

**What's happened to Pat Robertson's dream in the two decades since he opened America's first Christian TV station? The coauthor of his autobiography finds out.**

# STILL SHOUTING FROM THE HOUSETOPS

**T**he three-line news article was tucked on the back page of a religious broadcasting newsletter. I had already thrown the paper into the trash can when it dawned on me what I had just read. I rummaged through the wastepaper and pulled it out.

"CBN Continental Broadcasting Network is negotiating to sell its station in Portsmouth, Virginia. Christian Broadcasting Network president and founder, M. G. "Pat" Robertson is seeking \$10 million for WYAH-TV which was purchased in 1960."

Ten Million Dollars! I thought back when he had purchased the station for \$37,000. On faith. Without cash. Who would have ever dreamed back then. . . .

Pat and Dede Robertson had just moved to the tidewater area. He had \$70 in his pocket and a vision in his heart. The vi-

sion was to open a Christian broadcasting network on TV. Although the vision remained alive, his \$70 soon disappeared. In fact, he opened his first bank account at the Bank of Virginia in Norfolk with a deposit of \$3. It was all he had. His first checkbook cost \$6. He was overdrawn even before he left the bank. Now he was selling that same station for \$10 million. Incredible!

I looked up at the framed motto hanging on the wall of my studio: "ATTEMPT SOMETHING SO BIG THAT UNLESS GOD INTERVENES IT IS BOUND TO FAIL."

I had written that back in 1970, soon after Robertson and I started to work on his book, *Shout It From the Housetops*. I was then, as I am today, inspired by men willing to risk everything to see a dream come true.

Robertson's dream had literally come to pass. But, I wanted to know, what had happened to my old friend—and to CBN—over those dozen years since I put his story on paper. It was time to make another trip to Virginia.

There has been a wave of protest—perhaps more accurately defined as a backlash of protest—against the "electronic church." Magazine and newspaper reporters have scored religious television as electronic hucksterism.

The secular press howled in derision at Oral Roberts, saying he claimed to have talked to a 900-foot-tall Jesus. Rex Humbard was accused of closing a personal land deal for a million dollars in Florida while begging for TV funds at the same time. A Charlotte radio station had a program called the "Pass The Loot (PTL) Club," hosted by a Brother Jim Faker. Everywhere I turned I heard people—including some Christians—saying they were disgusted with TV preachers who were pleading for money—often with tears.

Robertson, on the other hand, had seemed to escape this kind of criticism. Even his strongest critics don't call him a snake-oil peddler or accuse him of hyping religion in order to line his own pockets. In fact, in February 1983, *Newsweek* magazine reported that even his critics felt he was one of the men in the nation who was qualified to replace Ronald Reagan as President.

Yet, while no one doubts Pat Robertson's academic and intellectual credentials, a number of his Christian brothers seriously question the way he has been leading CBN. They fear his direction has become worldly—rather than spiritual.

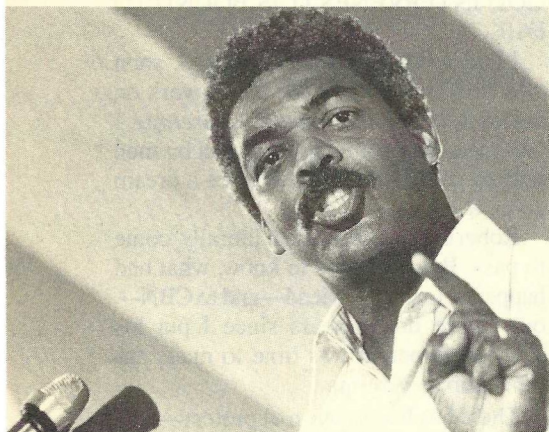
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## TELEVISION AND THE GREAT COMMISSION



SECOND OF A SERIES

I am admittedly awed by men operating under a mandate from God. Awed and afraid. Not afraid of them—but afraid *for* them. I have watched so many men with big visions fall by the wayside. Some have started with grandiose ideas, but floundered when the money ran out. Others have taken a lot of supporters down with them—spiritually as well as financially. I have seen some grow discouraged and quit. Far too many have gotten out of the will of God and have caused untold havoc in the Kingdom. A few have realized their vision, but in the process have become greedy, power mad, arrogant, or have



*"The 700 Club" cohost Ben Kinchlow started as a chauffeur and is now almost as recognized as Robertson.*

misused their status with God for personal gain. Then there are those who started as pure ministry, but enamored with the world, have turned secular.

