growing influence of fundamentalist televangelism only served to exacerbate those fears. Extending a lifeline to mainline churches, then, made business sense and ideological sense for the Baptist moderates running the RTVC.

The team behind ACTS saw their network as a way to counter the outsized cultural impact that television preachers like Pat Robertson, Jimmy Swaggert, and Jim Bakker had. As ACTS Texas Coordinator Ken Coffee explained it, ACTS sought to be the alternative for all Christians who were not charismatics, who were overrepresented on the air. As Coffee explained, "I think [ACTS] will be an attractive alternative to the 'hypered' charismatic programming that is now on the air. They (charismatics) represent 5 percent of religious America; the other 95 percent are left out."[229] In order to bring in those mainline Protestants to a channel operated by Southern Baptists, ACTS encouraged mainline churches and denominations to produce their own programming for the channel. This resulted in several churches having regular series, as well as specials, on the network. For example, the Episcopal Church of America produced *One in the Spirit*, which addressed current social issues, The Presbyterian

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[228] John Dart, "'Mainline' Church Strength Shrinks: If Trend Continues, Protestants' Liberal Groups Will Be in Minority," *Los Angeles Times*, April 6 1985, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-04-06-mn-18355-story.html.
[229] "Southern Baptists Building Ambitious Television Network," *Dayton Daily News*, July 21, 1984, Box 275, News Releases Newspaper Clippings 1981-1984 Folder, SBHLA.

Churches of America sponsored *Video One*, which explored moral and ethical issues, and even the Roman Catholics produced a half-hour drama, *Insight*, which emphasized "spiritual solutions to human needs."[230] Through alliances with mainline organizations, ACTS sought to diversify religious broadcasting, by inviting in those churches which had previously failed to maximize the potential of the airwaves.

Given what was happening within the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s, the decision to include mainliners was somewhat ironic. ACTS emerged at a particularly fraught moment for the Southern Baptist Convention. In what would become known as the "Southern Baptist Controversy," conservatives essentially pulled off a coup within the denomination in the 1980s, systematically removing all of the moderates from positions of power and influence. This takeover was the culmination of a long-time power struggle between moderates and conservatives within the Convention and, over the course of the decade, conservative Baptists systematically took over all denominational agencies and all six Southern Baptist seminaries. As this takeover was happening, the RTVC seemingly remained untouched by its influence, and Allen remained steadfast in his desire to make ACTS into an ideologically moderate force.[231] As Barry Hankins has noted, the conservative takeover was part of a larger effort on behalf of Southern Baptists to enter, and win, the culture wars.[232] Even though ACTS was not controlled by conservatives in this period, the channel, with its promotion of family programming and

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[230] Tarwater, "Launching Christian Cable," 48.
[231] I would surmise that one reason that ACTS has received so little attention from Southern Baptist scholars is that the channel does not fit neatly into the story of the Southern Baptist controversy.
[232] Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives in American Culture* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 1-13.

religious content, nevertheless aligned with the conservatives' general inclination to push back against the secularism of mainstream culture.

ACTS wanted to diversify the types of Christian programming available on television. They believed that it was absolutely necessary to bring mainline perspectives to their network, precisely because they would offer more alternatives for both believers and the unchurched to potentially tune in to. Most religious networks syndicated programs from different denominations, mostly as a way to fill out their schedule in the late night hours and bring in revenue by charging a fee for the air time. ACTS, however, actively solicited the involvement of mainline churches. ACTS's understanding of their audience was unique, because it relied on a different "us vs. them" calculus than other religious networks had previously operationalized. For ACTS, the rhetorical enemy was not secularists—instead, it was the highly conservative televangelists who personally profited off of their television success and started their own electronic churches, rather than promoting local churches could do. By inviting in all Protestant viewers, ACTS cast a much wider net than its status as the first denominational network would suggest. By doing so, ACTS once again sought to reimagine what was possible for a Christian network.

"What Cable Was Originally Designed to Do:" Building a Local/National Network

The motivations of the Southern Baptists behind ACTS were clear—they wanted to offer an alternative to both secular and fundamentalist programming. The challenge was figuring out how best to achieve that. To that end, in its planning documents the RTVC took care to establish guidelines that would help the network to stay true to its mission as it entered the secular marketplace of the television industry. The most important policy that ACTS established was its rules about soliciting funds on the air. In order to combat the image of so-called televangelist

hucksters, ACTS forbid direct solicitation of funds on its programming. The goal of ACTS was not to make money, as their mission statement attests. The mission of ACTS was threefold: "to offer family-oriented quality programming to every home in America and to assist the local churches in carrying out their tasks...and to offer our alternative to the often unacceptable programming of today."[233] This statement inverts the typical relationship between the television network and the church. Networks like TBN and CBN would sometimes refer callers to counseling shows to their local churches; however, it was not their primary goal. For ACTS, the goal was to bolster the local church. The mission of ACTS was to *assist* individual churches in building their congregations and spreading the gospel. During ACTS's launch, Jimmy Allen declared in a press release to Southern Baptist ministers that "the sole objective of the American Christian Television System is to equip you to minister in the Age of Television—to put "electronic arms" on your local church."[234] In all of the material promoting ACTS, the local church was emphasized as the heart of the operation, and television was just another tool to help them minister.

Making the local church their top priority was one way in which ACTS hoped to ward off the problems that had, in their mind, corrupted other televangelists. The RTVC's trustees therefore adopted a "basic philosophy" for ACTS, which included a list of seven commitments which would inform ACTS's decisions during and after its launch. These commitments were established as a reminder of the network's mission and values, and they were designed to shape

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[233] "ACTS Satellite Network Relationship to Distribution Systems," Radio and Television Commission, August 1983, Box 275, News Releases Newspaper Clippings 1981-1984 Folder, SBHLA.
[234] Jimmy R. Allen, "Press Release," n.d., Box 275, News Releases Newspaper Clippings 1981-1984 Folder, SBHLA.

all of ACTS's business dealings, even, and especially, if they were working with secular business partners. The first was a commitment to "a spirit of loyalty to Southern Baptist strategies for missions, evangelism, nurture and ministry."[235] This was an obvious promise to make because ACTS was actually beholden to an established church organization. It was not starting an electronic church from scratch. It was subject to significant oversight, and there were many SBC rules and procedures in place to prevent the network from rule-breaking in terms of fundraising or programming. ACTS therefore could not be used to enrich its leaders or the talent on the network.

It was not only the church that was at the center of ACTS's philosophy, but the community. The other six commitments focused broadly on promoting the creation of a decentralized network that would prioritize elevating local churches and communities. ACTS committed to supporting the local church, bolstering the SBC's pioneer missions, maintaining clear communication with churches, keeping costs down for churches, promoting maximum access to television for American homes, and restoring the neighborhood concept of television service.[236] In their marketing materials and public statements, ACTS executives insisted that television had the power to bring communities together. When pitching the network to cable operators and those within the industry, ACTS executives emphasized that reprioritizing the community was absolutely central to their mission. Ron Dixon, the RTVC's vice president for media services, put it succinctly: "it's what cable was originally designed to do."[237] The RTVC

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[235] "RTVC Trustees Adopt Policies To Relate To ACTS Affiliates," News Release, Sept. 16, 1983, Box 275, News Releases Newspaper Clippings 1981-1984 Folder, SBHLA.
[236] Ibid.
[237] Tarwater, "Launching Christian Cable," 48.

therefore understood ACTS as a potential corrective to cable's unfulfilled potential. As these planning documents demonstrate, ACTS had a clear plan for the network, one which was rooted in a belief that there was a strong desire for ideologically and theologically moderate perspectives and locally produced programming.

In order to reach as many people as possible, ACTS adopted a hybrid model of broadcasting. Originally, the network was to be comprised of a few full-power television stations, more low-power television stations, and coverage on cable systems. ACTS hoped that low-power stations, or LPTVs, would be a large part of the network. The FCC had decided in 1982 to start granting licenses for these stations, which only had a broadcasting range of ten to fifteen miles. These stations were granted through a lottery system, and by the summer of 1984, ACTS had submitted over one hundred applications and won five lotteries.[238] Acquiring full power stations proved to be even trickier, since licenses for those were highly sought after. ACTS had managed, however, to win licenses in San Francisco, Houston, and Greenville, North Carolina. Construction began on those stations in 1984, but it is unclear whether or not those stations ever went into operation.[239] Initially, Allen was hopeful that this hybrid model would allow ACTS to expand rapidly across the country, helping the network to catch up with its competitors. Allen told reporters that he hoped that ACTS would be able to reach forty million people after its first year, and be available in ninety percent of the country within the next six to

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[238] The FCC quickly faced a serious backlog due to an overwhelming number of applications, and decided on a lottery system to determine who won licenses. "FCC Low-Power Action Points to Mounting Momentum of ACTS," Feb. 13, 1984, Box 275, News Releases Newspaper Clippings 1981-1984 Folder, SBHLA.
[239] "Southern Baptists Building."

eight years.[240] This plan relied on a *lot* of things going ACTS's way, including winning licenses for LPTV stations and convincing many cable systems to add the network to their lineups. Unfortunately for Allen, neither of those projects went smoothly, and ACTS never hit that forty-million-viewer threshold during its entire run. Furthermore, it quickly became apparent that purchasing full-power stations would not be cost-efficient for the network, and that waiting to win LPTV stations would take too long and not net that many more viewers. ACTS quickly turned the majority of its attention to recruiting local cable systems to carry the channel instead, and the channel's pitch for inclusion in their lineups was built on its family-friendly, broadly Christian appeal.

In order to assure its viewers that ACTS would provide "quality," "clean" programming, ACTS established strict programming and advertising content guidelines for the new network. ACTS adopted a slogan, "A Channel You Can Trust," to emphasize how its strict rules would protect the family audience from all kinds of unsavory content. These included the prohibition of advertising for R- and X-rated movies, alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, contraceptives and feminine hygiene products. Also forbidden were "any favorable references to the occult, gambling, tobacco products, drugs, sexual promiscuity or other behavior judged morally offensive by RTVC management."[241] Bans on the occult extended to positive references to witchcraft, astrology, and magic. These restrictions applied to both advertisements and content aired on the channel. ACTS's standards were very similar to those that CBN had established a decade earlier. The network also expressly forbade on-air direct solicitation on its programs or

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[240] Tarwater, "Launching Christian Cable," 46.
[241] "RTVC Trustees Adopt Policies."

local advertisements. Importantly, ACTS also did not allow any proselytizing or maligning of other faiths on the network. These restrictions applied to local productions as well. For the RTVC, restricting programming and advertising in this way was necessary in order to protect the family audience that they were trying to win over. Allen believed that there was a "yearning" for clean television, and that through these guidelines and its non-commercial approach, ACTS could fulfill that need.[242]

ACTS encouraged the production and promotion of local programming, but the channel did have a 24/7 feed available for those communities that could not yet afford to produce their own programming. The RTVC spent three years and over three million dollars stockpiling their original productions before the network launched, and continued to regularly produce programming.[243] For the network's family programming, ACTS introduced a variety of new and old shows from a variety of genres. These included *Sunshine Factory* (a children's program styled after *The Electric Company*), *Country Crossroads* (a music program), *Prime Timers* (a talk show designed specifically for senior citizens), and *Lifestyle* (a weekday show for women). ACTS also featured a series of shows focused on various aspects of domestic life, including *Super Handyman!* (a DIY home repair show), *The David Wade Show* (in which a gourmet chef demonstrated cooking techniques), *Eat Yourself Healthy* (a nutritional guide) and *The Plant Groom* (a gardening show). This programming strategy mirrored what CBN had done in the 1970s; ACTS similarly imagined the audience for its family programming to include every member of the family. The channel's Christian programming included *Cope* (a call-in counseling

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[242] Martin, "A Home in the Sky," 48.
[243] Galloway, "Baptists to Launch TV Network."

show), *Life Today* (a religious variety talk show akin to *The 700 Club*), and *Invitation to Life*, which filmed revivals in Baptist churches across the country. Producing this much programming, even though each individual show was not particularly expensive, strained the RTVC's financial resources, and the network needed to come up with a sustainable funding model to offset its production expenses.

Given the principles that ACTS had laid out in the lead-up to the launch, the network needed a funding model that was different from its competitors'. The network was not opposed to asking wealthy Southern Baptists for their financial support—Jimmy Allen himself told reporters that he had personally contacted sixty-three Southern Baptist millionaires about pledging their support to the fledging network, many of whom had "expressed interest" in the project.[244] The network had received startup funds from the Southern Baptist Convention totaling 4.3 million dollars, which amounted to a huge influx of cash compared to what other SBC projects had received in the past. Through endowments, gifts, and pledges, the channel also raised ten million dollars from 1981 to 1984.[245] Like other commissions within the SBC, however, the expectation was that the RTVC would soon become sustainable on its own, without too much additional help from the Convention.

ACTS had staked its reputation on its refusal to solicit donations on air—but they did use the RTVC's existing mailing lists in order to drum up additional funds. However, the SBC had already established very specific rules about who could be contacted for these kinds of

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[244] Martin, "A Home in the Sky," 48.
[245] ACTS Satellite Network, Inc., "The ACTS Story: Inaugurating a New Network: ACTS Highlights," June 12, 1984, Baptist History File, Radio and Television Commission Folder, SBHLA.

campaigns—rules to which the other, individual-led Christian networks were not beholden. The SBC forbade the RTVC from contacting churches about providing support; instead, they were only allowed to contact individuals, and only those people who had donated or written to the RTVC in the last ten years.[246] These restrictions obviously limited the RTVC's options. Nevertheless, according to internal documents, the RTVC contacted over 34,000 individuals with its initial mailing to drum up support for ACTS. The RTVC also sent monthly mailings to those 22,000 people who had donated to the RTVC in the last five years. These campaigns brought some money into the RTVC, but no major financial benefactors emerged from this pool.

ACTS had to think creatively about finding other sources of income. The mainstream method of making television profitable—airing commercial advertisements—was neither immediately achievable nor particularly palatable to ACTS. Soliciting enough advertisers to sustain the RTVC and its production work, as well as the network's infrastructure itself, was practically impossible without compromising the RTVC's vision for the network's content. However, the network could not afford *not* to generate revenue through ads. So, ACTS planned to recruit corporations to underwrite particular programs, much in the way that PBS and NET had. ACTS had high hopes for companies supporting their mission initially, but it was difficult to attract high levels of financial support with the network's low ratings and small reach.

Ultimately, it was the churches themselves that would have to make ACTS sustainable. The RTVC set up a system through which those churches who joined the ACTS network would

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[246] "ACTS Task Force Progress Report Presented to the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees," The Radio and Television Commission, November 29, 1982, 28, Baptist History File, ACTS Task Force Progress Report Nov. 1982 Folder, SBHLA.

provide funds at the rate of ten cents per church member per month to ACTS. In this way, ACTS became a sort-of subscription service, and it needed at least ten percent of all SBC churches to become ACTS member churches in order to keep the network afloat.[247] The SBC prided itself on its respect for the autonomy of its member churches, so churches had to decide for themselves whether or not they wanted to join the ACTS network. There were incentives for churches to join ACTS—namely, that they would have the opportunity to have weekly spots on the network for promoting church activities. These opportunities to promote their church, and even create entire programs, would not have been feasible financially without ACTS.

Local ACTS boards were truly the engines of the channel. In each community in which there was an ACTS affiliate, whether through a low power television station, educational station, or cable operator, there was a local ACTS board comprised of local Southern Baptists. Any church that affiliated with ACTS, and paid the ten cents per member fee, was entitled to place one person on the board.[248] Forming an ACTS board was the first step to getting your church and community hooked into the network. Once formed, the first order of business for the motivated volunteers was to raise between 15,000 and 20,000 dollars to purchase a TVRO (a receiver-only satellite earth station).[249] By purchasing a TVRO, those churches ensured that their local cable system could air ACTS, regardless of which direction the cable operators' own satellites were pointed. ACTS was on GTE Spacenet I, a new satellite that most cable operators' antennas were

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[247] Lisa Ellis, "Baptists' Cable TV System Angers Competitor," *Dallas Times-Herald*, July 16, 1984, Box 275, News Releases Newspaper Clippings 1981-1984 Folder, SBHLA.
[248] "RTVC Trustees Adopt Policies."
[249] Ellis, "Baptists' Cable TV System Angers Competitor."

not trained to pick up. So, ACTS placed the burden on local communities to demonstrate their enthusiasm for the channel by raising enough money to purchase their own TVROs. Sometimes, fundraising could take years, particularly in communities with fewer resources. Whenever anyone questioned whether or not it was truly worth the financial struggle to launch ACTS, Allen responded that while the cost of ACTS was undoubtedly high, the cost of *not* launching the network was "unthinkable" because of its potential to bring people to the church.[250]

It also fell to the local ACTS board to convince the local cable operator that they should carry ACTS. This typically involved emphasizing how much the cable operator stood to gain by adding the network—particularly if the communities they served included a high percentage of Southern Baptists or mainliners. The RTVC recommended that local ACTS boards emphasize the potential for good public relations that the cable operator could garner by picking up ACTS, especially if they spun it as a gesture toward public service. It was essentially the responsibility of the local ACTS board to prove to the cable operator that there was a demand for ACTS in their area. As one RTVC official explained to the trade magazine *SAT Guide*, an ACTS board could "vow to encourage church members and others to sign up for cable service. One of ACTS' main arguments is that the service offers the operator more subscribers, increased viewer satisfaction and an enhanced standing in the community."[251] For some cable operators, this was an effective argument, particularly because it promised to increase cable subscriptions and therefore bring in more revenue. Many local ACTS boards hustled to get congregants to sign

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[250] Martin, "A Home in the Sky," 48.
[251] Terrance Stanton, "Opening ACTS: The Southern Baptists Bring Their Show To Cable, Town By Town," *SAT Guide*, May 1984, 23, Box 275, News Releases Newspaper Clippings 1981-1984 Folder, SBHLA.

petitions in support of the network, and they were dogged in their pursuit of cable coverage. Once the local ACTS board came to an agreement with their local cable operator, then ACTS could finally debut in their community.

In fact, sometimes ACTS's volunteers proved to be a bit too overzealous. Early in ACTS's run, the channel came under fire from its much more powerful rival, Jim Bakker's The PTL Network, which accused ACTS of using "underhanded" tactics to convince cable operators to replace PTL with ACTS. PTL spokesmen complained that ACTS had been "using a very aggressive political machine" to promote its service and accused ACTS of mischaracterizing PTL to cable operators.[252] The RTVC admitted that some volunteers may have been too aggressive while campaigning cable operators, and that the channel had made some "early marketing mistakes" which attacked their rivals too directly.[253] Why was the PTL Network so worried about this upstart channel from the Southern Baptists? Primarily because their tactics were starting to work, and there were several cable operators who had dropped PTL in favor of ACTS's more moderate approach. Major operators in Little Rock, Arkansas and Fort Worth had already dropped PTL, and in Jackson, Mississippi, ACTS had replaced the much more powerful and popular CBN on the basic tier.[254] This was the closest ACTS ever came to threatening its rivals' popularity.

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[252] Ellis, "Baptists' Cable TV System Angers Competitor."
[253] Daniel W. Pawley, "PTL Says Baptist TV Network Benefits From Unfair Marketing Practices," Newspaper Clipping, Sept. 7, 1984, Box 275, News Releases Newspaper Clippings 1981-1984 Folder, SBHLA.
[254] Ellis; Kevin Jones, "Will ACTS Ax CBN? Bible Belt Battle Begins," *The Clarion-Ledger-Jackson-Daily News*, May 19, 1984, Box 275, News Releases Newspaper Clippings 1981-1984 Folder, SBHLA. (8618)

Once ACTS was on the air in a particular community, it was the local board's responsibility to oversee programming and local advertisements. As part of their commitment to local television, ACTS set aside twenty-three hours a week in its schedule for local programming, three hours a day and five on Sunday.[255] In many cases, local ACTS boards oversaw the production of local programming, and solicited local advertisers to underwrite their programs. Before the network's launch, the RTVC held several conferences in order to give local ministers, music directors, and lay people training in television production.[256] Some churches were much more active than others in terms of production; the difference often came down to the amount of resources available. Only a few SBC churches had their own production facilities, but most churches had a minimal amount of equipment to film their worship services and perhaps a Bible study program.

By 1985, ACTS estimated that over 150 Baptist churches were producing their own programming. Worship services filmed for local circulation were by far the most popular production, but some particularly ambitious churches expanded their local production to include community events and more inventive formats. Many churches filmed city council meetings, local sports, or other community events of interest. For example, First Baptist Church in Alcoa, Tennessee served as its community's only public access channel and produced 25-30 hours of programming each week, including a counseling show, a local news magazine, and coverage of

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[255] There were reruns of standard ACTS programming available if the entire twenty-three hours could not be filled by the local ACTS board.
[256] Tarwater, "Launching Christian Cable," 47.

all major community events, including college basketball games.[257] Wichita Falls Church in Texas produced over seventeen hours of programming a week, including two weekly worship services, a weekly fifteen-minute package of music videos, half-hour music specials, and commercial spots for all the Baptist churches in the area. Some churches, including Wichita Falls Church and First Baptist Church of Lafayette, Louisiana, produced services specifically for the deaf population. Lanier Baptist church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, produced its own children's show. Pine Bluff Church in Arkansas produced *The Buddy Deane Show* (a local talk show hosted by a local retired radio personality) and *Positive Alternatives* (an inspirational program hosted by Pine Bluff pastor Mike Huckabee).[258] First Baptist in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, produced a community talk show as well as a health program in conjunction with the local Health Information Services office. Several churches also produced their own Bible study programs, often with the house-bound in mind. Given the opportunity, many jumped at the chance to produce programming that they felt would benefit their community in some way. Although it was not perfect, and not every ACTS affiliate had the same access to production equipment and expertise, that part of Allen's vision was largely realized. However, growing local production cultures did not do enough to stave off the RTVC's mounting debts, and the RTVC soon faced a series of difficult decisions that would shake some executives' faith in the channel's mission.

"Down Here in the Real World": Financial Difficulties, 1986-1987

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[257] Greg Warner, "ACTS Makes Good on Cable's Promise of Localism," Unpublished press release, 1985, Box 292, News Releases Newspaper Clippings 1985 Folder, SBHLA.
[258] Rick Joslin, "Huckabee: ACTS Is Lighting Candle," *Pine Bluff News*, April 4, 1985, Box 292, News Releases Newspaper Clippings 1985 Folder, SBHLA.

After a couple years on the air, it was clear that the RTVC's plan to build a decentralized network was deeply flawed financially. The structures of the US television system severely limited ACTS's potential growth, since the network could not attract lucrative advertising deals with its low viewership or rely on federal regulators to subsidize their operation. As a result, the RTVC was quickly pushed into a corner with regards to the channel's future, and the commission's leadership spent the next two years figuring out how to keep the channel on the air, and asking themselves if it was even worth it to do so. The result was a series of compromises designed to preserve the Southern Baptists' access to the airwaves, even at the expense of the RTVC's long-term financial health and their initial vision for the channel's principles.

The RTVC had taken on a significant amount of debt (around nine million dollars) to launch ACTS. The hope, of course, had been that the network would be successful enough to pay down that debt quickly. ACTS's leaders had been "too aggressive and optimistic" in their budgeting and projected income, according to a later Executive Committee report.[259] This assessment was especially true for the network's efforts to secure spots on cable systems and acquire low-power television stations; both of these tasks had proven much more difficult than the Southern Baptists had anticipated. By the fall of 1985, the commission's financial situation was dire. In order to pay their creditors, as well as their business partners, the RTVC took out a short-term, high-interest-rate loan for ten million dollars, to be paid back over a ten-year

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[259] Steve Maynard, "Loan, Fund Campaign Save ACTS from Final Curtain," *The Houston Chronicle*, October 26, 1985, Box 292, News Releases Newspaper Clippings 1985, SBHLA.

period.[260] This kind of move was rare for the SBC, which expected its commissions to be financially self-sufficient. After only a year on the air, ACTS had reached a critical impasse, with the *Houston Chronicle* and others reporting that the network had come "within an eyelash" of shutting down completely, according to anonymous sources within the SBC.[261] Jimmy Allen himself admitted that the network would have been "scrapped" if the funding and future fundraising efforts had not been approved. Former chairman of the board T.W. Terral, a pastor from Baton Rouge, would confirm eighteen months later that he had been "scared to death" about the financial condition of the agency during this period.[262] The ten-million-dollar loan stopped the bleeding. However, ACTS was not yet on firm financial footing.

ACTS failed to expand as quickly as RTVC leaders had hoped, in large part because they had been overly optimistic about how quickly local ACTS boards would get the channel on their local cable systems. Unlike most major cable programmers, who focused on getting their channel on in the major markets, ACTS's bottom-up strategy did not pay particular attention to the size of the communities they were adding to the network. The RTVC did not explicitly direct the formation of local ACTS boards in major media markets, nor did they allocate resources to favor those markets. While some state ACTS boards did focus more on breaking into those markets with the highest number of people, it was typically smaller communities with a high number of Southern Baptists where ACTS had its greatest success. ACTS was a markedly rural channel,

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[260] Dan Martin, "Executive Committee Notes Economic Woes at RTVC," *Baptist Standard*, March 4, 1987, Box 275, Newspaper Clippings 1987 Folder, SBHLA.
[261] Maynard, "Loan, Fund Campaign Save ACTS."
[262] Dan Martin, "RTVC Stability Questioned," *Baptist Standard*, January 21, 1987, Box 275, Newspaper Clippings 1987 Folder, SBHLA.

with most of its coverage in the American South—a region that was often dismissed or forgotten by other programmers. ACTS's expansion strategy was scattershot without strong direction from the RTVC. While some cable operators were very excited to put ACTS on the air, particularly if their system served an area with a lot of Southern Baptists, others were very skeptical of the channel or insisted that they did not need yet another religious channel on their service.

Louisiana provides perhaps the best example of how ACTS's expansion strategies played out on the ground. Based on the archival material available, Louisiana had one of the strongest state boards, run by Chip Turner. Louisiana consistently ranked as the state with the second or third highest number of ACTS boards, and those boards were particularly active and effective. By the winter of 1984, ACTS was on fourteen cable systems in Louisiana.[263] By the summer of 1987, that number had grown to thirty-three.[264] Louisiana was, by all accounts, a success story for the RTVC and ACTS. Despite their success, however, the major markets in Louisiana eluded ACTS. Turner was very open about his desire to break into the state's largest cities and the struggle to convince those cities' cable operators to carry the channel. It took until the summer of 1985 to get coverage in Baton Rouge and Shreveport, for example. It was New Orleans, however, that remained particularly elusive. According to Turner, a "dispute" with New Orleans's cable operator kept ACTS off the air for years in the state's biggest city.[265] In fact, ACTS did not become available in New Orleans until after their channel-sharing agreement with

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[263] Mary Knox, "ACTS Beams Baptist Witness Into Louisiana's Homes," *Baptist Message*, November 15, 1984, Box 275, News Releases Newspaper Clippings 1981-1984 Folder, SBHLA.
[264] "ACTS Launches New Campaign; Pledges Top $644,000," *Baptist Message,* July 23, 1987, Box 275 Newspaper Clippings 1987 Folder, SBHLA.
[265] Knox, "ACTS Beams Baptist Witness."

VISN in 1992. Lacking access to the over 500,000 people in New Orleans obviously hurt the channel's prospects. For ACTS to prove that it could become a powerful nationwide force in the cable industry, they first had to demonstrate that they could pull high-enough ratings numbers, which were incredibly difficult to achieve when the channel was shut out of many major markets entirely. This failure to expand quickly and effectively ultimately hobbled the channel's financial prospects.

After the loan ensured that the RTVC could pay its bills for the immediate future, the ACTS team set about brainstorming ways to increase the network's revenue and pay back its debts. However, these early efforts at raising development funds were largely failures. It was reported that fundraising campaigns from July 1985 to December 1986 had resulted in losses totaling over half a million dollars, with 1,179,000 dollars of cash received from pledges against costs of 1,645,000 dollars.[266] After these humbling figures were reported, the RTVC announced that they would revamp their fundraising strategies. In order to cut the costs associated with these dinners, the RTVC asked local ACTS boards to find local sponsors and supporters that could donate to the development efforts by providing discounted or complimentary services associated with putting on a banquet of this size.

By January of 1987, some of the RTVC's trustees were becoming disillusioned with ACTS's long term prospects. A meeting to discuss the first quarter financial report (which covered October through December of 1986) drew decidedly different reactions from trustees. Fred Roach, the finance committee chairman, declared that the report was "a cause for

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[266] Dan Martin, "Concern Expressed Over RTVC," *Baptist Digest*, April 1987, Box 275, Newspaper Clippings 1987 Folder, SBHLA.

celebration. It is a most fantastic report; the financial condition of the Radio and Television Commission is on more solid ground than ever before in history."[267] Not everyone shared Roach's rosy outlook, however. For some of the RTVC's trustees, it was glaringly obvious that the commission needed to seriously rethink its investments in and strategies for ACTS.

Unrest amongst RTVC trustees was widely reported within Baptist circles—with several trustees going on the record questioning how the vision for the network aligned with the reality of the commission's financial situation. Trustee Gary Jossa, an advertising agency owner from Indiana, disagreed with Roach's outlook. As he told reporters after the slightly contentious meeting:

> We need to take a lot harder look at this and not get caught up in the vision. I have as much vision as the next guy, but God also gave us gray matter to look at things. The trustees of the RTVC are going to need to be ready to decide what to do if development funds do not develop. We should not wait until the end, we should do that now.[268]

Jossa points to one of the central tensions that shaped ACTS—namely, the contrast between the RTVC's vision for the channel and the reality of their position in a crowded religious television marketplace. The commission's utopian hopes for the network could not be realized in a capitalistic television system that prioritized advertising sales and city-centric national distribution. Without soliciting donations for viewers, as their rivals had done, it was incredibly difficult to come up with enough revenue to break even. Another trustee, Laverne Butler, was even more blunt in his assessment of the RTVC leadership's shortcomings. Butler, a pastor from

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[267] Dan Martin, "RTVC Stability Questioned," *Baptist Standard*, January 21, 1987, Box 275, Newspaper Clippings 1987 Folder, SBHLA.
[268] Dan Martin, "RTVC Trustees Debate Financial Report," *Northwest Baptist Witness,* January 27, 1987, Box 275, Newspaper Clippings 1987 Folder, SBHLA.

