Evangelical Christians and Popular Culture

POP GOES THE GOSPEL

Robert H. Woods Jr., Editor
Foreword by Mark A. Noll

EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS AND POPULAR CULTURE

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Pop Goes the Gospel

VOLUME 1:
FILM, RADIO, TELEVISION, AND THE INTERNET

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PRAEGER

AN IMPRINT OF ABC-CLIO, LLC
Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado • Oxford, England

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Evangelical Christians and popular culture : pop goes the gospel / Robert H. Woods Jr., editor ; foreword by Mark A. Noll.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978–0–313–38654–1 (hardback) — ISBN 978–0–313–38655–8 (ebook) 1. Popular culture—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Evangelicalism. I. Woods, Robert, 1970–
BR115.C8E895 2013
261.0973—dc23 2012014133

ISBN: 978–0–313–38654–1
EISBN: 978–0–313–38655–8

17 16 15 14 13 1 2 3 4 5

This book is also available on the World Wide Web as an eBook.
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Praeger
An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC

ABC-CLIO, LLC
130 Cremona Drive, P.O. Box 1911
Santa Barbara, California 93116-1911

This book is printed on acid-free paper ♾

Manufactured in the United States of America

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Foreword

Mark A. Noll

The editor has assembled a superb crew of expert authorities in preparing this work on *Evangelical Christians and Popular Culture*. In recent years, popular media have occasionally paid some attention to the phenomena treated in these volumes. They have noticed the occasional best-selling CD or DVD by a contemporary Christian musician, they might be aware of the record sales wracked up by the *Left Behind* series of end-times thrillers, they know that public figures like Sarah Palin have roots in evangelical or Pentecostal or fundamentalist churches, and they could tell that the United States's conservative Protestants accounted for much of the surprising success of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. But these references are usually ad hoc. They almost never provide responsible historical background, and they do not indicate the scope or depth of evangelical investment in radio, television, popular merchandise, novels, music festivals, video games, and more. The well-researched chapters that make up this work are different. They proceed from a careful definition of the meaning of *evangelical*; they trace some of the background, going back centuries, that lies behind contemporary expressions of evangelical popular culture; several of them spotlight the crucial role of the 1960s "Jesus People" in bringing popular music and communication into conservative Protestant churches; and they provide a well-grounded sense of how deep and wide the streams of popular culture run in the contemporary evangelical world. In addition, the specific attention given to topics such as singers like Johnny Cash and groups like U2, evangelical magazines like *Christianity Today*, important innovators like C. S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters*, popular painters like Thomas Kinkade, and usually neglected forms like evangelical tattoos and evangelical candy ensure that these volumes are as lively and interesting as they are instructive.

The evangelical engagement with popular modes of communication goes back at least three centuries. German pietists, who wrote hymns designed to be sung by laypeople, were pioneers. The young British evangelist George Whitefield, who electrified crowds in the mid-eighteenth century with his dramatic gospel message, solidified the link between evangelicalism and the populace. Since then, evangelicals' attitudes have gone through cycles. In earlier periods, the reading of novels was sometimes considered a dangerous waste of time, and music with a syncopated beat was thought to be satanic. But also from earlier periods came the effective writing campaigns of Hannah More, a British evangelical who in the early nineteenth century published a great number of edifying stories aimed deliberately at the working classes, and the sprightly music of Ira Sankey written to captivate mass audiences for D. L. Moody's urban preaching campaigns. The whys and wherefores of such shifting attitudes provide the backdrop for many of the chapters found here.

Evangelicals have always moved toward the populist side of the Christian churches. They pioneered theologies of personal conversion, encouraged lay appropriation of scripture, favored democratic means of church organization, recruited ordinary men and women for missionary service, and often looked suspiciously at the markers of elite society. Negative effects of these tendencies have included a propensity toward anti-intellectualism and a susceptibility to irresponsible demagogues. Positive results have included great success in mobilizing large numbers of middle-class believers for active Christian service and unusual creativity in fashioning innovative modes of organization and communication. Both the negative and positive aspects of the democratic populism that has always been so prominent in evangelical circles are fully on display in the chapters that follow.

Even before the path-breaking labors of Marshall McLuhan, who underscored how much insight could be gleaned from careful study of popular culture, it had become commonplace for scholars to expect rich rewards from studying the artifacts of popular culture. For evangelical Christians, whose history has been fully engaged with an immense range of popular cultural forces, the rewards are particularly great. Even casual readers of these volumes will understand why. Those who attend to their pages carefully will reap an especially rich harvest of understanding and insight.

Acknowledgments

A project like this has 1,000 details and requires many selfless hands working in concert over an extended period of time. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to several individuals and groups of people who have labored tirelessly during the past three years to bring this project to publication.

Quentin J. Schultze, of Calvin College, recommended me for this project, and his wise council early on allowed me—among many other things—to collect an outstanding group of scholars who were committed to the task. As with other projects I've worked on, this one would not have happened without him. A better academic mentor and role model than Quentin would be difficult to find.

Mark A. Noll took time out of his busy schedule to write the foreword to this collection. Mark's scholarship over the past three decades has provided a strong foundation for the study of American evangelicalism. His leadership and influence in the field are visible throughout this collection, and his foreword wonderfully foreshadows the depth and breadth of scholarship represented herein.

Additionally, a collection such as this is not possible without a top-flight group of experts who can speak with authority on the subject matter. Special thanks are due, both individually and collectively, to the fifty-seven authors whose work spans fifty-four chapters across the three volumes. Their patience and persistence throughout the process were impressive. I especially appreciated their willingness to revise—and to keep revising—so their work would serve the needs of the target audience. I asked a lot from them during the past three years, and they delivered each time with a smile.

Several of the authors provided additional assistance throughout the project, including but not limited to supplying photographs and images for their own and in some cases others' chapters. Additional thanks to Phyllis E. Alsdurf, Diane M. Badzinski, William J. Brown, Judith M. Buddenbaum, Thomas J. Carmody, Paul A. Creasman, Terri Lynn Cornwell,

Samuel E. Ebersole, Larry Eskridge, Denise P. Ferguson, John P. Ferré, Michael V. Firmin, Benson P. Fraser, Janie Harden Fritz, Roddy Knowles IV, Michael A. Longinow, Gerald D. Mast, Lynn S. Neal, Paul D. Patton, Kevin P. Schut, Kathleen Osbeck Sindorf, Michael Ray Smith, Luke M. Tse, Terrence R. Wandtke, Annalee R. Ward, Mark Ward Sr., and Kenneth E. Waters.

Marsha Daigle-Williamson served as copyeditor on this project and provided additional content review. Marsha was an English professor for nearly twenty-five years who earned "teacher of the year" honors five times during her tenure. She is a master of languages: she speaks French and Italian and has some knowledge of German, Latin, and Greek, which come in handy, she explains, in doing translations and checking English speakers' use of those languages. Marsha makes what is "good" somehow "great" and what is "great" truly "awesome." Without her, this project and others I have worked on would not have been completed on time or with such high quality. A debt from me that can never be repaid is due her. Everyone needs a "Marsha."

Spring Arbor University's (SAU) library staff (Robbie Bolton, Roy Meador, Kami Moyer, Karen Parsons, and Susan Panak), and Dave Burns, formerly of SAU, provided ongoing and timely research support that allowed me to stay on schedule. Other SAU staff, colleagues, students, and friends provided much-needed support of varying kinds: Dave Buchanan, Rachel Buchanan, Jay Cordova, Darcy Drake, Nate Evans, David Goodrich, Benjamin Rupp, Shawn Rutan, and Jason Thiede. The consistent and reliable support of SAU master's of communication graduate assistants Alyse Lehrke and Annette Ford freed me up to spend extra time working on the project. My non-SAU colleague Naaman Wood provided support as well.

During the first several months of this project's formation, Kim Chimenti, formerly of the Gainey Institute for Faith and Communication at Calvin College, provided important administrative and organizational support. She created spreadsheets, managed author contracts, and helped me to stay two steps ahead of where I needed to be at all times.

SAU graciously granted me a reduction in teaching load during the early stages of the project. Paul D. Patton, chair of SAU's Department of Communication and Media, and Wally Metts, master's of communication program director, offered words of encouragement and other tangible support for my work on this project.

Praeger and ABC-CLIO deserves appreciation for recognizing the importance and timeliness of such a project. Thanks to Praeger editor Jane

Messah-Ericksen and former Praeger editor Dan Harmon for their patience throughout the project. Jane took over for Dan as editor about two months before final submission and handled the transition with professionalism and grace. Thanks to Erin Ryan, preproduction and media editor for ABC-CLIO, who patiently guided me through the photo selection process and who helped secure several images that were difficult to find. Thanks also to Nicole Azze, ABC-CLIO production coordinator, and N. Magendra Varman, senior project manager for PreMediaGlobal. Magendra managed the day-to-day production of the three volumes, providing excellent oversight of the copyediting, typesetting, proofreading, and indexing for all three volumes.

Finally, I'm extremely grateful for my wife, partner, and friend, Rebekah Starr Woods, who gives me time and space to work on such projects. She is a constant source of joy.

I absolve all my friends and colleagues of any responsibility for the weaknesses that remain.

Introduction

Robert H. Woods Jr.

Over the past two decades, the study of media and religion has changed significantly. Researchers were initially concerned about the effect of televangelists and other institutional religious media on society, but in the early 1990s, a major shift in the sociology of religion appeared as researchers began to document new religious cultures.[1] The focus on televangelism and institutional religion failed to notice that while institutional religion was declining, religion as cultural practice was growing in importance. The lines between the sacred and secular were blurring. Media and popular culture were increasingly becoming popular sites and sources for constructing and expressing religious identities for individuals and religious groups of all kinds—from monks to Mormons, Buddhists to Muslims, and, of course, Christians.

Evangelicals and Popular Culture

Popular culture, explains Andrew Greeley, is the "locus theologicus" of our age;[2] that is, pop culture is the place where we live, where we "do" theology, and where we encounter God. And, in this respect, American evangelicals (a sub-group within Christianity) are well suited to the task. In an effort to fulfill the biblical command to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19), evangelicals have been some of the earliest pioneers in new media, persistently packaging biblical truths in popular culture formats. Evangelicals also tend to get some of their theology from popular culture. They learn about the end-times from the *Left Behind* book series, the creation story from the Creation Museum in Kentucky, and the gruesome details of Christ's crucifixion from *The Passion of the Christ* and the Holy Land Experience theme park in Orlando, Florida. Christian television, despite several high-profile scandals, continues to draw millions of faithful viewers

each day, and the Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) radio format continues to be one of the most popular formats in the country.

Evangelical insiders in the academy have long been interested in the various cultural forces shaping American evangelicalism and how evangelicalism has shaped mainstream culture. For more than two decades, the evangelical exemplar has been historian of religion Mark A. Noll, who has successfully explored the development and dimensions of this sub-culture of American Christianity.[3] Religious historians like Randall Balmer and Joel A. Carpenter, to name a few, drew our attention to evangelicalism's adoption of new media, from film to radio and television, and its imitation of popular trends in the mainstream entertainment industry.[4] Scholars of religion and media such as Quentin J. Schultze showed the history of Christianity and mass media in the United States to be one of democratic accommodation, demonstrating how religion and the media in the United States have borrowed each other's rhetoric.[5] From social-scientific perspectives, others demonstrated how formal and informal evangelical groups provide spaces for expression of personal and communal faith.[6] Still others showed how evangelical leaders and churches are engaged in a highly competitive market for religious consumers and how certain well-known celebrity evangelical innovators market themselves in ways that challenge religious experience.[7]

Despite the short list of outstanding and multi-layered work listed above, the study of American evangelicalism and related movements in the academy is relatively scant compared with those of other religious subjects and movements. Recently, within the last decade or two, there has been a growing interest—what some insiders would call *renewed* interest—in the subject among non-evangelical readers inside and outside the academy. This growing interest has resulted in a publication boom led by several mainstream publishers. Several outstanding works from scholars of media and religion, religion and popular culture, sociology of religion, and religious history illuminate the landscape, and some of their research and insights are included in these three volumes.

There are several factors contributing to the growing interest in American evangelicalism in the last decade. To begin, the explosion in Christian-themed product sales, blogs, cyberchurches, and literature in the early 2000s may be attributed, in part, to a spiritual revival led by evangelicals in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the war in Iraq. Additionally, the role evangelicals played in the presidential elections of 2000 and 2004 garnered significant attention from individuals on the left and

right. The role of the evangelical vote in the elections of presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan are well documented, but George W. Bush's back-to-back victories in 2000 and 2004 prompted renewed interest in evangelicals' relationship with the public sphere. On the heels of the 2004 election was the record-breaking success of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, which became one of the top ten highest grossing films of all time. *The Passion*'s success led to several popular films and television shows with Christ-centered themes produced by evangelicals for mainstream audiences. The way in which evangelicals were assuming the role of Hollywood insiders drew mainstream attention. And the continued mainstream cross-over success of popular evangelical musicians (Amy Grant, Switchfoot, Relient K, and Lifehouse), painters (Thomas Kinkade), and best-selling authors (Rick Warren, Joel Osteen, and T. D. Jakes) meant that such merchandise—once only available at Christian bookstores—was readily accessible at mainstream retailers (like Wal-Mart and Target).

Moreover, several popular trade books about evangelical popular culture have been written by non-evangelicals who provide first-person accounts of their immersion in particular evangelical communities.[8] To these outsiders, evangelical popular culture seems like a "parallel universe,"[9] often mocked for its insularity, triteness, poor production quality, manipulative practices, and tendency to mimic mainstream trends for spiritual ends. To be fair, many of these criticisms are ones that evangelicals themselves level against evangelical popular culture these days.

Yet while such work by non-evangelicals provides harsh critique, it also positively demonstrates how many evangelical Christians are engaged in complex dialogue with popular culture rather than simply rejecting it. Furthermore, such works draw attention to a new generation of evangelicals raised on the Internet, social media, and downloadable music who struggle with making clear dividing lines between the sacred and the secular. These evangelicals watch Steven Colbert and Jon Stewart for their news and are as likely to find something "redemptive" in a Stephen King novel as in a Sunday morning sermon. Their performances and publications are changing the way non-evangelicals perceive Christian cultural engagement and, in many ways, how evangelical churches do ministry. The work of these evangelicals has led even the harshest non-evangelical critics to recognize the potentially transformative effect that evangelical popular culture might have on mainstream culture.

The three volumes presented here may be viewed as additional support for the ways American evangelicalism in general, and evangelicals and

popular culture in particular, are becoming subjects of serious academic study inside and outside the academy and beyond only those who identify with it as insiders. The fifty-seven authors across three volumes and fifty-four chapters represent nearly fifty institutions of higher learning, both public and private. The authors teach and write in the areas of history, English, theology, music, psychology, sociology, new media, journalism, communication and media studies, rhetoric and cultural studies, film and television studies, advertising, and public relations. Individually and collectively, they have been called upon to explore the following intersections between evangelicals and popular culture:

- how evangelicals produce traditional and non-traditional forms of popular culture;
- how evangelicals are portrayed in popular culture created by non-evangelicals;
- how evangelicals are viewed by the wider public and the mainstream media;
- how evangelicals and their faith have shaped and been shaped by popular culture;
- how evangelical critiques can be brought to bear on popular culture; and
- how evangelicals use, or make use of, popular culture for spiritual or religious purposes.

Key Definitions

At the outset, defining *evangelicalism* for a project such as this has its difficulties. *Evangelical* has become so vague that even the world's most famous evangelical, Billy Graham, had difficulty defining the term at one time.[10] Some evangelicals call the Irish rock band U2 evangelical, while other evangelicals think their music comes from the devil. Outsiders also find difficulty in defining the word. To journalists, *evangelical* is political, while to many non-evangelicals it is synonymous with "Christian" or "fundamentalist" or the most extreme fringes of conservative Christian theology. But the term actually represents a broad range of different Christian theologies, practices, and movements.

For the purposes of the current project, evangelicals are defined as individuals who believe in Jesus Christ alone for personal salvation, view the Bible as the word of God, and seek to share their faith with others. *Christians* is a term that describes everyone who follows Jesus Christ; Christians are "Christ-followers." As such, evangelicals are a subgroup of Christians who reside within many denominations: there are evangelical Presbyterians,

Methodists, Baptists, and even Roman Catholics. Some entire denominations define themselves as evangelical (the Evangelical Free Church, for example), although this is the exception. Many independent Protestant congregations consider themselves evangelical; the phrase *Bible Church* is a give-away.

In addition, the term *Christian media* is used throughout these volumes to refer to the larger grouping of all media claimed to be Christian by one or another Christian group—including Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant media ("mainline" Protestants being those who would not describe themselves as evangelicals). The term *evangelical media* refers to media that evangelicals consider their own media. Along the way, authors refer to "non-Christian" media as "mainstream media" rather than "secular media" to avoid making knee-jerk or superficial judgments about media that do not seem to be very religious, at least on the surface. The idea that particular media are "Christian" and others are merely "secular" does not work very well for understanding the real world. It simplistically suggests that "Christian" media are entirely godly while "secular" media are entirely godless. Using *mainstream* opens up rather than closes off a discussion about how evangelicals are using popular culture and media for spiritual purposes.

Organization of the Three Volumes

In Volume 1, authors focus on evangelicals' use of electronic media in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, specifically, film, radio and television, and the Internet. Because evangelicals emphasize *evangelization*, they have been among the world's earliest and most innovative users of media, from the printing press to the personal computer and just about everything in-between. Films about Jesus are among the most significant means through which mainstream culture has formed impressions of Jesus Christ and learned about the gospel story. Evangelical interest in film has spurred the development of the academic study of theology and film, birthed several institutes and programs at universities devoted to the subject matter, hatched dozens of popular books for popular consumption, and, in the process, further promoted the role of the "evangelical" critic in American society. Several chapters in Volume 1 describe the history and development of evangelicals in the North American film history and illustrate several models and approaches evangelicals use to critique and interpret film.

Other chapters in Volume 1 describe how evangelicals were some of the earliest radio and television broadcast pioneers in the United States. In the

1950s, television allowed Graham to "preach to more people in one night on TV than perhaps [the Apostle] Paul did in his whole lifetime."[11] In the 1970s and 1980s, evangelicals were among the first to push forward with satellite technology. Today, evangelicals are among the first to use the Internet to form cyberchurches, build online gaming communities, and experiment with the use of social media.

