

TENTMAKERS

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THE TAPE MINISTRY

by Gary North

It takes a great deal of effort to produce a competent sermon. Since pastors invest the time and effort to get educations that enable them to produce decent sermons, plus the time and effort invested in each sermon, it seems foolish to waste the results. It should be clear that while "the walls have ears," church members sometimes don't. Complex sermon outlines are lost on people who are not trained to listen carefully. The kind of memorization described in *Beside the Bonnie Briar Bush*—a novel about the Scottish church of the last century—is no longer common in today's congregations.

Then there are the shut-ins, or the vacationers, or the people who will join the church in ten months or ten years. What about their needs? What about those who live in another region? Pastors with a unique outlook on the Bible may have a considerable audience in distant homes. Some ministries are noted more for their tapes than for their congregations. Col. Bob Thieme of Houston pioneered the tape ministry, and Albert Martin of New Jersey has built up a large following.

It is obvious that the cassette tape has brought a technological revolution to the churches. Some ministers have used tapes effectively. Most of them, from what I have observed, have not.

Laziness

It takes time to develop a successful church tape ministry. It also takes more care in preparing sermons. If people are going to listen to sermons over and over, or if others who are more careful listeners start subscribing, then flaws in the presentations will become public knowledge. Some pastors prefer not to let their actual abilities be broadcasted widely.

Then there is the problem of getting someone to produce the tapes. It takes a considerable capital investment. The tape reproduction equipment is expensive, and these units must be maintained. Also, few pastors know which units are the "state of the art" in any price range. Not many parishioners are sure, either. So mistakes are easy, unless someone devotes a lot of time to reading up on what machines are best for a particular church ministry and church budget.

Marketing

Tapes just do not sell themselves. I have a successful tape business, but it is geared to financial advice. I can charge more because I am providing advice which (presumably) pays the buyer back in dollars. Even so, I am only guessing about the future potential for expanding the business. I also have a very large subscriber base to which I can advertise my tape services very inexpensively. So my case is not normal.

I know of few tape ministries that are larger than 50 tapes per week. Yet it takes hundreds to make it commercially profitable. Tapes must be advertised, either by word of mouth (the least expensive, and the most rare), or by renting mailing lists, or by encouraging church members to buy them. Cults and sects have a

better market, since their audiences are geographically dispersed, and most communities will not have a representative of the sect. But to the extent that a minister's theology is explicit, he has differentiated himself from most other ministries. He has a better opportunity to market his tapes.

Initially, the market is local. A few congregation members may want the tapes. A set can be produced for shut-ins. A set can be produced for training. If the minister speaks at conferences, he can market tapes there. But normally, the initial audience is limited to those who have heard him speak in person at some point.

Training

Churches that rely heavily on formal instruction to screen members have a built-in need for tapes. We live in a society with few careful readers. People like to absorb information more passively than by reading. We meet their needs by means of cassette tapes, possibly coupled with printed training outlines or other teaching materials.

Every pastor who expects to be burdened by marital counseling sessions needs first to produce a series of preliminary tapes geared to general principles of righteous living. Then he needs a second or third series on specific family counseling problems. These should be given to prospective counselees before the actual face-to-face counseling begins. It saves vast quantities of time, since the fundamentals have been reviewed by the counselees in advance. Even if they have forgotten most of the tapes—90% of the information will be gone in 24 hours—the information can be recalled during counseling more rapidly. It is foolish to meet face to face when problems could otherwise have been solved in advance by means of a carefully produced tape series.

Pastors are short of time. People see the pastor as a source of free counseling. At zero price, there is greater demand for his time than supply of his time. The tapes increase the cost to the user by forcing him or her to sit down, take some notes, give some thought to the problems, and then show up for counseling. If users are unwilling to invest the time in listening to tapes, then they are either in the middle of a life-and-death crisis, or not really deserving of any free time at all.

What about tapes on the history of doctrine, or the catechism, or on the confession of faith? What about courses on the doctrine of the church? Why should pastors spend endless repetitive hours teaching the basics of the faith to newcomers, when the newcomers could listen to tapes in a few afternoons, or driving to and from work, or while cleaning the kitchen? Shouldn't the fundamentals be put on tape, in a simple form, with the detailed instruction coming later on, once the listeners have a grasp of the basics?

When pastors treat their own time as a free good, their parishioners will do the same. Pastors of large churches have

assistant pastors to take care of the personal problems of most members in most instances. But to make good use of his time, the pastor of a small church has to find substitutes for a team of assistant pastors. His time should not be devoted to any project for which a substitute—a less expensive substitute—is economically possible. Screening should be done more mechanically, by means of tape teaching.