It was this last accusation I had heard thrown at Robertson. One critic, just the week before I made my trip back to CBN, had written in a Christian publication: "The Christian Broadcasting Network has lost the right to spell Christian with a capital 'C.' It has gone the way of the YMCA. It is impossible to tell the difference between a CBN production and one produced by ABC." Strong words. Could it be possible?

Few men since the Apostle Paul have entered the ministry with the credentials of Robertson. Son of a respected U.S. Senator. A Phi Beta Kappa graduate. A doctor's degree in jurisprudence from Yale. A theological degree. A combat Marine officer. A Golden Gloves boxer. Married to a brilliant woman who, many say, is smarter than he is. What better training could a man desire?

Yet such credentials often work against a man. Educated in the world and knowledgeable of its ways, there is always a tendency to want to make an impression on the world. Had Robertson, in his climb to fame and power, compromised his once bold, outspoken belief in a God of mira-

cles? Many of his critics so accused. I wanted to find out firsthand.

It's difficult to keep from being overwhelmed by a visit to the 347-acre, \$33 million broadcasting "campus" in Virginia Beach, Virginia. The technical equipment is better than that used by any American or British TV network. It's a far cry from what I remembered during those early days at WYAH-TV in Portsmouth where a roosting bat or a curious squirrel could cause a short-circuit and put the entire station off the air for days at a time. But the statistics are proof something has happened. Something big.

- The CBN Cable Network is the nation's second largest cable TV programming service and the largest religious network. It is carried by 3,480 local cable systems reaching 19,577,400 subscribers, according to *Cable-Vision/Plus* magazine. According to the last Neilsens survey, 6.5 million households tuned in each day. That means more than 18 million people are watching the CBN Cable Network sometime each week.

- CBN has a color TV station in Southern Lebanon enabling them to broadcast into that troubled region of the world.

- CBN's weekly animated Bible series in Japan—appearing at 6:30 p.m. every Tuesday, is covering 85 percent of all Japan. By actual survey it is watched by 5 million viewers in Tokyo alone.

- CBN's Continental Broadcasting Network owns three commercial stations in Atlanta, Dallas, and Boston along with the Norfolk station which is being sold. These stations have a potential viewing audience of more than seven million.

- CBN University, a unique graduate school, has already been granted candidacy status for full accreditation. The \$9 million library will be opened this year. They are offering master's and doctor's degrees in business administration, biblical studies, public policy, communication and education—with new schools added each year. Noted charismatic theologian Rodman Williams has recently joined the staff.

- CBN has 92 counseling centers around the nation. They cooperate with 8,500 churches. Last year 60,000 people made professions of faith and 100,000 others were channeled into local churches.

- Operation Blessing gave away more than \$2 million to needy people. These funds were matched by the cooperating churches, meaning almost \$5 million was distributed by CBN to the poor of America.

- "Another Life," CBN's daytime dramatic series (soap opera) has received

critical reviews all over the nation. Headlines have screamed: "What's This? Clean Soap Opera on TV?," "New Soap with a Different Scent," and "Squeaky-Clean 'Soap' Bubbles Up."

- Last year's receipts totaled almost \$80 million.

Then there's "The 700 Club," CBN's flagship program. It is here the criticism is the hottest. It began as a long-winded interview program where Robertson would interview some evangelist who would speak for 45 minutes or longer. But all that has changed. Seldom does a person have longer than 10 minutes on the air. And instead of interviewing evangelists and pastors (although a few of them still make it on the air), Robertson majors on people from the secular world. He has hosted U.S. Presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford, dozens of U.S. Senators and Congressmen, a number of foreign presidents plus famous medical doctors, authors, columnists, and entertainers.

Unlike the early days, Robertson no longer limits his interviews to Christians. As many as 40 percent of those interviewed on "The 700 Club" are non-Christians—or at least men and women without a clear Christian testimony. It is this factor, plus the addition of the soap opera and the ventures into the commercial world (CBN recently signed a \$1 million contract with General Foods for TV commercials) which is causing a number



*The 347-acre CBN University with its imposing colonial style buildings cost more than \$33 million to build.*

of Christians to question whether CBN is a ministry—or a business.

