

STANFORD

Dr. Gene Scott



ARABIAN KNIGHTS: ALUMNI SERVING DESERT STORM ■ A STAR WARS BOONDOGGLE REVISITED

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THE PREACHER IS ON



It's a Sunday evening in early March, and in dozens of small cities across America, sports fans are tuning in to their favorite cable television station, expecting to see professional athletes at work. Instead, they find an ultra-tight close-up of a white-haired man struggling to light a cigar.

For no apparent reason, the man signals for the picture to cut to images of horses in training and competition. Disco music plays in the background. Several minutes pass, and then the music stops. Again, the white-haired man appears, silent, staring intently, plumes of smoke rising from his cigar. At the bottom of the screen, a toll-free telephone number beckons—1 (800) 338-3030.

First-time viewers are, by this point, trying to figure out what's going on. And because tonight an additional 56 cable channels across the country have begun broadcasting this spectacle, there are perhaps more first-time viewers than ever before. The *potential* national audience is 40-60 million; exactly how many are watching tonight, though, is impossible to know.

The white-haired man smiles, amused and satisfied. "You will be asking, 'What's this?'" he says, his smile broadening. "We don't know."

And with that, Dr. Gene Scott laughs. And because he laughs, a hundred or so telephone operators, television technicians, and aides laugh, too, their laughter filling the converted hardware store that serves as his studio.

"The doctor," he says, referring to himself, "is a PhD from Stanford University. I don't deliver babies. I don't make them, either."

What he does do is preach the gospel according to Gene Scott. What he is, undeniably, is the most unconventional preacher in the history of broadcast religion.

To compare Gene Scott to such mainstays of television evangelism as Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart—or to even refer to him as an evangelist—is the surest way to invoke his considerable anger. "I am trying to find a way on television to keep me separate from the TV evangelists who I think have prostituted God," he says. "I refuse to give the territory of thinking about God over to the nuts and the carnival hucksters. And I feel put down and put upon that I'm still perceived as a specimen of that species."

And yet, in his own way, Scott can be as outrageous on

screen as any of his more famous brethren. Depending on the day, his mood, and the teaching, Scott will rage and warn, yell and threaten, mixing a bizarre brew of eccentric excess, studied provocation, populist anger, and an enticing concept of Christianity as a permissive, forgiving, and tolerant doctrine devoid of uncompromising self-righteousness and disingenuous moral posturing.

But perhaps most significant of all, Scott, like no one else, has turned the world's most powerful medium into a mass one-on-one dialogue. He asks his audience questions, commands them to respond, then sits back and listens to recorded music while a battery of phone attendants take his calls. He shuffles the phone messages as they are handed to him. Then, when the music stops, he reads them aloud.

"Bowling Green, Oklahoma—I thought it was Ohio. 'I'm a sinner.' Well, isn't everybody? Watching for the first time. This sure is a different kind of program."

"Lakeland, Florida—'Who is this guy?' Gene Scott. Me. Glad you can tell the difference in today's world I'm a guy. 'What does he do?' Right now, he's reading your message. 'What does he teach about?' Whatever's on my mind when I start teaching."

Both politically and theologically, Scott is a difficult man to pigeonhole. He sympathizes with the legal right to abortion, for example, and condemns the "new perfectionism" that's sweeping the country. Meanwhile, in his own personal life, he refuses to bow to anyone's sense of propriety. He has lived unmarried for some time with both his mother and a stunningly attractive woman twenty years his junior—an arrangement about which the 61-year-old Scott is both open and unapologetic.

"I built my church on the basis that I will not police your behavior. You won't police mine either," he says one afternoon with cigar in hand during a rare interview. "The issues that involve morality and lifestyle are mine to work out with God, and I give that same dignity to my congregation. That's where the fundamentalists have gone offtrack."

"I don't want to convert; I don't believe in conversion evangelism. I've become more fixed in what I call the election of God. The person has to be free to make his own choice without me coercing him. I don't want to save anyone. I don't think I can."

Like Scott, his church is a vehicle for earthy pragmatism, and his God is fully capable of anger, forgiveness, and laughter.

"We don't need gimmicks. We don't need love gifts and Jesus junk. We don't need crap," he says with characteristic bluntness. "And we don't need crises, with letters conceived and written in July [to solicit money] for the financial crisis you've got to have in December to keep the money coming in."