In short, few media bear witness to the evangelical impulse to spread the gospel to all nations as clearly as electronic media. More important perhaps, in the popular mind evangelicals and electronic media are inextricably linked. As the chapters in Volume 1 demonstrate, this linkage comes with its own unique set of benefits and burdens for evangelicals.

In Volume 2, authors address the areas of literature, popular art, music, and merchandise. Evangelicals are known for being people of the "Book"—the Bible—so their love for literature should come as little surprise. Since World War II, religious book sales have increased dramatically, with the 1970s producing religious blockbusters such as *The Late Great Planet Earth* that helped promote evangelicalism for a time. Today, best-selling evangelical cross-over titles such as *The Purpose Driven Life*, *The Shack*, and the *Left Behind* Series, to name a few, demonstrate the ongoing significance of this medium for evangelical cultural engagement.

Volume 2 further demonstrates how the explosion of popular art and music among evangelicals owes much to the Jesus Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, which helped to create the Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) industry and simultaneously provide new inroads for evangelicals into mainstream popular culture. Today, CCM is a thriving industry, and its music appeals to evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike. Significant growth within the Christian music industry over the past three decades has helped to promote an evangelical popular culture based on commercialism that in some cases elevates consumer tastes above good theology. The growth of Christian music and merchandise of all kinds further demonstrates the role of evangelical consumption communities in the production of popular culture. Although consumption communities can help strengthen individuals' faith, they also run the risk of commercial exploitation of spiritual desires. Chapters at the end of Volume 2, devoted to the Jesus merchandise phenomenon, Christian candy, and advertising, highlight evangelicals' consumeristic impulse in the name of evangelism, edification, and entertainment.

Finally, in Volume 3, authors explore public figures, popular press, places, and events that demonstrate the ways evangelicals create, consume,

and critique popular culture. As the opening chapters in Volume 3 demonstrate, evangelicals remain one of the most powerful political blocs in the nation and continue to influence elections at the local, state, and national levels. Evangelicals who run for office or serve as public figures tend to draw significant press coverage that regularly highlights mainstream press bias against evangelicals and existing religious tensions among Americans. Evangelicals, fed up with mainstream coverage, often turn to their own brand of journalism that provides cultural commentary from biblical perspectives. Chapters on Charles M. Sheldon's Jesus newspaper and evangelical magazines highlight the prominent role that the evangelical press has played in upholding evangelicalism and transforming mainstream culture. Furthermore, several chapters in Volume 3 illustrate that many leading evangelical figures are evangelical celebrities known for their megachurches or broadcast ministries, music careers, or politics. Although these public figures promote the causes of evangelicalism and provide support and encouragement to the faithful, they sometimes become embroiled in scandals that expose the dark side of the intersection between religion and popular culture.

Chapters toward the end of Volume 3 highlight several key evangelical movements and events that are less publicized but nonetheless significant in terms of showcasing evangelical influence in mainstream culture. Although the Jesus Movement is referenced throughout Volume 2, an entire chapter is devoted to it in Volume 3. Leading evangelical women and their national movements are also highlighted, along with lesser-known evangelical film festivals, theme parks, and theatrical events. By the late mid-1980s, evangelical festivals, tourist sites, and theaters were regular destinations in the Midwest and on both coasts. The Jesus Movement had clearly succeeded in promoting a growing comfort among evangelicals with such "worldly" amusements and entertainments.

Key Themes of Popular Culture Engagement among Evangelicals

To help the reader navigate the diverse topics and conclusions spread across the fifty-four chapters that comprise these three volumes, I present several key themes that emerge regardless of the medium, genre, style, or group being discussed. The following themes are by no means intended to be exhaustive or represent every nuance in evangelical popular culture expression in the United States; rather, they are intended to provide a backdrop for the more in-depth analysis of the artifacts, phenomena, and events that appear in the individual chapters.

Contemporary Evangelical Popular Culture Is Grounded in Historical Precedent

The relationship between evangelicals and the broader society is often called the "Christ and Culture" paradox.[12] How should followers of Jesus Christ relate to the world around them and even to their own churches and local communities? Put another way, how should Christians live *in* the world without becoming fully *of* the world (see John 17:14–16)?

These contemporary "Christ and Culture" questions have ancient roots that many evangelicals draw upon in their conversations about popular culture. The main issue for the early Christian Church was how to relate Jesus's teachings to mainstream Roman and tribal Jewish culture. Early Christians discussed whether they should go to Roman games and theater, dance at "non-Christian" festivals, or read Aristotle's "pagan" philosophy. The Apostle Paul, writing letters to early churches endorsing Christian "freedom" against excessive legalism, also cautioned that even though most cultural "things" were permissible, not all of them were "beneficial" for community (1 Cor. 10:23).

The dilemma today includes not just how to engage "secular" theater and books but also how to engage new media such as social networking websites, podcasting, and high-tech worship. Evangelicals face a dizzying array of media and popular culture, from high-tech Bible theme parks to fantasy computer games to intense public relations campaigns for political candidates and megachurch celebrities. Because many of the same arguments used in the early Church are still used today to support or condemn certain forms of evangelical cultural engagement, authors in these volumes were asked to situate their contemporary cases in historical contexts. This allows readers not only to make important connections deep within evangelicals' past but also to predict future modes of engagement.

Evangelical Criticism of Popular Culture Tends to Be Moralistic or Analytical

Broadly speaking, apart from evangelical groups that outrightly reject popular culture and those that accept it with few limitations, regardless of the media or popular culture, most North American evangelicals demonstrate two types of criticism: *moralistic* and *analytical*. The work of both types is illustrated and critiqued across the three volumes.

For some evangelicals, criticism of popular culture tends to be *moralistic*.[13] Such criticism is usually not grounded in a full review of the particular event

or pop culture artifact, its context, or its apparent meaning for a given audience. This criticism appears rules based at times (e.g., all R-rated movies, even *The Passion of the Christ*, should be avoided) and often says more about the critic's personal biases or his or her denomination's fears than about the Christian metanarrative.To avoid the negative influences of an ungodly media environment, many evangelicals simply recommend avoiding morally questionable content (mainly sex, violence, and profanity); boycotting media with the most offensive content; and choosing family-friendly programming. Not surprisingly, evangelicals who support moralistic criticism tend to promote or create Christian versions for nearly every form of popular media as a way to teach, encourage, and strengthen faith among believers.

For other evangelicals, criticism of popular culture tends to be *analytical*, that is, exegetical or hermeneutical.[14] This criticism includes close readings of popular myths found in popular media. Analytical critics first define the event or media content, then explain its context, and then identify a dominant reading or interpretation. Finally, they look for "points of tension, synergy, allegory, and irony between the TV series' [or other stories'] meaning and Christian faith." This cultural critique is "lower criticism with a higher purpose, or using a religious metanarrative to exegete the patterns and meaning of mass media's mythological formulas."[15] Rather than placing the Church in opposition to society as moralistic critics tend to do, critics operating within this mode tend to see the Church in dialogue with the world. Put another way, God not only gave Christians the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20) but also a mandate to form and inform culture, which calls them to redeem not just individuals but cultural institutions, including the media. Since "all truth is God's truth"—as the popular Christian saying goes—evangelicals should search for faith-affirming interpretations among all types of popular media content. Analytic critics are the first to write books that teach Christians how to "find God" or "look for God" in popular culture of all kinds—from *LOST* to *Harry Potter*, *The Simpsons*, or *The Sopranos*.[16] Such criticism has helped to elevate the role of the evangelical critic among evangelicals and mainstream communities.

Both types of evangelical critics do criticism with one foot in mainstream popular culture and the other firmly grounded in their basic Christian beliefs. Whether dealing with comic books, video games, music, or film, both types try to challenge popular notions of truth embedded in popular culture while asserting their own biblical notions of truth. And both support critical functions of Christian communication and the Church in the world, including evangelism, teaching, and cultural critique.

Yet in assuming that most mainstream popular culture is evil at worst, and unedifying at best, moralistic critics tend to be insensitive to the ways individuals can receive valuable religious truths. They also tend to voice somewhat narrow concerns about media content while ignoring media's promotion of racial and gender stereotypes and consumerism, for instance. Analytical critics, on the other hand, address broader concerns about media content and social institutions yet struggle with walking a fine line between understanding the world and sacrificing good theology. On the plus side, analytical critics are significantly more likely than moralistic critics to consider how technologies are value-laden human constructions that shape the messages they send as well as the people who use them.Several chapters in Volume 1, in particular, address various approaches evangelicals have toward technology and the consequences for evangelical criticism of adopting a particular view of technology.

Evangelical Media "Preaches to the Choir"

Despite their good intentions to reach non-evangelicals, evangelical popular culture is consumed mainly by individuals from the in-group. With notable exceptions, evangelicals often create their own gospel ghettos. Christian books are consumed mainly by those who are "born again," and Christian television attracts overwhelmingly older, already committed evangelicals. Nearly all evangelical magazines and newspapers speak to specific audiences intensely interested in their content. In fact, most evangelical media stay afloat from the support they get from evangelicals audiences, not advertisers. Granted, such media often provide important instruction and cultural critique not found in mainstream media, but it is mainly for Christians.

The downside to all of this, of course, is that in an effort to maintain audiences, evangelical media often self-propagandize, telling already-loyal viewers what they want to hear. Like mainstream media, evangelical media must transform their brands into "destinations," serving their targeted audience "better and in more ways than anyone else."[17] But in preaching to the choir, Christian media tend to promote ideological divisions already present among Christians. In the final analysis, perhaps the most significant impact of evangelical media has been to make various evangelical groups and denominations more cohesive, with shared identities and common understandings of who they are and how they should relate to mainstream culture.

There are exceptions, of course: evangelical painters (Thomas Kinkade), musicians (U2, Brandi, Johnny Cash), actors (Patricia Heaton, Zachary Levi, Tony Hale), and public figures and politicians (Jimmy Carter, George W. Bush, Sarah Palin) who reach beyond the in-group with great success. Some evangelical literature has reached well beyond the in-group, finding a place on best-selling mainstream book lists across the country. The history of evangelicalism in the United States is filled with such examples of evangelicals with "mass" appeal. Although most evangelicals who reach outside the in-group tend to avoid the label "evangelical" because of its negative political connotations, they remain committed to their faith. Such outliers seem to be on the rise among younger evangelicals today (just as they were among the younger evangelicals of the Jesus Movement), and they make for interesting case studies in several chapters across the three volumes.

Evangelicals Avoid Self-Criticism about Their Media

Evangelicals are quick to criticize mainstream media but not always their own media. As explained in Volume 3, the biggest evangelical scandals of the 1980s and 1990s were first reported by mainstream journalists, even though the evangelical press knew about them much earlier. Evangelicals also tend to avoid self-criticism while hurling insults at non-conformists even within their own ranks. Magazines on the evangelical right accuse magazines on the evangelical left of being overly concerned about social justice to the exclusion of other important social issues such as abortion, while evangelical magazines on the left accuse those on the right of imposing their views on every else.

And it seems that many innovative evangelical media artists receive more criticism from insiders than from mainstream audiences. In the process, they get marginalized, pushed underground, or accused of "selling out" or "watering down" their message to appeal to wider audiences. Evangelicals who question the efforts of a popular media "ministry" themselves can become the victims of harsh and often unfair condemnation. As a result, it is difficult to find sustained evangelical community discourse about media and popular culture.

Evangelical Popular Culture Lacks Originality and Artistic Quality

Although evangelicals historically were among the most creative artists, writers, dramatists, and so forth, few of today's North American

evangelicals set the trend in mainstream culture. Instead, most tend to follow or mimic mainstream culture and offer a Christian version of just about everything mainstream—does GodTube sound familiar? As one evangelical writer observed, "If imitation is the highest form of flattery, then Christians have become pop culture's most devoted admirers."[18]

Creative or *cutting-edge* would not be words used to describe many evangelical productions. Serious evangelical films are sometimes a joke (although not to most evangelicals). Many evangelical websites are amateurish, with poor grammar and bad graphics. What about the sets used on some evangelical television programs? It is probably fair to say that evangelical productions not only suffer from a lack of originality but also from a lack of artistic quality.

What explains this lack of originality and artistic quality? It could be argued that evangelicals' overemphasis on evangelization as the main goal of all media use has contributed to confusion about the purpose of art and entertainment in human life. For some evangelicals, the only real justification for popular art, including television and film, is evangelism. There is little room for the idea that art might be prophetic, that is, art that is devoted to social justice in that it willingly battles untruths and "lies of corrupt regimes."[19] The measuring stick for good art among evangelicals often becomes how well the particular work sets forth the plan of salvation or points to Christ as "the answer" to any number of (usually individual) problems.

Despite such low marks in the areas of originality and quality, several evangelical stand-outs have risen, and continue to rise, above the norm. *VeggieTales*, for instance, discussed in Volume 1, set new standards for children's animation and enjoyed several years as a top-rated NBC children's show. *Touched by an Angel*, also discussed in Volume 1, was a top-rated show on CBS for many years, led by evangelical writer/producer Martha Williamson, and opened the door for other faith-based programming. Contemporary Christian Music, the topic of several chapters in Volume 2, once criticized for low production quality, has now reached the same production quality as most mainstream music. Other evangelical stand-outs are represented in these volumes in the areas of film, literature, journalism, and popular art.

Evangelical Media Lack Ethnic Diversity

A significant percentage of evangelical popular culture is a Caucasian affair. That is not to say evangelicals are not African American or they do not create, critique, or consume what others would consider evangelical

popular culture. African Americans such as T. D. Jakes, for instance, rank at the top of many lists of evangelical leaders and authors. Since the twentieth century, black evangelists have been on the cutting edge of using media in ministry. But for the most part, African Americans are underrepresented in evangelical popular culture outside of two key areas: Contemporary Christian Music and Black Gospel music.[20]

Although North American evangelicals include many ethnic groups and races, audiences would hardly know it. Even more than their mainstream counterparts, evangelical media are owned and operated primarily by Caucasians. These three volumes correspondingly say very little about African American, Hispanic, and Asian media. Is it perhaps because many African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians do not use *evangelical* to identify themselves or their "Christian" media? Whatever the cause, it will not likely last. A large part of the growth of evangelicalism in North America is especially among Hispanic and Asian populations. It is expected that evangelical entrepreneurs within these groups will increasingly launch media, as is already happening among Hispanics in some major cities.

In closing, to trace the history of American evangelicalism through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is to observe the radio, television, literature, and political involvement of evangelicals. How evangelicals negotiated the "Christ and Culture" paradox in early theater, film, radio, television, music, and popular art offers special insight into the depth and breadth of evangelical modes of cultural engagement and expression. The contents of these volumes demonstrate how evangelicals' personal and communal identities are closely tied to the media they use, the media celebrities they admire, and the artists they appreciate. These volumes further demonstrate that American evangelicals take seriously their challenge to be in the world but not of it, to form and transform culture for the Kingdom of God. As religion and popular culture continue to converge, and as popular culture increasingly becomes a place where the spiritual and transcendent meaningfully work, evangelicals appear uniquely positioned to play a leading role.

Notes

1. For example, see Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993); and Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*

(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001). Later works in this same vein of scholarship include Stewart M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark, eds., *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); and Peter Horsfield, Mary Hess, and Adán M. Medrano, eds., *Belief in Media: Cultural Perspectives on Media and Christianity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), to name only a few.

2. Andrew M. Greeley, *God in Popular Culture* (Chicago: Thomas More, 1988), 9.

3. Some of Noll's significant work includes *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992); *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995); *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1997); *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000); and *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004).

4. Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

5. Quentin J. Schultze, *Christianity and the Mass Media in America: Toward a Democratic Accommodation* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2003).

6. For example, see Nancy T. Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987) and *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: Free Press, 1994) and *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and the Quest for a New Community* (New York: The Free Press, 1996).

7. See, for example, Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, and Shane Lee and Phillip L. Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

8. Jeff Sharlet, *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008); and Kevin Roose, *The Unlikely Disciple: A Sinner's Semester at America's Holiest University* (New York: Grand Central, 2009).

9. Daniel Radosh, *Rapture Ready!: Adventures in the Parallel Universe of Christian Pop Culture* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 19.

10. Billy Graham, quoted in Terry Mattingly, "Who or What Is an Evangelical Christian," in *Understanding Evangelical Media: The Changing Face of Christian Communication*, eds. Quentin J. Schultze and Robert H. Woods Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 21.

11. Billy Graham, "The Future of TV Evangelism," *TV Guide* 31, no. 10 (1983): 8.

12. See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951). For a critical update on the *"Christ and Culture"* perspective, see Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2007).

13. See Schultze, *Christianity and the Mass Media in America*, 201, for a discussion or moralistic criticism.

14. Ibid., 199 for an explanation of analytical criticism.

15. Ibid., 200–201.

16. For example, see John Ankerberg and Dillon Burroughs, *What Can Be Found in LOST: Insights on God and the Meaning of Life* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2008); Connie Neal, *The Gospel According to Harry Potter* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2002); David Dark, *Everyday Apocalypse: The Sacred Revealed in Radiohead, The Simpsons, and Other Pop Culture Icons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2002); Chris Seay, *The Gospel According to Tony Soprano: An Unauthorized Look into the Soul of TV's Top Mob Boss and His Family* (Lake Mary, FL: Relevant, 2002). More generally, see John Wiley Nelson, *Your God Is Alive and Well and Appearing in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976); Kenneth A. Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1989); Richard J. Mouw, *Consulting the Faithful: What Christian Intellectuals Can Learn from Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994); Rodney Clapp, *Border Crossings: Christian Trespasses on Popular Culture and Public Affairs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2000); Craig N. Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003); and William D. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2007).

17. Ray Richmond, "Thinking outside the Box," *Hollywood Reporter*, October 12, 2006, S-1.

18. Skye Jethani, *The Divine Commodity: Discovering a Faith Beyond Consumer Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 19.

19. Grace Emmerson, ed., *Prophets and Poets: A Companion to the Prophetic Books of the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 16.

20. See Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). Walton explains that even African American media theorists and religious historians, in general, have ignored African American broadcasters in their scholarship.