In fact, Christians are not the only ones questioning. Last year the Virginia Attorney General declared that CBN does not qualify as a non-profit religious institution for property tax-assessment purposes and therefore must pay real estate and personal property taxes in Virginia Beach. (This does not affect CBN's non-profit status with the IRS. Donors are able to count all gifts as tax deductions.) The

ruling did not change Robertson's direction, however. He believes his task is to reach the lost—not Christians. For that reason he has dared to break away from the customary "religious programming" which the legal authorities recognize, and innovate with other methods.

During my visit to CBN I made a guest appearance on "The 700 Club." Appearing with me was a psychiatrist from Washington, DC, who once headed the nation's drug abuse program. Although not a professing Christian, his words of warning about marijuana, cocaine and



*Robertson's interview with futurist Alvin Tofler is typical of the type of "secular" interviews that are common on "The 700 Club."*

other drugs being used by adults and teenagers alike—"we are committing national suicide"—carried far more weight than had the same words been spoken by a Bible-carrying evangelist.

Despite his changes in approach, much about Robertson remains the same. He is still the affable, gravelly-voiced, excited man I knew years ago. He also remains the impulsive man who often frustrated those closest to him, often grabbing hold of a half-baked idea and trying to serve it to those around him before its time. To that degree he has not changed much since that time in 1969 when words of prophecy began to come that CBN was to blanket the world with the Christian message. About that same time a friend called Robertson and told him about a one million-watt radio station in Costa Rica—the most powerful station in the western hemisphere—which could be purchased for a paltry \$1 million. Robertson snapped up the idea like a bird on a bug.

Egged on by those around him who were spouting prophecies which under normal circumstances would have rated nothing more than a smile and an "Amen, brother" response, Robertson began to take seriously that God had given him the station. Not only that, he began to talk

about it on the air—and to make plans as if the station were already his. Even though, at that time, he was having trouble paying his phone bill. The deal never did go through, although to have heard Robertson talk at the time they were ready to start broadcasting to 500 million people in the Americas plus shortwave to Europe and Asia.

The same thing happened with his vision for a Christian TV station in Israel. For years Robertson has been talking as though it would happen any day. In fact, as far back as 1970 he was sharing—on the air—his dream to broadcast into Israel and the Middle East. Years passed and nothing happened. Many of his critics laughed it off as another Robertsonism—an impulsive egg laid before its time. But unlike the Costa Rican project, this egg finally hatched. The TV station in Israel has become a reality—almost. Last year evangelist George Otis gave CBN a mobile TV unit which is located in southern Lebanon. It's not in Israel, but it's within a literal stone's throw of the Israeli border—and is, indeed, broadcasting right into the heart of the Holy Land.

I sometimes wonder if most prophets aren't impulsive—and far ahead of their time. Despite Robertson's failures, and they are many, his rate of success is incredible. Like Babe Ruth, who was the all-time strikeout king, Robertson is not known for his failures, but for his home runs.

Another unchanged characteristic of Robertson is that tendency cartoonist Al Capp ascribed to General Bullmoose—what's good for Pat Robertson is good for all those around him. My mind raced back to one of those times, 12 years ago, when I stepped off the plane in Norfolk and was met by a skinny Henry Harrison who was then co-hosting "The 700 Club." (He has long since moved to Charlotte

*Chancellor Robertson addresses graduates at the 1981 commencement exercises of CBN University.*



where he holds down the co-host chair for Jim Bakker at PTL.) I had always known Harrison as a laughing, roly-poly kind of summer Santa Claus—everybody's fat uncle. But the Harrison who met me at the plane that day was actually narrow-hipped. He explained that Robertson was on one of his weight-loss kicks. A proclamation has been issued at CBN that every employee should visit a doctor, determine his ideal weight, and reach that goal by a certain date. Those who didn't would be fired.

It lasted as long as Robertson remained slim. But when he began to put his weight back on, so did the rest of the staff. In fact, on this last visit it was obvious Robertson was having trouble keeping his coat buttoned—a problem which has plagued him during these recent years when he's been hard-pressed to find time to exercise.