Instead, Scott often opens his broadcasts by simply telling his audience that he will not begin the evening's lesson until his weekly \$300,000 budget is committed. In response, the telephones always ring, and the money always rolls in—more than \$12 million donated last year to





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a ministry whose pastor makes it clear that he is free to spend it any way he likes.

William Eugene Scott was born in Buhl, Idaho, on Aug. 14, 1929, the son of a 23-year-old traveling preacher and his 18-year-old wife. His was a Depression childhood, with difficult times for the parents and their three children. Eventually, the family settled near Oroville, Calif., where Scott's father ran a church for the Assemblies of God denomination.

At that time, Scott once told an interviewer, "The people like my dad were the cults, the kooks, and the nuts." When young Gene made the high school basketball team, for instance, his father's fundamentalist flock was mortified that Gene would wear shorts in public. He played anyway, although attending social events after the games was out of the question. "My dad might have lost his church if I got on the dance floor," he explains.

After high school, Scott enrolled for a time in Bible school in San Francisco, but by then he was having prob-

lems with the system. "The school had all these stupid rules," he recalls. "If you sat on the same couch with a girl, you could get expelled. So I kissed girls in the elevator."

Dropping out after only six months, he transferred to CSU-Chico, where, in 1950, he married his high school sweetheart—a marriage that ended 23 years later in divorce.

"I was wrestling with my faith," Scott says of his time at Chico. And, in a very real sense, he claims, he desperately wanted *not* to believe. But he couldn't get past the Resurrection. "I would have given my right arm if somebody could convince me Jesus did not come out of that tomb," he says. Eventually, he got a master's from Chico, and, with his faith returning, enrolled at Stanford to pursue a PhD in education. For his dissertation, Scott analyzed theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's relevance to Christian education.

"Stanford did a hell of a good job on me," he says. "They showed me the real heart of a PhD program, particularly in the realm of philosophy that conditions a person to be captured by truth. If I have a description of the way I'd like to think I teach, it is that I'm trying to turn lights on in rooms. If there's dust in the corner, you're always going to know it's there."

After graduating from Stanford, Scott taught briefly at a midwestern college, then joined up with Oral Roberts, who was organizing his university in Tulsa, Okla. That relationship lasted for only eight months—long enough for Scott to become disenchanted with the legendary televangelist.

All of which brought Scott back home in 1963 to Oroville where he helped run his father's church. He also began taking an active role in the Assemblies of God movement, and quickly rose to the top of the hierarchy as one of its ordained ministers. He traveled to more than seventy countries on its behalf and developed a Sunday school curriculum that is credited with helping to expand membership by more than 300 percent.

Then, in 1970, Scott once again struck out on his own. He bought a printing press in San Francisco, and in the late 1970s saved a mausoleum outside of Oakland from bankruptcy.

However, it wasn't until he took over the Faith Center Church in Glendale, Calif., that his television career took off. A fundamentalist organization, Faith Center owned several broadcast properties, including the nation's first Christian television station, Channel 30 in San Bernardino, Calif. Scott took over the church in November 1975 after the pastor succumbed to a scheme to sell worthless bonds to finance the acquisition. That same month, Scott made his first appearance on Channel 30.

He was dressed conservatively for the occasion, and stood before his audience, much as any preacher would at a Sunday sermon. However, as his broadcasts continued, the format quickly evolved. To convey to the viewer a sense of intimacy, for example, he began sitting rather than standing in front of the camera, with the lens tightly trained on his visage. And to draw as sharp a distinction as possible between himself and the television evangelists he so strongly takes exception to, Scott began to cultivate a most unorthodox persona. Most conspicuous were the hats. In fact, Scott has worn every conceivable form of headgear

in the air, including Stetsons, baseball caps, and football helmets.

His programs are four hours long, and usually go on the air every weekday night at 8 p.m., Pacific time. They mix tapes of his Sunday morning preaching and Bible teaching at Wescott Christian Center with footage of horse shows and horse training, beamed via satellite 24 hours a day from Southern California. "Our network is horses and me. That's all there is," he says. The horses were added several years ago, inspired in large measure by the example of Atlanta cable baron Ted Turner, who parlayed his two second-rate sports teams into a media empire. Only, unlike Turner's teams, Scott's show horses keep winning awards.