Chapter Summaries for Volume 1

Chapter 1: "A History of Evangelicals in North American Film Culture," by Terrence R. Lindvall. Evangelicals entered the film industry with a mixture of hope and suspicion, a schizophrenic attitude that would recurrently mark their participation with the medium of film. This chapter aims at tracing the trajectory of the involvement of evangelical Christians in the Hollywood film industry from the silent era to contemporary cinema, investigating both those prone to censure and condemn the film industry and others who sought to translate their faith into celluloid sermons.

Chapter 2: "Evangelical Approaches to Film Criticism," by Roy M. Anker. Only in the last several decades have North American evangelicals, and conservative Protestants as a whole, begun to engage—albeit unevenly—to a significant degree with film. While both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism in the United States long regarded film with caution, fearing moral and religious subversion and endorsing prior censorship, evangelicals alone overwhelmingly categorically rejected it, as they did most elements of modernism. This posture persisted until the 1970s when new formats changed distribution and made categorical rejection untenable. Disputes on the power and role of film continue, dividing into four distinct views: enthusiasts, moderates, rejectionists, and academics, who try to understand the discussion and film itself, especially how it relates to traditional theologies.

Chapter 3: "Evangelicals' Passion for *The Passion of the Christ*," by John L. Pauley and Amy King. Early in the history of commercial motion pictures, conservative Protestants often assigned films shown in local theaters to the category of "worldly" entertainment that pious believers should avoid. Over time, evangelicals altered their opinions. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association produced films like *The Restless Ones* (1965) and *The Hiding Place* (1975), among others, specifically for screening in movie

theaters. In 1981, new ground was broken as a mainstream Hollywood film, *Chariots of Fire*, was marketed specifically to evangelicals. But that effort was small in comparison to the efforts of Mel Gibson and his production company in marketing *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) to conservative Christians. This chapter explores the efforts of Gibson and his company to market his film to Christians and how evangelicals promoted and championed this commercial Hollywood film.

Chapter 4: "Evangelicals and Film: What Moviegoers Can Learn from the Bible," by Robert K. Johnston. Theological interpretation of film by evangelicals has historically suffered from the same disease that has plagued Protestant biblical interpretation since the Reformation—an overly focused concentration on the "facts" of the text. This chapter uses the present criticism surfacing in biblical studies regarding the historical-critical method, as well as a reassessment of the medieval four-fold method of interpretation, to explore how a more robust use of the imagination might benefit theology and film criticism. Exploring what a movie's "thick viewing" might entail, this chapter concludes with two or three filmic test cases.

Chapter 5: "Looking along the Line between Good and Evil: *Crash* and Evangelical Approaches to Film," by Mark Allan Steiner. This chapter offers a reading of the film *Crash* (2005) that shows how approaching the film from an evangelical perspective can yield insights missed in many other analyses of the film, and how the film speaks back to evangelical theological and cultural engagement issues. Such a reading of *Crash* allows for a renewed appraisal of how some evangelicals have dysfunctionally approached popular art and popular culture as well as of how mainstream popular art can function in an edifying way in evangelical communities.

Chapter 6: "Reviewing the Christian Film Review: Interpretive Critiques of *A Serious Man*," by James Y. Trammell and Daniel A. Stout. This chapter explores media criticism produced from three distinct Christian interpretive communities to help us better understand the role religious belief plays in interpreting and understanding media. In particular, it analyzes the interpretative strategies used by certain evangelical film reviewers to review the Joel and Ethan Coen film *A Serious Man* (2009) to explore what these strategies reveal about how their disparate approaches to the Christian faith influence how they interpret the film. In so doing, the chapter seeks to expand our knowledge of religious media literacy and the ways in which interpretive communities understand texts.

Chapter 7: "Air of the King: Evangelicals and Radio," by Mark Ward Sr. Though televangelism has inspired much scholarship, religious radio has attracted less attention. But because radio was the first "new media," there is much to learn from evangelicals' encounter with it. As this chapter describes, the evangelical movement has been shaped by its use of radio. The chapter frames the history of religious radio by identifying five distinct eras and describing their major figures, programming standards, and business models and the impacts of technological and regulatory developments.

Chapter 8: "Evangelicals and the Power of Television," by Quentin J. Schultze. Protestants have dominated religious television from the earliest days of the medium. American Protestants, especially evangelicals, have seen television as a particularly powerful medium for establishing in the United States the Puritan ideal of a Christian "city upon a hill." The history of evangelical television suggests, however, that television's actual impact has not been so much to establish such a "heavenly city" as to foster both centrifugal and centripetal movements. The *centrifugal* role of evangelical television has been to create new evangelical divisions and tensions. The *centripetal* role of evangelical television has been to homogenize evangelicalism as a fairly amorphous religion—a generalized symbol of itself and a set of stereotypes for the wider public. In other words, the resulting evangelical city upon a hill is actually a fusion of distinct neighborhoods, on the one hand, and a symbolic metropolis, on the other.

Chapter 9: "Assessing the Value of Devotional Television," by William J. Brown. Every year, cable systems and satellite companies pay compulsory royalties to the U.S. Copyright Office for the right to retransmit television programs that appear on Federal Communications Commission (FCC)–licensed broadcast stations. These hundreds of millions of dollars of royalty fees are then distributed by the Copyright Royalty Board (CRB). This chapter provides a history of devotional television viewing from 1990 through 2005 within a larger sociocultural context of Christian television programming in the United States. An argument is advanced, which was presented to the CRB's three-judge panel in formal federal court in the fall of 2010, indicating the distribution of royalties by the CRB to devotional television producers—many of whom are evangelicals—should be substantially increased. Implications of this case for future providers of devotional television programming are discussed.

Chapter 10: "God's Showrunners: Evangelicals and American Network Television," by Craig N. Detweiler. While many evangelicals criticize and boycott network television, a few committed Christians have endeavored

to create original programming, serving as writers, producers, and even showrunners for network television series. For example, Wheaton College graduate Coleman Luck grafted his understanding of redemption into the CBS drama *The Equalizer*. On *Touched by an Angel*, Martha Williamson offered viewers a weekly encounter with divine intervention. Dave Alan Johnson drew upon his evangelical roots to create PAX TV shows like *Doc* and *Sue Thomas F. B. Eye*. Evangelical Michael Warren produced the anchors in ABC's "Thank God It's Friday" line up, David McFadzean was showrunner on *Home Improvement*, and Sheryl J. Anderson found working as co–executive producer on *Charmed* to be a wonderful opportunity to explore dark themes and issues of the supernatural. This survey of American network television demonstrates how evangelicals have moved from the margins of Hollywood to the mainstream.

Chapter 11: "Evangelical Television Criticism through a Half Century of *Christianity Today* Cartoons," by John P. Ferré. Throughout the twentieth century, American evangelicals were among the earliest adopters of new media. But their enthusiasm for innovative channels of communication was limited to religious applications; their suspicion of secular media, particularly film and television, was persistent and strong. Distinguishing form and content, evangelicals of all kinds have preached resistance to secular media, which they regarded as seductive and morally and ideologically depraved.

Chapter 12: "*The Colbert Report:* Humor and Irreverence for Young Adult Evangelicals," by Jill Dierberg and Lynn Schofield Clark. This chapter explores how Stephen Colbert and the Comedy Central cable television program *The Colbert Report* have gained popularity among American evangelicals. In an analysis of the humor that often turns on the distances between evangelicalism and fundamentalism and occasionally highlights the arrogance of intellectual secularism, the authors argue that, through irreverence, *The Colbert Report* and the brand of Stephen Colbert create a space for evangelicals to position themselves in the mainstream of American views, distancing themselves from anti-intellectual fundamentalism as well as from secular intellectuals who speak authoritatively on religion.

Chapter 13: "Evangelicals Find God in *LOST*," by Paul A. Creasman. The ABC television show *LOST* was known for its ambiguous, intertextual narrative. Evangelicals, once fearful of ambiguity, now gravitate toward such ambiguous mainstream narratives, using them as entry points for discussions about their faith. This chapter examines three popular tradebooks that conduct such evangelistic critiques of *LOST*. The chapter reveals that

while evangelicals may be more accepting of ambiguity as a communication technique, they struggle to communicate their own values using it.

Chapter 14: "*VeggieTales*," by Janine W. Dunlap and Hillary Warren. *VeggieTales*, the children's video series that featured computer-animated vegetables telling Bible stories and morality plays, represented not only significant advances in the early use of computer animation but also a new kind of Christian media company—Big Idea, Inc. In seeking the broadest possible market while remaining focused on a values-based agenda, the company shaped both its message and its corporate relationships to compete in the competitive media landscape. This chapter examines the history of Big Idea, Inc., its business strategies, and what faith-based media companies can learn from Big Idea's experiences about producing popular media offerings that will succeed in the mainstream.

Chapter 15: "Evangelical Churches' Use of Commercial Entertainment Media in Worship," by Ellen E. Moore. This chapter explores the use of mainstream entertainment media—including Hollywood films, commercials, and popular television shows—in American evangelical churches. The work first documents the use of mainstream media in several churches over the span of several years, providing a detailed portrait of how the media permeate and frame church sermons. The chapter then addresses the potential conflict of weaving mainstream culture—via media—into religious messages by asking if churchgoers are hailed as churchgoers or as consumers.

Chapter 16: "Evangelicals and Video Games," by Kevin P. Schut. Evangelicals have always had a mixed and complex relationship with popular culture. In some senses, video games are no exception. However, in spite of their impact, the evangelical response to this new medium has been decidedly slower to develop than with other media. Despite a large population of evangelical gamers, evangelical success in the mainstream industry is rather unusual, and there is not yet much of an alternative market for explicitly Christian games. For the time being, then, evangelicals have relatively little influence in the burgeoning game culture.

Chapter 17: "Evangelicals and the Internet," by Heidi A. Campbell. Over the past two decades since the Internet went mainstream, it has been embraced by a variety of religious groups, with many early adopters and innovators being evangelical Christians. This chapter explores the rise of evangelical engagement with the Internet and the range of reactions voiced by evangelicals towards this media technology. Through an overview of Christian use of the Internet, key concerns and forms of appropriations

of evangelical innovators and Internet users are highlighted. Attention is specifically given to the rise of e-vangelism as an example of the evangelicals' tradition of appropriating media within a distinctive frame for specific religious outcomes.

Chapter 18: "GodTube," by Mara Einstein. YouTube's success spawned a number of copycat video-sharing sites; GodTube proved to be the most successful of these. GodTube provided a mix of religious (primarily Christian) videos, social networking tools, and even a prayer wall. Venture capitalists later bought GodTube, changed the name to tangle.com, and rebranded the site as family-friendly rather than strictly religious. The company was resold in 2010 when the move away from its evangelical roots turned out to be an utter failure. Using the history of GodTube as a case study, this chapter presents the transformation of this website from Christian-owned and evangelically focused to corporately owned and profit-based. It examines how evangelicals produce non-traditional popular culture for religious purposes while also commenting on the intersection of media, marketing, commerce, and faith in the evolving world of digital media.

Chapter 19: "Evangelicals and Social Media," by Samuel E. Ebersole. Twitter and Facebook, as well as other leading social media applications, are being embraced by the Church at an astonishing rate. Microblogging and status updates are being used for a wide range of tasks including brand promotion, organization communication, devotional prompts, and evangelistic outreach. This chapter examines how evangelicals are using social media to create online communities and interactive live events for religious purposes. It also addresses some of the promises and pitfalls that emerge when a subculture based on tradition adopts new digital technology. Once again the Church must grapple with questions regarding the proper role of technology and what it means to support and encourage the community of believers.

Chapter 20: "Evangelical Perspectives on Technology," by Clifford G. Christians. Media technologies are changing dramatically. These changes need to be understood correctly for the proper approach to popular culture. Instrumentalism is the traditional view that technology is neutral and reduced to engineering. Philosophers and religious thinkers have developed a human-centered theory as an alternative. Taking account of this new perspective, four evangelical thinkers have developed non-instrumentalist theories of technology. These theorists do not reduce media technology to instruments of the Great Commission but see them more broadly as agents of culture. This chapter explores the effects of such non-instrumentalist views on how evangelicals produce and critique media.

Chapter 1

A History of Evangelicals in North American Film Culture

Terrence R. Lindvall

While working in urban slums and singing hymns on street corners, Lois Weber wanted to be a missionary. She labored as an evangelist in the inner cities of New York City and Philadelphia in the early 1900s until she discovered a new way of spreading the gospel. Stumbling into the world of moving pictures, she rose to become the first American woman to direct and produce feature films. In particular, she found that she could preach just as effectively through this silent visual medium, crafting sermons out of images. And preach she did.

With missionary zeal, Weber sought to preach the gospel and reform society. In a speech to the Woman's City Club of Los Angeles, she reflected that a medium of voiceless language (film) would enhance her church work among immigrants. Weber followed the call to produce missionary pictures, following her uncle's advice that the "theatrical profession needed a missionary; he suggested that the best way to reach them was to become one of them, so I went on the stage filled with a great desire to convert my fellowman. I can preach to my heart's content; and with the opportunity to write the play, act the leading role, and direct the entire production. If my message fails to reach someone I can only blame myself."[1] As she envisioned cinema's potential to dramatize a moral issue, she found the most strategic outlet for her emotions and ideals.

Her social problem films ran the gamut from the anti-saloon film *Hop, the Devil's Brew* (1916) to a powerful anti-abortion and pro–birth control film, *Where Are My Children?* (1916), dramatically showing the abhorrent act of destroying unborn babies by selfish parents. Historian Kay Sloan described the fountain of Weber's thought as springing from "a curious combination of the Progressive notion of 'uplift,' optimistic reformism,

and a Victorian sense of religious responsibility."[2] Although an evangelistic filmmaker, she did not shy away from the corruption of her church. In particular, she directed a film titled *Hypocrites* (1915) that exposed the pomposity and selfishness of a seemingly pious congregation, even as Truth, represented as a nude woman, walks among them. Weber walked among her contemporary filmmakers, a bold evangelical silently preaching truth.

Evangelicals entered the film industry with a mixture of hope and suspicion, a schizophrenic attitude that would recurrently mark their participation with the medium of film. This chapter aims at tracing the trajectory of the involvement of evangelical Christians—those seeking to translate their faith into celluloid sermons in the film industry—from the silent era to contemporary cinema.

Many Christians point to an Episcopal priest and amateur chemist, the rector Hannibal Goodwin, who in 1877 filed a patent for a transparent, flexible celluloid that would make the film medium a reality. Other churchmen would extol his invention and call for others to imitate his creative means of evangelism. For example, in 1916, the Reverend Chester S. Bucher stated the following:

> Jesus used a lost coin, a dead sparrow and a little child as object lessons. Beecher auctioned off a slave girl in a Plymouth pulpit. "Wilberforce made them shudder" when he held up the chains of Africans and dropped them with a clanking thud on the floor. Why should the churches disregard this great potential asset, especially since it was a clergyman, the Rev. Hannibal Goodwin, who was the inventor of the flexible film that made motion pictures possible?[3]

The relations between silent American film and religion in general, and Christianity in particular, began tentatively but with a remarkable openness to a visionary accord. The relationship was not, as some historians have painted it, extensively negative or hostile. It was, in the early years, at worst ambivalent and at best downright optimistic.

Preaching without Words

The first blockbusters were familiar stories of the Bible, and in particular the Gospels. In Austria, filmmakers found a ready-made drama in the Oberammergau Passion Play.[4] In 1898, Pope Leo XIII granted permission for Edison's cameraman, W. K. L. Dickson, to film His Holiness at the Vatican so that his pontifical blessing could be conveyed to congregants

in America. That same year a series of religious subjects debuted in the United States. Churches frequently served as sites of sanctuary cinemas, so much so that in 1910 Pope Pius X stopped the desecrating practice of charging money for showing biblical spectaculars in Roman Catholic churches.

When films went out into the countrysides and fairgrounds, various evangelists exploited the new medium for revival services. The consensus was that the Kingdom of God had nothing to fear from this instructional and inspirational tool. In fact, a former corporate lawyer and New York journalist (two occupations of which he repented), Colonel Henry H. Hadley was converted and found that he could combine dramatic showmanship with evangelism, particularly in his obsession to illustrate the iniquities of hard liquor. In 1898, when he viewed a photo-play version of the Passion Play, Hadley obtained a copy as an illustrative accessory for his camp meetings in merry-go-round gospel tents in Atlantic City and Ocean Grove, New Jersey. Hadley prophesied that these "pictures are going to be a great force. It is the age of pictures; these moving pictures are going to be the best teachers and the best preachers in the history of the world. Mark my words: there are two things coming, prohibition and motion pictures. We must make people think above the belt."[5] Thousands attended his spectacular revivals that combined movies with music ("Ave Maria," "O Holy Night," etc.) to draw in crowds to hear and see the gospel message. It was the beginning of a movement that was to embrace the possibilities of enabling the eyes to see the wonders of God.

Passion plays baptized the medium with their holy sights and biblical scenes. Pathe Studio director Ferdinand Zecca coordinated a colored-tinted feature in the early twentieth century while Kalem Studio director Sidney Olcott's *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) generated an even greater sense of credibility with its authentic locations in Palestine and Egypt functioning as key sites of piety for both Protestant and Roman Catholic audiences. Even when trickster-producer Sigmund Lubin shot his own version of the Oberammergau drama on a Philadelphia rooftop, with the actor for Peter often on a binge and other disciples playing dice, crowds would flock to storeroom chapels to see the film. In these films one not only heard of God but also could now see Him "starring" and "making cameos" in films. Illiterate audiences around the world could be simultaneously instructed and entertained through these technological signs and wonders.

Handmaiden of Theology

During the early silent period of film when Victorian manners and mores governed much of culture, church leaders debated the dangers of "worldly amusements." While some found the theaters to be the devil's workshop and a menace (even more so in the 1920s after the Hollywood scandals), many more religious leaders commended films for beneficial church use. As early as 1910, the *Congregationalist and Christian World* periodical devoted two issues to argue a case for motion pictures as "a modern force for brotherhood."[6]

One Congregational minister and apologist, Reverend Herbert A. Jump, saw the potential of the film both to battle Satan and to articulate a vision for the Church. Jump penned a classic essay in 1911 titled "The Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture."[7] It would be the first significant document reflecting on the religious and cultural potential of film. For example, whereas numerous civic leaders were concerned with the boxing-film genre as detrimental to social order, Jump found a biblical model for such films in that the Apostle Paul had used boxing images drawn from the brutal Roman arena games to express theological ideas.