Louisville, Kentucky, explained that he didn't have "that gut feeling level of enthusiasm. I think we need to stop relying on inspiration and get down here in the real world."[269] That lack of enthusiasm spoke to the disillusionment some trustees felt in the face of the RTVC's sunny rhetoric about television's power to transform lives and bring people to the church—if they could not convince enough people to watch the network, how could they justify its enormous expense?

Throughout their financial challenges, the RTVC refused to embrace the types of fundraising that their rivals had used so effectively. This commitment to their principles, especially their belief that mixing pleas for money with spiritual guidance was unethical, forced the commission to get creative. Instead of asking viewers for donations, or launching a direct mail campaign to interested Southern Baptists, the RTVC instead decided to try to leverage the inroads it had made through its local ACTS boards to drum up support for the channel. The commission remained steadfast in its belief that ACTS's success would be the direct result of the efforts of the local ACTS boards, even in its fundraising. Working closely with some strong local ACTS boards, the RTVC kicked off a new capital development campaign in cities where the network had gained some traction and wealthy potential donors resided. Banquets were held in Jacksonville and Atlanta, but unfortunately, ACTS was not adept at fundraising. The Jacksonville banquet, the largest ever put together by ACTS, brought in a disappointing 191,000 dollars in pledges on April 3, 1987.[270] The "minimum goal" for that particular campaign had been 445,000 dollars. As local pastor Ray Melton put it, "We had hoped it would be more, but it

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[269] Ibid.
[270] Greg Warner, "ACTS Seeks Financial Boost from Jacksonville," *Florida Baptist Witness* Apr 9, 1987, Box 275, Newspaper Clippings 1987 Folder, SBHLA.

could be significant that more people than usual asked for more information. Such inquiries often produce the largest donations, leaving open the possibility the $445,000 goal can still be reached."[271] Melton's optimism here, even in the face of an obvious disconnect between the RTVC's goals and results, matched the optimism that, at least publicly, Jimmy Allen and other ACTS supporters continued to espouse. A series of four banquets in Atlanta in May of 1987 earned the commission 644,723 dollars in pledges and cash gifts, a disappointing total which was slightly more than half of the commission's goal of 1.2 million dollars.[272] More banquets were planned for cities like Harrisburg, PA, Birmingham and Mobile, AL, and Long Island, NY, but there is no archival evidence that these dinners ever actually happened. These dinners were a spectacular failure, and the commission's pursuit of more traditional revenue streams did not fare much better.

ACTS looked to leverage its assets as a television network to generate more income. First, they put together a plan to sell ACTS's most popular programs as a syndication package. These shows, *Cope* (their counseling program) and *Country Crossroads* (their music program) were packaged with decades-old films that the network had acquired. However, both *Country Crossroads* and those movie packages were met with "negative response" on the market.[273] Bob Taylor, senior vice president of programming services for ACTS, confessed that his own enthusiasm had waned "based on the response we have gotten from the industry," and lamented

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[271] Greg Warner and Dan Martin, "ACTS Seeks Boost Through New Approach," *Baptist and Reflector*, April 22, 1987, Box 275, Newspaper Clippings 1987 Folder, SBHLA.
[272] "Baptist Press News Briefs: Atlanta ACTS Campaign Gets $644,000 in Launch," *The Alabama Baptist*, June 18, 1987, Box 275, Newspaper Clippings 1987 Folder, SBHLA.
[273] Martin, "RTVC Trustees Debate Financial Report."

in particular the failure of *Country Crossroads* to cross over. Taylor blamed the failure of that music program on the fact that the "whole country music genre is in the pits right now," which the *New York Times* had published a report about a year earlier.[274] *Cope* made up the majority of ACTS's early syndication sales—but that show's appeal was limited to those stations interested in adding yet another call-in, Christian counseling show. Given the popularity of *The 700 Club, The PTL Club,* and *Praise the Lord* in this period, it would have been difficult for *Cope* to come close to achieving their ratings. In its budget report for 1987, the RTVC budgeted for 475,000 dollars of syndication revenue from this package over the next three years.[275] However, in the first quarter of the 1986-1987 financial year, the syndication fell short of its expectations—earning only 24,000 of the budgeted 30,000 dollars. Given that this was the first quarter of sales—the shortfall did not bode well for the RTVC coming anywhere close to that projected number.

Syndication efforts proved to be underwhelming, but the RTVC's trustees' decision to allow individual churches to purchase time on the network proved more reliably lucrative. In a reversal of previous policy, the trustees voted in April of 1987 to allow individual churches to purchase time on the network, in a series called *Great Preachers of America*.[276] The series would air for twelve-and-a-half hours every week, with programs scheduled each evening, for thirty minutes each day, and four additional hours on Sunday. Churches could purchase one program in

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[274] Robert Palmer, "Nashville: Sound: Country Music in Decline," *New York Times*, September 17, 1985, https://www.nytimes.com/1985/09/17/arts/nashville-sound-country-music-in-decline.html.
[275] Dan Martin, "RTVC Stability Questioned," *Baptist Standard*, January 21, 1987, Box 275, Newspaper Clippings 1987 Folder, SBHLA.
[276] Richard T. McCartney, "RTVC Votes to Sell ACTS Time to Individual Churches," *Baptist Message*, April 23, 1987, Box 275, Newspaper Clippings 1987 Folder, SBHLA.

the series (costing 96,000 dollars per hour) to showcase their pastor and their church. This system recalled the broker system that had kept many independent radio stations afloat in the previous decades, in which independent producers had purchased airtime and sold their own advertising in order to secure a slot on their local radio station. The first three preachers to sign up were Nelson Price of Roswell Street Baptist Church in Marietta, GA, Perry Sanders of First Baptist Church of Lafayette, LA, and Frank Pollard, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jackson, MS.[277] All of these churches already had the requisite technology available due to their involvement with producing local programs with their ACTS board, so purchasing these slots essentially allowed these pastors to preach beyond their local community and speak to ACTS's national audience. Allen framed the decision as a positive for the network by suggesting that these time slots would be a new avenue for mainline preachers who were frustrated by how difficult it was to get airtime on other secular and religious networks.[278] This policy change was small but significant—because selling these slots created the potential for a new, telegenic voice to gain a large national following, like the charismatics and fundamentalists had. A preacher could theoretically break out as a new star for religious broadcasting and use ACTS as a stepping stone to achieve greater celebrity. This was entirely antithetical to ACTS's mission; their entire network was structured to avoid having one telegenic personality dominate the network. For the commission, however, it was a necessary risk given their financial situation.

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[277] Pollard would go on to anchor ACTS's *Word of Life* program, leveraging his popularity from the *Great Preachers* series into a higher profile gig. "ACTS Names New Preachers for 1988," *Baptist Message*, December 17, 1987, Box 275, Newspaper Clippings 1987 Folder, SBHLA.

[278] Technically, Southern Baptists are not "mainline" Christians, but Allen frequently referred to them as such. "Bellevue Joins ACTS Series," *Baptist and Reflector*, July 1, 1987, Box 275, Newspaper Clippings 1987 Folder, SBHLA.

The combination of fundraising dinners, syndication, and especially selling time to individual churches, helped to save the RTVC from total collapse. It was clear that the commission would not be able to expand ACTS beyond its current total of nine million cable households without finding new forms of support for the network. Offers of support would soon manifest, from private corporations who wanted to further ACTS's vision for a more ecumenical channel. The RTVC would be faced with even tougher decisions, and would have to figure out how to preserve Southern Baptists' access to the airwaves, without bankrupting the commission or its principles.

To Sell or Not to Sell: 1988-1992

By 1988, it was clear that ACTS was not well-positioned to remain competitive in a marketplace with an increasing number of cable channels, growing competition for space on satellites, and an influx of new religious network competitors. The network's deteriorating financial situation, and the consequent debates about whether or not to sell the network, brought to the forefront the struggle over who ACTS was for, who could claim a sense of ownership over the network, and what it stood for in the marketplace of religious broadcasting. While the RTVC maintained that ACTS was an important part of its overall mission and highlighted the network's unique power to evangelize through television, the trustees of the RTVC began to explore options to sell the network and wipe out the significant amount of debt that the commission had taken on in order to keep ACTS alive. The decision to sell the network was a practical one—the RTVC trustees, and particularly RTVC director Jimmy Allen, still believed in the mission of the network—they just did not want to further jeopardize the financial stability of the commission (and, by extension, the SBC) in order to keep it going.

Despite their struggles to expand their audience, the RTVC's officials still believed that creating their own space in the television landscape was vital to the health of the denomination. So when Center "Chip" Atkins proposed an unconventional solution to the network's financial woes, the RTVC was eager to accept his offer. Atkins was an advertising executive from San Antonio whose firm had sold advertising time for ACTS for several years, and the two groups had developed a strong working relationship. In order to allow ACTS to keep its integrity and standards while bolstering the network's satellite positioning and financial situation, Atkins created and incorporated "Friends of ACTS," a for-profit company which would buy ACTS but preserve its principles. Crucially, Friends of ACTS (FOA) would take on the burden of leasing a spot on the new Galaxy III satellite, which was much better (and therefore much more expensive) than ACTS's outdated perch on the GTE Spacenet.

Both sides were initially confident that the sale would be completed, as evidenced by *Broadcasting* magazine reporting it as a fait accompli on May 2, 1988.[279] The terms of the sale were quite favorable to ACTS and the RTVC, who had happily found a business partner who could provide them the cash influx they desperately needed without forcing them to give up their access to the airwaves. Friends of ACTS (FOA) promised to pay eleven million dollars up front for the network's assets. The RTVC would receive an additional two million dollars per year to produce programming, and provide ACTS with at least thirty-five hours of programming each week. When the deal was announced, RTVC executive vice president Richard McCartney declared that the deal would be worth a total of 170 million dollars to the RTVC.[280] That number

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[279] "Business: Southern Baptists Sell ACTS," *Broadcasting*, May 2, 1988, 63-64, ProQuest.
[280] Ibid.

was optimistic, but McCartney's bold declaration speaks to what some RTVC trustees hoped ACTS could achieve be aligning with a commercial, for-profit backer.

The decision to sell ACTS to Friends of Acts was met with unanimous approval from the RTVC board. The trustees, well aware of the precarious financial situation of the RTVC, were eager to restore the commission to stability. In the RTVC's newsletter, Jimmy Allen laid out the case for the ACTS sale to the network's affiliates and other interested parties.[281] Friends of ACTS, true to their moniker, had made several key promises which eased the blow of selling the network that had become a hugely important part of the RTVC's operations. FOA promised to hold to the network's key tenets. Even though the new ACTS would be a commercial enterprise, the network would not allow direct solicitation on its programs. FOA also promised to keep ACTS's ratio of family and religious programming, with family programming making up at least sixty-five percent of the network's offerings. Crucially for Allen and many other ACTS enthusiasts, FOA vowed to support the "local origination program concept," a move likely designed to appease potentially angry ACTS affiliates. To further guarantee that the network's quality would not nosedive with the move to a more commercial model, Atkins also pledged to establish a non-profit multi-denominational board "to help assure a balance of mainline denominational programs of the highest quality."[282] In other words, FOA basically intended to keep ACTS more or less intact. FOA planned to use its resources to make a "heavy investment" in producing new programming and in mounting a major promotional push to bring in new

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[281] "Southern Baptists to Sell ACTS Network," *Impacts* 3, no. 4, May 1988, Box 304, Beam Internationals, Miscellaneous Pamphlets/Brochures Folder, SBHLA.
[282] Ibid.

viewers and, subsequently, advertisers. The continuity between the two operations was no accident– Allen worked closely with Atkins during the sale process, and planned to leave his post at the RTVC in order to become chairman of the board of FOA.[283]

Even though the sale was reported as a done deal, Atkins and the team behind Friends of Acts had not yet gathered a full complement of investors to facilitate the purchase. The Atkins group quickly realized that it would be much more difficult to convince investors to sign on to support the unprofitable network than anticipated. As Jimmy Allen explained it, the financial and time commitments to Southern Baptists that FOA had promised the RTVC "scared off" potential investors.[284] The partnership between FOA and the RTVC was unappealing to outside parties. Despite FOA's status as a commercial entity, they were not behaving like one. Promising thirty-five hours of weekly programming and millions of dollars to a group that had failed to sustain their own channel was not the type of decision made by a typical profit-driven group. For other potential investors, the cozy relationship between FOA and ACTS clearly spelled trouble for the channel's prospects. As a result, the FOA group failed to meet its deadline to complete the sale, despite being granted multiple extensions. Even though they had decided to make the switch to a commercial, ad-supported model of broadcasting, the RTVC refused to relinquish their access to television, even to make the sale of the channel more palatable to outside buyers. Access was still their primary concern.

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[283] Even though the sale eventually fell through, Allen still stepped down from the RTVC in 1989. McSwain, *Loving Beyond Your Theology,* 189.
[284] Ray Waddle, "Religious Cable VISN Expands; Baptists Chief Foe," *The Sunday Tennessean*, April 2, 1989, Box 292, ASNI/ACA/ACTSCOM 1987-1993 Folder, SBHLA.

After the disappointment and embarrassment of the canceled sale, ACTS began to test the waters to determine if there were other potential buyers. While they eventually worked out a deal with Atkins wherein he would continue to lease space on the Galaxy III and allow ACTS exclusive use at a discounted rate, the RTVC still had serious concerns about the long-term viability of the network—and they could not immediately rule out selling to a different buyer, even if their terms were less friendly than Friends of ACTS's had been. As detailed in a report made to the board of trustees on April 11, 1989, there were three main reasons why the RTVC would consider selling ACTS to a for-profit partner.[285] First, the growth of ACTS had plateaued, capping out around nine million households. Second, MSOs (multiple systems operators, the big cable companies) wanted to appease more of their customers with a "multidenominational religious channel." What had once been considered a huge strength of the network—its connection with an established church organization—had in fact become a liability as they tried to expand beyond traditional Southern Baptist strongholds. There was also a new competitor lurking on the horizon: VISN, the Vision Interfaith Satellite Network. ACTS was also in competition with more popular religious channels, particularly TBN (the Trinity Broadcasting Network) and EWTN (Eternal Word Television Network). ACTS was at an impasse—it needed more viewers to convince cable operators to add the channel, which required a significant influx of additional funds. This was the third reason that the RTVC cited for its decision to sell, and

[285] Board of Trustees Minutes for Radio and Television Commission (Attachment 9), April 11, 1989, Box 281, Minutes RTVC ACTS Board of Trustees Meetings 1989-90 Folder, SBHLA.

was likely the largest factor in their decision-making. ACTS still needed "capital infusion from outside sources" in order to grow and achieve stability.[286]

After the Friends of Acts deal finally fell through, there were a few other groups that expressed interest in purchasing the network. Each submitted proposals to the RTVC, and all promised to keep ACTS as a Christian network. One group, Satellite Network Services, Inc., promised to make a large investment in producing new programming and proposed creating an all-star "Interdenominational Christian Board of Directors" hypothetically featuring high-profile Christians like Billy Graham, Roy Rogers, Tom Landry, and Ronald Reagan.[287] Another group, Global Evangelism Inc., which was based out of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio and run by Reverend John Hagee, offered the RTVC nine million dollars to cover the committee's debt and four hours a day of programming time on the network for ten years.[288] The third preliminary offer was made by a refigured Friends of ACTS, which had brought on Ralph Tacker of DFW Uplink, Inc. as their new figurehead.[289] The RTVC met to consider each of these proposals, but ultimately decided to keep the network under their control.

This news was met with rejoicing from many ACTS supporters, who had made their displeasure with the potential sale known. *Religious Broadcasting*, perhaps hyperbolically, reported that the ACTS sale was cancelled in part due to "widespread appeal on the grassroots

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[286] Ibid.
[287] The SNSI Directors, "ACTS Network: Proposal for Purchase by SNSI," April 10, 1989, Box 281, Minutes: RTVC ACTS Board of Trustees Meetings Called Mtg/Full Bd May 18, 1989 Folder, SBHLA.
[288] President and Chairman of the Board John C. Hagee to Dr. Jimmy Allen, April 3, 1989, Global Evangelism, Inc., Box 281, Minutes: RTVC ACTS Board of Trustees Meetings Called Mtg/Full Bd May 18, 1989 Folder, SBHLA.
[289] The Negotiating Committee recommended that the RTVC accept their offer, but the trustees ultimately voted to keep the network. Special Called Meeting Minutes for the Radio and Television Commission, May 18, 1989, Box 281, Minutes: RTVC ACTS Board of Trustees Meetings 1989-90, ASNI Sep, 1989 Folder, SBHLA.

level."[290] The trade publication did not provide any further context, and there is scant evidence of these protests in the archive.[291] There were, however, moments of protest that did surface. The first was from Lynn Clayton, the editor-in-chief of the *Baptist Message* and a powerful voice within the Baptist community. Clayton implored the RTVC to look at the failed FOA sale as a second chance to tap into ACTS's true potential. After criticizing ACTS for its "instability," he argued in his "Letter from the Editor" that the Southern Baptists nevertheless had to remain committed to the network because television was still an important medium for the church. Clayton was particularly worried that, without ACTS, Southern Baptists would be shut out of the media entirely because, as he put it, "to have freedom of the press, one must own a press."[292] He even cited recent deregulatory moves that had made it more difficult (and more expensive) for religious programming to get on the air on the major media outlets. Clayton's fear of the Baptists ceding their platform echoes the rhetoric that surrounded the founding of ACTS in the first place, and speaks to how the uneven development of the religious broadcasting TV industry had left other, more moderate religious figures on the outside looking in. The second moment of protest was much smaller, and came courtesy of Mike Huckabee, who was then working with ACTS in his capacity as president of the Arkansas Southern Baptist Convention. According to the minutes

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[290] ACTS had a rocky relationship with *Religious Broadcasting* and complained at several junctures about unfair coverage from the trade publication. In fact, Chip Turner wrote a letter to the editor complaining about this story and the magazine's implication that ACTS was "failing." "Southern Baptist Convention Decides Not to Sell ACTS," *Religious Broadcasting*, June/July 1989, 22; R. Chip Turner, "Letter to the Editor: No ACTS to Grind," *Religious Broadcasting*, September 1989, 4.

[291] The SBC did, however, keep evidence of the protests to the later VISN/ACTS agreement, so I suspect much of the grumbling about this sale happened among those in the industry, rather than in public-facing op-eds and other published materials.

[292] Lynn P. Clayton, "LBM Editorial: Southern Baptists Will Always Regret It If They Allow the Opportunity of ACTS To Slip Away," *Baptist Message*, April 13, 1989, Box 292, ASNI/ACA/ACTSCOM 1987-1993 Binder, ACA – 1989 Folder, SBHLA.

from a meeting discussing a potential sale to Ralph Tacker's group, Huckabee made the appeal that ACTS should go against the committee's recommendation to sell and keep the network under RTVC control.[293] The trustees eventually agreed with him.

Those trustees could not keep the network financially afloat without making a few compromises, however. Direct solicitation of funds remained out of the question, so the network was forced to make concessions to bring in more revenue. In the wake of the decision not to sell the network, ACTS decided to break with precedent and start airing infomercials, which interim ACTS president Richard McCartney promised would make up no more than five percent of their programming.[294] ACTS struggled after Jimmy Allen's departure to work with its more profit-focused partners—and infomercials became a key point of contention. After the Friends of ACTS sale fell through, Chip Atkins still had business ties with ACTS through ACTSCOM, which was a subsidiary of Atkins's advertising firm, Atkins & Associates, Inc. ACTSCOM changed its name in 1990 in order to eliminate the confusion of some of the network's advertisers—who often, understandably, mistook ACTS for ACTSCOM (and vice versa) while negotiating business deals.[295] The company's new name, American Cable Advertising (ACA), better encapsulated their role as ACTS's primary facilitator between advertisers, infomercial producers, and the non-profit business side of ACTS. The fraught relationship between the two

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[293] Special Called Meeting Minutes for the Radio and Television Commission, May 18, 1989, Box 281, Minutes: RTVC ACTS Board of Trustees Meetings 1989-90, ASNI Sep, 1989 Folder, SBHLA.
[294] Board of Trustees Radio and Television Commission Minutes, Sept. 11-12, 1989, pg. 3, Box 281, Minutes: RTVC ACTS Board of Trustees Meetings 1989-90, Full Board Sep 11-12 1989 Folder, SBHLA.
[295] Dr. Bill Nichols to Dr. Richard McCartney, October 18, 1989, ACTSCOM. Box 292, ASNI/ACA/ACTSCOM 1987-1993 Binder, ACA – 1989 Folder, SBHLA.

entities (ACTS and ACA) intensified over the question of what infomercials were appropriate for ACTS to air.

In a series of back-and-forth memos, ACTS interim president Richard McCartney got into an increasingly passive-aggressive exchange with Bill Nichols of American Cable Advertising over this issue. ACTS made it clear when they announced this policy shift that it was meant to be temporary, and that they would not broadcast infomercials for products that did not meet their previously established standards for appropriate television content. Some of these infomercials came from a series called *Amazing Discoveries* (syndicated, 1989-1997). The series, starring host Mike Levey, consisted of infomercials for a variety of different products, many of which did, in fact, meet ACTS's standards. In October of 1990, however, McCartney demanded that Nichols phase out ACTS's involvement with *Amazing Discoveries* and its parent company, Media Arts Inc., as soon as possible, because they had produced infomercials about astrology.[296] In his earlier correspondence with ACTS, Nichols was typically magnanimous and conciliatory.[297] However, this time he decided to take a stand, and wrote McCartney a memo pointing out how much money ACTS stood to lose if they cut off their relationship with Media Arts Inc.

McCartney was obviously frustrated with the implication that ACTS should work with a company of which he clearly disapproved. As he explained:

> We believe it is not appropriate for ACTS to be identified with a producer which is airing programs on astrology even though such programs are not scheduled on ACTS... We will

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[296] Executive Vice President Richard T. McCartney to Dr. Bill Nichols, November 2, 1990, Radio and Television Commission, Box 292, ASNI/ACA/ACTSCOM 1987-1993 Binder, ACA – 1990 Folder, SBHLA.
[297] I read four years of their correspondence—Nichols was quite pleasant throughout, even when met (not infrequently) with hostility from those working on behalf of ACTS.

> not compromise the effectiveness of ACTS as a ministry tool in exchange for advertising income. I believe that we can have both without resorting to advertising that compromises the integrity of the Commission and ACTS.[298]

McCartney's hardline position, even in the face of significant financial losses, would have been considered naïve by some. I showed in chapter one how CBN kept moving the goalposts and slowly but surely changing their mission in order to justify bringing in secular programming and explain the network's growing wealth. ACTS resisted that pull much more strongly—in large part because they felt that they owed something to their audience and to their affiliates, who had invested so much time and money in the network.

ACTS had billed itself as "television you can trust"—and they believed that their viewers and, perhaps even more importantly, their affiliates, would hold them to their promises. Its leaders held themselves and the channel to exceptionally high standards. They did make small compromises—agreeing to air infomercials, allowing individual churches to purchase time—but they often refused to choose financial gain over their beliefs. Adhering this steadfastly to one's own principles, particularly when faced with financial hardship, was rare in the American television system. The team behind ACTS held out as long as they could, until the reality of the RTVC's financial situation forced them to make one more giant concession.

A Rescue or a Surrender: VISN/ACTS, 1992

By 1992, it was clear that ACTS's business model was not sustainable in the long term, and the RTVC had to find a way to salvage their failing network. In order to keep a toehold in television, the RTVC decided to enter into a channel-sharing agreement with its rival, the Vision

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[298] Executive Vice President Richard T. McCartney to Dr. Bill Nichols, November 2, 1990.

Interfaith Satellite Network (VISN). VISN had launched in 1988 as a non-profit, interfaith network designed to provide programming from most religions practiced within the United States. VISN was owned by the National Interfaith Cable Coalition, which included twenty-eight faith groups, including Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox groups. The channel determined airtime by how large a particular denomination was, and any denomination with over 75,000 members and 400 congregations was eligible for inclusion. Importantly, the network's early investor was Tele-Communications, Inc, (TCI) then the most powerful cable operator in the US. TCI essentially subsidized the development of the network and allotted over sixteen million dollars to its development in its first three years on the air.[299] TCI vice president Robert Thompson explained simply that the currently available religious television "did not appeal to a broad range of our subscribers," and TCI wanted to provide an alternative to the scandal-ridden profession of televangelism.[300] Like ACTS, VISN was born out of frustration with the religious broadcasting industry, at a time when most televangelists were hemorrhaging viewers. In order to win the public's trust, VISN forbade on-air solicitation as ACTS had. VISN entered the market as cable systems were looking to drop religious networks fronted by disgraced televangelists like Jim Bakker. Much more so than ACTS, VISN was successful at taking over PTL's former spots on cable lineups, and the channel posed a major threat to ACTS after only a

[299] Mark Robichaux, "Religious Networks In Pact to Share Single TV Channel," *Wall Street Journal*, July 30, 1992, Box 292, Newspaper Clippings 1991-1994 Folder, SBHLA.
[300] Mark Silk, "The Electronic Pulpit: Mainstream Faiths Turn to the Tube," *Wall Street Journal*, April 3, 1993, *LexisNexis Academic*.

couple years on the air.[301] The similarities between the two channels' missions were clear, but there were some key differences that would ultimately undermine their partnership.

The channel-sharing agreement was struck in the summer of 1992 and went into effect on October 1, 1992. Both parties were insistent that this was not a "merger," despite how the deal was sometimes characterized in the press. Under the terms of the agreement, both VISN and ACTS maintained control over their own programming choices, with VISN programming sixteen hours each day and ACTS getting the remaining eight, distributed throughout the daily schedule. Although their parent organizations had not "merged," the channel-sharing agreement did include a provision that the two channels would combine their ad sales, marketing, and distribution efforts in order to reduce costs.[302] The main impetus for the deal, however, was the skyrocketing price of leases for the best satellite positioning. Shortly before ACTS renewed talks with VISN, the RTVC learned that their lease for their current transponder was going to jump from 135,000 dollars a month to 200,000.[303] At the same time, the RTVC recognized that they would need to upgrade their transponder—otherwise they would immediately lose forty percent of their potential audience due to Galaxy III's inferior positioning.[304] Those costs, particularly for a superior satellite spot, proved to be too prohibitive for the cash-strapped RTVC. Under the VISN/ACTS deal, the Southern Baptists were not charged for their satellite time, with TCI covering those costs.

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[301] Kathy Clayton Neel, "Powers That Be," *Cable World*, October 12, 1992, Box 292, Newspaper Clippings 1991-1994 Folder, SBHLA.
[302] Robichaux, "Religious Networks In Pact."
[303] Jim Jones, "Baptists Keep the Faith While Sharing TV Wealth," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, August 8, 1992, Box 292, Newspaper Clippings 1991-1994 Folder, SBHLA.
[304] Jack Johnson, "Report to the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention," n.d., Baptist History File, Radio and Television Commission Folder, SBHLA.

The partnership was most advantageous for both ACTS and VISN in terms of expanding their respective reaches. ACTS had built a network that was predominantly located in the South and Southwest, the areas of the country with the highest concentration of Southern Baptists. VISN, on the other hand, was most popular in the northern half of the country, particularly the Northeast (areas with a higher percentage of mainline Protestants and Catholics).[305] By 1992, ACTS reached 8.2 million households on 604 cable systems, while VISN reached nearly 13 million on 712 systems. By combining forces, both channels got coverage in areas of the country that had long eluded them. The promise of gaining access to millions of Americans who had been out of the reach of ACTS previously allowed the channel to put a positive spin on losing sixteen hours of their broadcast day. RTVC executives touted the fact that ACTS would now air in 700 new markets, including Los Angeles, New York City, Salt Lake City, Denver, and Chicago, as the "number one reason" ACTS teamed up with VISN.[306] When questioned about the channel-sharing agreement, RTVC leaders assured the public and its affiliates that the channel was not retreating; instead, they were doubling their potential audience. In an internally circulated list of talking points about the pros and cons of the channel-sharing agreement, the RTVC emphasized that this move would reduce ACTS's screen time, but the resultant decrease in the network's costs would allow them to devote more money to production.[307] By adopting this line of argumentation, the RTVC conceded that it could not survive without the largest media markets.

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[305] "Interfaith Networks Agree to Share Cable TV Channel," *Los Angeles Times*, August 8, 1992, Box 292, Newspaper Clippings 1991-1994 Folder, SBHLA.
[306] Jones, "Baptists Keep the Faith."
[307] "Confidential: Fact Sheet for EMG," May 26, 1992, Box 292, ACTS/VISN/VGI 1992-1994 Folder, SBHLA.

The VISN/ACTS deal was a seismic event in the religious broadcasting industry— and the backlash was swift and loud.[308] The backlash boiled down to two main objections: first, many people worried about the fate of local programming and local church affiliates in the wake of the channel-sharing agreement. Although the RTVC had secured protection for local ACTS programming for the first two years of the VISN/ACTS agreement, many were concerned that local programming would be pushed out after that two-year grace period. Some affiliates were reportedly very upset with the new arrangement. Mark Brooks, the head of the ACTS board in Springdale, Arkansas, confirmed this to the press: "what the RTVC has ignored are the local affiliates. There is not one affiliate that I've talked to who thinks this is a good idea, who is excited about this."[309] Lynn Clayton, the editor of the *Baptist Message*, wrote an impassioned op-ed in which he "strongly urged" the RTVC to protect "affiliates' rights." Clayton conceded the financial necessity of the channel-sharing agreement. However, he wanted to protect local churches' ability to produce their own programming and grow their flocks on the grassroots level. In an internal report, the team behind ACTS acknowledged that the network would have a "major PR problem" on its hands if it were to further scale back local programming.[310] By 1992, according to this report, the majority of local programming produced consisted of church services, local events (like city council meetings), and local athletic events. Many ACTS affiliates, however, had convinced their local cable systems to carry ACTS because of the

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[308] After the agreement was official, *Religious Broadcasting* ran a feature story which featured five different perspectives on the deal. "The ACTS/VISN Agreement: A Necessary New Direction?," *Religious Broadcasting*, November 1992, 22-25.
[309] "Some ACTS Affiliates Upset with Interfaith Agreement," *Florida Baptist Witness*, August 20, 1992, Box 292, Newspaper Clippings 1991-1994 Folder, SBHLA.
[310] Ibid.

strength of their local programming efforts, so losing a significant amount of local programming time was a major blow to the network's appeal. Despite years of failure and underwhelming results, the response to the VISN/ACTS agreement highlighted how committed many people remained to supporting ACTS's local programming efforts.