Clearly, winning is important to Gene Scott. As a young man preaching with his father in Oroville, Scott once locked himself in the Butte County Law Library over a weekend to do research for a small claims case against a contractor. Scott won. Years later, Scott's legal acumen would again be tested, only the stakes would be much larger.

Over the years, Scott has built quite an empire, with assets that are maintained in more than a dozen separate holding companies. And though aides are careful to point out that he personally owns virtually none of it, he does nevertheless enjoy access to a Lear jet, a stable of some 120 show horses, and lives in a mansion located in one of the priciest sections of Pasadena.

He has been the subject of numerous investigations—several of which were initiated by powerful state and federal government officials hoping to end his television career for good. Journalists too have tried to find some project, no matter how small, for which he raised money without telling his flock exactly what he was doing. No one, however, has turned up anything—which, according to Scott, is because he practices a policy of full disclosure.

California Attorney General George Deukmejian, who went on to become governor of the Golden State, also came up empty-handed when in 1978 he and his staff followed up leads provided by disgruntled former associates of Scott. (Scott is, by most accounts, a demanding employer who assumes that anyone who works for him is available at any time, for any summons, yet he delegates little authority over operational decisions.)

The investigation infuriated Scott, who, as it dragged on, began to retaliate in an outrageous fashion. Night after night on his show, he would wind up a collection of mechanical toy monkeys, which he called "Gene's monkey band," and wander through the band hitting them with a stick. Ever defiant, he referred to Deukmejian on the air as "Dr. George, M.L.D.," short for "Missing Link Doctor."

Deukmejian was not amused, nor was the Federal Communications Commission, which launched an investigation of its own. Again, no evidence was uncovered of financial wrongdoing, but the FCC revoked the operating licenses of Scott's four television stations and one radio station anyway because the preacher refused to disclose to investigators the names and addresses of contributors.

It was that FCC order, in fact, that spawned one of the most bizarre incidents in television history. Late one night in May 1983, minutes before the deadline that the FCC had set for Scott to either obey or forfeit his ownership

rights, the preacher stared defiantly into the camera and declared: "My ministry will continue! Government fears what exposes its pompous-assed, deified authority!" and then pulled the plug on his own station. FCC officials later said that they knew of no other instance when a TV station simply faded to black.

Even on this occasion, though, Scott had the last laugh. True, he no longer owned KOHF, the flagship station of his burgeoning network. But after a short hiatus, he returned to KOHF's airwaves with as strong a following as ever, just by purchasing time from the station's new owners.

After so many confrontations with established authority, it's easy to suppose that Scott is merely a creature who exists on the nourishment of combat. He insists, however, that that's not true.

"I don't need a fight, and I don't want a fight," he says. "But if God drags something across my trail, I'll respond. I feel compelled to when a principle is at stake."

To the delight of so many of his fans, Scott onstage seems as belligerent as ever. But offstage there has, over the last few years, been a noticeable change. Instead of the angry maverick, it now seems as if he not only wants to accommodate, but, indeed, join the establishment.

In Los Angeles, he has cultivated friends in high places,

Our network is horses and me. That's all there is."



including the city council and the business community. And on a number of occasions he has come to the rescue of worthy causes.

When an arson fire devastated the historic Central Library building in downtown Los Angeles in 1987, Scott produced a successful telethon to raise funds to preserve the books. In 1988, when the Southwest Museum, one of the nation's premier collections of Native American art and artifacts, announced a budget emergency that forced closure of its library, Scott quietly wrote the museum a check to reopen the facility.

Scott also has received his share of attention from nationally known celebrities and is not above showing off a famous fan on occasion. One Sunday, a few minutes after his service started at the Faith Center auditorium that Scott now calls "Kings House One," Scott turned to the audience and acknowledged a newcomer to the flock. Cautiously, country singer Merle Haggard, who had flown all night after a gig in Detroit the evening before, made his way to the stage. With a flash of shyness, Haggard adjusted the microphone and admitted to the TV camera, "This is my first time in church in forty years." And then he added: "I think Gene Scott's a great entertainer, don't you?"

The audience had to agree. □

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