Jump recommended Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan as the ideal model for Christianity to speak to all people. He saw it as a dramatic sermon-story that shared certain characteristics with the motion picture. It was taken from contemporary sources, not from the Bible Jesus used. Like the western, it contained violence and provided an exciting robber adventure. And like the later films of the "good/bad man" William Hart, Jesus's parable introduced morally dubious examples—such as hypocritical religious leaders—and left them intact even at the end of the narrative. In fact, regarding the robbers themselves, Jump observed that "not only did the story give a most realistic description of precisely how they perpetrated the cowardly crime of violence, but it leaves them victorious in their wickedness, scurrying off with their booty, unrepentant of their sins, probably chuckling at the folly of the traveler."[8] It only needed a zesty new title such as *The Adventures of the Highwaymen* to sell and draw in the boys who would not visit Sunday school classes.

The year 1919 proved to be a momentous year for the emergence of a Christian film industry. In Chicago, the Society for Visual Education was underwritten in large part by public utilities magnate Harley L. Clarke. Through its official trade journal, *The Educational Screen*, it was able to propagate an infectious vision that attracted progressive educators and clergy. Simultaneously, Eastman Kodak offered the Presbyterian Church

2,000 projectors so that they might learn to exhibit their own films. In the summer of 1919, Methodists held their centenary in Columbus, Ohio, and converted hundreds of ministers into visual exhibitionists. Visited by such film luminaries as Paramount's Adolph Zukor and home-grown Methodist D. W. Griffith, Methodists took the new tools back to their churches, so much so that Sinclair Lewis would satirize the church's infatuation with new communication technology in his classic novel *Elmer Gantry*.

Various religious groups were primed to produce religious products. The *Christian Herald* magazine, for example, exploited its pages to puff and promote a fledgling industry. The *Literary Digest* suggested that the Church was "wresting another weapon from the devil and converting it to its own purpose."[9] By 1926 the *Literary Digest* pronounced that "the Motion Picture either can be made of assistance to the Church, as a vehicle for religious, educational and diversionary propaganda, or it may be left as an opposing weapon for satanic mischief."[10] Film was becoming a handmaiden to theology.

However, given the Hollywood scandals of the early 1920s, the invention of radio (a more affordable mass medium and one geared for preaching), and the innovation of talking pictures that made film production too expensive for churches, significant Christian filmmaking began to hibernate for over a decade. By the end of the silent era, movies had been abandoned to such "satanic mischief."[11]

One woman, Mary Beattie Brady, director of the Harmon Foundation, envisioned the 1930s as a new era for the Church and moving pictures. The Harmon Foundation had been set up by a wealthy real-estate tycoon in the late 1920s to investigate how religious groups could use motion pictures. Because denominations had largely retreated from motion picture production, the Harmon Foundation was the one organization that championed the use of film in Protestant circles. For Brady, the usefulness of film to the religious field had become clear. Despite its early entry as a novelty and its strategic use by Protestants to get people to Sunday evening services, it had proved a dismal and disheartening failure due to inadequate equipment and lack of suitable products. Brady envisioned more creative approaches in the religious appropriation of film. Denominational visual education boards, the use of moving pictures in missions, academic courses, journal columns, and emphases on religious education through visual means all made clear a persuasive case for optimism.[12]

Hearing of the Word

Religious filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille released his silent classic feature, *King of Kings*, in 1927. The Hollywood product was commandeered by the Christians who saw its potential in communicating the gospel story around the world. Financed by New York philanthropist Jeremiah Milbank's Cinema Corporation of America, the blockbuster film illustrated familiar Bible stories, incorporated numerous hymns in its presentation, and washed away fears of films. Its impact proved monumental, even evoking viewer responses as many testified that whenever they prayed, they saw the face of H. B. Warner, the actor who played Jesus.[13]

The 1930s gave birth to an international movement of missionary films, with Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and others traversing the globe to capture the stories and needs of exotic lands and people. The films not only sought to raise awareness of the spiritual and medical needs of other people but also to obtain funding for missionary endeavors.[14]

***The King of Kings* (1927), directed by Cecil B. DeMille. Shown (on right): H. B. Warner (as Jesus Christ), Dorothy Cumming (as the Virgin Mary), Jacqueline Logan (as Mary Magdalene). (MGM/Photofest.)**

In the mid-twentieth century, three diverse filmmakers emerged on the scene to inaugurate a tradition of evangelicals making films. Reverend James Kempe Friedrich, an Episcopal priest, sought to tell the stories of Jesus and St. Paul to a new generation of Christians. Carlos Octavia Baptista wanted to evangelize people who had never heard the gospel, making simple parable films. Irwin Moon inaugurated the Moody Science films that taught about a Creator-God, using amazing special effects such as time lapses and delighting audiences with the glories of God's natural world.

Friedrich started Cathedral Films after concluding that

> what they see impresses people more than what they merely hear. . . . [T]here are hundreds of thousands of little feet toddling over the thresholds of the theatres of America. . . . Too many of our boys and girls are growing up with no knowledge of the Bible. If I can rouse in them an interest to read the Bible, then, thank God, I shall have done something worthwhile.[15]

In 1937, as an enterprising student at Virginia Theological Seminary, Friedrich launched the first great wave of Christian filmmaking. Early experiences with Sunday school glass slides, chalkboard drawings, and flip charts animated young Friedrich's imagination. Stories of Noah and the ark or Jonah and the whale lingered in his memory. Friedrich thought he would like to retell these same stories some day in the future, especially on the movie screen.[16] He believed that film could potently communicate ideas and so wrote his senior thesis on raw material in the Acts of the Apostles. His calling was clear.

God called Friedrich into film production, a calling in which he would invest his inheritance. His first independent project, *The Great Commandment*, concerns a radical Jewish revolutionary who hears Jesus speak about loving one's enemy. Confronted by a Roman soldier, he remembers Jesus's words and chooses to show mercy. At the time, there was not an extensive church market for exhibiting films.[17] Nevertheless, Friedrich believed he could build one if he made films worth seeing. Such films would require polished professional talent, so Friedrich incorporated Cathedral Films and contracted Irving Pichel to direct his biblical films. Their work would culminate in 1945 with the beginnings of a twelve-part, black-and-white series of cliff-hanging episodes on *The Life of St. Paul*. It would be followed in the next decade with *The Living Christ*, done in color.

Most of the early Cathedral productions revolved around biblical narratives and were intentionally non-denominational so that churches from various traditions could use them without undue concern. To augment

the spare biblical narratives, Friedrich added dramatic elements and a voice-over narration to enhance the continuity. The films were remarkably entertaining, with last-minute rescues occurring as Paul would be persecuted and chased by his enemies, or shipwrecked and in danger of drowning, only to be delivered by God in the next episode.

Cathedral Films also built a viable church exhibition market by enabling churches to purchase 16mm projectors from the U.S. military after World War II. Coordinating the release of his films with the churches acquiring projectors enabled Friedrich to hatch his cinematic vision in nests he helped build.

Paralleling the undaunted vision of Friedrich, a Roman Catholic opportunist from Venezuela, Carlos Octavia Baptista, moved from exporting pianos to movie projectors. His work with movie equipment led him to realize its potential with children, and in 1939, after a spiritual epiphany, he attempted to create visual sermons for Sunday school. His first film, *The Story of a Fountain Pen*, crudely but clearly communicated that Jesus had purchased the salvation of children just as a poor fountain pen in a pawn shop was purchased and liberated. In 1942 Baptista followed his illustrated sermons with "talking head" films of famous preachers in his production company, the Scriptures Visualized Institute (SVI). One remarkable invention of Baptista and an employee, Max Kerr, was the design and manufacture of a light, portable projector in 1944. They named it the "Miracle Projector" and promised that it would function until the Second Coming.

A third venture originating immediately after the war focused upon the tension between science and religion. The Moody Institute of Science (MIS) saw its films as an effective way to penetrate mainstream institutions such as public schools and the military. The genius behind the state-of-the-art science films was Dr. Irwin Moon. Before the Public Broadcasting System's (PBS) NOVA series, Moon experimented with demonstrating the wonders of science through film. Using a variety of photographic, electronic, and scientific devices, Moon blended his fascination of science with the biblical message of God's intricate creation, creating truly awesome images in slow motion or in intricate detail. For example, he would show God's handiwork in the movement of corpuscles through the bloodstream in *The Red River of Life* (1957) or record the voices of bats or fish. All his images demonstrated the marvels of creation as seen through telescopes, microscopes, and time-lapse photography. His biblical motive for such spectacular revelations came from the book of Isaiah, where the

prophet had hoped "that they may see, and know, . . . and understand" (41:20, KJV).

Moon had been approached by Harvey Marks at the Moody Bible Institute to put all his experiments onto film, which would make his material accessible to even the smallest churches. It was a novel and effective way to teach as well as inspire, adding the sight of God's hidden miracles to faith. They produced their first major film, *God of Creation*, to fulfill the mission of MIS to communicate the "first century gospel with twentieth century illustrations."[18]

For the next thirty years, MIS would release over eighteen "Sermons from Science" films that would remarkably be exhibited in as many nonreligious settings as church settings. Many would be exported to the Soviet Union. Films like *City of the Bees* (1957) would win major awards in capturing the natural phenomena surrounding the building of hives, the organization of work, and the centrality of the queen. All these typically unseen wonders were rooted in verses like Romans 1:20: "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse." Such a basis enabled Moon and his partners to tell the gospel story in a unique and engaging fashion.[19]

With the creative output of films by Friedrich, Baptista, and Moon, a market was invented. Church libraries were set up to distribute these films, particularly for youth ministry programs. Acceptable products for exhibiting on Sunday evenings had been found, and soon demand would overreach supply.

Films of the Gospel

Building on the visions of these pioneers, a host of small studios and evangelical filmmakers emerged. Entrepreneur Sam Hersh began his company, Family Films, in 1946, in order to corner a market of entertainment for the entire family. As historian Harvey Marks recalls, "Hersh was not a Christian when he founded the company, he was an opportunist. But he became a Christian and began to produce films with a strong Christian message."[20] His typical films, like *In His Name* (1950), concerned ordinary family problems. In this one, a young boy breaks a stained-glass church window of the face of Jesus. He quietly seeks to redeem himself by sending pennies to the pastor to create a playground for other children. The pastor and others recognize the need for a community recreational center and

work to put their faith into practical action. To top the story off, the young boy follows a calling into church work.[21]

Envisioning communication of the gospel through film, Ken Anderson organized Gospel Films in 1949. An association of Gospel Films libraries evolved that established a rental network. Consistent monthly cash flow from rentals would prove beneficial for further investment. Gospel Films would provide libraries with advertising literature and film prints. This distribution system would become the Christian Film Distributors Association (CFDA).

Targeting a high school market, Gospel Films organized its youth films and hired an enthusiastic leader of the Youth for Christ clubs, the colorful Billy Zeoli. Zeoli's strategy was to expand the reach of Gospel Films by concentrating on teenagers.[22] Looking to popular music stars and celebrities, Zeoli proposed a film on Tony Fontane, the recording artist. Fontane had lived the fast life until a car accident brought him face to face with his mortality. His conversion to Christianity became the theme of the 1963 film *The Tony Fontane Story*, for which Zeoli contracted a professional Hollywood crew and director Jan Sadlo.

This new vision of Gospel Films moving into dramatic testimony films that veered away from the explicitly evangelistic films divided the founders of Gospel Films from the young pioneers. Anderson believed his calling had always been to produce message-oriented films while Zeoli looked to break fresh ground. In contrast to *The Tony Fontane Story* with its emphasis on biography and entertainment, Anderson's work, like the Singapore productions of *Something to Live For* (1957), emphasized missions and evangelism. In fact, *Something to Live For* aimed at an international audience (with dubbings into thirty languages) and sought to preach the gospel to all the world. Both men would develop their organizations into significant production houses.

Like Baptista, Anderson emphasized the clear and explicit salvation message of the Gospels. In fact, the leader tape at the outset of every Ken Anderson film proclaimed, "Ken Anderson Films where the message is always first." He produced notable films like the didactic *Pilgrim's Progress* (1977), which adapts John Bunyan's allegory quite literally. Two of the most impressive projects were Anderson's biographical studies of a missionary to China, *Hudson Taylor* (1981), and a blind hymn writer, *Fanny Crosby* (1984).

Gospel Films released its own noteworthy films, such as the remarkably clever satire on modern church evangelism techniques, *The Gospel Blimp*

(1967). Adapted from a satirical story by Christian author Joseph Bayly, *The Gospel Blimp* was directed by Hollywood director Irwin "Shorty" Yeaworth Jr. The film depicts the folly of non-personal evangelism, as Bible verses are dropped on unwary "victims" from a hovering zeppelin, which also broadcasts Christian music from the heavens. The film slyly indicted Christian studio companies (like Gospel Films) for believing that technological outreach was more effective than the conventional personal sharing of one's faith.

Gospel Films became more of a distribution center than an actual producer, hiring out for films. The works ranged from filmmaker Rolf Forsberg's adaptation *Peace Child* (1972) to the Hal Lindsey end-times "rapture" films, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1979) and *Years of the Beast* (1981), forerunners to the *Left Behind* series.

Gospel Films found phenomenal success with its release of Franky Schaeffer's *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture*, a series that would redefine and transform the film business. Creatively chronicling what they saw as the corruption and collapse of Western culture, Franky and Francis Schaeffer, his father, the noted apologist of the L'Abri Institute in Switzerland, marshaled their data to bring an indictment on contemporary society. It sparked conservatives' re-entry into cultural debates. It was followed in 1979 by another documentary done with the cooperation of Surgeon General Dr. C. Everett Koop titled *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* Both series of films tried to provoke an evangelical response to declining moral values, particularly by setting the agenda in a cultural war on such incendiary issues as abortion. A secondary result of the films was the discovery by Gospel Films and others that such serial films brought in revenue to the distributors and could also develop a repeat audience, one that would watch the films repeatedly and use them for educational and apologetic purposes, all of which increased revenues.[23]

Such films series became known in the trade as instructional films, or, more pejoratively, "talking heads." While they could promote a certain cause, they were more frequently turned into religious celebrity soapboxes, showcasing the ideas of particular individuals, exploiting their name recognition, charisma, or expertise. One of the most inspirational and practical of the emerging video teachers came out of the University of Southern California in the person of child psychologist James Dobson. The first film work of Dobson's organization, *Focus on the Family* (1979), sought not just to defend the God-ordained structure of the family but to nurture it as well.

His popular teaching focused on family issues: marital and parenting concerns. Amazingly, costing only about $30,000 to produce, the videos of his presentations would rent over 60,000 times in its first ten years. He would weave biblical instructions on training children, fathering, and mothering with psychological insights. Of special delight for church groups was his series on *What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew about Women*.

Dobson created an effect among Christian film distributors that was to cripple much dramatic filmmaking, as instructional films proved so easily marketable and financially profitable. Other talking heads would follow, such as Tony Campolo, Josh McDowell, T. D. Jakes, Philip Yancey, and Beth Moore.

Nevertheless, Billy Zeoli of Gospel Films recognized the potential of contracting with independent Christian film producers. Setting policy guidelines, Zeoli recruited a stable of young directors. He developed a reputation for being attuned to key trends in the market. He saw that film functioned as a major tool in church ministry, expanding and enhancing preaching and worship. As a head cheerleader for the industry, he actively advanced the state of the Christian film industry.[24] In the 1980s, over 90 percent of the Gospel Film productions came from independent filmmakers.

One of the first was a former Young Life leader (and subsequently my faculty advisor at Fuller Theological Seminary), Mel White. White's ingenious imagination ushered forth religious comedies grounded in his academic study of American silent films. His Charlie Churchman series incorporated silent slapstick gags, making their Christian lessons with hilarity. White moved out of his comic films to explore the problems of suffering with an original series rooted in Psalm 23. A line from the psalm would be matched with a relevant example of real-life tragedy. For example, in the first film of the series, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*, White documented the actual story of war prisoner Howard Rutledge and his release from his captors. One of the most powerful stories emerged out of the ordeal of a college professor, Tony Brouwer, and his family as he dealt with cancer. *Though I Walk through the Valley* (1972) not only examined Brouwer's courageous battle against the disease but also stepped tenderly into the aftermath of his death with family interviews. In a more triumphant and joyous vein, *He Leadeth Me* showed the wonderfully buoyant testimony of blind composer and singer Ken Medema.

Comedy sprang from the inventive University of California–Los Angeles (UCLA) film school graduate John Schmidt. Spoofing Hollywood

spectaculars, Schmidt targeted religious pomposity, hypocrisy, and evangelism with snappy, suburban films like *Super Christian* (1980), *The Greatest Story Never Told* (1983), and *Kevin Can Wait* (1983). Weaving gentle satiric humor and heart, Schmidt's parodies set new standards of entertainment with a message. The parody style of old movies and television shows also caught on with Dave Christiano's spoofing of *The Twilight Zone*, titled *The Daylight Zone* (1986).

In the late 1980s, Gospel Films expanded, acquiring groups like Thomas Nelson Communication film distribution, Fred Carpenter's Mars Hill Productions, Son Pictures, and Chuck Warren's Life Productions. The stigma of making religious movies was still attached to many of these talented directors. After twelve years of Christian filmmaking, Fred Carpenter was asked when he was going to make "real movies." Rather than becoming miffed, Carpenter differentiated between his kind of films, shorter and open-ended, and the Hollywood fictional narratives. He explained that his task was to facilitate legitimate relationships, "taking the whole message of Christ into the whole of creation, but not at the expense of the highest quality"—all to the glory of God.[25]

A World of Christian Films

Internationally, the film production unit of the Billy Graham Evangelical Association, World Wide Pictures (WWP), invested in feature films and four-wall distribution and exhibition channels (renting mainstream theaters and selling tickets to local churches). These films centered on the Billy Graham crusades and emphasized how preaching persuaded people of God's love for them and the necessity of conversion experiences.