Concerns about local programming disappearing definitely undergirded the backlash to the VISN/ACTS deal, but much of the backlash was about VISN itself. VISN was an interfaith network that allowed any religion with a significant foothold in the United States to receive airtime. For some ACTS supporters, bringing Southern Baptist programming in close proximity with faiths with which they strongly disagreed presented an insurmountable problem. ACTS had always included programs from mainline Protestants, but the channel had never sought out relationships with groups with whom they had major theological differences. The three main groups on VISN that Southern Baptists objected to were Mormons, Christian Scientists, and Unitarian Universalists. Each represented a small percentage of the US population, but had enough of a following to earn a spot on VISN. The diversity of faiths whose programming would air alongside the Southern Baptists' caused some to question whether ACTS had compromised too much.

Some Baptist leaders made it clear that their desire to see diversity in the world of religious programming did not extend to those faiths of which they did not personally approve. Rod Payne, chairman of the ACTS Affiliate Council, objected strongly to the deal and told reporters that he could not participate in a channel that supported Mormonism.[311] Payne, whose

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[311] Ibid.

Wichita Falls, Texas ACTS station had previously won the ACTS Affiliate of the Year award, was not alone in his discontent. Reverend Mark Brooks of Arkansas likened the channel-sharing agreement to "sleeping with the enemy" and insisted that "Mormonism is a cult. Christian Science is a cult. We are giving them our stamp of approval."[312] For local affiliates, who relied on the support of their local community, there was fear that introducing VISN's programming could cause loyal viewers to abandon the channel. R. Albert Mohler weighed in as well, lamenting in *The Christian Index*:

> The diversity telecast on the VISN network goes far beyond mere denominational differences. Time is shared with those who follow what Paul described as "some other gospel," be it Mormonism or mere pluralism. This is hardly programming we can "trust our family to," much less the nation. Is this a new era in communicating the gospel?...the new shared channel will be a theological vision of the United Nations. What must have looked to some as a rescue, may well turn out to be surrender.[313]

For Mohler and others, the spiritual compromise required to keep ACTS on the air conceded far too much. Mohler's point about ACTS's betraying its previous slogan, promising "a channel you can trust," spoke particularly to the specific challenge of sharing a channel. Because of the way that the VISN/ACTS schedule was divided (with each group switching in every two to three hours), ACTS supporters were particularly worried that potential Baptist converts would not be able to distinguish easily between VISN-sanctioned programming and ACTS-approved programming. The channel-sharing agreement was necessary to keep ACTS going, but the

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[312] Jim Jones, "Cable Alliance Worries Some Baptists; Some See Move as Way to Reach More," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, August 15, 1992, Box 292, Newspaper Clippings 1991-1994 Folder, SBHLA.
[313] R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "Rescue or Surrender?: The ACTS-VISN Agreement," *The Christian Index*, Sept. 18, 1992, Box 292, Newspaper Clippings 1991-1994 Folder, SBHLA.

channel sacrificed some of its moral authority (in the eyes of some Southern Baptists) in order to keep their access to a national television audience.

The RTVC had pitched the channel as a safe haven for Southern Baptists who disliked mainstream television and money-hungry televangelists, but the agreement with VISN weakened ACTS's moral stance significantly. Losing local programming hours in particular hurt the channel's credibility, since it had always pointed to its commitment to local programming as one of the channel's signatures. Ballooning satellite costs and the channel's stagnating growth, which was due to its restrictions on fundraising and advertisers' lack of interest in the small, Southern network, had essentially pushed ACTS to the margins of the television industry. The financial stability that the VISN agreement provided proved to be a temporary reprieve, as the two channels would continue to struggle to earn strong ratings and national attention.[314]

Conclusion: From Faith & Values to a Failed Experiment

From 1992 to 1996, ACTS and VISN struggled to coexist. The RTVC and the National Interfaith Cable Coalition fought about many aspects of their agreement, including accusing each other of violating the channels' program guidelines and anti-solicitation policies.[315] Their correspondence clearly indicates that there was mutual mistrust on both sides, despite the RTVC and NICC insisting to the press that everything was fine behind the scenes. Despite acrimony between the two groups, they eventually agreed to change the channel's name from VISN/ACTS

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[314] By the spring of 1993, only 1.5 million viewers tuned into VISN/ACTS each week. Silk, "The Electronic Pulpit."
[315] The NICC in particular objected to ACTS continuing to air Jerry Falwell's program since he solicited money on air and proselytized. The RTVC argued that they could not afford to break their contract with Falwell, and would have to wait until the end of his contract to discontinue airing his show, *The Old-Time Gospel Hour.* Chair Daniel P. Matthews to Dr. Jack B. Johnson, November 3, 1993, National Interfaith Cable Coalition, Inc., Box 292, ACTS/VISN/VGI 1992-1994 Folder, SBHLA.

to the Faith & Values Channel in 1993, with the hope that the new name would attract viewers more readily than the confusing VISN/ACTS moniker. The programming on the network remained largely the same, with a few new family-friendly programs added to the mix. The name change, however, did not produce the ratings bump that they hoped for, and the Faith & Values Channel still ranked dead last in the ratings at the end of 1994.[316]

The channel's continued failure to gain ratings traction resulted in TCI, VISN's initial benefactor, reorganizing the channel and bringing in fresh money and programming. The result was a partnership with Liberty Media Corporation, which purchased a forty-nine percent stake in the network. With this sale, TCI announced that they would no longer subsidize the network by covering its shortfalls, and that they would have to reprioritize in order to become self-sufficient. This partial sale resulted in ACTS's allotment of time on the network decreasing from its initial amount of fifty-six hours to twenty-and-a-half hours beginning July 1, 1996. The RTVC very reluctantly agreed to these new terms, and their involvement with the Faith & Values Channel fizzled out thereafter. In 1996, Liberty opted to change the name of the channel yet again, this time to the Odyssey Network. They brought in additional partners to ease their financial burden, including the Jim Henson Company and Crown Media Holdings, Inc. Despite bringing in popular properties like the Muppets, even this new configuration couldn't elevate the channel's status. In 2001, the VISN/ACTS project officially ended, and the channel was sold to Crown

[316] President Bill W. Airy to Dr. Jack Johnson, December 15, 1994, VisionGroup, Inc., Box 292, ACTS/VISN/VGI 1992-1994 Folder, SBHLA.

Media Holdings and christened the Hallmark Channel, with only a small amount of religious programming available on the new service.[317] Both ACTS and VISN had ended with a whimper.

ACTS's attempt to recapture cable television's lost potential ultimately failed because it launched in a broadcasting system that was structurally hostile to its success. ACTS prioritized local production, connecting rural communities, and a non-commercial programing model: all concepts that have faced an uphill battle in the US's capitalistic media environment. It was a network that was most popular in the South, a region undervalued by advertisers and investors. It was trying to build a small-scale operation in a moment in television history when deregulation was clearing the way for larger and larger media conglomerates. The RTVC wanted to build uplifting television; literally, television that would enrich the local church and, importantly, the local community. It also resisted the tactics that had made television preachers so popular, and its commitment to ideological moderation ran counter to the increasing polarization shepherded in by the expansion of cable.

ACTS's failure is instructive because it makes clear how dramatically the waves of deregulation in the 1970s and 1980s impacted the religious broadcasting industries. The changes to the sustaining time requirements and the abandonment of a public service model for cable combined to practically guarantee that the status quo for religious broadcasters, with charismatics and fundamentalists dominating the ratings, would remain unchanged in the decades to follow. The televangelism model did not go unchallenged, and there were those

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[317] Losing ACTS would have been more devastating for the RTVC's hopes of establishing a permanent broadcast space for Southern Baptists if the commission had not also invested in FamilyNet, the channel founded by Jerry Falwell in 1991. They sold that channel in 2008, which marked the official end of the RTVC's forays into television channel ownership.

within powerful religious organizations who sought to use television in more ethical ways. The failure of ACTS demonstrates how more ideologically conservative media thrives, particularly that media which relies on soliciting donations, or the heavy investment of a few wealthy individuals, or a strong, invested media conglomerate. Its failure is particularly stark when considered next to the stunning success of CBN, which would focus even more on family programming and emerge as a top cable channel, even as ACTS struggled to remain on the air.

CHAPTER 3

From the Holy to the Wholesome: The Christian Broadcasting Network Becomes the Family Channel

The Christian Broadcasting Network, through a series of shrewd business decisions, created the template for "family" television networks that many have since replicated. This process began in 1970, when the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), then just a single station in Virginia Beach, began to incorporate family-oriented, secular programming into its expanding lineup. With programs like *Leave It to Beaver* and *Mr. Ed* airing alongside the channel's religious programming, CBN blurred the distinction between "family" television and religious television early in its run. As CBN added stations in Atlanta, Dallas, and Boston in the 1970s and expanded its weekly number of programming hours, family programming became increasingly important to the network's survival. CBN only had a few networks and stations to compete with in those areas, and rerunning old family hits gave CBN a broader appeal than its televangelist programming did. By the time that CBN launched its cable network in 1980, Pat Robertson envisioned his network as one that would focus on "family-oriented" programming in order to provide an alternative for those viewers that were dissatisfied by the other networks' offerings.

Through the shrewd, forward-thinking business sense of Pat Robertson and his fellow executives, CBN decided in 1981 to de-emphasize its religious programming even further and to start incorporating traditional commercial advertising on its new cable network. With the number

of cable households growing rapidly each year, the CBN Cable Network had the unique opportunity to take its mix of religious and family programming nationwide. In 1983, the channel began to call itself "The Family Entertainer" in its on- and off-air marketing materials, cementing the importance of "family" to its brand. A staple of cable's basic tier, what was once a channel full of religious programming evolved into an assortment of reruns and original programming targeting a family audience.

Savvy business decisions in the late 1980s enabled the channel's continued growth in popularity. Tim Robertson, Pat Robertson's son, took over running the day-to-day operations as president of CBN after his father announced his bid for the Republican nomination for President of the United States in 1988. In his efforts to make himself a more mainstream candidate, Pat Robertson distanced himself from his ministries and gave up his seat hosting *The 700 Club*. (During this time, Pat Robertson remained chairman of the company and was consulted on major decisions.) Unlike his father, Tim was not a religious figurehead—he was a businessman. In 1988, shortly after his tenure began, Tim Robertson announced that CBN Cable would be changing its name to "The CBN Family Channel." This was a big move, and not just because it gave the channel a different designation in the *TV Guide* (from CBN to FAM, shifting its location in the TV listings grid). Although changing the name of an established and successful channel was risky, it proved to be incredibly profitable. Deemphasizing "CBN" moved the channel away from the televangelism scandals of the late 1980s that derailed the careers of Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart. At the time, many observers wondered how televangelism would survive the financial and moral scandals, and all tele-ministries saw their donations drop

precipitously in the immediate aftermath, including CBN's *The 700 Club*.[318] Even though CBN remained relatively scandal-free, both Pat and Tim Robertson decided to move their cable channel away from televangelism and toward the more positive associations of "family" programming.[319]

"Family" was an effective marketing tool in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as debates about the state of "family values" in the United States raged on. Every political debate in the late 20th century could be linked back to the idealized American family in one way or another, and invoking "the family" became a powerful, frequently deployed rhetorical maneuver. As Robert O. Self has demonstrated, the terms of this debate shifted from the Great Society's pledge to "assist" families in the 1960s to the New Right's promise to "protect" them in the late 1970s.[320] By the time the Family Channel debuted, the word "family" invoked protection and safety, and a sense that anything labeled "family" would necessarily be wholesome and unthreatening to the children and parents whose morals were supposedly under siege. As mainstream networks became more comfortable with so-called edgy content, The Family Channel figured out how to capitalize on the power of "family" as a brand.

Moving CBN away from its conservative religious roots and toward a "family" label made both financial and political sense. The Family Channel consistently ranked in the top ten of cable channels throughout its run, and had a total viewership similar to MTV's.[321] The channel

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[318] E.R. Shipp, "Scandals Emptied Pews of Electronic Churches," *New York Times*, March 3, 1991.
[319] Tim Robertson also cut 600 jobs at CBN in order to save CBN from financial collapse in the aftermath of the scandals.
[320] Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 4-5.
[321] In 1990, MTV and the Family Channel each averaged between 300,000 to 350,000 households. "Database," *Channels,* March 1990, 44.

became the seventh most popular cable outlet in the 1990s and offered its viewers an alternative to the sex and violence that had become more pervasive on network and other cable channels.[322] In fact, the Family Channel became so profitable that it threatened CBN's status as a tax-exempt organization. The Family Channel earned 17.5 million dollars in the last nine months of 1989, all of which was tax-free.[323] CBN operated as a non-profit, which meant that it had to earn most of its revenue from donations, rather than business activities like the Family Channel. In order to avoid losing their tax-exempt status, Pat and Tim Robertson formed a new for-profit company, International Family Entertainment (IFE), in November of 1989. Although IFE had other minority investors, including Tele-Communications Inc. (then the largest cable operator in the US), IFE was controlled by the Robertsons, who were the primary stakeholders in the venture.[324] The Family Channel's profits continued to rise, and in 1992 IFE became a publicly traded company. When the Robertsons finally sold IFE and the Family Channel to News Corp in 1997, it was worth an estimated 1.9 billion dollars. Clearly, the Robertsons had discovered a profitable and overlooked niche in the television market. By recognizing an underserved audience and effectively marketing to them, the Family Channel created and nurtured a new type of family audience for the cable era. Instead of the major networks and their consensus-driven thinking determining who and what the mass family audience wanted, a team of white conservative

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[322] The aggregate ratings for cable viewership were most frequently reported in *Channels*, an upstart trade magazine. Michael Burgi, "Database," *Channels*, January 1990, 76.
[323] Brett D. Fromson, "Stocks Sale to Multiply Robertsons' Riches; Televangelist, Son Turn $183,000 Investment Into $96 Million in Cable Company Shares," *Washington Post*, April 14, 1992.
[324] Pat and Tim Robertson initially invested 150,000 dollars in exchange for a controlling interest in the company, buying 4.5 million shares in IFE for 3.33 cents a share.

evangelical Christians was now making those decisions and redrawing the boundaries of family television.

Focusing on the years from 1985 to 1997, this chapter examines how the Family Channel constructed its brand and considers the cultural and political implications of the nation's first religious television network becoming the nation's first family channel. The Family Channel's brand was built, in part, on a backlash against mainstream television, which had become too "urban," too cynical, and too multicultural in the eyes of many social conservatives. It responded to the changes in the television landscape by offering viewers programs that originally aired decades earlier, and new, original series that imitated those old favorites. The Family Channel's commitment to nostalgia closely aligned the channel with the ideological project of social conservatism by insisting that family television must protect the most vulnerable populations (children and their conservative grandparents) and that it must promote so-called positive programming. The audience for family television was defined not by their religion, but by their values. Ostensibly, parents who did not subscribe to CBN's conservative, evangelical theology could still appreciate a space supposedly designed to protect their children from exposure to "offensive" content. This balancing act was key to the Family Channel's success. The Family Channel's executives had to simultaneously distance the channel from CBN's conservative evangelical brand while also reminding their viewers that the channel's programming was more wholesome and "safer" than the traditional networks.

In this chapter, I argue that the Family Channel proposed a particularly conservative definition of "family" that was overwhelmingly white and committed to reinforcing traditional, patriarchal gender roles. The Family Channel had enormous power to define "family television," and it did so primarily by looking backward to old shows and antiquated ideas about the ideal

American family watching *Father Knows Best* together. The Family Channel's decades-old reruns and movies, interspersed with religious content and more modern series, worked to promote a vision of family television as a "safe space" that would protect its viewers from any content that could possibly offend them. The channel's insistence on inoffensiveness ensured that the channel aligned with a conservative politics—its very insistence on avoiding politics was, of course, a political stance. This has had wide-ranging implications, as several channels that emerged after the Family Channel have essentially copied its template for family television. By looking at the Family Channel's branding, programming, and scheduling practices, it is possible to see how truly limited the Family Channel's definition of "family" was. It may not have dominated the ratings, but the Family Channel played a vital role in defining "family television" in the age of narrowcasting.

The Changing Television Industry

The Family Channel was perfectly poised to capitalize on the changes in the television industry in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The 1990s marked the culmination of a critical shift in US broadcasting; the "family" was no longer assumed to be the default audience of the broadcast networks. Much has been written about how the turn to narrowcasting created space for edgier programming that targeted increasingly narrow demographics and smaller audiences.[325] However, the emergence of spaces like the Family Channel is critical to understanding how

[325] Many narrowcasting channels have been the subject of extended attention, including MTV, HBO, and Bravo. See, for example: Lisa A. Lewis, *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the Difference* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990); Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones, eds,, *The Essential HBO Reader* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008); Katherine Sender, "Dualcasting: Bravo's Gay Programming and the Quest for Women Audiences," *Cable Visions*, ed. by Sarah Banet-Weiser and Cynthia Chris (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 302-318.

dramatically cable transformed American television. Increased competition from cable channels inspired NBC, ABC, and, to a lesser extent, CBS, to chase young, trendy demographics more aggressively than ever in order to increase their advertising revenue.[326] This shift created a vacuum of family-friendly programming that the Family Channel was engineered to fill. As network television shows on the whole got sexier, bloodier, and more scandalous, the Family Channel established a place where people who were turned off by those developments could retreat. They had their own channel now, and they did not have to interface with any of that content if they did not choose to. Wholesome and safe programming therefore emerged as a profitable niche. Before the broadcast networks recognized this disaffected segment of the population, the Family Channel capitalized on the desire of its viewers to protect their families from images that they deemed objectionable. It offered its viewers a mix of reruns, old movies, original programming, and religious programming all purportedly chosen because they would be inoffensive to the entire family. It encouraged viewers to "Accentuate the Positive" in its ad campaigns,[327] and built its brand on sunny nostalgia and its steadfast belief that good must always triumph over evil. While some dismissed the channel as quaintly out-of-touch, many viewers welcomed it as an escape from so-called edgy fare.

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[326] Victoria E. Johnson, "Welcome Home?: CBS, PAX-TV and "Heartland" Values in a Neo-Network Era," *Velvet Light Trap* 46 (Fall 2000): 40-55

[327] This ad is preserved by several users on YouTube, and is also discussed at length in Sherri Stocks's Master's thesis. See Sherri Stocks, "Rhetorical Motive as Discovered in The Family Channel's Image Campaigns of 1991, 1992, and 1993: A Network Viewed as Rhetor" (Master's Thesis, Regent University, 2008); "Family Channel 1992 Part 4," YouTube video, 4:22-4:52, August 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ys27N0nAF4E&t=324s.

Polling conducted by the Family Channel and other outlets suggested that many viewers were upset by the proliferation of violent, sexy, and otherwise edgy programming.[328] When the FCC proposed an indecency ban to stop unregulated cable programming from becoming too racy, for example, it became a hotbed for discussion. *Religious Broadcasting* reported in 1990 that the Federal Communications Commission was "inundated" with 46,000 letters from concerned citizens who overwhelmingly supported the commission's new 24-hour indecency ban.[329] Tellingly, the issue of inappropriate television content was frequently polled and reported throughout this period, with surveys revealing that many viewers were dissatisfied with the state of television. The Roper Organization, a non-partisan public opinion research center, reported in 1989 that viewers felt cable TV promoted "more sex, violence, and profanity than regular television."[330] A Gallup Poll (which was commissioned by the Family Channel) in the same year found that fifty-eight percent of parents polled were "either 'frequently' or 'occasionally' uncomfortable with something in a TV program they saw," with sex, violence and language identified as the top three offenders.[331] Another 1992 Family Channel poll revealed that seventy-one percent of respondents said that "objectionable programming content influences them to watch less television."[332] The 1993 version found that seventy-nine percent of viewers (especially older viewers) believed that television programs either "strongly contribute" or

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[328] As we have seen in Chapter 1, conservative media activists have objected to mainstream programming since television became a national medium. These objections were not new, but protests against network television occurred in waves, and the emergence of cable prompted more activity around the issue among activists.
[329] The ban was eventually ruled unconstitutional. "Trade Talk," *Religious Broadcasting*, May 1990, 20.
[330] "TV Viewership in America Examined by Roper Survey," *Religious Broadcasting*, June 1989, 26.
[331] Earl Weirich, "A Network Places Value in America's Homes," *Religious Broadcasting,* November 1989, 12-13.
[332] David Clark, "Signing On: Christian Broadcasters Need to Produce Positive Programming," *Religious Broadcasting*, November 1992, 4.

"somewhat contribute" to real-life violence.[333] Pollsters also found that viewers were most concerned about sexual content on television, followed by violent content and explicit language. Interestingly, those three offenders were almost always identified in that order, with sex and sexual suggestiveness concerning the most viewers. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting's 1994 poll revealed that eighty-two percent of the public agreed with Congressional leaders' assertions that TV was too violent.[334] Seventy percent of those respondents also felt that there was too much sex and offensive language on television.[335] Clearly, audiences had noticed the ways in which television had changed, and a significant portion of the population was displeased with those changes.

Viewers were upset about how content standards had changed, but they were also upset with the content itself. The growing popularity of series featuring socially progressive values and attitudes, including premarital sex, discussions about race and racism, and feminist programming all had threatened the midcentury model of status quo, inoffensive television since the 1970s. The move toward demographic-driven television began in earnest in the 1970s, with ABC's attempts to attract young audiences with "sexy" content like *Charlie's Angels*.[336] Feminist programming also flourished in this period, challenging traditional conceptions of womanhood.[337] The proliferation of new television outlets in the 1980s and 1990s pushed

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[333] Brian Lowry, "Viewers in Poll Say TV Causes Violence," *Daily Variety*, July 16, 1993, 22.
[334] The Corporation for Public Broadcasting's polling, like the Family Channel's, was self-serving, since that channel eschewed violent programming as part of its larger educational mission.
[335] Shauna Snow, "Morning Report," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 2, 1994, F2.
[336] Elana Levine, *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television,* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 1-11.
[337] Bonnie J. Dow, *Primetime Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

television executives to look for edgier programming in order to distinguish themselves in the increasingly crowded landscape. This resulted in the destabilization of the family sitcom, as upstart, attention-seeking network Fox promoted crass, irreverent series like *Married…with Children* and *The Simpsons* as edgy alternatives to the stodgy family programming of the past. Fox also used African American-driven programming to grow its young, urban audience, and shows like *In Living Color, Martin*, and *Living Single* brought a new Black sensibility to television and (at least temporarily) disrupted the homogenous whiteness of the medium, which some social conservatives likely found discomforting.[338]

It was, however, the major networks' decision to experiment with gay content that truly enraged social conservatives, who felt that including LGBTQ characters and themes was an affront to family values. The Parents Television Council made this dynamic obvious when they launched a campaign against the major networks that was ostensibly about protesting the death of the "Family Hour" but was, as Allison Perlman has shown, primarily motivated by their disgust with the proliferation of gay content on network television.[339] As Ron Becker has chronicled, there was a significant increase in the number of shows that included gay characters, themes, or a gay sensibility in the 1990s.[340] This proliferation of gay content was driven by networks' desire to attract the "slumpy" audience, the advertiser-friendly demographic of socially liberal, urban-minded professionals. The inclusion of gay and lesbian characters was not

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[338] Kristal Brent Zook, *Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
[339] The "family viewing hour" was a short-lived FCC policy which designated the 8 p.m. hour as "safe" for families. It was quickly defeated in court by a group of Hollywood creatives, but the idea of the Family Hour circulated for decades. Allison Perlman, *Public Interests: Media Advocacy and Struggles over U.S. Television*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016).
[340] Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

limited to "singles in the city" like *Friends* or *Seinfeld* either. Victoria E. Johnson has shown how queerness even infiltrated the Heartland in series like *The Ellen Show* and *Roseanne*, complicating viewers' understanding of the flyover states as conservative, heteronormative spaces.[341] If a show about a family living in Illinois was not immune to "edgy" comedy, what was? All of these changes threatened traditional "family values" and led some viewers to feel that television was no longer safe for their families.

Selling the Family Channel

The Family Channel was well positioned to capitalize on the anxieties of viewers feeling threatened by how television was changing. In order to do so, executives strategically pitched The Family Channel differently to advertisers and audiences. Relatively confident that their loyal viewers would remain with the network even if they changed the format, the first challenge for CBN Cable was to convince wary advertisers that the brand, still closely associated with controversial figurehead Pat Robertson, was safe to associate their products with. Selling the Family Channel brand effectively depended upon satisfying the requirements of advertisers and striking the right "family" tone, and finding the balance between being "too Christian" and not Christian enough. Beyond the channel's religious connotations, the growing notoriety of its founder and his penchant for controversial comments posed an additional challenge. By the 1980s, *The 700 Club* was widely syndicated across the country, and Pat Robertson was an influential and recognizable figure. CBN worked throughout the next decade to systematically distance itself from its religious roots without alienating Robertson's flock of supporters.

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[341] Victoria E. Johnson, *Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for U.S. Identity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

The transformation of CBN from the Christian Broadcasting Network to the Family Channel was purposefully slow and well-orchestrated. CBN first began incorporating the word "family" into its branding and marketing materials in 1983, when it used its rapidly growing cable network to position itself as "CBN: The Family Entertainer." As CBN executives explained, the network faced a critical decision in 1980, when it became clear that CBN's viewership had plateaued as more and more copycat Christian networks cropped up. The decision to drastically reduce CBN's religious offerings and dramatically increase its secular programming was "traumatic," according to CBN Director of Cable Operations Tom Rogeberg.[342] Offering wholesome programming for a family audience became the channel's new mission, and "family" quickly became its calling card. The introduction of "The Family Entertainer" label in 1983 marked the beginning of a five-year process of deemphasizing the "Christian Broadcasting Network" label in order to draw in new viewers [Figure 1]. CBN Cable's ratings saw tremendous growth in the mid 1980s, with year-to-year jumps as high as 56 percent.[343] This type of growth obviously made the channel very attractive to advertisers hoping to reach a family audience—but the "CBN" label still left some hesitant to invest.

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[342] Lamar B. Graham, "CBN Cable Takes Fresh Course in Programming," *The Ledger Star* (Norfolk, VA), December 6, 1987, Family Channel Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[343] Tom Bierbaum, "Nielsen's Good for WTBS, CBN, USA, But Weak for HBO, CNN," *Variety*, March 28, 1984, Reprint, Family Channel Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

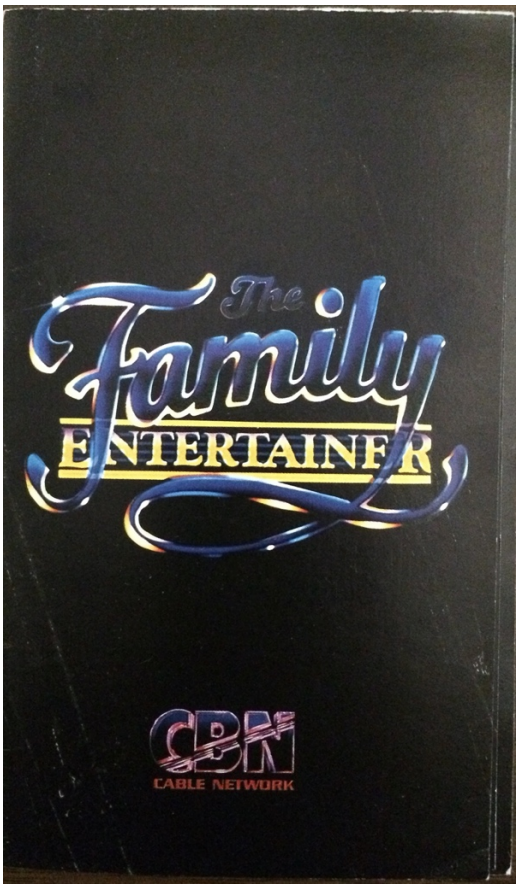

Figure 1: CBN Cable Network brochure from 1984

Tim Robertson's decision to change CBN's name officially in 1988 was, at least in part, an acknowledgement of the limited appeal of religion to television advertisers. As one exasperated advertising executive explained, "there is a subliminal thing in this business about religion and I don't understand it."[344] CBN was a successful channel and a quality ad buy by many measures, but the name "Christian Broadcasting Network" nevertheless provoked hesitance on the part of advertisers.[345] Masking the presence of religious programming on the

[344] Brian Donlon, "CBN's New Tune? We Are Family," *USA Today*, October 7, 1988.
[345] Throughout its run as a cable channel, CBN regularly averaged total viewership in line with TNN and Lifetime. "Database," *Channels*, August 13, 1990, 52.

channel went beyond changing the channel's name. When presenting schedules to advertisers, the Family Channel would mark time slots with "Various" rather than identify the religious program that usually occupied the spot.[346] The name change was designed to help advertisers move past their trepidation of the channel's religious content and focus on its ability to reach a family audience. As Tim Robertson reflected years later:

> Cable operators don't like change. And we were already a highly rated channel. But as the cable industry grew, we became aware we had to have a clear brand identification. People didn't know what CBN was and they didn't care. "The minute you see Family' in all the listings, you know what we are. It really gave us a lift.[347]

In a crowded marketplace, distinguishing yourself and your brand became increasingly important, and those flipping through the *TV Guide* could recognize "FAM" (the channel's abbreviation in the listings) and immediately deduce the types of programming they would find there. After all, who can object to "family" as a brand? Most viewers would respond positively to the name's connotations, even if they did not necessarily agree with Pat Robertson's definition of family values.