To some it sounds as if CBN is the Promised Land of employment. But while CBN is not Egypt, to many it is a wilderness. A lot of people have gone there and gotten lost. In fact, a quick rundown of the roster of many of the major Christian media shows will find the names of a number of ex-CBN employees.

Even Robertson himself seems at times to be wandering. Maybe this is the mark of a true prophet, wandering in and out of the wilderness. CBN is a junkyard of programs which have started with great flourish—and just as quickly fallen by the wayside. The latest was CBN's big venture into an early morning news/weather/feature program to compete with ABC's "Good Morning America" and NBC's "Today" show. It was called "USam." Despite good reviews, it received the axe last year. It was just too expensive to justify.

Yet it is this drive to compete with the very best—despite a few failures—which has pushed CBN to the top. Robertson has long believed in professional excellence. There is a sentence in the mission statement for CBN which reflects that. "Our policy will be to secure a small staff of outstanding people and to compensate them well for their labors. . . . We believe that God's work, done according to the principles of His Kingdom, will prosper financially."

This is the theme of Robertson's newest book, *The Secret Kingdom*, which is selling amazingly well. Despite his sometimes arrogant ways and the fact he has been known to run over those with whom he disagrees, Robertson has what Southern gentlemen call "class." It is the mark of a Thoroughbred. Although his father, a U.S. Senator, was one of the few senators who lived off his Senate salary, Robertson was still raised in the comparative

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opulence of a Southern plantation setting. Yet because he was gently-bred and grew up surrounded by the rich and the powerful, he has no seeming compulsions for personal gain—no need for yachts or condos in Florida. These are left for the nouveau riche Pentecostals. He is too intent on his mission to stop along the wayside and enjoy the side benefits.

Yet there are changes, subtle changes, I noticed in Pat Robertson. He is one of those men like Billy Graham. The moment he walks into a crowded room, every head turns. His magnetic charm simply draws people to him. He has an overpowering personality. He laughs a lot, but when he is crossed he is downright mean. Cutting. Dogmatic. I remember what he did to some of my friends—indeed, what he did to me—several years ago when the discipleship controversy was at its peak.



William F. Buckley, Jr., himself the host of "Firing Line" on PBS shares a light moment with Robertson on "The 700 Club."

If you didn't agree with Robertson back then, you got your tapes burned.

I specifically asked him about some of those past experiences. He told me frankly he didn't have time to look back. There was too much rushing at him from the future.

I agreed with him—especially when he said he did not want to use the airwaves to wash the dirty laundry of other Christians.

I also sensed a change in Robertson's management policies. The old Pat Robertson had to do everything. He arranged the sets, corrected the camera angles, signed the checks, flew his own airplane (which CBN no longer owns) . . . it was almost a compulsion. And while this drive has not diminished, it is obvious that he has learned the secret of trusting the men around him. A quick look at his lineup of vice-presidents and department heads shows he has surrounded himself with some of the finest minds in America.

Some of these men, like Michael Little who serves as a group vice-president in charge of programming and "The 700 Club" grew up with CBN. He joined CBN in 1968 and literally has come up through the ranks. Others, like Ben Kinchlow, Robertson's brilliant co-host on "The 700 Club," are later additions. Kinchlow, a former black militant from Texas, showed up at CBN and was given a job as a chauffeur. One day they needed a substitute co-host on "The 700 Club." Someone suggested the tall, articulate limo driver. Now Kinchlow's face is almost as well-known as Robertson's. As vice-president, director of national ministries, he oversees the 92 counseling centers, Operation Blessing, and works closely with the 8,500 cooperating churches in America. A quick rundown on the other top executives shows them to be men of outstanding business ability, all having made their mark in the corporate world before joining CBN. Yet it is to his board of directors that Robertson looks for final spiritual guidance.

The board of directors is a mixed lot. Tucker Yates, who recently resigned as a CBN vice-president, was a former retail executive with Belk-Yates in North Carolina. Harald Bredesen, the only other ordained minister besides Robertson in a high position, is retained by Robertson "because he hears from God as clearly as any man I know." Bob Slosser is a long-time board member. A highly respected newsman and writer, he co-authored Robertson's latest book *The Secret Kingdom*. The final member is Robertson's efficient red-haired wife, Dede, who combines exceptional business acumen with deep spiritual discernment.