Touted as "the granddaddy of evangelical filmmakers," WWP was officially created in 1952 as the Billy Graham Evangelistic Film Ministry when entrepreneur Dick Ross's production company, Great Commission Films, was incorporated into the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA).[26] The first film, *Mr. Texas* (1951), developed out of footage filmed at a Billy Graham crusade in Fort Worth, Texas. The dramatic feature film showcased the giant, expansive landscape of Texas as the site of a spiritual journey and featured Red Harper in the leading role. Rather than being shown in church basements, it premiered in the prestigious Hollywood Bowl and then made the circuit through regular theaters.[27]

In the neighborhood of the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in Burbank, California, WWP set up headquarters to produce such films as

The Restless Ones (1965), *The Hiding Place* (1975), *Joni* (1980), and *The Prodigal* (1983). From its distribution center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, it coordinated the work of pastors and church workers to advertise and support the theatrical showing of the films for evangelistic purposes. These films would usually insert the protagonist struggling through a personal crisis into a Billy Graham crusade where he or she would come to Christ.[28] In a 1966 article in *Christianity Today*, statistical records claimed over 120,000 conversions from the films. Their purpose was "to *demonstrate* that Jesus Christ, and He alone, is the answer to mankind's problems and needs—that a personal, vital relationship with Him is not only possible, but necessary, if we are to fulfill the purpose for which we are created."[29]

In seeking to expand its audience into a teenage and young adult market, WWP released Dick Ross's *The Restless Ones* (1965), an explosive drama about troubled contemporary youth, including those within the church community. As a "Message Motion Picture," it emotionally engaged spectators with real problems that were resolved through Graham's preaching on the pertinent issue. The marketing campaigns of rallying churches to recruit and invite "unsaved" friends to the theaters coordinated the loyal labors of many different denominations. WWP also developed a community of influential financial donors who would help to sponsor the productions.

The two most impressive WWP productions appeared in the late 1970s, with *The Hiding Place* (1975) and *Joni* (1979).[30] The first—the biographical story of Corrie ten-Boom and her travails in a Nazi concentration camp and personal struggles with forgiveness—was directed by James Collier. Collier, who also wrote and directed *Joni*, emphasized true-life stories as the most effective and compelling way to communicate the Christian faith. Collier would direct the quintessential WWP feature, *The Prodigal* (1983), with Hollywood producer Ken Wales. The two filmmakers joined to update Jesus's parable of the wayward son. However, they creatively expanded the story to demonstrate that three members of the same family experienced the journey to conversion. The wife, the son, and his brother all struggle with pride and pain and seek redemption. However, as film critic Harry Cheney observed, the film "violates a cardinal rule of good drama—that character, not ideology, dictates plot and action."[31] The filmmakers responded by articulating the key challenges facing evangelical filmmakers, particularly the unapologetic evangelistic intention of the films. Collier argued that one must look at the design of the film, namely to function as "a catalyst in their spiritual journey." If one assesses a film accordingly,

Collier pointed out in an interview with Mel White, then its purpose was achieved because "over 400,000 people indicated some sort of first-time commitment to Christ."[32]

Wales addressed another salient issue frustrating many evangelical filmmakers, namely the challenge of dramatizing evil as explicit or implicit. Wales argued that the more indirect method forces directors to be more creative and imaginative (especially sexually) and prompts spectators to enter the film with "all their imagination, their biases, their prejudices."[33] In an interview in *Christianity Today*, Collier confessed that the boundaries set by the evangelical market did constrain their work, joking that "any script that came into a major studio that had 'God' in it and didn't have 'damn' behind it was immediately sent to WorldWide Pictures."[34]

The story of evangelist David Wilkerson launching into New York City and proclaiming to gang members that God loved them offered a dramatic script. Dick Ross and Associates found the story compelling and adapted it for the big screen, aiming to infiltrate secular theaters with its message. When his company declared bankruptcy, the courts awarded its property to Ken Curtis, who managed to bring the film to completion. He incorporated Gateway Pictures in 1972 to distribute the film, which starred the squeaky-clean Pat Boone as the urban evangelist and Erik Estrada as the gang leader.

Curtis, however, had a greater vision for what films could do. With a passion for church history and a realization that most church members had little knowledge of how God had worked through history, Curtis committed to showcasing the significant work and sacrifice of saints. Cooperating with independent producers and organizations like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Curtis was able to build a library of fascinating educational films. Gateway acquired various British biopic productions such as those about reformer and martyr *John Hus* (1980), reformer *John Wycliffe, the Morning Star* (1983), and *God's Outlaw* (1988) about Bible translator William Tyndale. The visual docudramas not only revived interest in church history but led to the publication of the scholarly *Christian History* magazine.

One of Gateway's most notable successes occurred in 1985, when it sponsored a coproduction with the BBC, with writer Brian Sibley and director Norman Stone, in the deeply moving *Shadowlands*. The biographical film focused on the few years shared by Oxford professor and author C. S. Lewis and the Jewish, ex-communist New York poet Helen Joy Davidman, observing their peculiar romance, joys, and grief. *Shadowlands*

stands as one of the most poignant and authentic stories of love in the Christian film canon.

Touted as the "most seen film in the world," Campus Crusade's *Jesus* film project appeared in 1979 and was immediately translated into scores of languages. Beginning in 1945, Campus Crusade president Bill Bright had envisioned the creation of a biblically accurate biography of Jesus in 1945, which was realized thirty years later and translated into more than 610 languages. John Gilman's *Daya Sagar*, an ambitious film on the life of Christ shot in India with local talent, marked another milestone in global evangelism.[35]

The apocalyptic phase of Christian filmmaking began in 1974 with Southern Baptist preacher Estus Pirkle and exploitation filmmaker Ron Ormond's gruesome *The Burning Hell*, in which maggots crawl out of skulls. More popular was Russ Doughten and Irwin "Shorty" Yeaworth's classic end-times *Thief in the Night* (1972), a truly effective, albeit campy, film that sought to "scare the hell" out of spectators by focusing upon the tribulation. Doughten's production company, Mark IV Pictures, taken from the Gospel of Mark, ran off a legion of dispensational sequels such as *Distant Thunder* (1978) and *Image of the Beast* (1980), designed to frighten sinners into repentance. Canadians Peter and Paul Lalonde of Cloud Ten Pictures made the *Apocalypse* series and secured the rights to the Tim LaHaye runaway bestseller *Left Behind.* Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) produced *Omega Code* (1999) and other dramatic films. Along with the abysmal low point of Christian films, *Carmen, the Champion*, director Matt Crouch sought to exploit his diverse fundamentalist and charismatic audiences. TBN had previously underwritten the modestly successful *China Cry* (1990), the true story of Nora Lam, who suffered under Mao's communist society.

The tremendously unexpected success of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* opened the floodgates of evangelical-themed moviemaking in the early 2000s.[36] In 2001, Gibson invested his own money in what appeared to be a fanatic's folly, producing essentially a foreign-language film. It stands as a watershed film not only for its explicit, controversial portrayal of the killing of Jesus Christ but also because of its phenomenal success at the box office. Marketed through grassroots organizations of local churches, it shocked industry insiders by its enormous profits, taking in over $370 million in domestic gross. *The Passion of the Christ* made so much money that no studio in Hollywood could ignore the implications that there could be a Christian cross-over market to which they should cater.

***The Omega Code* (1999). Shown from left: Michael York, Casper Van Dien. (Code Productions/Photofest.)**

Fox formed a new division called Fox Faith, and other studios like Sony formed their own religious films division. Sony/Columbia bought the existing rights to the *Left Behind* series.

For a brief period, the Christian graduate film school at Regent University competed with other national programs, winning student Academy Awards for their university films (*Bird in a Cage*, *Turtle Races*), and marketing films to HBO, Cinemax, and other television channels. After graduating from Regent's film school, Danny Caralles ventured into end-times films, a vanguard in the trend to shoot films on high-definition video, releasing *Final Exit, Escape from Hell*, and *Pilgrim's Progress*. The low cost of digital video cameras enabled such low-budget productions and made it possible for churches to produce new films. Such a phenomenon marked the cinematic debut of Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Georgia, as they funded Alex Kendrick's feature-length *Facing the Giants* in 2006, and their establishment of Sherwood Pictures, with a second film, *Flywheel*, released in 2008.

Although complicated by financial decisions, Phil Vischer's Big Idea Productions possessed the ability to attract diverse audiences, resulting in the feature-length *VeggieTales* production of *Jonah*, with Bob the Tomato

and Larry the Cucumber, a descendent of the Lutherans' *Davey and Goliath* television series.

In 2002, Christian businessman Phillip Anschutz purchased over one-fifth of America's theaters acquiring Regal Cinemas, America's largest movie theater chain, along with Edwards Theatres and United Artists. Under the banner of his Walden Media film franchise and in conjunction with Disney films, Anschutz released an adaptation of C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, which grossed almost $300 million domestically in 2005. Anschutz could play a major role in the distribution of Christian films theatrically. The theaters thus became a viable venue for feature films such as Ken Wales's stunning production of *Amazing Grace*, the historical biopic of William Wilberforce.

One of the most unexpected trends in evangelistic filmmaking occurred in 2005 with the emergence of the impressive talents of director Tyler Perry's productions of the *Madea* series. Acting (and cross-dressing) as no-nonsense grandma Madea, Perry was able to be as evangelistically direct as Lois Weber but added a fresh African American naturalism to his scripts. Not only did Perry's films (e.g., *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* [2005]) preach the gospel message to spectators, but they also took on the hypocrisy of the church.

Conclusion

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, productivity and creativity in the Christian film industry seemed to be waxing because of economical filmmaking, numerous Christian colleges offering film programs, young maverick Christian filmmakers, and the wary but willing media markets (Fox Faith films) investing in films to religious audiences. A hundred years after Reverend Herbert A. Jump, it appeared that church organizations and Christian groups may have finally realized the "Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture."

In concluding this survey of evangelicals in the moving picture industry, one must marvel at the fact that Christians not only censured and condemned the medium but sought to use it for the glory of God. The stereotype of evangelicals as antagonistic to culture collapses as one discovers their various incursions into the world of film production. Evangelicals found that they could preach visually with "celluloid sermons," and denominations, small studios, and individuals took up the calling to proclaim the gospel in didactic and dramatic ways. The cinematic succession

of artists from Lois Weber to Tyler Perry established a tradition of filmmakers who sought to translate their faith through film and indicates the emergence of a fresh company of young, visionary film artists.

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Chapter 2

Evangelical Approaches to Film Criticism

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The scene right now, put in movie terms, between evangelicals and film is certainly not tidy or tame because there is a good deal of passion floating about. Four distinct groups stand out: First, an ample number of hip, youngish characters pronounce loudly as they together eagerly tear down a formidable old wall. Off to the side, a second group, vigorously shaking their gray heads in dismay, consists of a few old fellows. A third contingent, consisting of a random few others, tries simply to caution the young fellows, warning that some of that high old wall might well tumble back on them or let in something they might not appreciate. And last, a small, tame-looking few observe the scene, taking notes and earnestly scribbling to themselves and others about what they see transpiring.

Such is the current vexed circumstance among evangelicals, four distinct groups in all, who do film criticism. That wall, of course, is the one that has long stood between evangelicalism and virtually the whole of modern American culture, and the arts in particular, both elite and popular. This is especially so with regard to cinema. The reasons for the original construction of that wall are many and complex, good and bad, and range from Calvinist suspicions of visual images to Anabaptist yearnings for a purity achievable only by separation from all possible sources of contamination. Neither of these motives, however, nor a host of others, was unique to the revival-bent conservative Protestants known as evangelicals, as the tangled history of American churches and filmdom amply indicates. For roughly the first half of cinema's history, from its start to the 1960s, most Americans and their many churches thought Hollywood needed restraint and supervision if not outright censorship.

The wall-destroyers in this opening frame are very much evangelicals, though a diverse lot, as evangelicals by and large are. Youngish, passionate, and fearless, this first group boldly proclaims a radical break from evangelicalism's old rejectionist ways. The title alone of David Dark's influential 2002 offering makes the point: *Everyday Apocalypse: The Sacred Revealed in Radiohead, The Simpsons and Other Pop Culture Icons*. Something of a turning point, Dark's book argues that popular culture often does the very work the churches should do, and does it better, especially as it judges the "moral bankruptcy of our imaginations" amid the glib, deadening triviality of American culture in which a co-opted church itself partakes.[1] To the rescue come the arts, especially such classic filmmakers as Andrei Tarkovsky, Wim Wenders, and Robert Bresson, who can restore "the perplexity that arises when we're made to look hard (by looking, again) at the world." In this posture of "paying attention," viewers become "alive to the mystery" that "none of us (and no ideology) are possessors of the final say."[2] In short, for Dark and others, what the evangelical churches need most is the very thing they forbade so long.

It is no wonder then that the protesting old fellows of that second group, one-time leaders like Ted Baehr and Donald Wildmon, are upset, for they have long contended that movies, because they are potent cultural expressions, threaten both belief and morality. Between the young rebels and the old guard stands a third group cautioning the demolition crew to take heed lest the rocks they throw about damage others or themselves. One member of this third group, Brian Godawa, himself a screenwriter and a lover of movies, on the one hand decries the legalist prudery of the gray-haired traditionalists. At the same time, however, he persistently indicts the toxic worldviews that come dressed in attractive Hollywood pander.[3] Observing and interpreting the wild scene are those in the fourth group: various sorts of evangelical academics from seminaries and colleges who simply want to decipher conflicts and complexity for the benefit of all. And they themselves are but a small contingent within a new academic discipline fixed on understanding the intersections of religion and film.

Film and Religion in American Culture

Movies have always been contested turf for a public that from the start seemed fully aware of the extraordinary persuasive powers of cinema. From the very beginnings of filmdom, religious leaders of every sort recognized the potent sway films might have on viewers, especially younger viewers.

Concerned about the well-being of their considerable American flock, they early on initiated close scrutiny of the product emerging from Hollywood.[4] Religious leaders, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, voiced, and perhaps fed, widespread public apprehension about the potential for cinematic glamorization of what almost everyone considered subversive moral postures. In 1915, Hollywood itself abruptly got the message of just how conservative its public was when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that local municipalities could scrutinize and license films according to propriety. After all, said the Court in blunt terms, films could encourage evil.[5] Whatever anxieties Americans had about films were exacerbated in the early 1920s by a series of sensational lifestyle scandals among stars and moviemakers. Moreover, for some the fact that almost all studios were led by Jews both explained and added to the problem. So great was Hollywood's public relations problem, and specifically the fear of censorship, that in 1922 the industry itself created an instrument for self-policing, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). That entity soon became known as the Hays Office, named after its leader Will Hays, a former postmaster general and, more importantly, an ardent Presbyterian. Two years after taking this new role, Hays set forth a list of rules that required all studios to submit for review a synopsis of any film they intended to make. By and large, the public was more than eager for this sort of control.[6]

Protestant concerns about movies would, however, soon pale beside the efforts of U.S. Roman Catholicism and, in particular, its Legion of Decency, an organization that would hold sway over Hollywood practices for close to twenty years. With the advent of talkies in 1927, several archconservative Roman Catholics, lay and clerical alike, approached Hays with a new stringent code for film content, a constraint Hollywood was anxious to embrace in a period of sagging attendance. So eager was Hays to please an "increasingly vociferous Catholic lobby" that he hired for MPPDA's public relations consultant Joseph Breen, "a deeply convinced, virulently anti-Jewish, articulate Catholic," who would soon take over the day-to-day direction of Hays's agency and hunt down offensive material in addition to making sure films balanced evil with good and encouraged patriotism.[7] As a consequence, by 1937 "the Catholic lobby totally dominated Hollywood film content."[8]

After World War II, however, Protestants began to object to Breen's strident anti-film and anti-Protestant bias. Mainstream Protestantism, which had always conceded the potential for much good in cinema and had long

since made its own films for church use, began to move in a different direction, choosing to work *with* Hollywood to encourage films about Protestant clergy. Furthermore, major denominational magazines began to praise good films, and assorted denominations together began to sponsor groups to give awards to the best films. Nonetheless, external forces played a crucial role in breaking Catholic domination in shaping Hollywood. In 1948, after the Supreme Court determined that Hollywood's distribution system constituted an illegal monopoly, theater owners were free to choose bookings that had not gone through the Hays Office. One consequence was the exhibition of foreign films, specifically innovative films from Italy's neo-realist movement. In the late 1940s, films by Roberto Rossellini and Victorio De Sicca tested the patience of the Legion of Decency, but the Legion lost all restraint in protesting the showing in 1950 in Manhattan of Rossellini's *The Miracle* (1948), a 40-minute tale of a Italian peasant girl who thinks she is going to bear the child of St. Joseph. The Legion denounced the film and then pushed New York City to ban it, despite the fact that eminent film critics and countless Protestants leaders declared the film innocuous. The producers sued, and by 1952 the U.S. Supreme Court granted film the protections of free speech. Thus ended the possibility of church control over cinema. In 1957 the Vatican itself changed course with Pius XII's bull praising film for richly expressing the complexities of the human condition.[9]

Evangelicals Confront the Movies

Certainly by 1950, the Protestant establishment was far more in tune with the Vatican than with the Legion of Decency. Founded in 1950, the National Council of Churches has over the decades and in various postures supported "a more constructive relationship to media and culture as well as a noncensorship approach in its attempts to influence film."[10] In the 1960s, for example, the National Council's Broadcasting and Film Commission instituted awards for what it deemed worthwhile filmmaking. The distance that Protestant taste (or tolerance) had travelled in just a few years was apparent in the Film Commission's award in 1965 to Sidney Lumet's searing, controversial Holocaust film *The Pawnbroker*. The award demonstrated that mainline Protestants "were increasingly interested in films that laid bare the truth about the human condition and offered serious and realistic, even if intense and gritty, portrayals of the world."[11] In embracing contemporary cinema and especially its *avant garde*, mainline Protestants were not

only justified but heartened by the emergence of such singularly religious international writer-directors as Robert Bresson, Carl Theodor Dreyer, and Ingmar Bergman.

Evangelical Protestants were not there as yet, or for that matter anywhere close. Subsequent movement toward engagement with film would by and large prove belated, and when notable voices did emerge, they were regressive and oppositional. While mainline Protestants moved to affirm cinema's portrayal of the human condition, evangelical Protestants simply ignored that larger world while conceding the enormous attractiveness of cinema as an expressive medium. Evangelicalism responded in three distinct ways.