Adopting "family" television as a marketing strategy throughout the 1980s paid huge dividends for the channel. The switch to the Family brand in 1988 worked, ultimately, despite the fact that Nielsen Corporation does not actually quantify family viewership in its ratings reports. It was therefore challenging to sell a family audience directly to advertisers. The Family Channel suggested continually that it was a space that brought families together, but it could not

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[346] Laura Landro, "Family Cable Channel Switches Signals from Religious to Entertainment Fare," *Wall Street Journal*, July 24, 1990.
[347] Diane Goldner, "Clean, Safe, Successful; Beefed-up Family and Religious Programs Boost Cabler's Net Value," *Variety*, March 17, 1997, 37.

actually back its claims with data. Nevertheless, ads like Figure 2 tried to convince advertisers and cable operators that the Family Channel was uniquely qualified to bring the family audience back together.

Figure 2:Early trade magazine ad for the CBN Cable Network

Nielsen did, however, measure the channel's success with more quantifiable demographics. The channel was most successful with female viewers, especially women over the age of 25.[348] It performed disproportionately well with baby boomers,[349] and its Saturday afternoon block of

[348] Ibid.
[349] "Mature audiences" were defined as viewers over the age of 35. Gail Pennington, "Revamped Family Channel Will Bear Little Resemblance to Predecessor," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 15, 1998.

western programming was a hit with male viewers.[350] The channel was most popular in the South, but pulled decent ratings in all regions.[351] Its kids programming did not make a huge impact, with the major networks' morning blocks of cartoons, Nickelodeon, and Disney Channel pulling much bigger numbers.[352] Since it was impossible to prove that families were not gathering together to watch *Rin Tin Tin K-9 Cop,* the Family Channel could simply say that they were. The Family Channel could therefore sell its identity as the only provider of "family television" as well as its success with more particular demographics, doubling its potential appeal to advertisers.

When pitching advertisers on the channel's family-friendly brand, the Family Channel promoted itself as the only channel that was "wholesome" and "safe" for all members of the family. One Nestlé executive recalled that Family Channel executives emphasized that "this is a channel that you can stick your kid in front of and not worry about what he or she might be exposed to."[353] The Family Channel was one of the few television outlets that would proudly claim such inoffensiveness, and it used it to its advantage. Importantly, their pitch was not just about protecting children from the dangers of television programming, it was also about protecting the oldest members of the family. As Tim Robertson explained shortly before the sale to Fox in 1997, "we want to be funny, exciting, thrilling, but you can always be confident you won't get shocked by seeing something you don't want your 5-year-old to see or your

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[350] Landro, "Family Channel Switches Signals."
[351] Frederick Talbott, "A Family Resemblance: Where Does CBN end and the Family Channel Begin?" *Channels*, May 21, 1990, 49.
[352] In 1990, for example, Nickelodeon's overall audience average (which was predominantly children in the morning, afternoon, and early evening) was a 1.1 share, while the Family Channel's was a 0.7. "Database," *Channels*, October 8, 1990, 32.
[353] Landro, "Family Channel Switches Signals."

grandmother."[354] This was, in part, an acknowledgement of the Family Channel's key demographics, which skewed heavily toward older viewers. It was also, however, an indictment of television's obsession with youth, sex and violence at the expense of those who still wanted to watch television with the whole family without the embarrassment more adult programming provoked.

In terms of the larger television industry, CBN/the Family Channel emerged as a serious player in the 1980s, and advertisers ultimately bought what the Family Channel was selling. The first advertiser to sign on, after CBN Cable Channel started accepting paid advertising in 1981, was Richardson-Vicks (of Vick's VapoRub and similar products). By the end of 1987, on the eve of the official switch to the "CBN Family Channel," CBN Cable had 185 advertisers.[355] They achieved that impressive number even as they refused to do business with companies selling alcohol and R-rated movies, whose ads they believed would tarnish their brand. Softening the channel's image had increased its profitability dramatically, but even with advertisers largely on board, convincing the greater public that the Family Channel was wholesome *and* exciting proved to be a challenge.

The Family Channel received fairly regular coverage from outlets like *The TV Guide* and *USA Today*, and reviews often remarked upon the channel's sugary image. At various points, TV critics and pundits characterized the channel as "squeaky-clean,"[356] "mild-mannered,"[357] a

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[354] Goldner, "Clean, Safe, Successful."
[355] Lisa Ellis and Stephen Engelberg, "CBN To Alter Format, Adding Secular Shows," *The Virginian-Pilot*, n.d., Family Channel Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[356] Landro, "Family Channel Switches Signals."
[357] Ibid.

"baby-boomer-friendly haven,"[358] a "mix of good-for-you and soft programming,"[359] and "full of primitive reruns."[360] Matt Roush's review of *The New Zorro* (a Family Channel original series) began with this zinger: "Meanwhile, at cable's Family Channel, no one is worried about being hip or following trends. Far from it."[361] These characterizations probably appealed to some viewers (like Tim Robertson's aforementioned grandmothers), but they likely dissuaded other readers from checking out the Family Channel. Family Channel executives were aware of this problem, and frequently sought to reassure potential viewers that the channel was much more exciting than the critics would have them believe. President of Marketing Rick Busciglio, for example, insisted that "wholesome sounds boring and at no time do we want to be boring. We want to entertain."[362] It became increasingly clear that the Family Channel's reputation would be difficult to shake. To push back on its goody-two-shoes image, the Family Channel frequently emphasized how exciting its programming was in its ad campaigns. These ads emphasized chase scenes and moments of intense action from Family Channel shows like *Gunsmoke* alongside action-adventure series like *Scarecrow and Mrs. King* and *The New Zorro*.

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[358] Goldner, "Clean, Safe, Successful."
[359] Graham Jefferson, "MTM Comes Roaring Back to TV," *USA Today*, July 1, 1996.
[360] Matt Roush, "The Same Old Action Stories; *Max Monroe* and *Zorro* Have No New Tricks to Offer," *USA Today*, January 5, 1990.
[361] Ibid.
[362] Talbott, "A Family Resemblance."

Figure 3: 1988 Family Channel Ad featuring Rin Tin Tin, K-9 Cop

A 1988 print ad [Figure 3] featured a shot of Rin Tin Tin attacking a (supposed) criminal and biting his arm, with the copy reading "Our lineup may take some people by surprise. Because it's packed with snappy family-fare seen nowhere else…So who is basic cable's family entertainer? The answer should jump right out at you."[363] This ad, with its use of "snappy" and

[363] The CBN Family Channel Ad, Fall 1988, Family Channel Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

its somewhat shocking image, works overtime to convince potential viewers that the Family Channel, despite what they may have heard, is cool.

Beyond convincing people that wholesome programming could be exciting, the Family Channel also needed a coherent marketing campaign. While there were several campaigns throughout the years, I will focus primarily on the 1992 "Accentuate the Positive" campaign because it nicely encapsulates what the Family Channel achieved with its branding. In this ad, the Family Channel presents warm portraits of different family moments, showing a total of seven "real life" families doing various activities in a thirty-second spot. The ad opens with a Black family of five (mom, dad, and three kids) playing a card game together. Next, we see a white woman hug her young daughter, a white grandfather giving his grandson a puppy, a white mother with her arm around her teenage daughter, a white adult bride hugging her elderly mother or grandmother, and a white family of four watching television while laying on a bed together. The thirty-second spot ends with a very young Black girl adorably banging on a piano alone while smiling at the camera, bookending the ad with a degree of racial diversity not actually present on the channel, which I will discuss later in the chapter. All of these moments are designed to provoke an emotional response in the viewer, one that makes them feel as though the Family Channel is the only channel that truly understands the importance of family and facilitates these types of family experiences. These images immediately segue into promotion for some of the network's series: *Maniac Mansion* (a wacky family sitcom)*, The New Amateur Hour* (a revival of the classic talent competition), *The Waltons* (a family drama set during the Great Depression), and *Madeline* (an animated children's program based on the popular book series). The song that plays over the ad, a jingle-ized version the Arlen and Mercer classic "Accentuate the Positive," beckons viewers to "accentuate the positive/eliminate the negative/tune in to the

affirmative/The Family Channel yes indeed." The announcer then picks up his cue, reminding viewers that "nobody captures life on the positive side like The Family Channel." This emphasis on positivity and family togetherness was key to the Family Channel's branding throughout its run because it was so inoffensive. Viewers who were not devoutly religious could still appreciate a channel with "safe" programming, and emphasizing warmth and positivity over the executives' more conservative views proved to be a winning strategy.

However, convincing the devoutly religious, like those who had supported Pat Robertson's *700 Club* for years, that the Family Channel was still a sufficiently Christian channel was also necessary to its success. Tim Robertson's pitch to those viewers served as a sort of dog-whistle to those who were upset not just with the sex and violence on television, but with changing portrayals of the family and family life. In 1989, as the channel announced its transition away from the CBN label, Tim Robertson explained in an op-ed in *Religious Broadcasting*:

> People are saying that the trend of the 90s is a new search for values and a new quest for the meaning of life. We are responding to that by providing programming with good, solid values that we hold near and dear to our heart. Our shows stress values between husbands and wives, where they can have loving relationships, where children aren't smart alecks and the parents buffoons.[364]

Here, Robertson works to align the channel with the values of *Religious Broadcasting*'s readers (many of whom were evangelical Christian media broadcasters) without undoing what the name change was designed to achieve in the first place. Robertson invokes "values" here to assuage the fears of those worried that the Family Channel has "sold out" to commercial interests by

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[364] Weirich 12-13.

accepting advertising and decreasing its amount of religious programming. In this brief pitch, Robertson does not directly reference his competitors or the sex and violence that was supposedly rampant on national television. Instead, he points to a smaller concern, that of poorly behaved children (the rowdy kids over on Nickelodeon were his most likely targets here, as well as Bart Simpson) and of husbands and wives who did not exist in *Father Knows Best*-style tranquility. The Family Channel's programming consisted primarily of sincere, earnest, and straightforward stories about families who loved and supported one another. In the age of *Married...with Children*, Robertson's comments effectively establish his channel as a safe place for family viewing, unlike those crass send-ups of the traditional sitcom. They promise religious viewers that the channel will not deviate from its mission to provide content that promotes good, Christian values, even if that programming is now largely secular.

CBN's loyal donors received additional reassurances that the Family Channel would stay true to its mission of providing wholesome programming in the mid-1990s, after the channel's successful initial public offering made it an increasingly attractive acquisition for larger media companies. The Family Channel sent out monthly newsletters to CBN donors and shareholders that celebrated the channel's success, highlighted its new programming, and provided a monthly schedule.[365] These newsletters reveal how the channel worked to keep its devout donors engaged even as the channel broadened its definition of "family-friendly programming" and prepared for a potential sale in the mid 1990s. To that end, Family Channel executives focused on bringing in shows that would attract larger audiences, even if their fit with the brand was somewhat

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[365] Most of these newsletters are preserved in Regent University Library's Special Collections and Archives. See Family Channel Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

awkward. These newsletters essentially served to justify the channel's programming choices. For example, the channel started promoting Elvis Presley movie marathons and, given the rock star's once-controversial persona, the inclusion of those films on the channel was surprising. In their newsletters, the Family Channel framed those marathons as paying "tribute" to Presley, focusing on nostalgia for the performer rather than what he once represented.[366] Another article hailed the channel's acquisition of *Evening Shade*, a family sitcom with a slight edge, and pointed out future episodes in which the show's "family concept" would be more evident.[367] The Family Channel had the unique power to decide for its viewers whether or not programming was family-friendly—by 1995 they had even launched the official Family Channel Seal of Approval, which they granted to different entertainment products each week in *USA Today*.[368] They had effectively imbued themselves with moral authority, and used these newsletters to assure their most loyal audiences that they valued that authority above their profits.

Selling the Family Channel was a decidedly different proposition than selling CBN. While CBN needed to pull in donations with spiritual appeals, the Family Channel needed to appease advertisers and audiences, bringing them in relative harmony in order to keep the channel growing and prospering. The new focus on positivity and the family that this shift necessitated was not, however, as innocuous as it seemed. The Family Channel's message was highly politicized. The Robertsons cast a wider net with their commercialized definition of

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[366] "Three Movies Pay Tribute to Elvis Presley," August FAM Alert, August 1994, Family Channel Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[367] "'Evening Shade' Brings Southern Touch to FAM," October FAM Alert, October 1994, Family Channel Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[368] Dave Mayfield, "Media Guide Aims to Help Parents," *The Virginian-Pilot*, September 30, 1995, Family Channel Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

"family values" in order to include more viewers, but the channel ultimately remained deeply exclusionary, as its programming practices reveal.

Programming and Scheduling The Family Channel

From 1985 to 1997, the Family Channel's programming strategies and scheduling tactics were remarkably consistent. There were moments of experimentation but, for the most part, the vision for the channel was largely unchanged. The schedule was divided into dayparts, which is an advertiser-driven practice that divides the television schedule into different segments based on who the networks and advertisers imagine is watching (and the perceived value of that audience.)[369] Religious programming, once the channel's raison d'être, was now largely relegated to the late evening and early morning hours, with the exception of Robertson's own *The 700 Club*, which aired at 9 a.m., 9 p.m., and 1 a.m. each weekday. Daytime television was a space for women, while the early morning hours were designed for young children. Primetime sought a younger adult audience, and the weekend afternoons were designed for an (often older) male audience. While, of course, the audiences for these programs were more diverse than that in actuality, the Family Channel imagined itself to serve different members of the family at different times of day. These dayparts followed the same pattern that the broadcast networks had since the 1950s, catering to different audiences based on gendered assumptions about their daily schedules.

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[369] Eileen R. Meehan, "Heads of Household and Ladies of the House: Gender, Genre, and Broadcast Ratings, 1929-1990," in *Ruthless Criticism: New Perspectives on U.S. Communications History*, eds. William Solomon and Robert McChesney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 204-221.

In terms of programming, there were several rules that the Family Channel stuck to when determining whether or not something qualified as family-friendly. In 1982, CBN Director of Cable Operations Tom Rogeberg promised trade magazine *CableVision* that all programs were reviewed for content, and that CBN would "avoid anything that would give an endorsement to homosexuality, adultery, magic as science, illegal drug use, overt violence."[370] Rogeberg also shared that the channel had once nixed an episode of an unnamed sitcom because it featured a séance. These guidelines remained in place throughout the channel's run, and are indicative of how CBN executives' conservative evangelical worldviews shaped their definition of "family-friendly." As Tim Robertson explained to reporters when the Family Channel rebrand was complete in 1990:

> At the core of who we are, there remains a commitment to providing value-based programming. [Our shows don't] all have to be about going to church or synagogue on weekends or running around saying grace over food…the Family Channel is committed to solid entertainment where good guys win, bad guys lose, people aren't engaging in gratuitous sex, and violence is a last resort where the bad guy is punished or an innocent defended.[371]

Importantly, Robertson delineates here between religious programming (in this case, shows that portray families practicing their religious beliefs) and values-based programming, wherein good always wins and characters have strong moral fiber. This was the critical shift that CBN made when it moved to the commercial model—that the channel could take shows produced in a secular, commercial context and reclaim and repackage them as values-based programming. For

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[370] Brooke Gladstone, "Minor Miracle Shows Up in Cable TV," *CableVision*, April 2, 1984, Reprint, Family Channel Folder, CBN Information File, RULSCA.
[371] Landro, "Family Channel Switches Signals."

the Family Channel, programming was about good values (which closely aligned with Christian values) and inoffensive, safe content.

The Family Channel recognized and exploited anxiety on the part of viewers who felt that television had left them behind. Although it was easy enough to change the channel if you encountered objectionable content, television's presence in the home amplified fears about "edgy" television. As Lynn Spigel has argued, television and the American family were inextricably linked in the early days of television, when advertisements celebrated television's ability to bring the family together.[372] Because of its placement in the home, television was, for decades, considered a family medium, even if that was not always how it worked in reality. The image of the postwar family gathering around the television together remains a powerful one, and the changes in the television industry threatened that image. Television and the family were linked in the American imagination so, when television slowly but radically changed with the growth of cable, it provoked an identity crisis for some social conservatives.

The taken-for-granted whiteness and Protestantism of early television, especially in the 1950s and early 1960s, had given television an aura of safety and wholesomeness (for some viewers) that was now under attack.[373] While early television programming did not regularly feature explicit religious content, most series' convictions largely aligned with those of Christianity.[374] Characters were not often seen going to church or attending prayer meetings, for

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[372] Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 36-72.
[373] This aura of safety is largely a product of nostalgia rather than reality, and it was implicitly white audiences who felt reassured by these programs. NBC, for example, came under fire in the early 1960s for the violence inherent in its popular western series.
[374] Jorie Lagerwey, "Are You There, God? It's Me, TV: Religion in American TV Drama, 2000-2009" (Dissertation, University of Southern California, 2009), 14-15.

example, but the lessons imparted on *Father Knows Best* or *Bonanza* were typically in line with the principles of Christianity. Good triumphed over evil, families worked together to solve problems, and the protagonists generally behaved admirably. When some viewers in the 1980s and 90s rejected modern programming, it was not *just* about objecting to hipness or trendiness. Rather, their rejection was rooted in a desire to have Christian values and (their) ideas about right and wrong present in all programming. There was a sense among some Christians that television had lost its moral center, a moral center it supposedly had in the 1950s in the black-and-white suburban paradises of *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* and in the westerns that depicted the frontier as a battle between the moral and just white man (whether he be the sheriff, a Lone Ranger, or even just a friendly local ranch owner) and the various enemies who threatened his territory and community. There was a longing to return to the wholesomeness of that bygone era.

Nostalgia was already a vital cog in the American television machine and proved to be a valuable countermeasure to all of the changes occurring on television for the Family Channel. As Derek Kompare has shown, the prevalence of reruns on American television (unlike other nations) cultivates unprecedented nostalgia, because shows can circulate for decades after their original airdates and have a longer-lasting cultural impact.[375] Reruns of older shows have nostalgic qualities that give them an aura of safety and positivity, even if their content was once considered controversial. The Family Channel capitalized, in every sense of the word, on this nostalgic whirlpool by using old series to rekindle the dream of the entire family watching

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[375] Derek Kompare, *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 101-119.

television together. Investing in old shows was also a sound financial decision. The Robertsons were smart businessmen, and the channel's success was due in no small part to their ability to keep costs low by acquiring old series that were largely out of circulation for a low rate and then exploiting their nostalgic and family-friendly value. When they ventured into original series production, they were perfectly content to produce shows whose production values were significantly lower than their competitors. The channel did not pay a premium for any of its content, and relied on the Family Channel brand to attract audiences as much as (if not more than) its programming.

The Family Channel's strategy for building its schedule was not unique. Most of the early cable channels built their initial brand identities and audiences through the acquisition of reruns. Nickelodeon, with its "Nick at Nite" programming block, used reruns of sitcoms from the 1950s through the 1970s[376] to attract an adult evening viewership. Lynn Spigel has shown how Nick at Nite re-contextualized reruns of programs like *The Donna Reed Show, The Partridge Family*, *Bewitched, The Dick Van Dyke Show,* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and "created a new reception context for old reruns by repackaging them through a camp sensibility," by gently mocking the shows' outdatedness.[377] Nick at Nite's ads essentially took a block of older, cheaper reruns and repackaged them as a fun, quaint look into a distant past. While Nick at Nite made reruns of decades-old shows trendy, the Family Channel took a more straightforward approach.

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[376] Nick at Nite's programming shifted to include shows from the 1980s in the early 2000s, with stalwarts like *The Cosby Show* and *Cheers* being added to line-up.
[377] Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 360-362.

There was no winking sensibility to their repackaging of old shows, no sense that these were antiquated series meant to be chuckled at for their outdated views.

Instead, the Family Channel held up its own twenty- (and even forty-) year-old series as beacons of hope, as symbolic of a simpler time. This was perhaps best revealed when the Family Channel miscalculated its viewers' devotion to *The Waltons*, which aired at 7 pm on the channel for several years. When they proposed moving *The Waltons* out of that time slot to make room for *Life Goes On*, a sweet contemporary series about a boy with Down Syndrome and his loving family that ABC had recently cancelled, the Family Channel received an outpouring of letters protesting the decision. (The fans won out, and *Life Goes On* was pushed back to 6 pm.) *The Waltons* was one of the channel's highest rated shows throughout the Family Channel's run, even occasionally beating out competing programming on CNN. Director of programming Judy Lyons decided to spin this potential public relations misstep into a positive, declaring that the outcry over removing the Walton family from their evening time slot proved that "there is a hunger out there for this kind of entertainment."[378] As one fan explained to *The Wall Street Journal*, "It's a relief to see something like this back on TV. The shows on TV today aren't worth watching."[379] Here, this fan articulates the primary message of the Family Channel: we have the television that you want to watch if you hate modern television and want to reminisce about the good old days.

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[378] Mark Robichaux, "So Under the Dysfunctional Tinsel Lies All of the Real, Family Tinsel," *Wall Street Journal*, November 27, 1992, B1.
[379] Ibid.

The Family Channel's entire slate of programming was built on this logic of nostalgia. Westerns, sitcoms, light-hearted dramas, vintage movies, and original programming appeared most frequently on the Family Channel, and ultimately formed the basis for the Family Channel's definition of "family television." The channel's devotion to westerns perhaps best illustrates the channel's logic of nostalgia. During its run, the Family Channel programmed about seventeen hours of westerns a week, a significant portion of its schedule. The channel's Saturday and Sunday afternoon programming was wall-to-wall westerns, with classics like *The Virginian, Big Valley*, *Broken Arrow,* and *Wagon Train* interspersed with newer shows like *Young Riders* (a 1989-92 western series from ABC about attractive young cowboys) and *Bordertown* (a Family Channel co-production about a frontier town on the US-Canada border in the early 1800s). Even though westerns could be quite violent, with shootouts a commonplace occurrence, they passed the Family Channel's programming standards because of their remove from modern violence and their straightforward good vs. bad plotlines. As Horace Newcomb has explained, the heroes of the television western were stalwart against physical, moral and ethical threats and those who jeopardized their way of life on the mythic frontier—and the hero always prevailed.[380] Violence, on the Family Channel, was justified when necessary for the greater good and when exacted by a white, male moral authority.[381] The historical settings combined with the preponderance of white men as moral authorities closely aligned westerns with the values of

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[380] Horace Newcomb, "From Old Frontier, to New Frontier," in *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict,* eds. Michael Curtin and Lynn Spigel (New York: Routledge, 1997), 296.
[381] Some viewers, including Thomas Radecki, who ran the National Coalition on Television Violence, strongly objected to the violence featured on the Family Channel and wrote letters protesting the channel's claim to the "family" brand. Thomas Radecki, "Readers' Forum: Violence Western Style?," *Religious Broadcasting*, December 1989, 5.

conservative Christians, many of whom likely saw themselves in the good guy gunslingers fighting for justice in an unjust world.

Westerns performed remarkably well in their weekend time slots on The Family Channel, and their limitations and outdatedness were recast as positive attributes. The western genre had fallen out of favor for decades on television since its heyday in the 1950s and early 1960s. However, there was a brief renaissance for the television western in the 1990s. The Family Channel's Vice President of Programming Paul Krimsier theorized about their renewed popularity to an industry trade magazine in 1990:

> About 15 years ago, television really got into reflecting current social issues and Westerns weren't able in the creative sense to play out current social issues—terrorists and drug deals didn't play out as well in a Western as in *Starsky & Hutch*. We've been a little social-issued out and now we realize regardless of what the social issue is, it's really an issue of character, the challenge and opportunity for someone to stand up and say 'Here's who I am.' This is so apparent in Westerns and makes them very attractive.[382]

Here, Krimsier perfectly encapsulates both the programming strategies of the Family Channel and the nostalgic appeal of decades-old television. For viewers who wished to avoid the messiness and uncertainty of contemporary life, westerns provided a potential escape. Weirich acknowledges that westerns, as a genre, were ill-equipped to address contemporary issues, and celebrates this quality. To say that "we've been a little social-issued out" is to say that westerns provide a way to escape contemporary (identity) politics and the alleged moral decay of American society reflected in modern programming. Gritty police dramas and oversexed primetime soaps were not only inappropriate for the family, but they, according to this logic,

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[382] Richard Katz, "Western Sunrise?," *Channels*, August 13, 1990, 12.

forced politics into entertainment. Weirich suggests that the Family Channel provided a respite from that kind of content while bringing the emphasis back to an individual's moral character, rather than a commitment to some sort of larger political cause.

Westerns were not the only programs on The Family Channel that celebrated old-fashioned ideals—the channel's comedies were also throwbacks to the postwar Golden Age. The Family Channel had a very specific idea of the kind of comedy that was appropriate for a family channel. Series like *Father Knows Best, Hazel, My Three Sons, Green Acres,* and *Bachelor Father* featured in the channel's early afternoon hours throughout the channel's run. All of these shows centered around family units, so their compatibility with the "family" brand is obvious. However, their similarities extend beyond that. *Father Knows Best*, for example, demonstrates how the nostalgic appeal of classic television played out on the Family Channel. As Mary Beth Haralovich points out, the realism of series like *Father Knows Best* cultivated a sense of warmth, stability and comfort for the viewer through their use of realistic sets, warm lighting, and plotlines about everyday problems.[383] *Father Knows Best* (which was a staple of the Family Channel's afternoon lineup for many years) embraced a realist mode of storytelling and rejected the slapstick- and gag-heavy comedy of earlier sitcoms. Jim Anderson, the titular patriarch, was not a character to be laughed at. He was not a buffoon, in the way that many television fathers were before and after him. Instead, he was a venerated father figure. He could make jokes, but he was not to be ridiculed. His family members were also highly respectable, with the children generally well-behaved and Margaret Anderson, his wife, running the household with relative

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[383] Haralovich cites critics' enthusiasm for the series in the *Saturday Evening Post.* Mary Beth Haralovich, "Sitcoms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 11, no. 1 (1989): 63.

ease. As Haralovich demonstrates, viewers adored the Andersons precisely because they did not sacrifice their dignity for the sake of comedy. This type of comedy was the only kind that regularly appeared on the Family Channel's schedule--- even their children's programming was not as zany as other channels'. For the Family Channel, it was critical that all of its shows feature respectable characters of strong moral fiber, even those on situation comedies. In fact, *Father Knows Best* was so popular that the channel proposed a sequel series (titled, of course, *Father Still Knows Best*) after the channel's *Father Knows Best* cast reunion special and all-day marathon performed exceptionally well in the ratings.[384] While the series never came to be, the fact that the channel wanted to produce it speaks to the incredible appeal of this type of comedy to the Family Channel's executives.

Part of the Family Channel's mission was to revive genres that had been abandoned by the major networks—and this manifested most clearly in the channel's carousel of game shows. These shows were all produced by the Family Channel and were very cost-efficient. Fashioned after the classic game shows of the 1960s, these half-hour shows were pure throwbacks. *That's My Dog*, a Family Channel original that aired from 1991-95, featured families' dogs competing for prizes by running through obstacle courses and performing tricks. On *Baby Races*, babies performed fun tasks (like sitting on sandcastles their parents had built) in order to win a prize from the show's "Toy Store." *Shop 'Til You Drop* and *Shopping Spree* both aired on the channel from 1996-98 and showcased adults demonstrating their talents for consumerism by answering

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[384] The Father's Day marathon drew a 1.2 rating, peaking at 700,000 households, considerably higher than the typical ratings for those time slots. Matt Roush, "Young May Return with More Fatherly Advice," *USA Today*, June 26, 1989.

trivia questions or racing strategically through big box stores. The channel even experimented with interactive game shows, launching interactive versions of *Boggle* and *Trivial Pursuit*. These shows were popular enough with audiences that Pat Robertson eventually launched his own (very short-lived) game show channel.

In primetime, the Family Channel targeted an adult audience with newer series that had recently been cancelled by other networks. These series all shared a particular sensibility—they featured characters trying to do the right thing, most of whom were trying to solve mysteries and many of whom were over the age of 50. *Father Dowling Mysteries*, for example, was the story of a priest and a young nun who solved mysteries in Chicago. Originally produced by NBC for one season in 1989, then ABC for its final two until 1991, the show was incredibly popular on the Family Channel and ran for 5 years. *Paper Chase*, which was cancelled by CBS in 1979 after one season and revived by Showtime in 1983, was the story of a young, fish-out-of-water law student, his classmates, and his elderly professor, whose wisdom set his students on the path to success. *Crazy like a Fox* originally aired on CBS from 1984-86 and was the story of an eccentric private detective who continually involves his straight-laced lawyer son in his strange cases. The Family Channel's primetime audience skewed older, likely because its programming regularly featured older characters. Even though these shows were relatively new, they still made sense as components of the Family Channel brand. They prioritized family (whether that be a work family or a domestic one) and closure at the end of each episode. These shows did not feature sex or explicit language, and they represented some of the tamest offerings that the major networks had produced in recent years. Unequipped to produce primetime programming that could compete with the major networks' production values, the Family Channel instead pounced on the opportunity to recirculate shows that fit their ideals and targeted older audiences.

The Family Channel's nostalgia for the past extended beyond television to the silver screen. The channel regularly featured movies on its schedule, often in primetime, and demonstrated a remarkable nostalgia for Production Code Era films. In the channel's early years, it gravitated toward comedies produced in the 1940s and 50s. These films were never four-star films (according to the *TV Guide*'s rankings system) and were cheaply acquired in package deals. For example, one week in September 1992 featured the following films: *The Hell with Heroes* (2 stars in the *TV Guide,* a 1968 film starring Rod Taylor)*, Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* (from 1957, "John Huston's shrewd character study of a marine and a nun trying to survive on a Japanese-held island")*, I'd Rather Be Rich* ("Amusing tale about an heiress (Sandra Dee) who has to supply a fake fiancé (Robert Goulet) on a visit to her "dying" grandfather (Maurice Chevalier)"), *Batman* (from 1966), and *Fluffy* ("Lightweight escapist fun, involving a biochemistry professor (Tony Randall) with a domesticated lion.").[385]

In the Family Channel's final years, after its parent company went public, the channel started to feature more and more popular films. Elvis movie marathons became a regular occurrence, even though the King of Rock and Roll was once considered to be responsible for the corruption of an entire generation, courtesy of his hips. In the Family Channel's newsletters, Elvis's movies were declared to be fun, retro, and conducive to the family brand. Perhaps the most peculiar film choice came in March of 1997, when *Grease* was the month's featured film. The 1978 musical was celebrated for its setting in the "idyllic 1950s," and hailed a "modern day fairy tale romance" in that month's newsletter. The more controversial parts of the film's plot

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[385] All of these descriptions are from that week's *TV Guide*. *TV Guide* 40*,* iss. 36 (Sept. 5, 1992), 38-180.