The actual executive work of the entire corporation, although overseen by Robertson at all levels, is coordinated by Chief of Staff Bob Slosser. Slosser, along with Allen Rundle, vice-president in charge of finance, served as a member of the board of directors for the now defunct Logos International. He is one of those visionaries who has helped push CBN beyond its former Christian-oriented mode into its present perspective. Because of men like Slosser, Little, and a number of other highly-motivated executives, Robertson's dreams—like the dreams of all great men—are now being merged with the dreams of others around him.

I remember talking with Slosser a number of years ago before he joined the staff at CBN. Even then he was talking of reaching the world for Jesus Christ using drama. We used to sit around talking about "The 700 Club." Slosser felt the format should change. It should be a news magazine approach rather than a platform for preachers and evangelists. At that time I



CBN created a special set for singer Della Reese shown here with Kinchlow when she appeared recently on "The 700 Club."

thought it was merely the pipe dream of an old newspaperman.

Now, wandering around CBN, I realized what I was seeing was a combination of Robertson's dream, Slosser's dream, and the dreams of a lot of other men. The result was a dream bigger than even the sum total. What Robertson had originally dreamed had come to pass in a way far larger than the original dreamer ever imagined. How is it done? It is best summed up in the words of the mission statement.

"Three words should characterize the execution of our mission. First we will be *innovative*. Our task is not to duplicate or copy other men's labors. Second, we will be *excellent*. Our work must either be of lasting value and highest quality or it should not be done at all. Third, we will demonstrate *integrity*. In our work, our public relations, our internal and external communications, there will be an abiding commitment to truth. Integrity must characterize all of our dealings with others."

To accomplish this Robertson has determined he will not use his regular programs to ask for money. Although CBN depends on donations, fund-raising is limited to the once-a-year telethon. Another statement in the mission statement spells out CBN's feeling about finances. "We also categorically state that the payment of accounts when due is a key ingredient of integrity." In an age where Christian media are constantly under fire for poor financial management, that statement breathes like fresh air.

When I pinned Bob Slosser down about the reality of these statements he grudgingly told me of a meeting he had just come from. A marketing firm retained by CBN had discovered that giving increased whenever Robertson sent out a

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letter to his mailing list asking for prayer. They suggested he send out regular "prayer letters" to take advantage of this phenomenon. Robertson answered with an unequivocal "No!"

"I cannot ask for prayer unless our sole motive is to have people pray. When we need money I will ask for money. But I shall not mix our motives," he said.