First came an effort, beginning already in the 1950s, to make films for other than commercial purposes, specifically to marshal cinema for evangelistic ends. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association formed World Wide Pictures (WWP) in order to produce and market its own fare to commercial markets.[12] WWP's almost fifty years of production and approximately twenty films began in 1953 and ended in 2004, including such films as *The Restless Ones* (1965) and *The Hiding Place* (1975). Given a highly competitive marketplace, WWP never really achieved its goal of exercising evangelistic outreach.

Evangelicalism's second significant response to the ever-increasing popularity of film emerged in the 1970s in the steady denunciation of virtually all manner of mainstream film. New para-church organizations formed to threaten the boycott of a wide swath of increasingly problematic entertainment. While mainline Protestants sought voluntary restraint by the industry, reasoned dialogue, and support for rating systems, conservative evangelical minister Donald Wildmon in 1977 founded the National Federation for Decency, its name recalling the infamous National League of Decency. With the appearance in 1977 of a controversial new ABC television series called *Soap*, Wildmon undertook letter-writing protest and, with the help of the Southern Baptist Convention and the U.S. Catholic Conference, exerted pressure on the program's sponsors. Wildmon's heyday no doubt came in 1988 with Universal's release of Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, an adaptation of Nikos Kazantzakis's controversial 1960 novel. Wildmon and a host of other evangelical leaders, such as Jerry Falwell and Bill Bright, urged a boycott of the film and all Universal products. Wildmon continued threats of boycott well into the 1990s when he threatened the Blockbuster video rental chain for considering the rental of films with the newly instituted NC-17 suitability rating.

A third response to Hollywood emerged from the work of film activist-critic Ted Baehr (born 1946, the son of 1950s cowboy hero Tex Allen). In 1985, Baehr began to publish *Movieguide*, a newsletter that sought to apply stringent content standards to the evaluation of movies. *Movieguide* reviewers enumerated verbal and sexual offenses and assessed "worldview," though emphasis on the former prevailed. The two standards often came into conflict on many occasions when *Movieguide* found films noteworthy for positive Christian worldview elements but recommended against viewing because of the slight presence of offensive elements such as language or nudity. A year after beginning *Movieguide*, Baehr founded his own Christian Film and Television Commission, an organization that has sought to resume the role and restrictive standards of Hays's long-gone Protestant Film Office. This approach to cinema has resulted in a small industry that sets about sanitizing DVD releases of Hollywood films. The films remain the same except for the deletion or dubbing of offensive verbal elements.

These very public strategies hardly account for the whole of evangelicalism's response to film. Rather, as a notably diffuse and varied social-religious movement, evangelicalism's responses to the expanding appeal of a newly open and robust cinema and television continued to be halting, spotty, and inconsistent, depending very much on each strand's posture toward culture. Most of those diverse postures were dictated as much by historical and cultural circumstance as by theological conviction. For the most part, avoidance and suspicion dominated, though there were notable exceptions. The best known of these, at least within evangelical and film circles, lay within the religious world of Dutch Reformed immigrants, many of whom settled in western Michigan. The oldest denomination in America, the Reformed Church in America (RCA), its members, settlers of New Amsterdam and founders of Rutgers University, largely welcomed film, seeing within it few moral and religious pitfalls. In the mid-1960s, for example, Hope College in Holland, Michigan, one of three colleges associated with the denomination, sponsored on-campus film series that celebrated the emergence of *avant garde* European cinema. Meanwhile, a mere 20 miles away, Calvin College, owned and operated by the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), a denomination that split from the RCA in 1857, strictly forbade films, even once firing a faculty member who was seen emerging from a movie theater. CRC policy remained as such until the broad cultural turmoil of the 1960s when a group of Calvin students, led by now-famous filmmaker Paul Schrader, writer-director of such films as *Hardcore* (1979) and *American Gigolo* (1980), undertook an insurgency

on behalf of film. Schrader organized a Film Arts Committee, hoping to show films on campus. The administration shut down the committee and eventually expelled Schrader (though not for his film activities). In the end, however, the CRC in 1966 opened its doors to judicious film viewing, and by the early 1970s Calvin College offered an introductory course in cinema study.

What stands out in this brief tale of two colleges with virtually identical doctrinal commitments and ethnic origins is the markedly different attitudes toward film and American culture in general. From its very early start, the RCA had for the most part embraced American culture, proving largely assimilationist over its long history, while the CRC, begun mostly by new immigrants, kept a wary distance both ethnically and denominationally and distrusted many currents in American culture, most notably public schooling.[13] Indeed, this sort of complex history is no doubt repeated in innumerable denominational and sectarian strands within American evangelicalism.

Despite the evangelical rejections, ambivalences, and reappraisals that characterized the 1960s and 1970s, film soon overwhelmed whatever evangelical hesitancies persisted by simply surrounding and inundating the obstacles and protest that existed. Occasional skirmishes occurred, as over *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), but more often than not evangelicals succumbed and largely accepted, if not embraced, the capacity of cinema as one of the arts that can enrich life and profoundly inform religious experience and understanding.[14] This largely transpired because the entertainment culture deployed successive technological means of conveying its products, whether for good or ill, to just about everyone in American culture. That began in the 1970s with the coming of home video, the chain rental store, and the possibility of viewing a vast horde of movies within the privacy of one's own home. Not long after, cable television and premium movie channels gave access not only to movies but to new freedom in programming unfettered by the strictures of the movie cineplex or broadcast television. Still another step is presently underway in the age of the Internet with the instant streaming of film and cable television series to computers and a new generation of large, high-definition flat-screen televisions. All of these allow increasingly ready access to films past and present, whether G-rated or pornographic, in dazzling viewing (and listening) environments that only enhance the experiential immediacy and power of film. No matter where one resides, escaping the compelling allure of American movie culture and its storytelling cinematic wonder machine has become increasingly difficult.

The Evangelical Reckoning with Film

The beginnings of a new evangelical reckoning of the import of this dramatic development in American culture began in earnest, though perhaps belatedly, at the turn of this century. In just a few years came a flurry of efforts very much dedicated to examining what Hollywood had wrought for American culture and Christianity within it. This reckoning happened in periodicals, such as *Christianity Today* and *Books and Culture*, but especially in books. These responses ranged from the ongoing conservative denunciation of many Hollywood products to individuals eager to tear down the wall between American evangelical Christianity and popular culture in general. As might be expected, the evangelicals now grappling with film come from an array of religious backgrounds and forge divergent rationales for film study and criteria for critical analysis of meaning and religious significance. It is important to remember, however, that evangelicals are relatively new arrivals and have only very recently taken part in a larger discussion initiated long ago by mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics. Within this larger movement, a diverse array of evangelicals work passionately to understand what benefits film might afford their understandings of this world and of God. Needless to say, the variety of current postures is some distance from traditional evangelical warnings that forbade watching just about any film.

There are also those who continue to approach movies with very considerable trepidation for the moral and spiritual harm they fear movies surely inflict. The most conspicuous example of these remains Ted Baehr's *Movieguide*. Now web-based, it continues, as its statement of purpose proclaims, "in-depth analyses of current movies from a biblical perspective," monitoring degrees of "violence, sex and profanity" and probing "deeply into the moral content, theology and worldviews of the movies, videos and television programs it reviews."[15] This vision, to which it has remained loyal over the decades, still fosters contradictory postures: regularly praising films for moral seriousness and depth but then recommending against them because of offensive content. Perhaps recognizing its own inconsistency, it has now created two categories of films, those suitable for family viewing, which includes viewing by children, and those suitable for adults. *Movieguide*'s most enthusiastic praise goes to overtly evangelical Christian films, no matter their quality. It seems as well that its judgments often meld with archconservative politics, its website referencing articles on the errors of global warming, the dangers of Islam, the necessity of anti-socialism, and the virtues of capitalism. Its favorite target, however,

remains the conspiratorial moral and spiritual degradation of Hollywood culture and product.

A more moderate, wary view, taken by the third group in this conflict, urges caution in tearing down the wall. Hollywood screenwriter Brian Godawa, author of *Hollywood Worldviews*, is far less disturbed about movie content than the folks at *Movieguide*, instead insisting on graphic moral realism such as the Bible itself displays, a point he argues cogently at some length. He does share, however, *Movieguide*'s concerns about worldview and finds Hollywood rife with the promulgation, quite intentional in his judgment, of worldviews that subvert Christian belief. His book is replete with lists of films that push various strains of existentialism and postmodernism, to name but two maladies. In this posture, Godawa relies on the views of popular evangelical philosopher Francis Schaffer, who did much to promote a "culture wars" ethos among evangelicals. This has three negative consequences for *Hollywood Worldviews*. First, Godawa at times seems overcertain of *exactly* what Christian theology or the Bible asserts. The history of Christian controversy would seem to urge more intellectual humility before such daunting texts. Second, Godawa seems overeager to find culprits, leading him to view many films as symptomatic of this-or-that intellectual virus when in fact they seem apt representations of central biblical thematics, such as the nature of evil or the limitations of human perception. That is certainly the case in his discussion, to offer but one example, of *The Usual Suspects* (1995).[16] Last, that same readiness to categorize and indict seems to skew his interpretive objectivity to the extent that he inverts the meaning of a film like *Grand Canyon* (1992), seeing it as an embrace of Darwinian nihilism when in fact the film painstakingly moves beyond that perspective to suggest the working of a miraculous reconciling providence in human affairs.[17] That skewed view persists undiluted into the second edition of the book even after other thoughtful critics, such as Robert K. Johnston, have cogently argued otherwise.[18] Near the end of the book, Godawa does concede that his thumbnail portraits of films might do injustice to the totality of a film, but he does not suggest any ways to avoid this reductionism.[19]

Then come the enthusiasts, the new guard, those tearing down the rejectionist wall in order to build from its rubble a cathedral of cinema. Their initial foray came in 2003 from Craig N. Detweiler and Barry Taylor with the publication of *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture*. This boldly provocative text explores assorted strands of pop culture—advertising, music, movies, television, sports, and fashion—for what they might say

theologically. In looking first to these pop cultural artifacts, the authors seek to challenge the isolation and sanctimony of evangelicalism within American culture. Instead of standing apart and wagging an accusatory finger at everyone, Detweiler and Taylor urge engagement and even embrace of what has long been thought "subversive" in order to achieve "a refreshing, alternative route to a Jesus who for many has been domesticated, de-clawed, and kept under wraps" by the very churches that have sought to protect Jesus from contamination.[20] Their controversial interpretive tact is to "reverse the hermeneutical flow" by looking first at popular culture instead of preemptively applying biblical texts for the purposes of religious and moral judgment.[21] They advocate, then, creating "a theology *out of* popular culture rather than theology *for* popular culture."[22] Rightly done, observers might just "discover the divine emerging from the matrix" of meanings abounding in popular culture.[23] Their sanction for this approach comes from traditional Reformed theology's emphasis on a "common grace" that concedes that God might speak by any means He wishes, even ones that at first glimpse seem vulgar and crass.[24] Needless to say, this sort of unabashed enthusiasm stands in robust opposition to the cautions of Baehr and Godawa. The risk perhaps lies in tearing down a wall that, to their own surprise, in fact opens the floodgates to just about anything and the conclusion that at "the turn of the new millennium, God has never been more alive in Western culture."[25] In this regard, Detweiler's chapter on movies argues that by "looking closer" at movies that "look closer" at the depths and complexities of life, movies can again become art instead of mere diversion, again compelling attention to the moral and spiritual conditions that define the human condition. Indeed, movies can impart an acute sense of the "real" and of redemptive possibility.[26]

If Detweiler and Taylor enthuse and exhort, a more deliberative and academic run at the topic comes from Robert K. Johnston, a long-time professor of theology and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary. His *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (2000), now in a second edition (2006), sets out a reasoned, schematic explanation of possible theological interrelationships of theology and cinema; the book offers a model in its clarity and thoroughness. Addressed to religious conservatives inside and outside the academy, the book in effect pleads with evangelicals to begin to take film seriously, an emphasis that the second edition now deems unnecessary, so great is the change of mind about movies in the evangelical world.[27] Johnston's consistent argument is that movies have much to tell the church, especially in noting that many biblical theologians, such as

Larry Kreitzer and Robert Jewett, look to film to find incisive illuminations of biblical texts. In this process, film informs theology, providing new clarity and depths of understanding for puzzling biblical and theological texts. Theologically, he emphasizes common grace; increased attention to the presence of God's Spirit in art, especially in image and narrative; and the necessity of dialogue with the larger culture. Engagement with film urges an expansive, if not altogether sacramental view of art and culture as a whole: if "the Spirit is active in and through the human spirit, then the potential for the sacred is present across our human endeavor," and even in the mundane and conspicuously non-religious cultural products.[28]

These approaches to popular culture from Detweiler and Johnston have not gone without criticism, particularly of the methodological foundation of "reversing the hermeneutical flow," a concept borrowed from British theologian Kreitzer that has become something of a flashpoint of disagreement among evangelical critics.[29] William D. Romanowski and Jennifer L. Vander Heide of Calvin College take to task both Detweiler and Johnston for their reliance on this central methodological assumption because (1) it fails "to portray accurately the film-viewing experience" as uncovered by cognitive films studies, and (2) it does not in practice achieve the sort of ingenuity it claims.[30] On the first point, Detweiler and Johnston ignore the "phenomenology" of viewing in their suggestion that viewers can simply suspend the psychological and intellectual selves they bring into the theater in order to "open" themselves in innocent, neutral receptivity to the world conjured on the screen. This paradigm "does not accord with the observably presuppositional nature of the film-viewing phenomenon and established understandings of film viewers as active agents, co-creators in the meanings of films."[31] Much cognitive evidence and critical theory argue against the possibility of the sort of suspension of judgment Detweiler and Johnston see as crucial for film interpretation. Practically, "this two-directional scheme oversimplifies the hermeneutical (interpretive) process by creating a kind of oppositional relation between theological perspective and the filmic text," one that posits a theological judgment and film text as stark opposites.[32] This dualism, in esteeming culture too highly, accepts "culture as a source of theology without providing an adequate means for critical judgment" and thus risks "cultural accommodation."[33]

Another dispute that simmers within evangelical film criticism hinges on the question of subjectivity in interpretation. At least some evangelical film criticism has tended to interpret films in order to make a larger point, one whose purpose often seems evangelistic. Indeed, this often seems the case

for Godawa in interpreting films to fit within his varieties of subversive worldviews. Detweiler and Taylor admit in the introduction to their book *A Matrix of Meanings* the appeal of the "subjective" in pursuing what "interests" them, and that is a method, to some extent, that Detweiler continues in *Into the Dark*, his book about his own and viewers' responses to films.[34] The danger here is not with subjectivity per se, for everyone brings a distinct human self into a movie theater, but with what we might call, for lack of a better term, impressionism: the viewer or critic too highly values his or her own perspective and risks doing violence to the film's meaning and significance. In the second edition of *Reel Spirituality*, Johnston emphasizes the need to pay closer attention to the film text—such matters as cinematography, music, and editing—to make sure one fully appreciates and understands the interplay of aesthetic and intellectual aspects of a particular film.[35] Nonetheless, he advocates reading film with allegorical lenses of one's own devising, a route that risks doing violence to the integrity of the film text.[36] This strategy may be warranted and indeed fruitful for some films in some contexts, but with it comes overvaluing individual perception.

The perils of this approach appear in conflicting interpretations of James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997). Johnston sees in *Titanic* a potent allegory of divine love, salvation, and redemption, even seeing Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio) as a Christ figure and going so far as to suggest that the filmmakers must have as well.[37] Romanowski, on the other hand, sees *Titanic* as a trite example of the gospel of human progress and self-fulfillment. For him, the film offers a bogus salvation where "romantic love substitutes for salvation . . . and secures one's place in a Titanic heaven where everyone travels first-class."[38] These two deeply opposed readings raise the question of what the film itself, and its array of audiences, sets forth about the nature of "salvation" and, for that matter, the nature of God. Romanowski does indeed seem to attend more closely to how the film itself defines salvation and love. In short, then, the eagerness to theologize film can risk bad analysis that fails to reckon with the fullness of the film text. For some, as in my own work, the first and primary call of the critic is to pay very close heed to the cinematic fullness and complexity of the work itself, the authorial intention, the audience and critical response, and the cultural context of the work's production. Perhaps the first purpose of criticism is to understand so that the cinema artist can "speak" as fully as possible; only after hearing that voice should the critic begin to reflect on a film's religious and cultural significance.

Evangelicals interpret the film *Titanic* (1997) in conflicting ways. Shown: Leonardo DiCaprio (as Jack Dawson), Kate Winslet (as Rose DeWitt Bukater). (20th Century-Fox/Photofest.)

A Brief Forecast

These disputes about interpretive methods will no doubt persist within evangelical criticism, as well they should, for they are bracing and keep folks on their critical toes, leading to a fruitful discussion of approach and latitude in the analysis of film. As evangelical film criticism sorts out some of its own thorny issues, it will assume a more prominent role in the larger discussions about religion and film. Doing so will entail paying closer heed to some areas of academic cinematic theory and practice, particularly cognitive approaches to individual and group film reception. Hard work also has to be done in theological aesthetics and phenomenology, both of which promise to foster a fuller awareness of what makes beauty and how people as full-fleshed creatures apprehend and appropriate narrative in general and visuality in particular.

Put in religious terms and practical terms, that means emphasis on how, and how much, the divine shows up cinematically in film. A corollary to that lies in a fuller understanding of religious experience, a domain in which evangelicals should thrive, given their traditional emphasis on the

work of the Holy Spirit within the mysterious depths of the soul of the human self. All of that prepares the way for moving beyond theological conversation with the biblical text and within evangelical culture to full conversation with U.S. culture, both lay and academic, religious and mainstream—an exchange to which a mature religious film criticism has much to offer. In short, the debris of that wall can also construct a meaningful roadway to authentic and enriching conversation about religious belief, cinema, and the arts in general.

Notes

1. David Dark, *Everyday Apocalypse: The Sacred Revealed in Radiohead, The Simpsons and Other Pop Culture Icons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 19.