(like Rizzo's pregnancy scare) were not mentioned.[386] By 1997, everyone at the Family Channel knew that buyers were circling the channel, and *Grease* had the potential to draw audiences, despite its questionable family-friendliness. *Grease* is an outlier, however. Most of the films featured on Family Channel were produced in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s and featured no explicit language, sex, or excessive violence.

Even the Family Channel's original programming evoked the shows of the past. Series like *The New Zorro, Crossbow, Bordertown, Black Stallion,* and *Rin Tin Tin K-9 Cop* were all designed to look and sound like the westerns and adventure shows of yesteryear. *Zorro* and *Black Stallion* were relaunches of previously successful franchises, while *Rin Tin Tin K-9 Cop* brought the famed dog of classic Hollywood back to the small screen. *Crossbow* was a classic adventure series about William Tell and *Bordertown* was a classic western that worked well on the schedule next to the stalwarts of the genre. Sitcoms *Big Brother Jake* (produced in the Virginia Beach studios, about a Hollywood stuntman who returns home to help his widowed foster mother raise her current foster children) and *Maniac Mansion* (based on the Nintendo game, a sitcom about a mad scientist and his friends, one of whom was literally a talking housefly) both ran for four seasons on the channel and were designed to appeal to children and adults alike. The Family Channel even tracked down the creator of *The Waltons*, Earl Hamner, Jr., and asked him to pitch them new ideas for series. *Snowy River: The McGregor Saga* was the result—a pioneer drama about a widower and his three sons set in Australia in the 19th century. Nostalgia, in the case of the Family Channel, could literally be produced, and their programming

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[386] "Grease Lightning Strikes on the Family Channel," FAM News, March 1997, CBN Information File, RULSCA.

strategies relied on their viewers' desire for old fashioned entertainment. This even extended to the production values, as critics often lamented the lackluster quality of the Family Channel's shows.[387] However, the low budget productions made the channel's original series closer in aesthetic to the old favorites that they aired next to on the schedule—which still worked to reproduce nostalgia for old television.

Who Isn't Family: Race and Gender on The Family Channel

The nostalgic whirlpool that the Family Channel's programming choices created and the channel's insistence on providing programming that would make its imagined audience comfortable also severely limited who was included in its definition of "family." People of color were overwhelmingly and conspicuously absent from the channel. While American television writ large has a poor track record of inclusivity, the lack of people of color on the Family Channel is nevertheless remarkable. Competing kids' networks like Nickelodeon and the Disney Channel had their own failings in terms of diversity, but they at least managed to produce several original series with diverse casts.[388] In an era in which *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World* were perched atop the weekly ratings charts, the Family Channel's reluctance to include families of color as a part of its schedule is at once conspicuous and unsurprising. Industry logic about the ratings ceiling for shows about Black families was not completely upended by *Cosby*'s success, in part because *Cosby*'s success was attributed to the way its Blackness was mediated through an

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[387] Matt Roush, "The Same Old Action Stories; *Max Monroe* and *Zorro* Have No New Tricks to Offer," *USA Today*, January 5, 1990.

[388] For more on how kid's networks incorporated people of color and discourses of multiculturalism into their programming, see Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Kids Rule!: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 142-177. See also Angharad N. Valdivia, "Mixed Race on the Disney Channel: From *Johnnie Tsunami* Through *Lizzie McGuire* and Ending with *The Cheetah Girls*," in *Mixed Race Hollywood*, eds. Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 269-289.

upper middle-class family.[389] *Cosby* was held up as the exception, rather than the rule, in terms of ratings success. Nevertheless, *The Cosby Show* was the highest rated family-centric show on television when the Family Channel launched, and the Robertsons could have chosen to capitalize on that momentum and produce their own series about a family of color. Given their status as a lower-rated cable channel, the move would have made strategic sense, as Fox was proving at that time that it was possible to build an audience by targeting neglected demographics. Instead, the Robertsons continued to make television programs that looked like television programs had looked in the good old days of the 1950s: white, heteronormative, middle-class, nondescriptly Protestant and blissfully suburban or rural.

The Family Channel was a remarkably white channel, but its branding worked preemptively to deflect criticism about its lack of inclusive programming. The channel's ads promoted a much more racially diverse conception of family than their programming did. For example, the 1992 "Accentuate the Positive" thirty-second ad, referenced earlier in the chapter, was bookended by a Black family playing a board game and a young Black girl adorably playing the piano. However, this push to portray diversity was not reflected in the channel's programming. The only characters of color who regularly appeared on the Family Channel in 1992, the year of this ad, were foster mother Connie 'Ma' Duncan and foster children Kateri, Jill, and Caroline on *Big Brother Jake* and one of the adult, human characters on the CBN-produced children's puppet show *Gerbert*.[390] Despite all of this, Ben Kinchlow, an African American man

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[389] Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, 2nd ed.), 79-84.

[390] Ironically, the Family Channel also celebrated Black History Month every February and became the first cable channel to rebroadcast *Roots* in its entirety in 1992.

who had renounced Black nationalism to become a born-again Christian, was Pat Robertson's most popular co-host on *The 700 Club* during this time. In the period from 1988-1997, when it was the official Family Channel, its schedule included only one show with a lead character of color, *T. and T.*, a Canadian series produced initially for first-run syndication before being picked up by the Family Channel. To put this in harsh perspective, during this time the channel featured *two* series with dogs as the main character, *Rin Tin Tin K-9 Cop* and *The New Lassie. T. and T.*'s premise is best explained by the title sequence narration that introduced each episode:

> T.S. Turner was a city-smart kid fighting his way off the street, until he was framed for a crime he didn't commit. Amy Taler was a young crusading lawyer. She mounted an appeal to put Turner back on the street, this time in a suit and tie, working as a private detective. Together they are: T. and T.[391]

The politics of *T. and T.* were hardly perfect--- each episode featured Turner (played by Mr. T of *The A-Team*) using his "street smarts" and boxing skills to solve crimes, while his white female partner handled the more intellectual work of the case.

While the channel's non-scripted programming (primarily its game shows) often featured contestants of color, the channel's scripted programming (both originals and off-network acquisitions) usually only featured characters of color in guest roles. This lack of representation on the Family Channel for people and families of color was partially the result of the overwhelming whiteness of network television in the 1950s and 60s, where most of their programming came from, and partially the result of the channel's own ideology of the family. The American family remained a white nuclear family in the national imagination, even though

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[391] *T. and T.*, directed by Douglas Williams. (January 11, 1988; Toronto: Nelvana and Tribune Entertainment). Amazon Video.

that white suburban ideal represented only a small fraction of actual American families. Stephanie Coontz's work has shown that the idyllic American family is a fiction and that the myths we perpetuate about the American family negatively impact people's lives.[392] In the case of family television, the whiteness inherent in the iconography of the traditional American family has consistently kept creators of color from being able to get their ideas for family programming greenlit, and the Family Channel was no exception.

The Family Channel's rejection of families of color can therefore be understood as both industrial and ideological, a result of prevailing industry logics and their understanding of "family" as a primarily white, suburban, and middle-class category. It is clear, based on the programming that the Family Channel produced, that people of color were not an important part of their imagined audience and were considered tangential to the type of "good Christian family" that was imagined to be watching the Family Channel. While it was just one channel in an ever-expanding television landscape, the Family Channel's lip service to diversity in its ads and its lack of inclusion in its programming reveals how narrowly the channel conceived of family programming in terms of representations of race. The channel, through its lack of inclusion, perpetuated the idea that the white family was the true American ideal.

The channel's conservatism extended to its representations of women as well. Surveying the Family Channel's schedules reveals a dearth of female-led programming. While local stations and cable outlets banked on the popularity of family-friendly shows like *I Love Lucy* and *Bewitched*, the Family Channel mostly eschewed woman-centric shows. The Family Channel

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[392] Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, (New York: Basic Books, 2000). 2nd ed.

never produced an original series starring a woman, except for some of its daytime programming. Of the hundreds of series that featured on the channel from 1985-1997, only a few placed women at the center, and the gender politics on those shows were largely uninspiring. *Hazel*, a sitcom based on the long-running comic strip from the early 1960s, revolved around the adventures of a live-in maid and the family that she served. *The Flying Nun*, which was about a young nun's misadventures and her unique ability to fly out of trouble, was featured early in the channel's run, while *Gidget,* about a cool surfing teenage girl and her father, aired on the channel in the late 1990s. *Punky Brewster*, the story of an adorable young girl and her aged foster father, briefly featured on the schedule in 1995. Some exceptionally funny female comedians were featured. Gracie Allen was a co-lead on *Burns and Allen*, which aired at midnight on the Family Channel for several years in the late 1980s. In the late 1990s, a syndicated version of *The Carol Burnett Show* was featured in the afternoon. The children's cartoon *Madeline,* which followed the adventures of a French schoolgirl and her friends, was the only children's program on the channel that centered on girls instead of boys.

Even the female co-leads of *Remington Steele, Scarecrow and Mrs. King*, and *T and T* were all the straight-laced, no nonsense partners of their risk-taking, charming male partners, and as a result rarely got to have as much fun as the men on their shows. All of those shows featured in the Family Channel's primetime lineup at various points, and each begins with the promising premise of "women in the workplace." In *Remington Steele*, private investigator Laura Holt could not convince any men to hire her, so she invented a male boss. By the end of the first episode, Pierce Brosnan's unnamed character has assumed Steele's identity and the two begin solving crimes together while romantic tension simmers. *Scarecrow and Mrs. King*, on the other hand, featured a divorced mother-of-two, Amanda, who gets swept up in espionage after an

"Agency" operative asks her to deliver a package. They embark on a will-they-or-won't-they relationship while she trains to become a spy herself, all while hiding her secret life from her own family.[393] On both *Remington Steele* and *Scarecrow and Mrs. King,* the independent women eventually marry their partners, creating a traditional family out of their work family.[394] Thus, even though these shows broke away from the traditional "family" model, they ultimately reinforced it by ending with heteronormative marriages and the promise of future children. It is not just that these shows end in traditional marriage, but the simmering tension between the leads throughout the show assures viewers, even in the earliest episodes, that the show will eventually end by creating a new family.

The Family Channel was deeply conservative in its representation of women. Across the channel, women were largely in roles in which they were subservient to men or focused entirely on their family life. Fictional characters were stay-at-home mothers, raising children and taking care of the housework (off screen), or they were career women whose stories ended in a traditional heterosexual marriage. Women never hosted game shows, but they could serve as assistants. Women were featured as hosts only on programs dealing directly with home life, like *Home & Family* (a two-hour morning talk show) and *Family Edition* (a quarterly show hosted by newswoman Mary Alice Williams that dealt with issues affecting the American family.) Although it is difficult to say with certainty, it is quite likely the personal politics and religious beliefs of Family Channel executives played a key role in determining what types of women

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[393] Kate Jackson played Mrs. King and was a former star of *Charlie's Angel*s, a notoriously oversexed show, and her presence on the Family Channel is therefore somewhat ironic.
[394] However, this was not the case on *T. and T.*, where an interracial relationship would have been too controversial.

were deemed appropriate for a "wholesome" channel. Pat Robertson often espoused conservative views on the family and the role of women, once famously declaring on *The 700 Club* that feminism was a "socialist anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians."[395] This is a particularly colorful quotation, but Robertson's views on women's roles and their relationship to Christ have always been very conservative. Those views extended to the structure of his company; there were very few women in positions of power at CBN or the Family Channel. For the Family Channel, wholesome portrayals of women were those that showed them in the home, supporting their families.

The Family Channel also espoused a limited view of acceptable masculinity. Masculinity was never maligned or challenged on the Family Channel, while female characters largely embodied traditional gender roles. In fact, there are very few buffoonish male characters on the channel.[396] Male protagonists on the channel were almost exclusively capable, powerful leaders who had earned the respect of their communities. This brand of masculinity aligns, of course, with the values of the channel's founder, as Robertson frequently called for a return to "traditional" family values and strong father figures. The channel as a whole, therefore, promoted a very traditional and conservative understanding of acceptable gender roles in US society. Men were to be respected, while women were supposed to fade into the background. While there are arguments to be made as to how this played on particular shows and episodes,

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[395] Rupert Cornwell, "Profile: A Corporate Messiah," *The Independent*, October 4, 1992, 13.
[396] The only exception is perhaps the men on *Maniac Mansion*, but even they were not as manic as the title of their show implies.

when taken in the aggregate, it is clear that the Family Channel invited its viewers to remember the time before the women's movement disrupted the "natural order" of things and confused everyone as to the proper place of men and women in society. Even for its shows that were produced after the 1960s, the Family Channel still gravitated toward and produced programs that aligned with this conservative worldview.

Conclusion

The greatest testament to the Robertsons' success in building a valuable brand was the bidding war that it provoked between Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. and the Walt Disney Company. By the beginning of 1997, it was widely known within Hollywood that Fox (a subsidiary of News Corp.) and Disney were both circling the Family Channel, each hoping to add the successful outlet to their growing conglomerates. After several waves of deregulation in the 1980s and 1990s, practically all of the independent cable channels had been purchased by larger companies. The Family Channel was one of the few cable channels left that was not affiliated with a major conglomerate by 1997, and its brand was incredibly valuable. To make the channel as appealing as possible to its secular potential buyers, the Family Channel excised all of its religious programs (with the exception of *The 700 Club*), replaced them with infomercials, and drastically reduced its overall amount of programming in order to cut costs. More than any of IFE's assets, however, what Disney and Fox were truly fighting for was the right to own the "family" brand. Fox eventually won out, paying an estimated total of 1.9 billion dollars for IFE and the Family Channel.

Why did the Robertsons decide to sell the channel they had built from nothing but a rundown UHF station in Virginia Beach? Selling the Family Channel was the culmination of Pat Robertson's decision to adopt a commercial model of broadcasting. Both Pat and Tim Robertson

benefited handsomely from the sale, which made them well over 200 million dollars combined. Robertson's Regent University (which he founded in 1978) and the Christian Broadcasting Network (which still operated as a production company) also held shares in the channel and earned well over 250 million dollars between them.[397] Going commercial had paid off, and by selling the Family Channel, Robertson ensured the long-term financial health of his other organizations. Pat Robertson insisted throughout negotiations that *The 700 Club* must keep its place on the channel, airing three times a day, regardless of whether or not it changed hands in the future. While he sacrificed his primetime slot (since 1997, the show has aired at 10 am, 11 pm, and 3 am each weekday), Robertson ensured that his primary fundraising outlet would continue to benefit from the popularity of the Family Channel.

All of that money had, however, come from a corporation that Pat Robertson had loudly condemned in the past. News Corp's deal with IFE was billed by one journalist as "a merger of the sacred and the profane," and the irony of a business transaction between Rupert Murdoch, whose Fox network featured some of the most controversial shows on television, and televangelist Pat Robertson was lost on no one.[398] Robertson had, on *The 700 Club*, called for an advertising boycott of *Married…with Children*, one of Fox's first breakout hits, because of its crass humor. In that diatribe, he also implied that Murdoch and everyone at Fox was guilty of corrupting the nation, declaring that God had "little obligation at the present time to spare America because we are polluting it with our television programming."[399] Yet, by selling the

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[397] I cannot delve into the ethics of the sale here, other than to point out that the Family Channel existed because of CBN supporters' donations, and those donors did not benefit directly from the sale.
[398] Geraldine Fabrikant, "Murdoch Set to Buy Family Cable Concern," *New York Times*, June 12, 1997.
[399] Ibid.

Family Channel to Murdoch, Robertson knowingly condemned his painstakingly built outlet to the same fate. Everyone involved in the sale knew that the channel would dramatically change, and that its wholesome image would be replaced by an edgier one.

Fox completely overhauled the channel's programming, and the only program (other than *The 700 Club*) that stayed on was *Home & Family*, a midday talk show aimed at a female audience. Most of the new programming came from Fox's extensive library of cartoons and other kid's shows (led by the *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*). The tone of the channel, dubbed Fox Family, was wildly different, and its ratings plummeted 28 percent in its first year and never fully recovered.[400] Fox's plan to revolutionize family television ultimately failed, and Murdoch sold the channel to Disney for 5.3 billion dollars (half of which was debt that Disney assumed) in 2001. The sale price, dramatically higher than what Fox paid only four years earlier, demonstrated that the promise of the "family" brand remained untarnished despite Fox's miscalculations. Disney renamed the channel ABC Family and used it as an outlet for its own library of family-appropriate shows and movies. The channel slowly drifted away from family programming, focusing instead on the young adult demographic. In 2016, the channel officially dropped "Family" from its name, re-introducing itself to the world as "Freeform." The "Family" era had finally come to an end.

Pat Robertson had much to gain from the sale of the Family Channel, but he did lose one critically important thing: the power to define "family television." It quickly became clear that neither Fox nor Disney would target the same "family" audience that had once loyally tuned into

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[400] Heather Tomlinson, "Murdoch Parts with the Power Rangers and the Preacher Man," *Independent on Sunday,* July 29, 2001.

the Family Channel, and other channels soon began to court those viewers. The success of the Family Channel created a template that future family-focused channels readily adopted. Premiering in 1998, The Hallmark Channel (which was also the product of a religious network, ACTS-VISN, deciding to sell to Crown Media Holdings) targeted a family audience with reruns of wholesome programming. INSP (short for Inspiration) also began as a religious network, only to switch to the commercial model in 2010 and populate its channel with many of the series that once aired on the Family Channel. UP, which began as the Gospel Music Channel, has courted a family audience with reruns of wholesome shows since 2013. FamilyNet was another channel that started as a religious channel (this one owned by Jerry Falwell, before the Southern Baptists took over its management), but, in 2017, it pivoted and became "The Cowboy Channel."[401] All of these channels took up strategies that the Family Channel established, including relying primarily on older reruns and an emphasis on pleasing older audiences. In many cases, they literally programmed the same series that the Family Channel did. *The Waltons, Gunsmoke,* and *Father Knows Best* have been staples of all of these networks and classics of the "family" genre.

The legacy of the Family Channel is complex. It built itself in the image of the perfect American nuclear family—which was white, middle-class, and suburban. Although the Family Channel's maneuvers were considered an embrace of secularism and a savvy money-grab by some, in actuality the Family Channel remained firmly aligned with the messaging of the Religious Right. The Family Channel asserted that "family values" were ultimately conservative

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[401] Coincidentally, Pat Robertson seriously considered investing in Willie Nelson's Cowboy Channel in 1990, but ultimately decided against it. Once again, his instinct for the television business was spot on—the channel folded shortly after its debut due to low ratings.

values. Unmarried people, childless people, gay people, young adults, feminist women, and people of color were all implicitly disinvited from the emphatically un-edgy Family Channel through its branding and its programming choices. The channel was dominated by white families, even if those families were "unconventional," i.e. families without two biological parents raising a brood of children.

Unlike other cable channels, which built their brands around specific programming genres or demographics, The Family Channel built its appeal around its audience's morals and values. It was unique in that it featured all different types of programming, mimicking the broadcast networks at a time when most cable channels were more specialized in their approach. The Family Channel strategically perpetuated the link between television, the family, and nostalgia, reinforcing the connection between the good old days and the old-fashioned television of the 1960s, and reminding viewers how much better things used to be. It softened its religiosity in order to gain more followers, both for the channel and for its flagship program, *The 700 Club*. The minds behind the Family Channel figured out how best to exploit the weighted connotations of the word "family" and turn it into a successful brand. They catered to an underserved audience, and commiserated with those viewers over the terrible state of modern television. Its appeal lay in its conservative values, and its promise to protect vulnerable viewers from unsavory content. The Family Channel provided dissatisfied viewers with an alternative space—it gave them the opportunity to disengage from the broadcast networks and other cable channel's inappropriate content without turning off the television. When CBN abandoned the Christian broadcasting space for family entertainment, other televangelist networks seized the opportunity to build their own Christian alternative spaces. As I discuss in the next chapter, the Trinity

Broadcasting Network stayed on the secular path, and built its own media conglomerate for the 21st century Christian audience.

CHAPTER 4

"Fully Spirit Empowered and Fully Contemporary": The Trinity Broadcasting Network as 21st Century Media Conglomerate

In 2016, shortly after the death of Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) co-founder Jan Crouch, her pet project—a theme park called The Holy Land Experience—held a de facto estate sale that doubled as a perfect metaphor for the handover of TBN from its founders to the next generation of Christian televangelists. Elaborate costumes, large gold nativity statues, ornate furniture and other "bejeweled knickknacks" made up the bulk of the sale items, as the team at the Holy Land Experience moved immediately to tone down the park's most garish elements in the wake of Crouch's death.[402] Like many of the women of televangelist fame in the 1980s, Jan Crouch was immediately recognizable, with her big, pink and blonde hair and heavily-made-up appearance. She was also known for her ostentatious taste, which included a particular affinity for gold and excess. Crouch was, by the 2010s, a relic of an earlier age of religious broadcasting, whose tastes were out of step with what contemporary Christian audiences supposedly wanted. As the estate sale evidenced, Crouch's model of televangelism (which extended to her vision for the Holy Land Experience theme park) embarrassed her former co-workers, who sought to scale down the park's gaudier elements and modernize it into an attraction that would speak to the

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[402] Beth Kassab, "Absence of Jan Crouch Being Felt at Holy Land Experience," *Orlando Sentinel*, July 23, 2016, ProQuest.

modern Christian consumer. By the 2010s, it was clear that the Holy Land Experience, and the entire TBN empire, would be moving in a different direction under its new leadership and embracing a more contemporary, spectacular, big-budget style, along with more traditionally secular programming formats.

The Trinity Broadcasting Network was founded by Paul and Jan Crouch in Orange County, California in 1973. Paul Crouch was then a pastor affiliated with the Assemblies of God and preached an evangelical, Pentecostal doctrine. It was a network in name only, as the Crouches struggled for years to get their programming blocks on local stations before raising enough money to buy their own station. They finally did in 1977, christening KTBN-TV in Fontana, California. Like Pat Robertson before them, the Crouches initially worked with Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker (who had left CBN at that point), before a falling out inspired the Bakkers to leave the West Coast and start the ill-fated PTL Network in North Carolina. TBN's early programming was traditional televangelist fare, with Paul and Jan Crouch both co-anchoring what would become the network's signature show, *Praise the Lord*. In 1978, cable opened the door for TBN to be seen much more widely, and the Crouches were among the last televangelists standing when the scandals in the 1980s destabilized their industry. In the 1980s and 1990s, as donations started to pour in, the Crouches focused on buying television stations across the country, eventually capitalizing on the regulatory changes that upped the number of stations one entity could own and the "must carry" rules, which they could use to force cable systems to carry

the channel. By 2005, TBN was available to ninety-five percent of all homes in the United States and carried by 5,000 stations, 33 satellites, and thousands of cable systems.[403]

This expansion in the US is dwarfed however, by the network's presence abroad. I have cannot do justice to a study of TBN's global empire in this dissertation, but its global footprint is remarkable.[404] TBN has networks and stations in place on every continent save Antarctica, currently totaling twenty-eight networks in all. In many places, TBN produces original programming locally in the native language/s, including TBN Nejat TV, the first Christian network in Iran, which offers programming in Farsi. TBN in Africa, another of the TBN networks, promises that locally produced programming comprises at least half of its schedule. TBN's programs and formats are circulated around the globe—and the network evangelizes through them. While TBN has invested considerable energy and capital into expanding abroad, it has also worked on expanding within the United States. As we have seen in Chapter 1 and Chapter 3, the imperative to expand has long been a guiding principle for religious broadcasters. The Christian Broadcasting Network was, for decades, the premier example of how to build a powerful Christian media empire. As CBN's power as a "faith and family" broadcaster faded with the sale of the Family Channel, however, a successor rose to take on the mantle as king of the Christian television. The Trinity Broadcasting Network has, particularly in the 2000s and 2010s, established itself as the largest Christian television network in the world. TBN claims that moniker for themselves proudly in their marketing materials without citing hard data.

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[403] Anne Becker, "TV's Religious Revival," *Broadcasting & Cable*, April 25, 2005, https://www.nexttv.com/news/tvs-religious-revival-106710.
[404] TBN's global expansion unfortunately falls outside the scope of this dissertation, and certainly merits further investigation.

Regardless, it is difficult to overstate the organization's reach. Having the largest Christian network has not satisfied the Crouch family, however. They have sought to transform TBN into a media conglomerate, with a family of networks and a theme park working synergistically together to evangelize around the world.

In this chapter, I focus on the US operations of TBN since 2012, when the "next generation" of TBN leadership began making changes to their parents' media empire. Paul and Jan Crouch's son, Matthew, and his wife, Laurie (née Orndorff), began their takeover of the family business after a truly appalling scandal resulted in the first born son, Paul Crouch Jr., being ousted from the organization. During this period, TBN's finances also came under scrutiny, and network leaders were accused of misusing church funds to fuel their extravagant lifestyles. As a result of this round of bad publicity, donations to TBN dipped significantly[405] and the network began selling off some of its least profitable properties, including its famously flashy headquarters in Costa Mesa, California. In order to rebound from these setbacks, Matthew Crouch set out to make TBN more entertaining by modernizing the network's programming, adopting popular formats, and providing highly mediated experiences for its viewers and theme park visitors.

Since the takeover, TBN has worked to shed its image as traditionally televangelist—a movement that began with Matthew Crouch's decision to jettison the network's telethons in

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[405] Annual donations dropped from 207 million dollars in 2006 to 121.5 million in 2014. Teri Sforza, "'Very Clear Signs of Trouble' at Trinity Broadcasting Network as Revenue Shrinks, Attractions Close," *Orange County Register*, July 18, 2016, https://www.ocregister.com/2016/07/18/very-clear-signs-of-trouble-at-trinity-broadcasting-network-as-revenue-shrinks-attractions-close/.

2012—and emerge as a modern media conglomerate built to satisfy the desires of the contemporary Christian audience. TBN draws inspiration from secular media industries for models on how to build its empire, and has adopted strategies used by companies like Disney and NBCUniversal in order to build its global brand and bring new audiences into the fold. TBN has developed a veritable portfolio of networks in the US, beginning with a digital cable lineup launched in 2002. That group included The Church Channel (a 24/7 channel comprised entirely of church services), JC-TV (a music video, youth-oriented network for "cool" Christians), and TBN Enlace USA (a Spanish-language channel modeled after TBN). In 2005, the elder Crouches launched Smile of a Child, a children's network offering Christian programming and inspired by Jan Crouch's charitable work with young kids. After 2012, TBN accelerated its growth, and launched several new channels targeting specific demographics, including JUCE (a relaunch of JC-TV for activist-minded "millennials") and TBN Salsa (for English-speaking Latino/a audiences in the US). They also partnered with Hillsong Church (the massively popular megachurch and music company out of Australia) in order to launch Hillsong Channel, a 24/7 contemporary Christian music and worship channel, in 2015. On top of all of those networks, they also bought and revamped a theme park, The Holy Land Experience, in Orlando, Florida in 2007. The evolution of the Trinity Broadcasting Network, in many ways, closely mirrors the development of the major American media conglomerates in the last ten to twenty years. Although the Crouch family's efforts at expansion were explained as evangelical rather than capitalistic by the family themselves, the results are nevertheless strikingly similar. While Disney and other media companies have amassed a truly staggering number of media properties, TBN has similarly worked to expand its footprint and build out alternative spaces for evangelical

Christians to gather. Across the TBN empire, it is clear that the perceived need to make Christian programming as entertaining as possible has only accelerated in the last ten years.

In this chapter, I explore how TBN conceptualizes the modern-day Christian consumer, and outline what strategies the network has adopted from its secular counterparts in order to bring more Christians into the fold. I argue that TBN, through its collection of networks and new programming, strives to attract 21st century evangelical viewers by breaking them into different demographics, and attempting to create at least one alternative space for each imagined audience. Sometimes, the imagined demographic is niche but growing, like evangelical English-speaking Latinos in the US. Other times, the demographic they seek is broadly defined, like the always-desired Christian youth audience—but they imagine that audience to be desirous of a very particular style of Christian entertainment. TBN's expansion is an attempt to carve out even more alternative space for Christians to gather through the medium of television and, in the case of The Holy Land Experience, to congregate in a *literal* alternative space. Through all of these media holdings, TBN promotes Christianity as an oppositional identity, one which requires a safe haven from the mean-spiritedness of contemporary secular media. While TBN executives and talent denigrate secular media whenever they can, they have also learned from their strategies of conglomeration and implemented many of the lessons of contemporary media empire-building.

My analysis of TBN begins by situating the network within its broader context, and explaining how two forces, media conglomeration and the prosperity gospel, have compelled the network to expand. I then detail how the flagship TBN has transformed under Matthew Crouch's control and analyze the network's programming strategies before elaborating on two of the network's shows: *Huckabee* and *Better Together.* While TBN gave itself a makeover, it also

sought to bring in new, younger audiences by creating ancillary networks like TBN Salsa and the Hillsong Channel. I will explain how each channel conceived of the modern Christian viewer, how they sought to attract them, and why one succeeded while the other failed. I have chosen to focus on the ancillary networks that I believe reveal the most about TBN's current mission, and offer the most interesting case studies into how the mediated practice of faith has evolved in the 2010s. Finally, I turn to the Holy Land Experience theme park, drawing on my own site visit to describe and analyze the post-2016 park space and its pivot into providing epic, entertaining musical spectaculars. This chapter attempts to capture the breadth of TBN's media empire in the US, and to use the network to consider how the business of Christian media-making and televangelism has changed in the 21st century.