Quality Production

The audio cassette tape, being cheap, is used by many people. Yet few people really ever listen to the tapes produced by cheap hand-held machines, with their pitiful built-in condenser microphones. The reproduction is atrocious. These are the sound equivalent of the 1898 Brownie camera. You simply would not want to spend time listening to them. You could not hear these lectures in a car, given the noise of the engine and traffic. A cheap cassette tape recorder is a toy for actual recording.

Something worth doing at all is worth doing well. Never use a cheap mimeograph machine and a manual typewriter, when you can use an IBM Selectric III and an offset press. Never use an IBM Selectric III when you can use a microcomputer and a good word processing program. Use the best tool you can afford to make the products look professional and to save you time. Cheap is seldom best. I am tired of seeing those who do have the truth at their disposal continue to proclaim this truth in forms that are an embarrassment, which look as though total incompetents had produced them. It is not glorifying to God. Christians need more pride in their workmanship. Quality counts.

When it comes to audio tapes, two pieces of equipment are vital. First, a high quality microphone. This will do more to improve the quality of the product than any other piece of equipment. Good quality units are sold by Shure, Sony, Sennheiser, Electro-Voice, and other companies. Expect to pay \$80 to \$250 for a good mike. Second, get a good cassette tape deck. Sony, Aiwa, Technics, Akai, Superscope, and many other companies produce suitable units for \$250 to \$600. Pick up a copy of *High Fidelity* or another magazine aimed at the stereo equipment market. Look at the ads. You will get a feel for what is available. Any unit with Dolby circuitry (especially the new Dolby C), with wow and flutter under .08%, and push-button controls, is fine. Auto-reverse is also nice.

One other item is useful: a graphic equalizer. It can be "tuned" to filter out low rumbles, such as the church's heater or air conditioner. This makes it easier to play in an automobile, too. The mid-range frequencies, where the human voice operates, are "punched out" far more effectively. Expect to pay \$200.

A minimum investment to produce decent master tapes is about \$400. It would be wise to get started immediately by recording good, clear master tapes, whether or not you plan to market the tapes. The quality of the master will determine the quality of the reproduction. The reproduction is never quite as good as the master.

What is absolutely not acceptable is a master produced by a battery-powered cassette recorder with a cheap plastic mike. Forget about these as anything more than play-back units. They are useless for serious recording. The church has to put some capital into proper recording equipment.

A successful ministry that uses a single audio cassette tape as the foundation of its operation is the American Vision. It produced an expensive tape on the Christian origins of America.

They mail out free copies of the tape to any organization or family that requests one. The tape is educational, and it creates interest in the follow-up materials that American Vision makes available. This is one approach to a tape ministry that seems to be working. Of course, the quality of the production is far higher than what a church could normally produce. For a copy of the tape, "The American Vision: 360 Years Later," write:

American Vision
P. O. Box 720515
Atlanta, GA 30328

costs

A tape ministry does have one great advantage over other media forms: you only produce as many copies as you have orders for. You do not have to risk ordering a hundred in advance, and then sit on unsold inventory. You can produce a good quality tape for about \$1.50 to \$1.75, depending on quantity ordered. Large orders would sell for about \$1.25, plus postage to get your tapes back to you. This means that you send a company the master, and the firm then turns the master into a specified amount of tapes.

The advantage with having an outside producer make the tapes is that he makes the initial capital investment, keeps the equipment maintained, and guarantees the quality of the tapes. He also buys (or rents) the computer that prints up the tape labels. This keeps the church's initial costs much lower. The disadvantage is the loss of time.

Volunteer labor seldom works well. You are never quite certain of product quality and fast production. If someone in the church does it for pay, make certain that you keep getting outside bids, so that you know that the amateur inside the church is not overcharging you. Blank C-60 tapes in bulk, for example, cost about 50¢ each.

The tapes can be used for several purposes, as I have mentioned. Not every tape may be worth saving, except in the form of a master. Not every series is worth reproducing, but some series should be permanently available for listening. A master tape should never leave the church's premises. It should be kept in a master file, and used only (if then) when people come in to listen to cassettes. The church library room should have a playback machine and a pair of lightweight earphones for private listening.

Use high quality tapes for the master: Scotch; Maxell UD; TDK AD Series; or other brand equivalents. Stay away from 120-minute tapes (stretching, breaking). Put only one sermon on a tape: easier cataloguing, circulation, etc. If you have to fill up a tape, put on some explanatory material after the sermon is over. Or add questions and answers, if it is from a Bible study. (Use a separate high quality mike for the audience's questions.)

The rule is this: put your money into the "front end" of the production process, meaning the mike, tape deck, and cassette masters. This gives you the quality master tapes. You can buy top quality reproducing equipment later on. In the meantime, you can contract out the production job with an independent producer. Examples:

Geneva Tape Enterprises	Youth with a Mission Tape Services
P. O. Box 6975	P. O. Box 4600
Tyler, TX 75711	Tyler, TX 75711

Contact either or both for more information on costs, turnaround time, and recommended equipment at your end of the operation.