2. Ibid., 21.

3. Brian Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 20.

4. Andrew Quicke, "The Era of Censorship (1930–1967)," in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden (London: Routledge, 2009), 32–51.

5. The Court ruled against free speech for movies in *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio*, 236 U.S. 230.

6. Quicke, "The Era of Censorship (1930–1967)," 33.

7. Ibid., 35.

8. Ibid., 36.

9. Ibid., 43–47.

10. Bryan Stone, "Modern Protestant Approaches to Film (1960 to the Present)," in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden (London: Routledge, 2009), 73.

11. Ibid., 74.

12. Ibid., 82. See especially chapter 12 in William D. Romanowski's history of American film and Protestant censorship, tentatively titled *Reforming Hollywood: American Protestants, Freedom and the Movies* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

13. For a deft treatment of the history of the rationales of the Christian Reformed Church toward film, see William D. Romanowski, "John Calvin Meets the Creature from the Black Lagoon: The Christian Reformed Church and the Movies 1928–1966," *Christian Scholars Review* 25 (September 1995): 47–62. For the larger relationship during this period between the Dutch Reformed churches (CRC and RCA) and evangelicalism, see James Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 204–221.

14. Stone, "Modern Protestant Approaches," 78–79.

15. *Movieguide: The Family Guide to Movies and Entertainment*, www.movieguide.org (accessed December 20, 2010).

16. Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 137.

17. Ibid., 96–97.

18. Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 96–97. See also the chapter on *Grand Canyon* in my book *Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 318–343.

19. Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 251–253.

20. Craig N. Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 9.

21. Ibid., 10.

22. Ibid., 16.

23. Ibid., 12.

24. Ibid., 17.

25. Ibid., 22.

26. Ibid., 155–156.

27. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 14.

28. Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 64, 69.

29. In his revised edition, Johnston uses the term *reversal* less often, but the notion is still very much a key critical orientation. See *Reel Spirituality*, 2nd ed., 64.

30. William D. Romanowski and Jennifer L. Vander Heide, "Easier Said Than Done: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow in the Theology and Film Dialogue," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 30 (March 2007): 45. British New Testament scholar Larry Kreitzer has written four books on the arts with the recurring subtitle *Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow: The New Testament in Fiction and Film* (1993), *The Old Testament in Fiction and Film* (1994), *Pauline Images in Fiction and Film* (1999), and *Gospel Images in Fiction and Film* (2002).

31. Romanowski and Vander Heide, 48.

32. Ibid., 54.

33. Ibid., 55.

34. Detweiler and Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings*, 11, 45–47.

35. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 2nd ed., 14.

36. Ibid., 40, 260–261.

37. Ibid., 261–262.

38. William D. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 157.

Chapter 3

Evangelicals' Passion for *The Passion of the Christ*

John L. Pauley and Amy King

Hollywood film studios and American evangelicals have, more often than not, had a rocky relationship. There was a perception in the 1950s and 1960s in the more conservative wing of evangelical Christianity that there was no redeeming value in Hollywood films and going to a theater to watch a movie was a threat to one's spirituality. For some, "going to the show" was one of the "filthy five"—five sinful activities that every pious believer avoided.[1] Even those evangelicals who attended movies were cautious and argued that believers had to exercise careful discernment so that they could separate the "wheat" (content affirming of biblical beliefs) from the "chaff" of worldliness. Underlying this uneasiness was the belief that the Hollywood movie industry was no real friend of the faith. As sociologist Christian Smith states, "I think Evangelicals feel generally excluded from Hollywood and generally that their values are totally ignored or lampooned and misrepresented."[2]

This strain in the relationship did not deter some from within the Hollywood film community from reaching out to Christian and evangelical audiences from time to time when they believed they had a film that would be of interest to this audience. There is evidence that as early as 1927 with *The King of Kings*, Hollywood studios were targeting religious audiences with marketing campaigns for certain films. While Hollywood studios had made previous attempts to market select films to American evangelicals, what differentiates the episode surrounding *The Passion of the Christ* is the unprecedented efforts directed at evangelicals and the ways in which evangelicals supported and defended this film.

In this chapter, we will briefly discuss marketing efforts directed toward American religious audiences prior to the campaign that led up to the

release of *The Passion*. Then we will demonstrate that a significant portion of Mel Gibson's marketing efforts were directed toward American evangelicals and, in turn, that a sizable percentage of evangelicals responded favorably to the film. Next, we will argue that, in a way quite different from earlier films marketed toward evangelicals, their enthusiastic response to Gibson and the film was emblematic of the fact that they had, in some meaningful way, come to feel a sense of ownership for this film. Lastly, we will conclude with four reasons why evangelicals responded so positively to the actual film—a film that became one of the top-grossing films of all time.[3]

Hollywood Marketing to Religious Audiences prior to *The Passion*

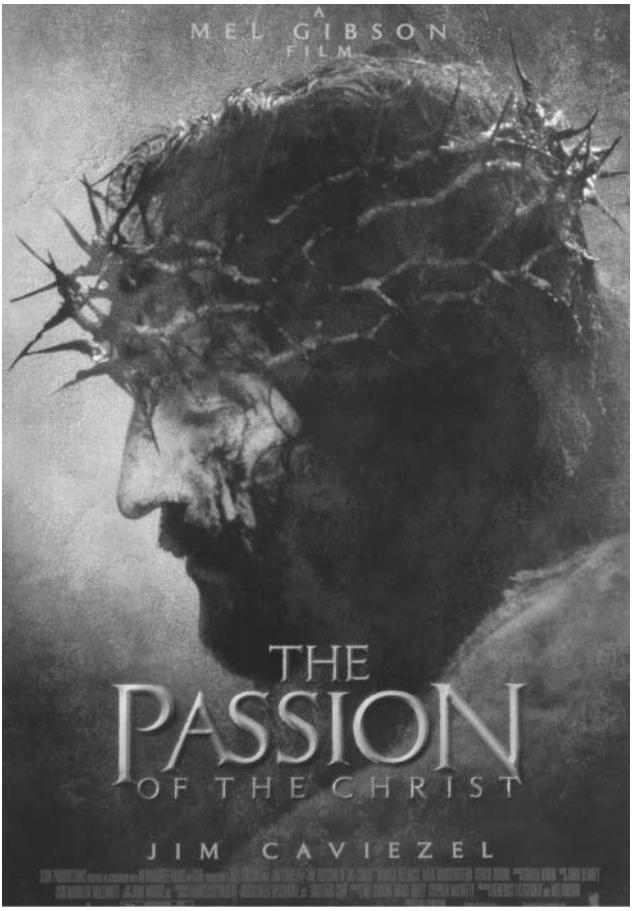
Peter Maresco details marketing efforts that surrounded "Hollywood Biblical Epic" movies back to the 1927 film *The King of Kings*.[4] Other films he mentions include *The Sign of the Cross* (1933), *The Robe* (1953), and *The Ten Commandments* (1956). Some of the marketing strategies Maresco mentions involve pre-release screenings of the films for religious groups, coordination with local churches in pre-release publicity activities, direct-mail campaigns, and advertising in religious periodicals. Sheldon Hall outlines in great detail director George Stevens's activities in marketing his film about the life of Jesus, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965). Strategies included direct mail to religious organizations, ministers, and church members; invitations to select ministers and religious leaders to visit the movie set during production; solicitation of endorsements from these religious leaders; speeches delivered by movie executives at church gatherings and seminars; advertising in church-related periodicals; and luncheons and pre-release previews for representatives of religious groups. Also, religious organizations were targeted for block ticket sales in the first few showings of the film in each city in hopes that these religious believers would "give off community opinion."[5] Hall is careful to clarify that Stevens's efforts were directed toward a broad spectrum of religious organizations, not just Christian or, more narrowly, evangelical believers. However, it is interesting to note that representatives from Fuller Theological Seminary, the Southern Baptist Convention, American Baptist Communications, and the American Bible Society were solicited and responded favorably to the marketing efforts and the film itself.[6] In contrast, the Reverend Billy Graham declined the offer to attend a pre-release screening.[7]

While occasional marketing efforts were directed to religious audiences in the next several decades, some attempts were directed specifically to American evangelicals. In 1981, Barry Reardon of Warner Brothers came to what was then Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) University (later Regent University) in Virginia to show a sneak preview of *Chariots of Fire*.[8] There were other showings of *Chariots* for evangelical pastors around the country. In 1986, Reardon came to show *The Mission* to CBN students and faculty. In 1988, Jeffrey Katzenberg asked Terrence R. Lindvall, a communication faculty member at CBN, and A. Larry Ross, president of A. Larry Ross Communications in Dallas, to consult with him and assist him in marketing an animated feature about Moses, *The Prince of Egypt*.[9] These incidents point out that Hollywood studio executives were cognizant of American evangelicals and were exploring ways of reaching this niche audience. Jonathan Bock, founder and president of Grace Hill Media, asserts that since the founding of his company in 2000, he had worked with every major Hollywood studio. Projects that Grace Hill worked on include *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003), *Signs* (2002), and *Bruce Almighty* (2003).[10] Although Hollywood believed there was a potentially lucrative market among American evangelicals and attempted to market some of their projects to them prior to 2003, all of these attempts would seem small in comparison to Mel Gibson's efforts in marketing *The Passion*.

The Marketing of *The Passion of the Christ*

There is no doubt that a significant portion of Mel Gibson's efforts at marketing *The Passion of the Christ* was directed at conservative American Christians, most notably conservative Catholics and evangelical Protestants.[11] First, Gibson often sought the advice and counsel of evangelicals and those who understood this target audience. Second, Gibson courted evangelicals by making personal appearances and showing portions or clips of *The Passion* to numerous evangelical groups, especially leaders and pastors.

As early as the summer of 2002, Mel Gibson was in contact with evangelicals about his film project. In August, Holly McClure, a member of Biola University's Film Task Force and a board member of the Dove Foundation and the Parents Television Council, was invited by Gibson to read a script of *The Passion* and provide feedback. McClure was invited to the movie set in Italy in December of that year.[12] Documented evidence of Gibson's consultations with other evangelicals during the last half of 2002



***The Passion of the Christ* (2004), directed by Mel Gibson. Shown: Promotional Poster. (Newmarket/Photofest.)**

and the first few months of 2003 is not readily available. Beginning in May 2003, Gibson consulted with Ross, whom Deborah Caldwell calls "an expert at presenting popular culture to an Evangelical audience."[13] Ross was invited to California to see a "rough cut" of Gibson's film and asked Gibson what one idea could garner assent and support from the "vast conservative American Christian audience—Evangelicals, conservative Catholics, charismatics and others." Gibson replied without hesitation, "Christ died for our sins."[14] Gibson and Icon's marketing strategy centered around that idea from that point forward. Gibson was going to take his film to an audience who, with him, already believed in the atoning death of

Jesus on the cross. Amid a public relations controversy that began in March and escalated into late spring and early summer,[15] Gibson and Paul Lauer, his "marketing man," developed a strategy that included two essential elements: (1) showing portions or entire rough cuts of the movie to as many religious opinion leaders and laypeople as possible, and (2) making Mel Gibson himself available to interact with these audiences. In these personal appearances, Gibson would discuss why he was making this movie and what Christ's passion meant to him personally.

In a month marked by ongoing criticism of *The Passion*, Mel Gibson took a trip to Colorado Springs, Colorado, "a national hub of evangelical Christianity."[16] By June 26, 2003, Gibson had perfected his marketing strategy to evangelicals. He screened the film for approximately 300 staff members at Focus on the Family headquarters and to more than 800 pastors who were attending the Life Giving Leadership Conference at New Life Church, then pastored by Reverend Ted Haggard, the president of the National Association of Evangelicals. Gibson talked to them about his faith and how it affected his work on the film. One reporter writes that Gibson "was candid in relating how events more than a decade ago led him to become a more committed Christian" and quotes him as saying, "I'm not a preacher, and I'm not a pastor. . . . But I really feel my career was leading me to make this. The Holy Ghost was working through me on this film, and I was just directing traffic."[17]

The trip to Colorado Springs would be the first of many such excursions.[18] On August 3 Gibson went to Nashville, Tennessee, to show a cut of the film to "Christian music industry movers and shakers."[19] Five days later, Gibson was in Houston and Dallas, Texas, showing the film to invitation-only audiences that included Joel Osteen, pastor of Lakewood Church in suburban Houston, Auxiliary Bishop Joe S. Vasquez of the Diocese of Galveston-Houston, and Darrell Bock, a New Testament professor at Dallas Theological Seminary.[20] That same evening, a four-minute clip of the film was shown in Anaheim, California, to a large audience assembled at Edison International Field for evangelist Greg Laurie's Harvest Crusade.[21]

Among other notable showings, Gibson went to North Carolina twice in the fall to visit with Rev. Billy Graham before and after the evangelist had seen the movie.[22] In December he returned to the Nashville area to show the film at the First Baptist Church of Hendersonville, hosted by country music star Ricky Skaggs.[23] On January 5, 2004, Gibson screened a cut of the film for 3,600 pastors at a conference at Rick Warren's Saddleback

Church in Lake Forest, California.[24] Later in January, he showed a portion of *The Passion* to 4,300 individuals who were attending a conference at Bill Hybel's Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago, Illinois[25] and to over 5,000 pastors who were attending the Beyond All Limits 2 conference at Calvary Assembly of God Church in Orlando, Florida.[26] In February, Gibson screened the film at the annual conventions of the Christian Booksellers Association in Indianapolis, Indiana,[27] and of the National Religious Broadcasters in Charlotte, North Carolina.[28] It is estimated that Gibson or other representatives of Icon showed portions or rough cuts of *The Passion of the Christ* on more than eighty occasions from the summer of 2003 until the movie release on February 24, 2004.[29] Just exactly how many of these showings were directed to evangelical or mostly evangelical audiences is uncertain, but there can be no doubt that a high percentage of those attending screenings of *The Passion* were evangelicals.

In Gibson's appearances, evangelicals heard what sounded to them like Gibson's personal testimony, and they responded quite favorably to his talking openly about his faith. Ted Haggard said, "I've been pastor at New Life Church for 18 years, and I don't remember anyone displaying a fear of God on our platform the way Mel did today."[30] Billy Graham, Robert Schuller, Darrell Bock, and David Neff, editor of *Christianity Today*, among others, vouched for Gibson's personal piety.[31] Perhaps there is no more clear endorsement of Gibson's faith credentials than those offered by Lisa Bevill, a contemporary Christian music artist who attended a showing of *The Passion* in December 2003, at the First Baptist Church of Hendersonville, Tennessee. In her review, she says, "Mel, I have to say, is a man of the word [*sic*]! He knows the Bible and is a believer. He said that this movie has been his passion for the past 12 years and just 3 years ago did the Lord begin to give him landmark signs that now was the time to start filming the movie."[32]

Not only did evangelical Christians offer public endorsements of Mel Gibson and *The Passion of the Christ*, they also organized efforts to get people into the theaters to see the movie. Outreach, Inc., developed a line of products—door hangers, invitation cards, church bulletin inserts, Bible excerpts, and study guides—to assist churches in their efforts to motivate their members and friends to see *The Passion*.[33] Mike Ilitch Jr. and Mark Koch of Prelude Worldwide Ministries "launched a state-of-the-art series of Internet sites in December [2003] to sell tickets to *The Passion* through nearly 50 Web pages designed to look like they were sponsored by individual religious groups."[34] Additionally, churches and individuals all across

the United States bought blocks of tickets to see opening-week showings of *The Passion*.[35] Perhaps no story garnered more media attention than that of Arch Bonnema, a lay member of Prestonwood Baptist Church near Dallas, Texas, who purchased and gave away 6,000 tickets to first-day showings of *The Passion*.[36]

Why Were Evangelicals Passionate about *The Passion*?

There is abundant evidence that Mel Gibson and his marketing advisors targeted conservative American Christian audiences and evangelicals in particular. There is also ample proof that a high percentage of American evangelicals responded favorably to Gibson and his movie—from positive statements to the press praising both the movie and Gibson to purchasing tickets to watch *The Passion*.[37] The question remains, however, why significant numbers of American evangelicals responded so enthusiastically to Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* and came to view this movie as their own. To explain this, we first outline reasons external to the film itself and then offer several reasons that come from an interpretation of the film.

While many evangelical pastors and other leaders had seen a rough cut or portion of *The Passion*, many of the evangelicals who went to the theaters on February 24, 2004, and the following days had only experienced the movie through media coverage, announcements from the pulpit, church promotional materials, or other forms of marketing. What prompted them in such large numbers to attend a violent, R-rated movie? Unlike other movies, such as *Chariots of Fire* and *The Mission*, that were seen as friendly to evangelical beliefs, *The Passion of the Christ* was viewed in evangelical circles as a film about the central event of the Christian faith. The belief that "Christ died for our sins" is the heart of evangelical Christianity. What evangelicals had heard from their pastors and others was that Gibson had taken the story of Jesus's passion seriously and had relied heavily on the Gospel records to fashion this narrative of the last hours of Jesus before his death on the cross. This is particularly significant in light of the fact that the last big Hollywood film dealing with Jesus had been Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*—a controversial movie based on Nikos Kazantzakis's rather unorthodox novel of the same name. Many evangelicals had seen that movie as an attack on their beliefs and welcomed Gibson's film as a faithful cinematic re-telling of the beloved story at the core of their faith.[38]

One other related factor contributed to the overwhelming advocacy American evangelicals provided for *The Passion*. There were individuals, particularly a group of religious scholars as well as individuals within the Jewish community, who were opposed to Gibson's project and were concerned that the film was anti-Semitic or could possibly incite anti-Semitic acts. This group, consisting of Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish academics and theologians, was convened by Dr. Eugene Fisher, a "leading Catholic ecumenist," and Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League.[39] This ad hoc committee received a copy of the script of *The Passion* in April 2003, and within days some members were talking to reporters about their concerns. Sister Mary Boys, a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and Rabbi Eugene Korn, director of Interfaith Affairs at the Anti-Defamation League in New York City, expressed concern and alarm that Gibson's film would be nothing more than a return to medieval passion plays that blamed the death of Jesus on the Jews and resulted in anti-Semitic violence.[40] Gibson denied these charges with two lines of defense. The first was that all humanity, including himself, was responsible for the death of Jesus. In a meeting with a group of pastors in July 2003, Gibson stated, "For culpability, look to yourself. I look to myself."[41] The second was that he was merely trying to make a film based on the Gospel accounts of Jesus's betrayal, trial, scourging, and crucifixion.[42] Both of these arguments resonated with evangelicals who identified with Gibson as he articulated these positions, and they empathized with him, believing he was being unfairly attacked by "liberal" scholars and religious leaders.[43] Though not an evangelical himself, Gibson became a champion of American evangelicals—a "brother" in the faith who was being persecuted for his beliefs and his desire to make a biblically accurate movie about the passion of Jesus Christ. This identification was constructed prior to many evangelicals' exposure to the movie itself; it was solidified through their viewing of the actual film.