Expansion as Imperative: The Twin Forces of the Prosperity Gospel and Media Conglomeration

Two developments in American Christianity combined to propel TBN's rapid expansion in the United States and around the world. The first was the rise and relative ubiquity of the prosperity gospel, also sometimes derisively shorthanded as the "Name It and Claim It" or "Health and Wealth" gospel. Although difficult to define, the prosperity gospel "inscribes material rewards with spiritual meaning" and encourages its followers to understand money, health, and good fortune as divine.[406] Its evangelists promoted the idea that faith was a tool that could "activate spiritual power that drew blessings into the believer's life."[407] The growth of the

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[406] Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7-8.
[407] Kate Bowler and Wen Reagan, "Bigger, Better, Louder: The Prosperity Gospel's Impact on Contemporary Christian Worship," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 190.

prosperity gospel is a largely decentralized phenomenon, with no central church or doctrine at its core. Its power comes instead from its simplicity, and the overwhelming popularity of those who preach it. As religious historian Kate Bowler has chronicled, the prosperity gospel has several historical antecedents and emerged as a significant force in the United States in the 1970s. Its popularity exploded in the 1990s with the pivot to "soft prosperity," which toned down the excess of the 1970s and 1980s version, which was perhaps best encapsulated by the appearances and lavish spending of over-the-top televangelists like Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and Paul and Jan Crouch. Soft prosperity instead leaned into the trend toward "therapeutic" religion, and diluted the stricter message of hard prosperity in order to appeal to a larger audience. Megachurches across the US and around the world have embraced soft prosperity, and have transformed their worship spaces into high tech concert arenas in order to entertain their congregants and show that God has blessed their congregations with riches.[408] Crucially, television itself played a key role in normalizing the prosperity gospel, particularly for Christians who enjoyed supplementing their regular church attendance by watching televangelist programming. As I have shown in Chapter 2, fundamentalists and charismatics (and particularly those who subscribed to the tenets of the prosperity gospel) dominated the television airwaves after regulatory changes cleared the way for paid religious programming to dramatically outpace not-for-profit religious programming. Bowler herself points to the enormous importance of television to the movement's growth, citing TBN as one of the important engines that drove the prosperity gospel's continuing popularity.[409]

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[408] Bowler and Reagan, 187.
[409] Bowler, *Blessed*, 4.

In order to make sense of TBN's strategies for the 21st century, it is important to understand how the tenets of the prosperity gospel inform the thinking of those Christian celebrities now running the network. Prosperity preachers, including many on TBN, put forth the idea that the Lord will bless you with material wealth, physical and mental health, and good fortune if only you repeatedly demonstrate your faith. (This is the basic logic that many prosperity-informed televangelists use to encourage viewer donations, including, until recently, TBN's *Praise the Lord* program.) By this logic, amassing more resources proves that you have earned God's continued favor. In the case of TBN, the prosperity gospel is a key driver of its continued expansion. Building a media empire was not only a way to evangelize, but also a way to demonstrate that God approves of TBN's efforts and continues to bless the network. Unlike CBN, TBN never courted success in the commercial sphere, instead opting to keep its non-profit status. TBN has amassed a considerable amount of wealth, and has come under fire for the misuse of church funds repeatedly throughout its history. The prosperity gospel is crucial to how the Crouches have defended their incredible wealth, their dogged unwillingness to pay taxes, and their grand plans for expansion. TBN may technically be a non-profit organization, but it nevertheless behaves much like a secular media company in the 21st century.

As the prosperity gospel paved the way for megachurch pastors to build global brands and networks like TBN to become global broadcasters, the secular media industries were undergoing a similar transformation. Deregulation across the media industries created a perfect storm for media conglomeration, and companies like Disney and NBCUniversal set about acquiring as many assets as was legally possible in order to diversify their portfolios and provide something for (almost) every possible consumer. In her work on the Disney's media empire, Janet Wasko breaks down how each element of the massive Disney corporation works to support

the others as well as the whole—including Disney's holdings in film, television, theatrical productions, music publishing, home video, and consumer products/merchandising.[410] Disney has proven particularly adept not just at brand management, but at creating an insular media ecosystem wherein children (and adults) can have all of their entertainment needs met without needing to seek out products or experiences beyond the Disney empire. Despite their family-friendly image, Disney has nevertheless come under fire from conservative religious groups for its secularism and perceived "liberal" agenda. Most famously, the Southern Baptist Convention threatened to boycott the Walt Disney Company in 1997 because of the company's decision to give health benefits to the partners of gay employees.[411] Although those efforts fizzled out, they did make it clear that there were some who felt that even Disney was too secular for Christians, and particularly Christian children, to enjoy without risk of being corrupted.

Even as they scorned Disney for its tremendous influence, Christian media moguls sought to copy its tactics for media domination. The Trinity Broadcasting Network was one such organization which, with the exception of film, spent the first two decades of the 2000s steadily breaking into new businesses and expanding their portfolio. By 2020, they had established over thirty television networks and channels around the world (including new, younger-skewing channels in the US), formed a partnership with Hillsong Church (one of the largest Christian music producers in the world), bought a theme park (the Holy Land Experience), and created and produced a steady stream of theatrical productions to entertain the park's guests. TBN's

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[410] Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Inc. 2001): 28-69.
[411] Allen R. Myerson, "Southern Baptist Convention Calls for Boycott of Disney," *New York Times*, June 19, 1997, https://www.nytimes.com/1997/06/19/us/southern-baptist-convention-calls-for-boycott-of-disney.html.

expansion in this century is symptomatic of the deregulatory climate which has characterized the US media landscape since the 1990s.[412] Its business model is not beholden to stockholders, but its imperative to evangelize served as alternative motivation to dramatically expand their holdings.

TBN in the 2010s: Getting "Beyond the Pews"

TBN became the largest Christian network in the world somewhat by default. In the 1980s, there were three major evangelical networks vying for Christian audiences: CBN, TBN, and the PTL Network (founded by Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker). CBN, as we have seen, left the televangelism game in order to become the Family Channel and eventually sold its network. The PTL Network did not survive scandals involving the misuse of church funds and Jim Bakker coercing his church secretary, Jessica Hahn, into sex in 1987.[413] TBN was the biggest evangelical network left by 1990, even though the Crouches themselves had come under fire many times for financial misdeeds. After the wave of televangelist scandals in the 1980s, TBN was the subject of a major inquiry by the Ethics Committee of the National Association of Religious Broadcasters (NRB) after several ethics complaints were filed against the company. These complaints covered a range of unfair and illegal business practices, such as cutting rates to carry programs in order to drive their competitors in local markets out of business and ordaining employees who did not actually serve ministerial functions in order to avoid paying employee

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[412] Jennifer Holt, *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1996* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011): 3.

[413] It was initially characterized in the press as a consensual encounter, but Hahn has since described the encounter as sexual abuse. Tim Funk, "Jessica Hahn, Woman at Center of Televangelist's Fall 30 Years Ago, Confronts Her Past," *Charlotte Observer*, December 16, 2017, https://www.charlotteobserver.com/living/religion/article189940794.html.

benefits and taxes.[414] There were also considerable questions about the salaries that Paul and Jan Crouch drew, which dramatically outpaced those of other televangelists. Whistleblowers also reported being fired by the network for voicing their concerns about the network's questionable accounting practices. Despite all of these complaints, the NRB announced in 1990 that it could not *definitively* prove that there had been wrongdoing at TBN, but that they also were not exonerating the network. Enraged by this result, Paul Crouch announced that he would leave the NRB and answer only to "the Body of Christ" and not any manmade organizations.[415] Crouch had also let his license an as Assemblies of God minister lapse years earlier. As a result, TBN has basically operated with no oversight or accountability to any church or government body.

In the 2010s, several scandals once again threatened the network's credibility and financial stability. In 2011, Brittany Koper, TBN's former finance director and the daughter of then-presumptive TBN heir Paul Crouch Jr., filed a lawsuit against TBN alleging improper spending of church funds on personal expenses, including luxurious personal homes, lavish meals charged to large expense accounts, and an $100,000 air-conditioned trailer purchased for co-founder Jan Crouch's two Maltese dogs.[416] TBN countered Koper's suit by accusing her and her husband, Matthew Koper, of embezzling 1.3 million dollars from the network. The lawsuit brought a national spotlight onto TBN's questionable financial practices and decisions, including a profile in the *New York Times,* which described in detail the Crouches' his-and-hers

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[414] Randy Frame, "TBN: Growth Has Bred Criticism," *Christianity Today*, October 8, 1990, 56-59, ProQuest Research Library.
[415] Ibid.
[416] Brandy Zadrozny, "Goodbye to the Queen of Jesus TV, Jan Crouch," *Daily Beast,* June 5, 2016, https://www.thedailybeast.com/goodbye-to-the-queen-of-jesus-tv-jan-crouch.

neighboring mansions in Florida and California as well as various schemes enacted by TBN to avoid paying taxes and employee benefits.[417] A second lawsuit followed in 2012, when another of the Crouches' granddaughters, Carra Crouch, sued TBN and Jan Crouch because when she was sexually assaulted as a thirteen-year-old by an older male TBN employee, her grandmother failed to report the abuse to the proper authorities.[418] These court battles, both of which lasted for multiple years, continually brought Paul and Jan Crouch back into the news, even after their deaths.

The scandals also rocked the company on an interpersonal level. It was widely assumed, before the long legal battles began, that Paul Crouch Jr, the eldest son of Paul and Jan Crouch, would take over the network whenever his parents died or stepped down. He is the father to both Brittany Koper and Carra Crouch, and spoke publicly about how the family feud that erupted around these scandals was the "one of the hardest things I've ever had to endure."[419] It also, apparently, caused him to fall out of favor with his parents. As the *Orange County Register* reported, after Paul Crouch fell ill with congestive heart failure in September 2011 and appeared to be at death's door, the senior Crouch wrote and signed a letter handing control of TBN to his second son, Matthew.[420] Paul Crouch Jr. was removed from his position in TBN's leadership and

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[417] Erik Eckholm, "Family Battle Offers Look Inside Lavish TV Ministry," *New York Times*, May 4, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/05/us/tbn-fight-offers-glimpse-inside-lavish-tv-ministry.html.
[418] TBN's denial of this claim was particularly ugly and misogynistic. Their defense rested on blaming Carra Crouch for the assault and their assertion that, although Jan Crouch was an ordained minister at the time, she was not required to report the assault because Carra had come to her "as a grandmother" as opposed to a minister (who would be required to report the assault under the Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act.) Teri Sforza, "Child Rape Claim Reveals Dark Secrets of California Televangelist Family," *The Mercury News*, May 9, 2017, https://www.mercurynews.com/2017/05/09/from-beyond-the-grave-opening-statements-in-child-rape-claim-get-personal-with-video-testimony-from-the-late-jan-crouch-of-tbn.
[419] Zadrozny, "Goodbye to the Queen of Jesus TV, Jan Crouch."
[420] Teri Sforza, "Deathbed Power Struggle at Trinity Broadcasting?", *Orange County Register*, September 14, 2012, https://www.ocregister.com/2012/09/14/deathbed-power-struggle-at-trinity-broadcasting/.

his entire branch of the family was essentially exiled. Paul Crouch Sr. would recover and live for another two years, but Matthew Crouch had already begun working behind the scenes to modernize the network.

All of this highly publicized drama and accounts of TBN wrongdoing hurt TBN's image as a network devoted to Christ and spreading the gospel. Many viewers fled from the troubled network, and the organization's overall revenue fell precipitously, from $207 million in 2006 to $121.5 million in 2014.[421] (Much of TBN's revenue was generated by viewer donations to the network.) Some of that decline can be attributed to the discontinuation of TBN's "Praise-a-thons," their biannual fundraising drives soliciting donations and prayers from home viewers, in 2012. Tom Newman, who became TBN's program director in 2016, explained that TBN nixed the Praise-a-thons because they "offended" some viewers by soliciting donations so unabashedly.[422] Telethons were also old-fashioned, and harkened back to the 1980s model of televangelism that TBN ultimately wanted to distance itself from. Although losing the Praise-a-thons may have hurt the network's bottom line, the bigger problem was that TBN had lost credibility as well as its two charismatic founders, both of whom devoted TBN viewers had been watching and worshipping with for years.

Before the younger Crouch took over, TBN's schedule was almost entirely comprised of independently produced televangelist shows. The network did produce its own programming, primarily *Praise the Lord*, TBN's version of *The 700 Club*, which featured Paul and Jan Crouch

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[421] Oforza, "Very Clear Signs."
[422] Bill Sherman, "'America's Pastor' Max Lucado in Tulsa to film new TBN series titled 'Unshakable Hope," *Tulsa World*, May 26, 2017, https://www.tulsaworld.com/lifestyles/america-s-pastor-max-lucado-in-tulsa-to-film-new/article_fa33754b-9c6d-5374-83d9-c43ca0d05967.

as co-hosts of the Christian variety program. In practice, TBN acted more like a platform than it did a network. While Paul and Jan Crouch and their team chose which ministries they would promote by scheduling them on the channel, they had little to no creative control over how those ministries would produce their programs. TBN featured televangelists like Billy Graham (even long after his death), Joyce Meyer (a popular prosperity gospel promoter), Joel Osteen (pastor of the very popular megachurch Lakewood Church), and even Pat Robertson, whose *700 Club* has run on TBN for decades. These popular preachers, who also syndicated their programs on local television stations and other Christian networks like Daystar, lent credibility to TBN whenever the network came under fire for its financial and moral failings. Viewers could disapprove of Paul and Jan Crouch and still support the network with their viewership.

When he officially took over as president of TBN in 2015, Matthew Crouch vowed to refresh TBN's program offerings and expand its programming beyond more traditional televangelist fare. He consistently lauded his parents for amassing a large global network of stations and satellites, and emphasized that he wanted to take TBN to the next level by upping its entertainment value. As Crouch explained, "you can have the largest distribution system in the world but if nobody wants to watch it ... what do you really have? Nothing."[423] However, Crouch was also sensitive to critiques from viewers that his plan would detract from TBN's original mission to bring the gospel to the masses. The concern about Matthew also stemmed from his status as the second son of TBN, the one who was never supposed to inherit the network in the

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[423] Holly Meyer, "Mike Huckabee Brings Star Power and a Shot of News to TBN's Christian Lineup," *The Tennessean*, October 6, 2017, https://www.tennessean.com/story/entertainment/2017/10/06/huckabee-show-tbn-donald-trump-nashvilletrinitybroadcastingnetwork-crouch/721876001/.

first place. In response to that critique, Matthew insisted during an appearance on *The 700 Club* that TBN's mission would remain unchanged. As he explained emphatically to Pat Robertson:

> Jesus is never going be compromised. The spirit empowered is never gonna be compromised...We're never going to move to the middle, we're going to be fully spirit empowered and fully contemporary at the same time, that's what we feel our mantle is.[424]

Crouch's invocation here of the spirit and the contemporary is a reference to what TBN Pastor Leon Fontaine has dubbed "the spirit contemporary," which is about updating Christianity for the modern, technologically savvy generation. In order to reach new potential Christians living in a media-saturated world of high production values and glistening pop music, Christian media creators needed to meet those young people where they are, by providing content that could rival their secular counterparts. TBN was late to that game—as we have seen, CBN tried a similar tactic in the 1990s. However, TBN's global reach and impressive war chest meant that the network could nevertheless catch up, particularly if they partnered with Christians who had the media savvy to refresh the network's look and attitude.

Crouch attributed the necessity of TBN changing to the proliferation of new technologies, particularly streaming television. In order to remain competitive, the network would have to up its entertainment value. As Crouch explained:

> The look and feel of Christian television—and TBN—are far different than they were even a few short years ago. With a wide variety of programming and content beckoning viewers to cable, satellite, and online platforms, we've had to create new and fresh content, just like every other network. While the Christian message hasn't changed, we've had to rethink how we're delivering that message.[425]

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[424] "TBN's Matt and Laurie Crouch Introduce the Hillsong Channel," *The 700 Club*, YouTube, June 6, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LRMNxYuUETg.

[425] "Trinity Broadcasting Network Casts Creative Vision for New Generation of Christian Television," Trinity Broadcasting Network Press Release, January 22, 2015, https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/trinity-broadcasting-network-casts-creative-vision-for-new-generation-of-christian-television-300024718.html.

Here, Crouch explains that TBN is "just like every other network," despite his insistence that TBN will be true to its mission and remain fully "spirit empowered." Much like Tim Robertson before him, Crouch essentially spoke out of both sides of his mouth, reassuring loyal TBN viewers that the network's mission had not changed whilst simultaneously telling those who were not convinced that the network was adapting to the times. And the truth was that the network did change, and rather quickly, under Matthew Crouch's tutelage. While many of the network's popular televangelist programs remained, TBN's schedule quickly diversified in an attempt to bring new viewers (and hopefully, their donations) to the network.

In order to bring more "faith and family" entertainment to the network cheaply without attracting too much criticism, Crouch initially focused on building out TBN's reality and variety show offerings. Those programs included *Drive Thru History* and its spin-off *Drive Thru History—the Gospels*, both of which invited viewers to explore "significant historical and spiritual landmarks" around the world.[426] One of the longest-running reality shows on TBN is *Treasures*, a weekly program which "shows how the power of God can transform and restore the lives of those formerly involved in drugs, alcohol, crime, prostitution, and gangs."[427] For those seeking more adventurous content, there was *Travel the Road*, which chronicled the journeys of two young missionaries as they traveled to remote and dangerous locations to share the gospel. All of these shows adhered to Crouch's promise to center Christianity in TBN's programming, and their inclusion on the schedule did not ruffle many feathers.

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[426] Ibid.
[427] "Treasures: About the Program," Trinity Broadcasting Network, accessed May 2020. https://www.tbn.org/programs/treasures/about.

One reality show which veered farther from TBN's evangelical mission was *Somebody's Gotta Do It*, a show produced and hosted by Mike Rowe, the popular host of the Discovery Channel program *Dirty Jobs*. *Somebody's Gotta Do It* captured Rowe's visits to "hardworking Americans" on the job and celebrated their passion for their unusual jobs. The show originally aired on CNN from 2014-2015 and was subsequently picked up for a fourth season by TBN in 2018. In order to make the show's back catalog more Christian-friendly, TBN re-edited the episodes to eliminate any cursing and added back in footage of participants praying or saying grace that had been previously left on the cutting room floor. During the show's re-launch, star Mike Rowe made a strong case for its inclusion on TBN, and emphasized that *Somebody's Gotta Do It* spoke especially clearly to TBN's Christian audience. Rowe was very explicit in his pleas for "positivity" and for the importance of escaping the "negative" cycles of cable news and social media.[428] Rowe insisted that his show would help viewers feel "better" about America, rather than worse, and that focusing on "ordinary" Americans in the Heartland was the best way to reconnect with what is great about America. This kind of rhetoric is not new, of course; it is Rowe invoking traditional notions of the Heartland in 2018 on a supposedly unpolitical Christian network that is remarkable. Rowe's reputation as an everyman who cares about "real Americans" and his comments about the importance of positivity and celebrating the Heartland took on new meaning under the Trump presidency. The kind of rhetoric that once functioned as a dog whistle for the Family Channel now sounds more like a bullhorn, one which draws a clear distinction

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[428] Brandon Showalter, "Mike Rowe Says New TBN Series Will Help People Feel Better, Not Worse, About Country," *Christian Post*, November 21, 2017, https://www.christianpost.com/news/mike-rowe-says-new-tbn-series-will-help-people-feel-better-not-worse-about-country.html.

between rural and urban, conservatives and liberals, and Christians and non-Christians. Even though he claims to target a "middle of the road" audience, Rowe's rhetoric aligns him, and by extension his audience, with the then-current platform of the Republican party under Trump. Acquiring Rowe's show, however, was just one facet of TBN's not-so-subtle push into bringing more explicitly political conversations onto the network.

Huckabee: "Opening Up the Barn Door a Little Wider"

Matthew Crouch's initial forays into reality programming and making TBN more entertaining were relatively benign. Then, in 2017, the network announced that it would produce a new show from former Fox News contributor, former Arkansas governor, and former Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee. *Huckabee* features a mixture of political commentary, musical performances, and interviews with political figures, celebrities, and other inspiring guests. When Fox News decided not to renew *Huckabee* in 2015 after seven years on the network, Huckabee pivoted to TBN to launch a new version of the show. Since its premiere on October 7, 2017, *Huckabee* has consistently been TBN's highest-rated show by a considerable margin. *Huckabee,* which airs on Saturday nights, consistently draws over one million viewers per episode and circulates widely on social media through Huckabee's popular Twitter feed and other right-wing outlets. Huckabee's Twitter account (@GovMikeHuckabee) has over 1.6 million followers, and Huckabee himself has topped *Hollywood Reporter*'s list of "Top TV Personalities Social Media Ranking" several times—a list based on how much the public interacts with television hosts' various social media accounts.[429] *Huckabee* is also

[429] Huckabee typically rose to the top of the rankings after taking on politicians on Twitter or creating controversy and garnering thousands of retweets and likes. Kevin Rutherford, "Mike Huckabee, Jake Tapper Go 1-2 on Top TV

available to stream on TBN's website, and segments are made available on YouTube each week. These videos often go viral. For example, in 2020, Huckabee has already broken the 100,000 viewer mark for segments entitled "I'm Going to ENRAGE Every Leftist Who Sees This: ALL LIVES MATTER!"[430] and "TERRORI$T Pardoned by CLINTON Is Funding BLM" [431] less than a week after each video was posted. The show's footprint extends far beyond TBN itself—and even though Fox News dropped him as a weekly host, Huckabee remains a popular figure for many conservatives.

Despite what the previous segment's titles may suggest, Huckabee and Crouch both initially pitched *Huckabee* as a "wholesome" show that would "cover politics" rather than be an overtly religious show. In an interview with CBN's *Faith Nation*, Huckabee promised viewers that his show would be an hour of "information, entertainment, and encouragement" wholesome enough for parents to watch without worrying about what their children might see or hear, echoing the rhetoric that Tim Robertson once used to pitch The Family Channel.[432] Like Mike Rowe before him, Huckabee also expressed his desire to create a show specifically for the flyover states, and pointed to his decision to base the show in Nashville as a testament to his

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Personalities Social Media Ranking," *Hollywood Reporter*, August 18, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/mike-huckabee-jake-tapper-go-1-2-top-tv-personalities-social-media-ranking-1135657/item/gordon-ramsay-mvp-8-22-1135645.
& Kevin Rutherford, "Andy Cohen Re-Enters, Mike Huckabee Leads Top TV Personalities Social Media Ranking," *Hollywood Reporter*, December 29, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/andy-cohen-enters-mike-huckabee-leads-top-tv-personalities-social-media-ranking-1171759/item/gordon-ramsay-mvp-1-2-1171741.

[430] "I'm Going to ENRAGE Every Lefty Who Sees This: ALL LIVES MATTER!," *Huckabee*, YouTube, July 19, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjfVoo_QXR0.

[431] "TERRORI$T Pardoned by CLINTON Is Funding BLM," *Huckabee*, YouTube, July 11, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsAhK-bGIzU.

[432] CBN News Staff, "Mike Huckabee Premiers New "Wholesome" Kid-Friendly Show," *CBN News*, October 5, 2017, https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/politics/2017/october/mike-nbsp-huckabee-premiers-new-ldquo-wholesome-rdquo-kid-friendly-show.

understanding of the importance of the Heartland.[433] As he very frankly explained on a panel at the National Religious Broadcasters' annual conference, Huckabee believes that there are four cultural centers in the US: New York, Washington, DC, Los Angeles, and Silicon Valley, and that:

> If you don't live in one of those bubbles, which I call Bubbleville, then you probably live in what I call Bubbaville. But there aren't a lot of shows that are directed toward Bubbaville, and that's what I'm convinced there's a dramatic need for.[434]

The Bubbleville/Bubbaville rhetoric is clunky, but Huckabee's invocation of the coastal elites/Heartland divide demonstrates how much that configuration still figures into television creators' and executives' thinking, regardless of how quickly that false binary breaks down under scrutiny. TBN bills *Huckabee* as "America's favorite 'front porch' music and talk show," and it's clear that the "America" they are referring to is the politically conservative one. Huckabee himself likens the experience of watching the show to "sitting on a front porch talking with people, or around the kitchen table."[435] The difference, of course, is that typical front porch chat does not have the potential to go viral on alt-right, white supremacist platforms[436] or spread misinformation about a deadly global pandemic.[437]

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[433] That Huckabee commuted from his residence in Florida every week to film the show was less discussed.
[434] Michael Smith, "Mike Huckabee, Others Say Content, Storytelling are Critical to The Future of Television," *National Religious Broadcasters*, April 2, 2019, http://nrb.org/news-room/articles/nrbt/mike-huckabee-others-say-content-storytelling-are-critical-future-television/.
[435] CBN News Staff, "Mike Huckabee Premiers."
[436] See, for example: Aaron Klein, "Exclusive: Mike Huckabee Backs Trump for Opposing Extremist Congresswomen," *Breitbart News*, July 18, 2019, https://www.breitbart.com/2020-election/2019/07/18/exclusive-mike-huckabee-backs-trump-for-opposing-extremist-congresswomen/.
[437] For example, a video with 174k views promised viewers "deep state views among pandemic pandemonium!" and peddled the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 was created in labs in China. "Soooo Did Coronavirus Come From A LAB? It's Looking Like It...:Facts Of The Matter," *Huckabee*, YouTube, April 18, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASieFWW1U2M.

Although the network had already launched *The Watchman*, a newsmagazine ominously described as focusing on "gathering threats to America's and Israel's[438] security," that show has yet to achieve the political or ratings impact of *Huckabee,* which featured a very friendly interview with President Donald Trump in its very first episode.[439] Every programming decision that every network makes is inherently political, and TBN's decision to dive into real-life partisan politics during the Trump administration attracted notice. *Politico*, in a longer piece about evangelical media's crucial support of Trump, pointed to *Huckabee* as a show "saturated with politics" that consistently supported the president's agenda. In order to defend the network's dramatic departure from its typical modus operandi, Matt Crouch explained that he was trying to have TBN "speak to everybody" and that *Huckabee* represented the chance to open "the barn door a little wider, [and let] other people get a view into this."[440] He further argued that a show like *Huckabee* was "late in coming" for TBN and that the network needed to provide its viewers with information about "current events."[441]

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[438] Many evangelicals are invested in Israel's affairs because of their belief in dispensationalist interpretations of the Bible. These Christians believe that the establishment of the nation of Israel was prophesied in the Bible, and that "God will draw the Jewish people back to Israel where they will rebuild the temple and eventually accept Jesus as the rightful Messiah. This will trigger the return and reign of Jesus." Evangelicals eagerly await Jesus's return, and therefore monitor all geopolitical events in and around Israel very closely.
See Jonathan Merritt, "Understanding the Evangelical Obsessions with Israel," *America: The Jesuit Review*, December 11, 2017, https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2017/12/11/understanding-evangelical-obsession-israel.

[439] Dismay with the interview was widespread, and Huckabee's fawning treatment of Trump was widely criticized. See, for example: Media Matters staff, "Mike Huckabee's Trump Interview Was Ridiculous," *Media Matters for America*, October 17, 2017, https://www.mediamatters.org/donald-trump/mike-huckabees-trump-interview-was-ridiculous. James Poniewozik, "President Trump Finds His TV Niche in Softball Interviews," *New York Times*, November 10, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/arts/television/president-trump-finds-his-tv-niche-in-softball-interviews.html.

[440] Meyer, "Mike Huckabee Brings Star Power."

[441] Ibid.

The show is not *all* politics, however. It also features musical performances, interviews, the occasional comedy segment, and heartwarming, "positive" stories about good deeds. While Huckabee claims that he is happy to have guests on who disagree with him, they rarely appear. Instead, the show has become an easy stop on conservative media tours, and almost every episode features an interview with a conservative politician. Some of Huckabee's most recent guests, in the summer of 2020, include Congressman Ken Buck (explaining why China is a security threat), Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt (defending Confederate monuments), and Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Chad Wolf (defending federal property and the response to the Black Lives Matter "riots" in Portland, Oregon). On its website, TBN describes *Huckabee* as "no agenda news," a claim which is so misleading that it is almost laughable. *Huckabee* has highlighted what was often lurking beneath the surface of TBN's more traditional, preacher-driven programming, which is a commitment to promoting political conservatism. Even if individuals on the network may not necessarily align themselves with the Republican party, the overall effect is clear, and only crystallized by Huckabee's version of "no agenda news."

Better Together: "Nobody Needs Another Makeup Tutorial. We Need a Soul Tutorial"

As *Huckabee* brought primetime talk onto TBN's airwaves, TBN also sought to expand into daytime talk programming and build a program specifically for women. *Better Together* premiered on TBN on April 22, 2019 and currently airs every weekday at 1:30 pm Eastern time (10:30 am Pacific). Hosted by Laurie Crouch (the wife of chairman Matthew Crouch), the program is TBN's first-ever foray into women-produced and women-targeted programming. Its origin story, frequently told by Laurie Crouch (often with an assist from her husband), neatly encapsulates how the transition from the old guard of TBN to the new generation has played out. As Laurie Crouch explained to several Christian news outlets, her very last conversation with her

mother-in-law Jan Crouch was about how TBN was beginning each day with its "Hope and Grace" programming block of Joel Osteen's and Joseph Prince's programs, but the network was missing "Love" and needed to cater more directly to female Christians. Matthew Crouch would later explain to *Charisma* magazine that the leaders at TBN had "started thinking about how, quite frankly, underserved the female audience is on Christian television."[442] Jan, on her deathbed, tasked Laurie with coming up with a new women's program that would center on love.[443] *Better Together* was the eventual result.

The show is pitched very explicitly to a female audience. It is no accident that *Better Together* blends two of the television genres most closely associated with the feminine: the talk show and the reality show. Its promotional videos (circulated widely on the network's social media accounts as well as the very popular accounts of its famous participants) emphasized that this was a show by women, for women. Even the show's title card leans heavily into a traditionally feminine vibe, with a lavender and gold color scheme and a scrapbook feel [Figure 4]. When describing the talk show's mission, Laurie Crouch explained that she and her husband wanted to design a space for women to have the kinds of conversations they would typically have at a dinner party with friends, when the men and women would separate into different rooms.[444] The set is circular with no camerapersons or producers inside; instead, episodes are filmed by robotic cameras installed on the set's walls. Each episode features five prominent

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[442] Stephen Strang, "Matt and Laurie Crouch: TBN's Brand-New Show Encourages Women in a Way 'The View' Won't," *Charisma*, April 2019, https://www.charismamag.com/blogs/the-strang-report/41046-matt-and-laurie-crouch-tbn-s-brand-new-show-encourages-women-in-a-way-the-view-won-t.
[443] "TBN's Matt and Laurie Crouch Introduce the Hillsong Channel."
[444] Jeannie Law, "'Better Together': TBN's First All-Women Christian Talk Show Where Leaders Get Personal," *Christian Post*, May 17, 2019, https://www.christianpost.com/news/better-together-tbn-first-all-women-christian-talk-show.html.