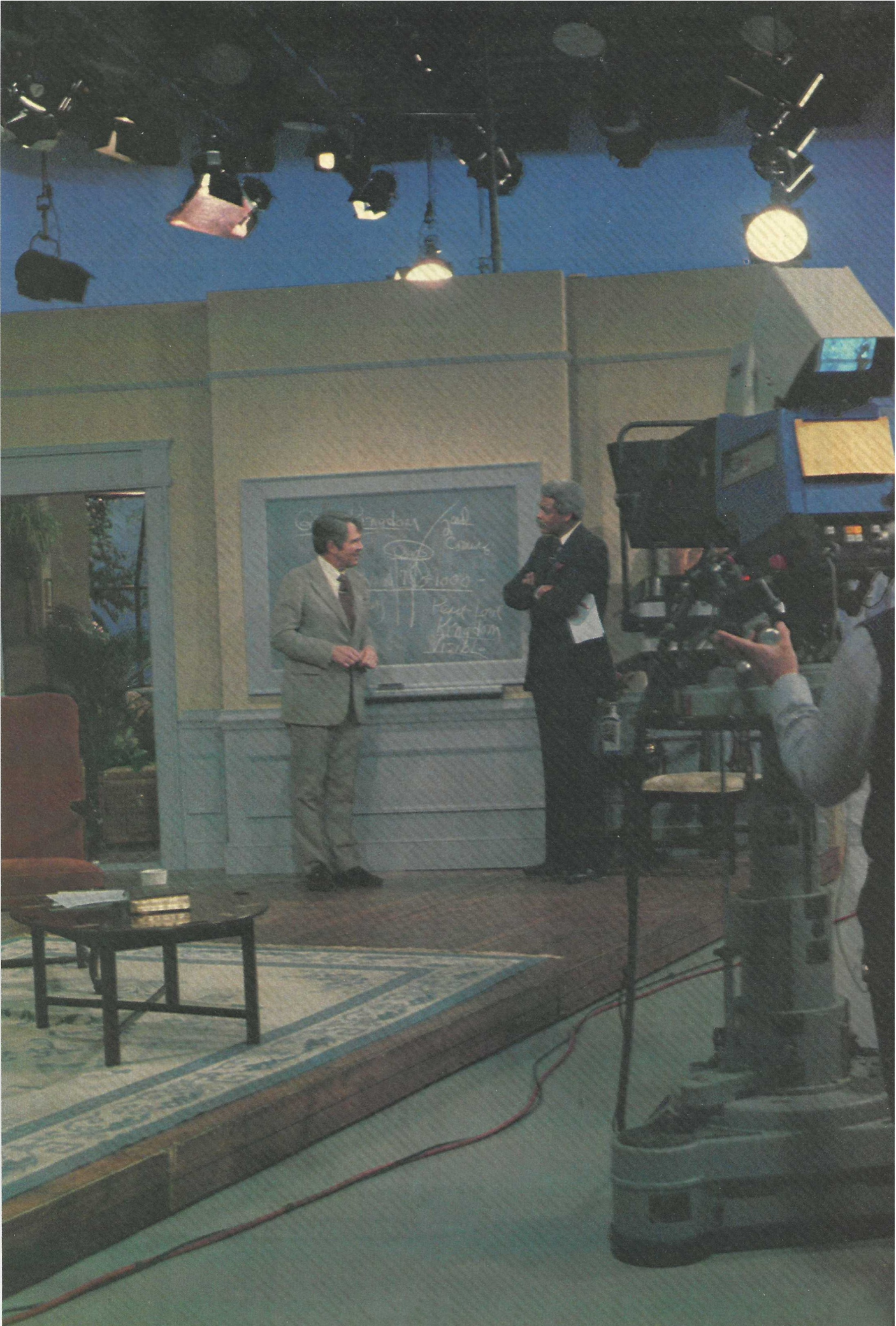
What many evangelists would have seen as a great fund-raising scheme was vetoed—to maintain integrity. Yet the original question lingered. Is CBN still a ministry, or is it simply a Christian business?

"Somehow," Michael Little told me, "we need to get the message to Christians as to what we're doing. There is no way to compare us with what the other religious broadcasters are doing. We've come to seek and save those who are lost. We're not aiming at the Christian audience—we're taking aim at the world."

That is clearly spelled out in the mission statement. The mission of CBN is "to prepare the United States of America, the nations of the Middle East, the Far East, South America, and other selected nations of the world for the coming of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. Our ultimate goal is to achieve a time in history when 'the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.'"

So, despite the changes taking place, the mission remains the same. Perhaps it's best related in an incident that took place several months ago. Mary Brown, a middle-aged housewife in Dallas, was home from work one day. She was sick. Her doctor had told her she had a malignant tumor on her uterus. Sitting in front of the TV set doing needlepoint, she flipped through the channels and stopped on "The 700 Club." It was her first time to watch the show. Suddenly there was a man—she couldn't remember whether it was Robertson or Kinchlow—looking at her from the tube saying: "God has just spoken to me. There is a woman in Dallas, Texas, sitting in front of her TV with needlepoint in her lap. The doctors have just told you of a tumor on your uterus. God loves you. He is healing you right now." Mary Brown felt a gentle warmth pass through her body as she sat in her rocking chair. She returned to her doctor. His examination left everyone mystified. The tumor had disappeared.

Pat Robertson believes the world is still won to Jesus the way it was won to Him during the first century—through signs and wonders. It is thus the task of CBN to get that message to the world, using every available means—still, as in the beginning, shouting it from the housetops. ↪



Handwritten text on the chalkboard:

- Good Friday
- Call
- Crash
- 17,5000 -
- Post-look
- Kitchen
- Visible