Christian women (including pastors, clergymen's wives, entertainers, and inspirational speakers) having a free flowing conversation about a particular theme, and begins by dropping in on a conversation already in progress.

Figure 4: Better Together*'s Title Card*[445]

Better Together covers a broad range of conversations designed to interest women of all ages. Topics covered by the show include how to deal with grief, anxiety, and depression; how to find a godly spouse; how to rebuild a friendship after an offense; learning patience in motherhood; and how to build lasting friendships. As Alex Seeley, a frequent guest on the show and the co-founder of The Belonging Co, explained: "It's the older instructing the younger. We give life to each other. We can't do it alone. God is a God of community, and in the age of isolation and selfies, it can be easy to forget that."[446] There is an emphasis on including women of all ages, as well as women from different racial and social backgrounds, in order to learn from each other and share their journeys with God. Because TBN is commercial-free, the conversation is occasionally broken up by reality-show style confessionals, where the women typically share

[445] Source: https://www.brainbowinc.com/portfolio/better-together/
[446] Ibid.

additional advice or reflect upon the conversation the audience just heard. Spontaneous backstage moments and footage from production meetings are also interspersed throughout the show in order to emphasize how much fun the women are having making the show and how they support each other off camera.

As we have seen throughout the history of Christian television, Christian programmers are wont to explain their new programming by calling it the Christian answer to a secular show or genre which they find problematic. In the case of *Better Together*, it was pointedly pitched as the female Christian's answer to the negativity of secular women-led, long-running talk shows like *The View* (1997-present, ABC) and *The Talk* (2010-present, CBS). In several interviews, Laurie Crouch spoke with varying degrees of frankness about how her show's mission diverged from that of *The View.* At her most candid, she explained:

> This program [*Better Together*] deals with the heart. Nobody needs another makeup tutorial. We need a soul tutorial. These are the issues of the heart that matters. I don't watch *The View*, but I've seen it a few times. But what I saw was very ugly. Iron sharpens iron, but our show is very encouraging. It's women staying together and sticking together. We all know God wants to do something for us ... but how do you make it through those times of difficulty, friendships, and identity and all that? That's what we deal with—finding your voice and your intimacy with God.[447]

There is no fighting on *Better Together*, and any disagreements are mild. In that way, it provides a stark contrast to the arguments and screaming matches that often dominate daytime talk shows like *The View. Better Together* is a supportive environment, as viral moments like gospel singer Mandisa's sharing her experience with depression[448] or pastor of The Belonging Co Alex Seeley

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[447] Strang, "Matt and Laurie."
[448] The video has 14,000 views as of August 2020. "Mandisa Shares About Her Struggle with Depression," *Better Together TV*, YouTube, September 9, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXqoZv46kuw.

and popular Christian activist and speaker Christine Caine sharing their personal experiences and advice for how to worship through the emotional and physical pain of a miscarriage.[449] Even though these conversations invariably end with a discussion about the relationship of scripture and the Holy Trinity to that day's topic, *Better Together* nevertheless represents a softening of TBN's traditional image and an effort to make the network's programming more palatable to a broader range of Christian viewers (and, of course, the unconverted). The show looks very polished, it is sleekly produced, and it moves quickly between segments. It is quite entertaining, and the conversational format feels much less "preachy" than TBN's slate of more traditional televangelist programs. While TBN has broadened its appeal by embracing new genres, the network has also sought to expand its brand by adding to its stable of networks and targeting specific demographics with programming tailored to their imagined audience.

Faith with Flavor: TBN Salsa

In 2015, Matthew Crouch announced that TBN would create a new network, TBN Salsa, which would cater specifically to English-speaking, Christian Latinos. The network was run by Latinos, including several popular evangelical pastors, and sought to bring the gospel to this growing demographic. Although its run was brief (it shuttered in 2019), the failed network nevertheless demonstrates how TBN conceptualized the Christian, English-speaking Latino/a audience and how they attempted to mobilize them. TBN Salsa was pitched as a new network that would "feature contemporary Christian worship and music from popular Latino singers and groups; church and ministry programming with Hispanic pastors and Christian leaders from the

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[449] The video has 15,500 views as of August 2020. "How to Worship Through Pain!" *Better Together TV*, YouTube, May 10, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2B5hd9PstQ.

United States and Latin America; talk shows; Latino-themed documentaries, sports shows, family-friendly movies and broadcast specials."[450] It was, in other words, a Latinized version of the flagship TBN. In order to attract viewers, TBN leaned strongly on bright colors, Latin music, and its slogan, "Faith with Flavor," in its branding, as you can see in Figure 5.

Figure 5: TBN Salsa's original logo, with literal splashes of color

Ahead of the network's debut, its website described its audience as "second and third generation Hispanics who may not speak Spanish, as well as non-Hispanic viewers who enjoy the unique warmth, passion, and flavor of the Latino-American culture and faith community."[451] The buzzwords "warmth, passion, and flavor" certainly do little to challenge stereotypical white visions of Latino and Hispanic cultures. Nevertheless, despite this framing on their website, in every other public statement network executives, including Matthew Crouch, made it clear that they envisioned this as a network for evangelical Latinos and those Latinos who had yet to welcome Christ into their hearts. TBN already had a Spanish language network, TBN Enlace

[450] Kent Gibbons, "TBN Salsa Targets English-Speaking Hispanics," *Multichannel News*, May 29, 2015, https://www.multichannel.com/news/tbn-salsa-targets-english-speaking-hispanics-390953.
[451] "About Us," TBN Salsa, January 16, 2020, https://tbnsalsa.org/aboutus.

USA, which had premiered in 2002 to serve Spanish-speaking audiences. TBN Enlace also broadcasts programming around the world to Spanish-speaking countries as part of TBN's global operations. TBN Salsa was therefore pitched at a very specific population—one which evangelicals had been eagerly trying to convert for years—English-speaking, "next generation" evangelical Latinos.

Evangelical leaders in the US were well aware that there were important shifts happening within the Latino population with regard to religion. In 2007, the Pew Research Center released an extensive survey about "Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion."[452] The first significant finding was that, as Catholicism waned across the country, Latinos would make up a higher and higher percentage of US Catholics. The second finding, however, galvanized American evangelicals: Latinos were, at a surprising rate, leaving Catholicism for evangelicalism. The numbers in 2007 were not particularly spectacular—only fifteen percent of Latinos identified as born-again Protestants, compared to sixty-eight percent identifying as Catholic. However, the numbers were trending upward, and evangelical Latinos demonstrated markedly more enthusiasm for church-related activities (including attending church and reading the Bible) than their Catholic counterparts. Importantly, those Latinos who identified as born-again Protestants were significantly more likely to identify as Republicans or align themselves with conservative values, particularly on matters of abortion and literal interpretation of the Bible. By 2015, when TBN Salsa premiered, evangelical and mainstream publications were

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[452] Pew Research Center, "Changing Faiths: Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion," April 25, 2007, https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2007/04/25/changing-faiths-latinos-and-the-transformation-of-american-religion/.

consistently reporting on the staggering growth and success of Latino-led evangelical churches and wondering how they could further encourage this movement.[453]

It therefore makes sense that TBN, which had never particularly catered to the Latino audience before, would try to make a splash with TBN Salsa. Latinos were (and remain) a hugely important demographic for evangelical churches, and their values were increasingly aligning with TBN's socially conservative theology. In order to launch the network, Crouch brought on the Reverend Samuel Rodriguez, the president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (NHCLC), as a key advisor for TBN Salsa. The NHCLC, which Rodriguez founded in 2000, is the largest Hispanic evangelical Christian organization in the world, with over 40,000 affiliated churches. Rodriguez is a power player in the evangelical world, and a hugely important voice in American politics.[454] Given TBN's latent political ambitions, later realized more fully with the introduction of Mike Huckabee to the network, partnering with Rodriguez checked all of TBN's boxes. Rodriguez was also an aspiring film producer (he later produced the hit 2019 Christian film *Breakthrough*) with an interest in growing his own media ministry—so he stood to gain from the TBN Salsa platform as well.

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[453] See, for example: Mandy Rodgers-Gates, "The Latino Protestants in Our Backyards," *Christianity Today*, September 2, 2015, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/september-web-only/latino-protestants-in-our-backyards.html. Karina Ioffee, "Boom in Latino Evangelical Churches Underscores Growing Population," *The Mercury News*, March 23, 2015, https://www.mercurynews.com/2015/03/23/boom-in-latino-evangelical-churches-underscores-growing-population/.

[454] Rodriguez's political affiliations are not as easy to pin down as some of his white counterparts in the evangelical world, but he has traditionally supported conservative Republicans. He has advised US presidents on immigration reform since the 2000s and delivered prayers at both President Obama's and Trump's inaugurations. Jack Jenkins, "The Explosive Growth Of Evangelical Belief In Latinos Has Big Political Implications," *ThinkProgress*, June 16, 2015, https://archive.thinkprogress.org/the-explosive-growth-of-evangelical-belief-in-latinos-has-big-political-implications-c71a9a0a5009/.

In a TBN press release, Rodriguez explained why he felt TBN Salsa was so important to the mission of growing the next generation of evangelical Latinos:

> I believe the Hispanic-American community represents, to a large extent, the future of Christendom in America. We are the fastest growing Christian demographic in the nation. Out of ten people who come to Christ on a daily basis, seven are of Latino descent. That means 70 percent of those who come to Christ every day in America are Hispanic.[455]

This language of demographics permeated the discourse surrounding TBN Salsa, and Rodriguez was not the only prominent pastor to explain the need for TBN Salsa in this way. Pastor David Diga Hernandez similarly emphasized that "God is going to use this network greatly to give that growing spiritual demographic a voice in this nation."[456] This emphasis on Latinos as a demographic harkens back to the 1990s, when advertising executives realized that Latinos in the US were a hugely underserved, "hot" demographic and scrambled to cater to them.[457] It is clear that that "demographic" way of thinking continues to shape how the American establishment thinks about Latinos in the US. Rather than thinking of that population as a group that could be invited onto the flagship TBN network by launching programming featuring popular Latino pastors, TBN instead decided to sequester that audience away from the "mainstream" TBN audience—essentially relegating their Latino talent to a struggling new network rather than integrating them onto their global platform. Although TBN Salsa represented a huge opportunity for many Latino pastors to grow their media presence and reach larger audiences beyond their

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[455] Trinity Broadcasting Network Press Release, "One Year In, TBN Salsa Network Powerfully Impacting 'Next Generation' Latinos," May 19, 2016, https://www.streetinsider.com/Press+Releases/One+Year+in%2C+TBN+Salsa+Network+Powerfully+Impacting+%26quot%3BNext-Generation%26quot%3B+Latinos/11651723.html.
[456] Ibid.
[457] See Arlene Dávila, *Latinos, Inc: The Marketing and Making of a People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

own congregations and ministries, they were also inherently limited by TBN's narrow imagination of what the TBN Salsa platform could do and who it was ultimately for.

TBN Salsa faced an uphill battle from the beginning, because TBN had difficulty convincing cable systems and television stations to carry the network, even in areas with a large Latino population. Even with today's proliferation of channel capacity in the digital cable age, it is still difficult to convince cable providers that niche networks will be financially viable, worthwhile additions to their line-up. To combat this problem, the network put out ads (on YouTube and TBN Salsa's website) urging interested viewers to call their cable providers and ask them to add TBN Salsa. Prominent pastors like Rodriguez even tweeted their pleas for their followers to call their cable providers.[458] Over a peppy music track and remarkably bland footage of Latino/as performing everyday tasks (teaching a class, going to the mall, etc.), TBN Salsa personality and preacher Jacob Arreola asked the "Salsa family" to help the network by calling their cable providers:

> Hey Salsa family, it's your friend, Jacob Arreola, back again, asking for your help. Mark 16, otherwise known as the Great Commission passage, tell us to go into all of the world and preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Well, Christian television's attempt at doing so is by getting into the living room of as many homes as possible. As our nation's Hispanic population continues to rapidly increase, so has the demand for faith-based television that connects to the culture of this vast demographic. Would you help your Salsa network fulfill the Great Commission by calling your cable provider *today* and requesting that they carry TBN Salsa? That one simple call to your cable provider could possibly open the door for tens of thousands of Americans to hear this beautiful gospel of grace that the Salsa network is boldly proclaiming 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.[459]

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[458] Jeannie Law, "Samuel Rodriguez looks to expand cable offerings for Latino Christian network TBN Salsa," *Christian Post*, November 14, 2018, https://www.christianpost.com/news/samuel-rodriguez-expand-cable-offerings-latino-christian-network-tbn-salsa.html.
[459] "TBN Salsa: Call Your Cable Provider TODAY and Request TBN Salsa!," *TBN Salsa*, November 3, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhkReVhG4qM.

By placing the onus on viewers to convince their cable operators of their enthusiasm for TBN Salsa, the network recalled the Southern Baptists' struggles to get ACTS on the air. Their campaign, however, did not have the grassroots backing and enthusiasm that ACTS did. TBN did have an infrastructural advantage that ACTS had lacked, which was that they owned hundreds of broadcast stations across the country. TBN Salsa was digitally broadcast in 40 major markets where TBN owned stations, including New York City and Los Angeles. The problem was breaking into cable systems. Despite this significant infrastructural advantage, TBN Salsa did not gain enough traction with those coveted "next generation" evangelical Latino viewers, and the network finally folded in May 2019. TBN committed to the type of demographic-driven logics that dominate the secular advertising industries, but it relied on audience members and TBN Salsa's own talent to promote the network through word-of-mouth, instead of offering them a significant publicity budget to attract their "hot" demographic. It was yet another example of TBN's struggle to parlay its flagship network's popularity with Christian viewers into a full-blown media conglomerate. However, TBN's next experiment in expanding its brand would prove much more successful.

Spectacular Worship: Hillsong Channel

TBN's desire to become a more entertaining global media conglomerate is perhaps best encapsulated by the network's partnership with Australia's Hillsong Church, the Pentecostal megachurch with the most popular Christian music publishing company and musical acts in the world, to create Hillsong Channel. This partnership was mutually beneficial, because both TBN and Hillsong were globally popular Christian brands looking to grow their evangelical footprint. Hillsong Channel launched on June 15, 2016 as a 24/7 channel, and was instantly available to millions of households in the US and around the world, as TBN secured the channel prime

satellite positioning ahead of its global launch. The channel is also easily accessible to cord cutters as an over-the-top service, streaming for only $7.99 a month. Hillsong Channel received a global launch and a full-fledged media blitz, unlike TBN Salsa's slow rollout. The Hillsong partnership revitalized what had once been a key focus of the TBN empire: capitalizing on the skyrocketing popularity of contemporary Christian music.

Before delving more into Hillsong Channel, it is important to note that Hillsong was not TBN's first music-forward network. That honor belonged to JC-TV (which stood for "Jesus Christ Television"), which launched in 2002. That network sought to capture the youth audience—particularly those between the ages of 13 and 29—the young kids and adults who loved Christian music and were looking for an alternative to the popular, sexed up channels like MTV and, to a lesser extent, VH-1. JCTV was relatively successful in the 2000s,[460] and its popularity grew as Christian music became increasingly industrialized. However, its fortunes waned with the introduction of YouTube, which almost singlehandedly killed the importance of the music video to cable television. In response to this shift, JCTV rebranded as JUCE, a network for "socially conscious" millennials, in 2013 before finally transforming into a fully digital network (specifically, a YouTube channel) in 2019. This context is important for understanding why partnering with Hillsong made sense for TBN: TBN already had experience launching a channel built on the popularity of Christian music programming. As evangelical and

[460] TBN is not required to report ratings or subscription information, and they almost always decline to do so. However, JCTV was impactful enough to rate a profile of *The AV Club*, and I have anecdotally heard many stories of young Christians of the 2000s watching the channel. Sean O'Neal, "JCTV," *The AV Club*, October 10, 2011, https://tv.avclub.com/jctv-179822452.

Christian media became increasingly sleeker and more able to compete with well-funded secular alternatives, Christian youth flocked to those spaces, and TBN was ready to build another one.

Partnering with Hillsong has allowed TBN to recapture some of the old JCTV magic while chasing the ever-elusive youth demographic. And Hillsong, for its part, had spent decades perfecting its recipe for bringing young people to the church. Scholars like Justin Wilford have dissected how megachurches, particularly those in suburban and ex-urban spaces, have emerged as "one stop shops" for their congregants—essentially serving as community centers as well as worship spaces.[461] Hillsong serves a similar function. While many megachurches grow to host thousands of worshippers every Sunday, most do not manage to become a globally recognized brand (with campuses in over 30 cities around the world). Hillsong ascended to its current heights and influence because of its success in creating a new, modern, arena rock sound for Christian music, and that music proved to be particularly appealing to young people looking for a more entertaining and spectacular religious experience.

Hillsong Church was founded in 1983 in Sydney, Australia, when the churches pastored by Frank Houston and Brian Houston, a father-son duo, merged. Doctrinally, Hillsong Church is a Pentecostal church (affiliated with the Australian equivalent of the Assemblies of God, Australian Christian Churches) whose worship leaders preach the prosperity gospel. However, for most American audiences, Hillsong was, for many years, known as a "sound" and particular

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[461] Justin Wilford, *Sacred Subdivisions: The Postsuburban Transformation of American Evangelicalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 5.

style of soft arena rock Christian music rather than a specific church in the suburbs of Sydney.[462] Hillsong Church was an entrepreneurial innovator on the megachurch scene, and established its own music label in 1991. This move, more than anything else, has secured Hillsong's global dominance. They anticipated the explosion in Christian contemporary music, and now provide the soundtrack to over 50 million church services every Sunday. Hillsong broke onto the global scene with its first huge, denomination-spanning hit, "Shout to the Lord," in 1996. Since then, it has dominated the contemporary Christian music charts, with its worship groups Hillsong Worship, Hillsong United, and Hillsong Young & Free consistently topping the charts.[463] The secret to Hillsong's success, according to religious music scholar Wen Reagan, is that its controversial doctrine, which would likely offend or displease many mainline Christians, is almost entirely absent from its music's lyrical content.[464] So, the music label's songs circulated globally by a highly professionalized operation, with those outside of Australia likely unaware of from whence they came. In the first ten months of 2018, for example, Hillsong songs were streamed more than 760 million times—rivaling huge pop stars like (frequent Hillsong Church attendee) Justin Bieber.[465]

Hillsong thrives on spectacle. Its songs are catchy, meticulously constructed by a team of songwriters and musicians, and, according to several Hillsong insiders and fans interviewed by

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[462] Wen Reagan, "'The Music That Just About Everyone Sings': Hillsong in American Evangelical Media," in *The Hillsong Movement Examined: You Can Call Me Out Upon the Waters*, eds. Tanya Riches and Tom Wagner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 155.
[463] Rather than credit individual worship leaders or performers, Hillsong recruits musicians to perform under one of the Hillsong bands' names. The members may change, but Hillsong church collects the royalties regardless.
[464] Reagan 155.
[465] Kelsey McKinney, "How Hillsong Church Conquered the Music Industry in God's Name," *The Fader*, October 11, 2018, https://www.thefader.com/2018/10/11/hillsong-church-worship-songs-music-industry.

the music magazine *Fader*, designed to sound like "a song Coldplay would envy."[466] Hillsong's brand of music is spectacular arena rock—U2 walked so that Hillsong could run. Their predilection for spectacle is not unique, as consumer-driven spectacle has become the name of the game for prosperity megachurches around the world. For some proponents of the prosperity gospel, spectacle is absolutely necessary in order to both evangelize to the unconverted and to mobilize the affective labor of worshippers in the sanctuary space in order to bring more people to the church.[467] Many megachurches have built sanctuary spaces that rival concert venues in their technology, acoustics, and aesthetics. Many are guided by the idea that, in a media-saturated, 21st century world, there can never be a dull moment during a worship service, or the church risks losing its members to the mediated experiences of the secular realm.

Given its emphasis on spectacle and creating affectively effective mediated experiences, Hillsong's move into television felt inevitable. For their part, TBN executives saw the partnership with Hillsong as an opportunity to make a play for a broad audience, with particular focus on the younger generation of Christians. The triumphant press release announcing the new network described Hillsong Channel as an "amazing opportunity for us to reach a whole new generation of viewers with the message of hope and grace as we partner with the most iconic and far-reaching presence in contemporary Christian music."[468] The "whole new generation of viewers" rhetoric is key here-- and echoes how TBN described its goals with TBN Salsa. The

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[466] Michael John Warren, quoted in McKinney.
[467] Matthew Wade, "Seeker Friendly: The Hillsong Megachurch as an Enchanting Total Institution," *Journal of Sociology* 52, no. 4 (2016): 670.
[468] Herb Longs, "Hillsong & TBN Announce Launch of The Hillsong Channel June 15," *The Christian Beat*, March 9, 2016, https://www.thechristianbeat.org/index.php/news/1768-hillsong-tbn-announce-launch-of-the-hillsong-channel-june-15.

difference, of course, being that TBN Salsa was created for a niche audience while Hillsong was created with a mass global audience in mind. Both channels were chasing youth, but in different ways. Hillsong Channel was designed to give viewers "24/7 front-row access to all the best of Hillsong's popular international conferences," as well as "dynamic worship" from popular Hillsong-affiliated musical acts and teaching from pastors like Brian and Bobbi Houston, the husband-and-wife team currently running Hillsong. Hillsong's conferences are multiple-day events that mix traditional concert performances by the Hillsong groups with preaching from some of the church's superstar speakers. The channel has also recently looked to cash in on the church's popularity with American celebrities, which has flourished since Hillsong established churches in New York City and Los Angeles in 2010 and 2014, respectively. In 2019, for example, it premiered *Now with Natalie*, a show (hosted by Natalie Manuel Lee) that promised to demystify Hollywood fame, celebrity, and the Instagram-ization of everyday life while simultaneously counting on the celebrity of its guests (including model Haley Baldwin, NBA player Tyson Chandler, and music star Kelly Rowland). The show recently relaunched as *Catching Up with Natalie and Hailey* and chronicles Baldwin's life as a model and her marriage with fellow Hillsong devotee Justin Bieber. This is a level of Christian celebrity that even the televangelists in their heyday in the 1980s could never attract, and Hillsong's embrace of celebrity evangelists confirms that Hillsong could, perhaps, become the perfect blend of evangelism and entertainment that televangelists desired to achieve. The Hillsong Channel has, thus far, proven to be the most successful of Matthew Crouch's experiments. The work of creating a media conglomerate is difficult however, and no piece of TBN's portfolio proved that more resoundingly than TBN's theme park, The Holy Land Experience.

A Faith-Based Version of Universal Studios: The Holy Land Experience

The Holy Land Experience was not created by the Trinity Broadcasting Network, but it did become an important part of the network's plan to build a successful, synergistic media conglomerate. The park's evolution over the last twenty years helps to illuminate how media executives' ideas about what the Christian audience wants have shifted in the 21st century. The Holy Land Experience opened on February 5, 2001, in Orlando, Florida. The park's founder, Reverend Marvin Rosenthal, was also the founder of Zion's Hope, an organization whose primary goal is to convert Jews to Christianity. Rosenthal himself had been born and raised as Jewish before converting and eventually becoming a Baptist minister. The opening of the park drew the ire of leaders of the Jewish community, who were concerned about the park distorting Jewish life and experience in the Holy Land. Those leaders ultimately opted not to publicly protest the park and therefore provide free publicity—but their concerns were ultimately justified. As archaeologist Yorke Rowan, who visited the park shortly after its opening, explained:

> The Holy Land Experience is a decidedly and unabashedly Christian version of the Holy Land; Judaism is virtually non-existent except in its role as the essential roots of Christianity, and as a purchasing opportunity. Islam, of course, is absent. Virtually no mention of Jewish inhabitants is made during the public presentation of the model of Jerusalem.[469]

Although the Holy Land Experience park was not necessarily belligerent in its attempts to convert visitors to the evangelical faith, the park was not subtle in its emphasis on the Christian experience of the Holy Land as the most important experience of that space. Visiting the park a

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[469] Yorke Rowan, "Repackaging the Pilgrimage: Visiting the Holy Land Experience in Orlando," in *Marketing Heritage: Archaeology and the Consumption of the Past*, eds. Yorke Rowan and Uzi Baram (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004): 261.

few years after Rowan, art historian Joan Branham argued that the Holy Land Experience made an effort to "merge Judaism and Christianity into a homogenous and harmonious entity," best symbolized by its use of the "Jerusalem Temple" (based on descriptions of Herod's Temple) as the park's tallest and most visible attraction.[470] Although the real-life Holy Land is of sacred importance for multiple faith groups (including Islam, which has always been entirely absent from the park), the creators of the Holy Land Experience clearly prioritized what those sites meant to Christians and, specifically, evangelical Christians.

The designers of the first iteration of the Holy Land Experience imagined the theme park space as an opportunity to "recreate" the experience of touring the real-life Holy Land (vaguely defined by the park as sites in Israel, Palestine, and Jordan). The park featured attractions including recreations of Herod's Temple and courtyard, Jesus's tomb, a street market with artisans' workshops, a Bedouin tent, and the caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. One of the park's main selling points was its Jerusalem model, which was billed as the largest model of Biblical Jerusalem in the world. Guides would give ten- to fifteen-minute talks at each location, explaining the significance of each space to significant figures from Biblical history. The park was moderately successful in the early years, with curiosity about the attraction high for the first few months (with tickets then priced at a very-affordable-for-Orlando 17 dollars for adults). It quickly became apparent, however, that the Holy Land would need more attractions in order to keep drawing tourists to the site.

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[470] Joan Branham, "The Temple That Won't Quit: Constructing Sacred Space in Orlando's Holy Land Experience Theme Park," *Crosscurrents* (Sept. 2009): 363.

This problem was solved by the estate of the late Robert Van Kampen, a Wall Street investor who used his wealth to amass one of the largest private collections of Biblical artifacts in the world. Originally housed at a museum in Michigan, the Van Kampen family decided to permanently loan the collection to the Holy Land Experience in 2002. With this acquisition, the park opened the Scriptorium in 2002—a twelve-million-dollar attraction which guides visitors on a fifty-five-minute tour of artifacts including Babylonian clay tablets, Egyptian papyrus leaves, ancient Biblical scrolls, and fragments of Gutenberg's Bible and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The museum is designed to move visitors through time, with each room representing a different important moment in Biblical history. The Scriptorium functions primarily as an educational space, designed to teach visitors about the great struggles that many Christian martyrs undertook in order to bring the Bible to modern-day Christians. Although the attraction, with its bells and whistles and animatronic recreations of important moments in Biblical history, did help boost the Holy Land Experience's profile, the park still struggled to break even, and posted a two-million-dollar deficit by 2006.[471] TBN's offer to buy the troubled park was a welcome one.

The Holy Land Experience was not the first Christian theme park to be associated with a major evangelical media enterprise—and the Crouches' decision to purchase it was likely influenced by the previous success of Heritage, USA. In 1978, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker opened Heritage USA, a Christian theme park in Fort Mill, South Carolina. Hailed by many as the "Christian Disneyland," the park featured a mix of classic Americana (including old-

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[471] Ken Storey, "In Major Overhaul, Holy Land Experience Will End All Theatrical Productions," *Orlando Weekly*, January 7, 2020, https://www.orlandoweekly.com/Blogs/archives/2020/01/07/in-a-major-overhaul-orlandos-holy-land-experience-will-end-all-theatrical-productions.

fashioned, pastel "Main Street" shops like Noah's Ark Toy Shoppe and Susie's Ice Cream Parlor) and traditional amusement park rides, as well as overtly Christian sites. Billy Graham's childhood home and a passion play reenacting the life and death of Jesus Christ, accompanied by a light show, were also popular draws to the park. At its peak, in 1986, Heritage USA was the third most popular theme park in the United States, trailing only Disneyland and Walt Disney World, with over six million visitors a year.

For many Christians, the highlight of that park was the life-sized version of The Upper Room, where Christians believe both the Last Supper and the Pentecost took place. The PTL Network promoted The Upper Room not as a re-creation, but as a pilgrimage site in and of itself.[472] The building featured a phone bank staffed by PTL volunteers on the lower level, and both the phone bank and the room were staffed by PTL pastors twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Visitors to the park were encouraged to pray in the Upper Room, and its popularity soon spawned a new television program on the PTL Network, *The Upper Room*, creating a direct synergistic connection between the park and the network. PTL also taped several of its programs on the Heritage, USA site, and relied on park crowds to be their studio audiences. Heritage, USA, although not explicitly branded as a product of the PTL Network (likely due to concerns about alienating potential anti-televangelism visitors), nevertheless worked as an effective extension of the PTL empire. Scandal eventually brought an end to the PTL Network and

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[472] Emily Johnson, "A Theme Park, a Scandal, and the Faded Ruins of a Televangelism Empire," *Religion & Politics*, October 28, 2014, https://religionandpolitics.org/2014/10/28/a-theme-park-a-scandal-and-the-faded-ruins-of-a-televangelism-empire/.

Heritage, USA, but not before the media ministry had created the template for developing a successful Christian theme park.

TBN's interest in purchasing the Holy Land Experience was driven by the Crouches' desire to diversify their organization's portfolio and create a pilgrimage site for their own network. As communications scholar Susan Davis has explained, entertainment companies like Disney, NBC Universal, and Sony all became obsessed with purchasing real estate in the 1990s, and transforming public space into hyper-commercialized, media-saturated "location-based entertainment."[473] Real estate became an indispensable part of the largest entertainment companies' portfolios, with spaces like theme parks, specialized shopping centers (like the Disney Store, Universal's City Walk, and NikeTown), and branded indoor family entertainment centers popping up in cities around the world. This move toward "location-based entertainment" was driven in part by a desire to create more opportunities for synergy, particularly for successful media companies that could capitalize on their success by creating pilgrimage sites for fans of their media products. Disney, of course, was and remains particularly adept at this. As Davis argues, media conglomerates essentially changed the relationship between public and private experiences by transforming once public spaces into marketing opportunities.[474] By purchasing the Holy Land Experience and establishing a presence in the theme park capital of the world, TBN worked to position itself alongside its secular rivals as a premier media entertainment

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[473] Susan G. Davis, "Space Jam: Media Conglomerates Build the Entertainment City," *European Journal of Communication* 14, no. 4 (1999): 436.
[474] Ibid.

company. The Holy Land Experience gave the TBN faithful a place to frequent, something that the network's famously elaborate headquarters in Orange County, California failed to do.[475]

After TBN purchased the park, Paul Crouch, Jr. announced his desire to have the Holy Land Experience serve as a "smaller, faith-based version" of Universal Studios, which was famous for its backlot, "behind-the-scenes"-style attractions.[476] Crouch went on to describe the new connection between TBN and the Holy Land Experience as "a perfect marriage" that had "brought synergy to an unprecedented level."[477] Crouch's emphasis on the business-world buzzword "synergy" is instructive here—and makes it clear that TBN was drawing inspiration from secular business practices to grow its own Christian empire. This was particularly true in terms of promoting the park, as free advertisements on TBN and its affiliated networks drove up attendance to the park, particularly in TBN's first year of ownership.[478] Part of TBN's motivation for purchasing the park was also spurred by FCC regulations, which required TBN to establish a studio and local production facilities in Orlando, because TBN had recently acquired a new station there (WTGL-52, purchased for 50 million dollars in 2006). The original plan was to build elaborate production studios either on the Holy Land property itself, or across the street (with a Roman Aqueduct-style pedestrian bridge connecting the studios to the park). Buying the

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[475] As Justin Wilford has explained, TBN's headquarters are incredibly ornate, gaudy, and attention-getting, but the space itself is not particularly welcoming to visitors. Despite the prominence of TBN's campus in the area (and its memorable visibility from the highway), TBN's headquarters never served as a meaningful pilgrimage site for devoted fans of the Crouches or the network. Justin Wilford, "Televangelical Publics: Secularized Publicity and Privacy in the Trinity Broadcasting Network," *Cultural Geographies* 16 (2009): 505-524.
[476] Mark Pinksy, "Holy Land's Debts Erased in Christian Network Deal," *Orlando Sentinel*, June 6, 2007.
[477] Ibid.
[478] Park attendance jumped 47% between December 2006 and December 2007. Sara K. Clarke, "Holy Land Grows; The Attraction Plans a New TV Studio," *Orlando Sentinel*, February 8, 2008, ProQuest.

Holy Land Experience was clearly framed as a business decision as much as it was a spiritual decision.

Crouch sought to expand TBN's synergistic capabilities, by purchasing prime real estate in the theme park capital of the world and using the park and the network to bolster each other. The original vision for TBN's Holy Land Experience was to mix the existing park's infrastructure (particularly its recreations of Biblical sites and its museum-style attractions) with the tours of TBN's production facilities and opportunities to become part of the studio audience for its locally produced programming. Even that combination, though, lacked the pizzazz necessary to compete with Walt Disney World and Universal Studios (which is literally located across the street). The park did offer much lower admission prices than its competitors. In 2019, an adult ticket to the Holy Land Experience cost $50. Kids were cheaper—toddlers' tickets were $20 and older children were $35—and the group discounts were also available. A one-day adult ticket to Disney World, for comparison, cost at least $109, but you got significantly more bang for your buck, particularly in terms of the types of rides, roller coasters, and other amusements available. In order to bolster attendance and draw people away from its competitors, TBN decided that the Holy Land Experience needed to become more *entertaining*. Under TBN's tutelage, the park began to incorporate more and more live shows and presentations. These included live baptisms (performed by an actor playing Jesus, who became locally famous for the role and a favorite of Jan Crouch),[479] a demonstration of Jesus walking on water, and the

[479] Nina Strochlic, "Follow A Day in the Life of a Theme-Park Jesus," *National Geographic*, December 21, 2018, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/2018/12/follow-a-day-in-life-with-theme-park-jesus-at-holy-land-usa/#close.

capstone, a passion play in which Jesus was tried and crucified before emerging from the tomb. The original version of the Holy Land Experience had also had actors playing Biblical characters, but TBN took these performances one step further by building up the park's programming with a daily "schedule of events" that encouraged visitors to move from show to show in a roughly chronological order, culminating in the passion play. Jesus's crucifixion, which some visitors protested was too violent/realistic, was eventually replaced by a much milder reenactment of Lazarus's resurrection [Figure 6]. TBN also attempted to link its properties synergistically by branding specific areas within the park. The children's area was christened the "Smile of a Child" play area, after TBN's children's network. After JCTV rebranded as the hipper JUCE in 2013, TBN established a JUCE karaoke room in the park, where young visitors could perform their favorite contemporary Christian songs.

Figure 6: Holy Land Experience Park Schedule from Summer 2019

The park's efforts to build out its entertainment value bore fruit in 2012, with the debut of the sophisticated 2,000 seat theater, the Church of All Nations. The theater is technologically

state-of-the-art, and outfitted with recording equipment for TBN programming. I took a backstage tour of the theater between shows during my visit to the park, and the tour guide emphasized that their equipment was on par with that used in secular productions of this magnitude. Although TBN initially hoped to film some of its original programming in the space, that happened only rarely. Instead, each day's park crowds gathered in the theater to see musical, spiritual programming. Once the theater space was built, TBN partnered with Robert and Elizabeth Muren of Charis Bible College to start producing full-scale, three-hour, original Christian musicals. The Murens co-wrote five different musicals for the park (including *Esther: Queen of Persia*, *The Heart of Christmas*, *The Empire and the Kingdom*, and *God with Us*) and these productions were test-run for audiences in Colorado, before transferring directly to The Holy Land Experience. Each featured a giant LED screen that provided scenic backdrops and music videos, occasionally used to dramatize moments that could not be effectively staged with The Holy Land Experience's sparse staging style.[480] During my visit, I saw that season's featured show, *David: The King of Jerusalem*, a three-part musical with a non-linear structure which illustrates how King David lost his way before eventually repenting his sins and being welcomed into God's grace in the form of his childhood friend Raiti.[481] The show features Christian pop-inspired songs and a multimedia presentation, with the live numbers supplemented by filmed, music-video style segments featuring the actors singing the musicals' various refrains. Pivoting

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[480] For example, in the *David* musical, David's reunion with his friends in heaven after his peaceful death was dramatized on screen, with David embracing his friends on the beach while the actors on screen lip synced to a catchy, Christian pop tune.

[481] All of the shows are included in the price of admission—without them, one could experience the park's offerings in about two hours.

to musical entertainment made sense, because it can create many new potential revenue streams (including selling DVDs of the show for twenty-five dollars and soundtracks for fifteen in the parks' three gift shops). These shows also were much more entertaining and provided a more mediated experience than the park's old-school exhibits. By embracing musical entertainment as the centerpiece of a visit to the Holy Land Experience, TBN bet that visitors would happily pay the park's escalating entrance fees (which jumped from $17 in 2001 to $50 in 2019) in order to experience an original Christian stage musical.

The problem, of course, with establishing a theme park in the Theme Park Capital of the World is that you have to compete with all of the other theme parks. Because TBN did not have the resources to build epic rollercoasters or immersive experiences like The Wizarding World of Harry Potter, they had to distinguish themselves from the competition. In 2018, the park embraced a new slogan: "Where the True Heroes Live." The park used this slogan across all of their marketing materials, as a way to remind its audience that the higher-production-quality thrills of Disney's or Universal's heroes, with their rollercoasters, high-budget movies, and inescapable cultural presence, are spiritually empty in comparison with what the Holy Land Experience can provide. In television ads that aired that summer, the narrator invited potential visitors:

> This summer, come to Orlando and bring your family to the Holy Land Experience, where the *true* heroes live. See with your eyes the stories of the Bible come to life as you have never seen them before. Through unique educational exhibits and breathtaking live stage musical productions, you and your family will encounter the *true* heroes of our history. Make memorable moments this summer at Orlando's premier family vacation destination, The Holy Land Experience. Where the True Heroes Live.[482]

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[482] "Holy Land Experience TV Spot 60 Sec," *Holy Land Experience,* downloaded from YouTube August 22, 2019. This ad has since been removed from YouTube.

The choice of slogan is particularly fascinating, given that Holy Land Experience repeatedly, openly draws from secular culture in the creation of its multimedia entertainment products and its marketing. The push-and-pull between the secular and sacred continued in the marketing of the Holy Land's musical spectaculars. The poster for the show *Simon Peter*, for example, clearly recalls the promotional imagery for the HBO series *Game of Thrones*, from the font to the dark color scheme. This poster [Figure 7] is so reminiscent of the marketing art for *Game of Thrones* that it cannot be a coincidence—even as the Holy Land Experience condemns secular heroes, it pulls blatantly from their iconography.

Figure 7: Frankincense and Myrrh Gift Shop in Holy Land Experience, Author's photo

Holy Land's simultaneously aggressive yet subtle anti-Hollywood campaigning did not boost attendance at the floundering theme park, which hemorrhaged money before and especially

after Jan Crouch's death. The next generation of Crouches did not feel compelled to funnel TBN's viewer donations to the park at the rates that Jan Crouch had, and the park struggled to survive losing half of its funding. The Holy Land Experience ultimately failed because it could not be entertaining enough to compete with the major theme parks, and because TBN overestimated the demand for a Christian alternative to the theme park space. During my visit in the summer of 2019, for example, the park was at roughly 20 percent capacity, and the visitors were largely Christian bus tour groups from across the South. There were less than ten children in attendance each day—and the Smile of a Child play area was eerily empty. It is impossible to say definitively whether banking on live musical entertainment staved off the park's decline or accelerated it—but the evolution of the Holy Land Experience from a glorified Bible museum to a day of bombastic musical spectaculars speaks volumes about how TBN imagines the 21st Christian theme park visitor as one who demands to be entertained by Christian media experiences.

Conclusion

In 2020, TBN's experiment with modernizing the network by making it more entertaining has been met with mixed results. TBN's stable of networks has contracted. Only two networks are traditionally successful: TBN, which remains the highest-rated Christian channel in the US; and Hillsong Channel. Smile of a Child remains a programming service available through some TBN stations, and TBN Enlace USA no longer produces programming specifically for US audiences. Instead, TBN simply beams its Spanish-language feed of Christian programming from around the world into the US. JUCE has transitioned to being an online-only channel– specifically, a dedicated YouTube channel of Christian music videos. TBN Salsa has been replaced on TBN station subchannels by Positiv TV. Positiv TV (sometimes styled as

PosiTiV) is yet another attempt by Christian broadcasters to attract a "faith and family" audience with cheaply acquired vintage films and inoffensive family TV shows. It "offers quality movies filled with messages of hope, encouragement, triumph and redemption [and] aim[s] to show movies that not only make you feel good but inspire you to do good."[483] If that tagline feels familiar, it is probably because it closely echoes how many Christian networks (including INSP, FamilyNet, UP, and even the Family Channel) have framed their transition to showing retro secular content to their Christian followers. This rhetoric of "positivity" hits differently in 2020 than it did in 1990, but the strategy of using positivity as a way to distance yourself from secular media whilst simultaneously building a network/channel on the back of vintage Hollywood product never goes out of style.

TBN's biggest play for media conglomerate status, the Holy Land Experience, ultimately failed to transform itself into a mediated park experience that would attract Christians from across the globe. The park announced in January of 2020 that it would lay off the majority of its park staff and end its theatrical productions in April. Park officials insisted that the park was not permanently closing, and was instead returning to its roots as an "educational living museum attraction."[484] Even before the COVID-19 pandemic forced the park to close its doors early, the tea leaves were not difficult to read. The Holy Land Experience is situated on very valuable real estate in Orlando (a huge luxury shopping mall is located across the street, and the park is right next to the major north-south highway in the city), and TBN could make a substantial amount of money by selling the property to developers. It seems unlikely that, if the park ever does reopen,

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[483] "About Us," *Positiv TV*, August 10, 2020, https://positiv.tv/about-us/.
[484] Storey, "In a Major Overhaul."

that refocusing on serving as a Biblical museum will yield sustainable results. It would also be antithetical to TBN's motivation for owning the park in the first place, which was to serve as a synergistic location for TBN to promote its networks.

TBN's efforts to build a series of alternative spaces reveals how modern market logics also shape Christian media companies. Those channels that are the most successful, TBN and Hillsong Channel, both had long-established brands that are recognizable to the modern Christian consumer. Hillsong, in particular, has parlayed the incredible success of its spectacle-driven music into a global media presence. TBN has been around for almost fifty years, but by bringing in celebrities like Mike Rowe, Mike Huckabee, Kirk Cameron (with his own faith-centric docuseries), and all of the female inspirational speakers and entertainers who populate *Better Together*, the network has capitalized on the mainstream celebrity that many evangelical Christians now enjoy. By gathering these figures on one network, TBN can sell itself as an alternative space for Christians who want to enjoy positive programming that affirms Christianity.

Matthew Crouch's obsession with making Christian programming, and TBN in particular, more entertaining speaks to an anxiety that has driven megachurches across the US and evangelical media makers to keep getting bigger and bigger. That anxiety, that the 21st century Christian audience demands slick production, constant engagement, and secular-style media products, has profoundly reshaped Christian media. Despite what TBN's half-hearted throwback approach to Positiv TV may suggest, Christian programmers believe that they can no longer rely on grassroots efforts or underfunded programming to get their message out. They believe that the 21st century Christian audience only wants to watch the most spectacular and best-produced programming. It is therefore only those broadcasters with huge coffers of money

that can produce Christian programming that can break through to the Christian audience. And their messages are now available far beyond the airwaves. Clips from TBN and Hillsong now circulate widely on social media, and the media that TBN produces has a footprint far beyond its space on the channel guide.

TBN's evolution over the past ten years reveals how closely connected Christian and secular media industries have become to each other. Although evangelicals will proclaim that they want to escape the pull of secular media and all of the temptations therein, the fact remains that Christian media companies, now more than ever, look to the extremely profitable secular media industries when shaping their own strategies. Breaking audiences into demographics is a practice with consequences, as we saw in the case of TBN Salsa. It is hugely consequential that TBN has adopted the practice of describing their audience in terms of demographics, rather than imagining the network as a place that welcomes all Christians and non-believers equally. The chase for demographics has impacted how programmers think about content, and has nudged Christian programmers closer to the secular model of program development. The line between secular and Christian broadcasters has never been particularly clear, but now it is blurrier than ever. Hillsong's deployment of celebrity, *Huckabee* and *Better Together*'s use of social media, and even the Holy Land Experience's musical spectaculars all owe a significant debt to secular media practices. Even though Christian media executives like Matthew Crouch frame Christianity as an oppositional identity that should reject secular content, his network draws on secular production strategies and blends evangelical and secular approaches in order to reach a bigger audience. TBN's focus on building multiple alternative spaces for different groups of Christians both perpetuates and reflects how much the television industry has fragmented since

the days of the Family Channel—even “Christian” channels feel compelled to further narrow their audience.

CONCLUSION

In his 2019 book *Audience of One: Donald Trump, Television, and the Fracturing of America*, longtime television critic James Poniewozik proposes that "without television, there is no Trump."[485] He argues that Trump's primary occupation was always playing the "multimedia character of Donald Trump," and that he had an uncanny understanding of how the medium could help him succeed and keep him relevant. Poniewozik lists all of the ways in which television abetted Trump's rise to political power, including teasing a 1988 presidential run on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, promoting *Trump: The Art of the Deal*, various appearances on sitcoms and in movies like *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York*, hosting *The Apprentice*, weekly appearances on Fox News programs (particularly *Fox and Friends*), in the WWE wrestling ring, and finally in heavily-televised campaign rallies and later the White House.[486] It is an extensive list—but it is missing a few key appearances which also played a critical role in his election: his televised interviews on *CBN News* and *The 700 Club* during his 2016 presidential run. Trump is a TV president. Without those appearances, however, he may very well have lost some of the evangelical voters that his campaign absolutely needed to win. This was very likely an oversight on Poniewozik's part, a simple omission rather than an intentional one. It is indicative, however,

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[485] James Poniewozik, *Audience of One: Donald Trump, Television, and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2019), "Introduction," Kindle edition.
[486] Ibid.

of a much larger issue: evangelical media has been left out of too many ongoing conversations about the rise of Trump (and Trumpism) and the evolution of conservative television in the United States.

Trump's personal celebrity and penchant for staying in front of the camera are only part of the story. After his election, many stunned journalists tried to figure out how Trump had won. Many think pieces followed.[487] The general consensus was that Trump had won, in large part, due to unexpectedly strong support from white evangelical voters (he won over eighty percent of votes from that demographic).[488] This was particularly confusing because of Trump's persona and the well known details of his personal biography, including multiple sexual assault allegations, years of lying and cheating people out of money they were owed, multiple divorces, and the infamous *Access Hollywood* tape—all things that many assumed would be disqualifying for the faithful. As Matthew Avery Sutton and other scholars have since pointed out, evangelicalism, and particularly white evangelicalism, has become closely intertwined with Christian nationalism, the belief that the US should be (and is destined to be) a Christian nation.[489] The political alignment between evangelicalism and Christian nationalism created reasons for evangelicals to accept Trump as the Republican presidential nominee despite his

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[487] See, for example: Laurie Goodstein, "Religious Right Believes Donald Trump Will Deliver on His Promises," *New York Times*, November 11, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/12/us/donald-trump-evangelical-christians-religious-conservatives.html; Elizabeth Dias, "How Evangelicals Helped Donald Trump Win," *Time*, November 9, 2016, https://time.com/4565010/donald-trump-evangelicals-win/; John Fea, "Evangelical Fear Elected Trump," *The Atlantic*, June 24, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/06/a-history-of-evangelical-fear/563558/.

[488] Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "White Evangelicals Voted Overwhelmingly for Donald Trump, Exit Polls Show," *Washington Post*, November 9, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/11/09/exit-polls-show-white-evangelicals-voted-overwhelmingly-for-donald-trump/.

[489] Matthew Avery Sutton, "The Truth About Trump's Evangelical Support," *The New Republic*, July 16, 2020, https://newrepublic.com/article/158539/truth-trumps-evangelical-support-sarah-posner-jesus-john-wayne-book-review.

considerable and well-documented personal failings. That alignment was also frequently articulated on evangelical television, by figures like Pat Robertson and other popular televangelists.

What many had not realized before the 2016 election is that Trump had capitalized on the structures of the evangelical media culture that religious broadcasters had been building for decades, and that his appearances on CBN News and *The 700 Club* (and, after his election, on TBN's *Huckabee*) were only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Since the 1960s, with the debut of *The 700 Club* in that rundown station in Portsmouth, Virginia, evangelicals had been working tirelessly to build alternative media systems to promote their ideology—and those systems would eventually mobilize to support Trump's election. Evangelical media-makers were soon rewarded for their loyalty, as Trump would grant CBN News (the country's leading evangelical news organization) more access to the White House than ever before, even more than mainstream outlets like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.[490] Trump's presidency therefore gave evangelical reporters and journalists, many of whom had risen through the ranks of evangelical media organizations, a new level of legitimacy.

It was not just the news divisions of evangelical TV networks, however, that powered Trump and his particular brand of conservatism to victory. Trump appearing on CBN should be more than a historical footnote. As this dissertation has demonstrated, the evangelical media industry had built the structures that enabled his success, by cultivating the Christian audience as

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[490] Sarah McCammon, "Trump Scorns Mainstream News, But Not the Christian Broadcasting Network," *NPR Morning Edition*, December 29, 2017, https://www.npr.org/2017/12/29/573218006/trump-scorns-mainstream-news-but-not-the-christian-broadcasting-network.

a distinct demographic, by pouring money into producing Christian content, and by creating television networks that could convey the ideology of conservatism twenty-four hours a day. This was the decades-long ideological project undertaken by networks like CBN, ACTS, the Family Channel, and TBN. Their struggle to build a climate of righteousness, in which Christians understood themselves to have an oppositional identity because of their spiritual and moral values, played a crucial role in creating the conditions under which Trumpism emerged. The "Christian" and "family" programming that these outlets produced and acquired continually reinforced socially conservative values, and their branding and promotional tactics emphasized that Christians were persecuted and forgotten by the mainstream, even as their political power grew. That ideological project is still ongoing, and new players arrive on the scene with greater and greater frequency, intent upon creating content and producing alternative spaces that will appeal to what they imagine the "Christian audience" or the "family audience" wants. For decades, the most theologically and politically conservative voices have been the ones that have dominated that space. As the election of Trump and the country's general turn toward conservatism demonstrate, the fact that fundamentalists dominate the religious media space has had a critical effect on the country's culture and politics.

In the years since I started working on this dissertation, a new player has emerged in the evangelical media industries, one that, as I will explain, has worked explicitly to bolster Trump's political prospects: Pure Flix. Pure Flix is another useful case study for how so-called apolitical media can create space for overtly political media and pro-Trump propaganda to emerge and be more widely seen than it might otherwise be. It is the kind of alternative space that is typically overlooked by media scholars and glossed over by historians, but its development offers clues about what the next phase in the evolution of evangelical media may entail. Pure Flix is the

evangelical answer to Netflix's domination of the global streaming space. It started as a film production company in Scottsdale, Arizona and was founded in 2005 by David A.R. White (an aspiring actor), Michael Scott (a photographer-turned-producer, who also produced *Travel the Road* for TBN), Russell Wolfe (an actor with managerial experience), and Randy Travis (a very famous country singer) and his then-wife, Liz. Its early output was modest, with films like *In the Blink of an Eye* (2004), *The Wager* (2007), and *Sarah's Choice* (2009) all produced as straight-to-DVD films for the Christian market. Most of Pure Flix's films also starred their founders, particularly David A.R. White, whose acting ambitions had not abated. There was a market for these films among the same audience that TBN and other evangelical media companies targeted, and these films largely circulated among church groups and Christian audiences who sought them out.

The company's success was modest and largely under-the-radar until March of 2014, when surprise box office hit *God's Not Dead* grossed over nine million dollars on its opening weekend and went on to gross sixty million dollars at the box office. The film, based on Rice Broock's book *God's Not Dead: Evidence for God in an Age of Uncertainty*, was produced by Pure Flix Entertainment and Red Entertainment (a Louisiana-based Christian film producer/distributor) on a two-million-dollar budget as an independent feature and released theatrically around the country. It tells the story of a Christian college student who sets out to prove to his atheist professor that God exists, and it starred Kevin Sorbo, Dean Cain, and Willie Robertson (of *Duck Dynasty* fame). Its success surprised the film industry, despite the fact that films appealing to conservative Christians have been "over-performing" at the box office for

years.[491] The film spawned two sequels and its runaway success set Pure Flix on the path to expansion. Its success also caught Hollywood's attention, to which Pure Flix's new distribution deal with Universal Studios attests.[492] *God's Not Dead*'s surprising financial success was particularly important because it gave Pure Flix the capital needed to expand its operations beyond production and distribution of feature films, and it demonstrated (once again) that there was a market for stridently Christian programming.

In the summer of 2015, Pure Flix announced that they would launch a new streaming service for Christian audiences—which many quickly characterized as "Netflix for Christians." Pure Flix is, in some ways, a classic Christian alternative space. Its streaming service mimics the Netflix layout, and it provides lower-budget original productions that strive to compete with deep-pocketed Hollywood productions. Its streaming library includes over 5,000 titles, including all of the films and documentaries that Pure Flix has produced, as well as a library of old Hollywood films and classic sitcoms like *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* and *The Donna Reed Show*. The streaming service currently costs $12.99 a month, $99.99 per year, or you can purchase a "lifetime" membership for a one-time fee of one thousand dollars. Those within the company insist, however, that they have their sights set higher than simply being a "Christian Netflix." As Greg Gudorf, the chief executive of Pure Flix's digital unit, explained it: "I always

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[491] The mainstream entertainment press has a long history of overlooking evangelical media efforts, until they become too successful to ignore. Variety Staff, "Box Office: *God's Not Dead* Soaring to $8.2 Million Release," *Variety*, March 21, 2014, https://variety.com/2014/film/news/box-office-gods-not-dead-soaring-to-8-2-million-opening-in-limited-release-1201142441/.

[492] Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, "Pure Flix Entertainment & Universal Pictures Home Entertainment Enter Into Long Term, Multi-year Distribution Agreement," Press Release, January 19, 2016, https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/pure-flix-entertainment--universal-pictures-home-entertainment-enter-into-long-term-multi-year-distribution-agreement-300204775.html.

chuckle when someone says, 'Oh, you're a Netflix for Christians.' Well, that's one way to think of us. We're really focused on bringing faith, family and fun to consumers everywhere."[493] This gesture toward broadening the company's scope beyond its evangelical base is a familiar one, one on which CBN and the Family Channel especially relied as they expanded. Pure Flix has attempted to broaden its appeal by producing shiny sitcoms (including *Mood Swings* and *Malibu Dan the Family Man: Reloaded*) and even a soap opera (*Hilton Head Island* starring Anthony Sabato Jr.). They also produce content designed to supplement homeschooling curricula. Unlike its predecessors, Pure Flix is not run by a religious organization or an ordained figurehead. Nevertheless, Pure Flix is an evolution of the Christian broadcasting business model, with Christian media moving into the digital streaming space.

Pure Flix has also continued the tradition of "protecting" vulnerable viewers from offensive content with 21st century tools. In order to protect families in the same way that the Family Channel promised to do, Pure Flix recently partnered with a new service, ClearPlay, in order to ensure that its most sensitive viewers do not hear any language that could potentially offend them.[494] ClearPlay is a filtering service that allows users to filter out any language they find offensive from existing content. The logic behind the move was two-fold: first, it allowed the streaming service's most conservative viewers to filter out words like "hell" and "damn" that would have passed network censors and been permitted in otherwise wholesome content.

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[493] Daniel Arkin, "How a Faith-Based Movie Studio Is Seizing the Moment in Trump's America," *NBC News*, August 5, 2018, https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/movies/how-faith-based-movie-studio-seizing-moment-trump-s-america-n897551.
[494] Gene Maddaus, "Pure Flix Lets Users Delete Words Like 'Hell' and 'Damn'," *Variety*, December 19, 2016, https://variety.com/2016/digital/news/pureflix-streaming-filtering-clearplay-vidangel-1201945386/.

Second, partnering with ClearPlay allows Pure Flix to bring more content under its umbrella, since users have the choice to filter out those words and phrases that they would rather not hear. Shows that previously would not have passed muster now can, under the argument that any offensive language can be easily excised. Standards for "family" programming have not relaxed since the Family Channel years, at least among those programmers who imagine their audiences to be evangelicals.

In this moment in which Donald Trump's presidency has broken down many norms of American politics, the rules of the game have also shifted for evangelical media-makers. As I have shown throughout this dissertation, broadcasters were always invested in conveying their political viewpoints alongside their theological ones. Pat Robertson's 1976 "It's Time To Pray, America!" special, for example, was one of the more obvious attempts to sway political opinion through religious broadcasting. TBN's decision to give Mike Huckabee a platform for his very conservative perspective is another example. Pure Flix has taken that impulse even farther however, with their decision to partner with conservative polemicist and conspiracy theorist Dinesh D'Souza in order to distribute his films *Hillary's America: The Secret History of the Democratic Party* in 2016 and *Death of a Nation* in 2018, under its subsidiary Quality Flix. *Death of a Nation*, in which D'Souza argues that Donald Trump is comparable to Abraham Lincoln and the Democrats are akin to the Nazis, had a Washington, DC premiere hosted by Donald Trump, Jr., with Republican politicians like Ted Cruz and Ben Carson in attendance. The ultraconservatives from the 1950s would be shocked and delighted to see how close to the mainstream the far right has become.

Pure Flix's executives deny that the decision to distribute these films reflects their own politics. Instead, executives like Steve Fedyski, then Pure Flix's chief operating officer, insisted

that the company does not endorse D'Souza's controversial brand of politics. Their decision to distribute the films was a matter of satisfying its audience's desires, purely a "business decision." This invocation of the inevitability and necessity of making "business decisions" harkens back to the early days of CBN's evolution, when Pat Robertson and his team felt the need to justify every expansion and equipment upgrade as a "business decision" that was essential to growing their ministry. As Fedyski explained, "we have an audience that skews to support this type of film. We felt that we could be successful on launching the film because it would resonate with a lot of our audience."[495] Regardless of whether or not Pure Flix's executives personally endorsed D'Souza's pro-Trump provocations, the fact that they did not fear a public backlash over their decision to distribute these films is illustrative of the contemporary moment. The evangelical audience is now imagined as one closely aligned with Trump, and the "business decision" to distribute D'Souza's films was not widely questioned in the way it would have been decades earlier.

The rise of Pure Flix and its distribution of D'Souza's films demonstrates clearly how the cultivation of the "Christian" and "family" audience has been weaponized by conservatives. The evangelical television networks that created and cultivated those audiences also fostered division by proposing that "Christian" was an oppositional identity. The stakes of this decision can be clearly seen in how easily the evangelical audience can now be linked to a far-right conspiracy theorist like D'Souza. The "Christian" audience, as imagined by evangelical media-makers, has been weaponized for political purposes, and groomed to believe that their faith must align them

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[495] Arkin, "How a Faith-Based Movie Studio."

with conservatism. While viewers can and do make the decision to ignore that messaging, some have not, and being told for decades that your faith distinguishes you from the mainstream has taken a toll as American culture has fractured and fragmented in media particularly and society more generally. Inoffensiveness has also been utilized to sow division, and the insistence that every piece of family programming should appeal to the most conservative viewer has played a role in determining what kinds of Christian and family content get produced in the first place. Inoffensiveness and "positivity," as the Family Channel often framed it, therefore become political weapons designed to protect Christian viewers from encountering viewpoints different than their own. It is vitally important to recognize how the media structures that evangelicals built for decades have created space for conservative evangelicals to thrive.

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