An Evangelical Interpretation of *The Passion of the Christ*

Much of evangelical response to *The Passion* has to do with the context of evangelicalism and popular culture and the lengths to which Gibson went in his courtship of evangelicals; in many cases, support for the film was granted before exposure to the film itself. However, there are reasons why the actual film resonated so powerfully with the average evangelical spectator. It is our position that evangelicals responded favorably to *The Passion*

because of four reasons that relate to the specificity of evangelical faith: (1) the movie focuses on the crucifixion, (2) the crucifixion is central to Christian conversion, (3) the film was seen as a medium for evangelism, and (4) *The Passion*'s representation of the suffering of Jesus serves as a visual reminder of the sacrifice he made for his followers.

Because the crucifixion is a focal point of evangelical faith, it is logical that a film that creates a corporeal reality representative of this moment in such visual detail would be emotionally compelling to evangelical viewers. The very fact that this movie incisively details not the teachings of Jesus but His crucifixion stresses its importance. When considered within the context of other films created about the life of Jesus, this film is an anomaly. Other films include the crucifixion, but only as a small part of a much larger story. *The Passion* is a movie about the crucifixion with a few flashbacks to the teachings of Jesus and a moment of His resurrection. Therefore, Gibson's decision to portray the last fourteen hours of Christ's life resonates powerfully with evangelicals, for whom this is one of the most important elements of their faith. It is not that the teachings of Jesus are unimportant, but that their belief that Jesus's act of love in submitting to the crucifixion (with its implications for salvation) is the heart of the Christian faith.

James Caviezel, as Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), is shown here being crucified on the cross. (Newmarket/Photofest.)

Second, evangelical faith emphasizes the crucifixion because of its pivotal connection to Christian conversion. For an evangelical who believes that this act is the defining moment in a person's faith and leads to a spiritual rebirth and, consequently, redemption, this is an emotionally powerful experience. As the film portrays the violent beating and scourging of Jesus, evangelical spectators believe that Jesus is receiving their own punishment. From the evangelicals' perspective, they themselves are to blame for what is happening to Christ. This is one reason why it is so difficult for evangelicals to conceive of this film as anti-Semitic. In their minds, they would in no way blame Jews for the death of Jesus:

> Those who find no anti-Semitism in *The Passion* begin by stating that, according to Christian thought, it was divine design, not Jewish enmity, that ultimately led to Jesus' death. They would never state that "the Jews" killed Jesus. To the contrary, Jesus was handed over by G-d the Father, and he died of his own free will. He took his place on the cross because of human sin.[44]

Moreover, evangelical Christians are less critical of the film because "in this world of personal and individualistic piety, they will see Christ dying and enduring immeasurable suffering because of *their* sin and their sin alone."[45] As evangelical spectators see their Savior being beaten violently, they are reminded of the extraordinary sacrifice he made on their behalf.

A third reason that evangelicals responded so positively to the film is due to its potential as a source of evangelism, another central tenet of evangelical faith. Because the film shares the good news of Jesus's sacrifice on behalf of sinners in a secular forum that is conveniently circulated, many evangelicals saw this as an opportunity to reach a larger audience. When Kathy (one individual we talked to about the film) set out to see *The Passion of the Christ* on Easter in 2004, she had no idea her life was about to change forever. Having grown up Catholic in Ecuador, she had been disillusioned with Christianity and was searching for spiritual fulfillment and belonging elsewhere. Nevertheless, after seeing *The Passion* on that day, she would ultimately return to Christianity. The depiction of the pain and suffering experienced by Jesus was what Kathy describes as an awakening of her conscience. The visualization of the blood was necessary for her to understand the dimension of Jesus's sacrifice. Six years later, after being baptized at an evangelical church, Warehouse 242 in Charlotte, North Carolina, Kathy still references the film as the moment that jolted her into conversion.[46] While Kathy's story is the most ideal response

imaginable to evangelicals, it is not the typical response of the non-Christian to this film. Research finds that "overall, it appears that viewers interpreted the film in light of the faith perspective that they brought to the film rather than *The Passion* causing significant reevaluations of that faith."[47] Whether this was a reality eventually accepted, at its release the film was initially thought to be a tool for evangelism.

The final reason that this film resonated so powerfully with evangelicals is that viewing *The Passion* was a spiritual experience for evangelicals as they witnessed the beautiful act of love their Savior performed for them. The film painfully recounts that Jesus did not just die for his follower's sins, but he also *suffered* in payment of their debt. The film begins with the scripture that foretells the sacrifice of Jesus, Isaiah 53:5, "he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed" (NRSV). This scripture, for many evangelicals, summarizes most eloquently the sacrifice of Christ. When evangelicals confess their sins and accept Christ's punishment as their own, many experience such a compelling expression of love and grace that this transforms and pervades their entire life. Therefore, the filmic representation of this defining act predictably evokes an emotional response in the evangelical viewer. One study observes, "the conservative Christians were proportionally more likely to note that the film increased their awareness of God's personal love for them," and they were, in fact, "participating in a worship service."[48] This, in part, accounts for the stories of the weeping that occurred in the theaters. For many, it was painful to witness the intensity of Jesus's sacrifice. Viewing *The Passion of the Christ* was, indeed, a worshipful moment for many evangelicals.

Conclusion

There are multiple reasons that explain the overwhelming positive reception of *The Passion of the Christ* by the evangelical community. Even before the release of the film, the efforts of Mel Gibson to recruit evangelical leaders and consequently the larger community were successful in creating a flock of supporters who patronized the film and defended it against its attackers. Gibson was able to accomplish identification with evangelicals, and they, in turn, became advocates for his film and developed a sense of ownership for *The Passion*. Additionally, an interpretation of the movie from the perspective of evangelical faith offers further clarification for why it evoked a passionate response from evangelical viewers. While many

offer legitimate theories to explain the unexpected phenomenon of the enthusiastic evangelical response to the Catholic-influenced film, when the entire context is considered along with an interpretation of the actual movie, this outcome seems almost inevitable. The filmmaker successfully created identification with the evangelical community prior to the film's release, and *The Passion* resounded powerfully with their spiritual experience of love and forgiveness. This explains why so many in the evangelical community could not understand the criticisms posed by many that the film was anti-Semitic. From their perspective (at the time of its release) *The Passion of the Christ* was created by a fellow believer who depicted their Savior's sacrifice more faithfully than any film before it had. They had no choice but to defend it like they would their faith.

Notes

1. The "filthy five" were smoking, drinking alcohol, dancing, playing cards (other than games like "Rook"), and going to the movies.

2. Quoted in Deborah Caldwell, "Selling *Passion*," in *Perspectives on "The Passion of The Christ": Religious Thinkers and Writers Explore the Issues Raised by the Controversial Movie* (New York: Miramax, 2004), 213.

3. According to Box Office Mojo, *The Passion of the Christ* is one of the top-grossing domestic films of all time, listed at $370,782,930. Worldwide revenue is listed at $611,899,420. *The Passion of the Christ*, http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=passionofthechrist.htm (accessed July 23, 2011).

4. Peter Maresco, "Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*: Market Segmentation, Mass Marketing and Promotion, and the Internet," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 8 (2004), http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art8-melgibsonmarketing-print.html. The term "Hollywood Biblical Epic" was developed by Bruce Babbington and Peter William Evans, *Biblical Epics, Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1993).

5. Sheldon Hall, "Selling Religion: How to Market a Biblical Epic," *Film History* 14 (2002): 178.

6. Ibid., 176, 179.

7. Ibid., 176.

8. We are indebted to Professor Terrence R. Lindvall of Virginia Wesleyan University (formerly on the faculty at CBN) for this information.

9. Terrence R. Lindvall, email to author (Pauley), July 20, 2010. For Ross's involvement, see Caldwell, "Selling *Passion*," 212. Caldwell states that the Ross company is a "Christian public relations and marketing film" (p. 211). Among Ross's clients are the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, Rick Warren, Campus Crusade for Christ, and the National Association of Evangelicals.

10. Grace Hill Media, although not an evangelical company, states on its website that the company "is committed to highlighting entertainment for the faith community which shares in their beliefs, that explores their values, and that enhances and elevates their view of the world" (http://www.gracehillmedia.com/aboutus/, para. 2). That same page asserts that Bock "serves on the board of Reel Spirituality at Fuller Theological Seminary and is a deacon at Bel Air Presbyterian Church" (para. 3). In a phone conversation on September 16, 2010, with one of the authors, Bock also asserted that many of the marketing strategies that were employed on behalf of *The Passion of the Christ* had already been utilized with evangelical audiences.

11. Caldwell, "Selling *Passion*," 212. While the focus of this essay is on Gibson's targeting of evangelicals, press reports indicate that the director also marketed the film to conservative Catholics (his interview on EWTN and screenings of the film to groups of Catholic clergy and laity).

12. See Holly McClure's involvement with *The Passion* in her interview on the 700 Club's website. See also http://www.cbn.com/700club/guests/bios/Holly_McClure_030804.aspx.

13. Caldwell, "Selling *Passion*," 212. A. Larry Ross confirmed Caldwell's details, interview by author (Pauley), October 14, 2004.

14. Caldwell, "Selling *Passion*," 212.

15. For a brief discussion of the controversy surrounding the film, see Peter J. Boyer, "The Jesus War," *The New Yorker*, September 15, 2003, 58–71. Paul Lauer is the founder of Motive Entertainment, the parent company of Motive Marketing, whose website says the company was "in charge of marketing Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ,*" http://moviemarketing.biz/moviemarketing.html, para.1.

16. Kamon Simpson, "Mel Gibson Brings Movie to City's Church Leaders," *The Gazette*, June 27, 2003, 1, 15.

17. Ibid., 15.

18. While our narrative skips from June to August, there is evidence to suggest that Gibson screened the movie in July. Columnist Cal Thomas wrote in early August that he had attended a screening for "50 people" in Washington the previous month. Cal Thomas, "The Greatest Story Ever Filmed," *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, August 11, 2003, B7. See also Laurie Goodstein, "Months before Debut, Movie on Death of Jesus Causes Stir," *New York Times*, August 2, 2003, A1.

19. Brad Schmitt, "Nashville Previews," *The Tennessean*, February 25, 2004, D1.

20. Jeannine Kever and Tara Dooley, "Hollywood Comes to Houston; Gibson's *Passion* Hearing Whispers of Anti-Semitism," *The Houston Chronicle*, August 9, 2003, A1. For the Dallas showing, see Caldwell, "Selling *Passion*," 217.

21. William Lobdell, "Stadium Stirred by *Passion* Preview," *Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 2003, A1, 15. Lobdell estimated that there were more than 30,000 present at the crusade meeting.

22. "Billy Graham Screens *The Passion of the Christ;* Evangelist Calls Mel Gibson Film 'Faithful to the Bible's Teaching,' " WorldNetDaily, November 26, 2003, http://www.wnd.com/?pageId=22003.

23. Schmitt, "Nashville Previews."

24. Gabriel Snyder, "Inside Move: Mel Is Shepherding the Flock," *Variety.com*, January 18, 2004, http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117898609.

25. Sara Burnett, "Promo from the Pulpit; Gibson Stages Private Showing of *Passion* at Willow Creek," *Chicago Daily Herald*, January 21, 2004, 1.

26. Julia Duin, "5,000 Pastors Cheer Mel Gibson's *Passion*," *Washington Times*, January 22, 2004.

27. David Crumm, "Gibson Forges Allies for Controversial Film," *Detroit Free Press*, February 7, 2004.

28. Liz Szabo, "*Passion of Christ* Moves Film's Early Viewers," *USA Today*, February 17, 2004, http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2004-02-17-passion-main_x.htm.

29. Paul Lauer, interview by author (Pauley), September 20, 2010.

30. Quoted in Simpson, "Mel Gibson Brings Movie," A15.

31. According to a press release issued by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association on November 25, 2003, Graham "became convinced of Mr. Gibson's deep sincerity and great desire that this motion picture be used to bring a new emphasis on those events 2,000 years ago, and their relevance to us today." Schuller, after seeing a screening of *The Passion*, said to Gibson, "It's not your dream, this is God's dream. . . . He gave it to you, because He knew you wouldn't throw it away" (Boyer, "The Jesus War," 69). Bock states that evangelicals embraced Gibson because "he was a Hollywood star willing to put his faith on the line. They supported the kind of testimony this movie represented" (Caldwell, 218). Neff's essay, "The Passion of Mel Gibson: Why Evangelicals Are Cheering a Movie with Profoundly Catholic Sensibilities" (*Christianity Today*, March 2004, 30–35) is an attempt to explain how Protestant evangelical viewers connected with Gibson and the film. Neff writes, after an interview with Gibson, that the actor/producer/director believes in such fundamental evangelical faith tenets as a personal sense of sin and responsibility for Christ's crucifixion and personal salvation.

32. "Christian Artist Lisa Bevill Reviews *The Passion of Christ*," http://www.3daudioinc.com/3db/showthread.php?3942-Mel-Gibson-s-quot-The-Passion-of-Christ-quot.

33. Maresco, "Mel Gibson's *The Passion*," and Caldwell, "Selling *The Passion*," 219–220.

34. Crumm, "Gibson Forges Allies."

35. See Laurie Goodstein, "Some Christians See *Passion* as Evangelism Tool," *New York Times*, February 5, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/05/national/05CHRI.html; Gordon Govier, "Area Churches Energized by *Passion*," *Capital Times* (Madison, Wisconsin) February 10, 2004, 1B; Ida Chapman,

"Passionate Effort Brings Movie: Drive Prompts Area Screenings of *The Passion of the Christ*," *South Bend Tribune*, February 13, 2004, A1; and Stefanie Cirillo, "Churches Plan Outings to See, Discuss *The Passion*," *Chicago Daily Herald*, February 13, 2004, 1 (F3 Edition).

36. See Erin Curry, "Man Buys 6,000 Tickets for *Passion*, Gives Them Away," http://www.bpnews.net/printerfriendly.asp?ID=17568.

37. Press estimates pegged pre-release ticket sales at $10 million, and it is reasonable to assume that a high percentage of those sales were to evangelical churches and individuals. Bob Berney, president of Newmarket Films that handled distribution for *The Passion*, said, "Theaters are adding two to four screens in each complex, based on demand. . . . They had advance sales of $10 million. They've been inundated with calls from church groups." Quoted in Anne Thompson, "A Busy Week: *Passion* and 2 Oscar Hopefuls," *New York Times*, February 24, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/24/movies/oscars/24BERN.html.

38. For a complete discussion of this argument, see Ben Witherington III, "Numbstruck: An Evangelical Reflects on Mel Gibson's *Passion*," in *Perspectives on "The Passion of the Christ": Religious Thinkers and Writers Explore the Issues Raised by the Controversial Film* (New York: Miramax, 2004), 81–93.

39. See Boyer, "The Jesus War," 64–67. For an account of the incident see Paula Fredriksen, "Mad Mel: The Gospel According to Gibson," *The New Republic*, July 28–August 4, 2003, 25–29.

40. Bettijane Levine, "Scholars Concerned about Film's Fallout: Some Express Fears That Gibson's *The Passion*, about Christ's Last 12 Hours, Could Ignite Animosity between Christians and Jews," *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 2003, E3.

41. Quoted in Neff, "The Passion of Mel Gibson," 33.

42. Boyer, "The Jesus War," 67.

43. According to Witherington, evangelicals harbor a "great suspicion of the media, and believe that the media do not treat Christianity fairly. Thus, the opposition to Gibson and his film, many Evangelicals think, is just another example of the media's anti-Christian bias" ("Numbstruck," 89). See also Robert H. Woods Jr. et al., "The Audience Responds to *The Passion of the Christ*," in *Re-Viewing "The Passion": Mel Gibson's Film and Its Critics*, ed. S. Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2004), 163–180. Woods et al. write, "[M]uch of the movie's popularity among conservative Christians may be a reaction to the criticism it received, particularly prior to its release. Conservative Christians may have perceived the attack on the film as an attack on orthodox Christianity and on Christians as a whole and so rallied to its defense" (p. 174).

44. Amy-Jill Levine, "First Take the Log Out of Your Own Eye: Different Viewpoints, Different Movies," in *Perspectives on "The Passion of the Christ"* (New York: Miramax, 2004), 199. Note that in this quote "God" is intentionally spelled "G-d" because the author is Jewish and as such cannot spell out the name of God.

45. Kathryn J. S. Smith, "Reframing Difference: Evangelicals, Scripture, and the Jews," *After the Passion Is Gone*, eds. J. Shawn Landres and Michael Berenbaum (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2004), 277.

46. Interview by author (King), May 2011.

47. Woods et al., "The Audience Responds to *The Passion of the Christ*," 173.

48. Ibid., 171.

Chapter 4

Evangelicals and Film: What Moviegoers Can Learn from the Bible

Robert K. Johnston

It was while viewing *Becket* (1964) that I experienced "God's call" to the Christian ministry.[1] It was while watching *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007) that one of my students felt compelled to enter a doctoral program in counseling in order to help those suffering emotional trauma. It was his viewing of *Easy Rider* (1969) that caused another of my students to choose to live in a Christian commune, something he is still doing over forty years later. Testimonials of similar transformative and shaping experiences by friends and students are easily multiplied. But are these filmic experiences theologically significant?

If one were only to consider the majority of current critical work in theology and film by evangelicals, the answer would seem to be, "Not really." Theological interpretation of film by Protestants, particularly evangelical Protestants, has historically suffered from the same disease that has plagued Protestant biblical interpretation since the Reformation—an overly focused concentration on the "facts" of the text. This has too often been at the expense of a robust use of the imagination—something that has narrowed the interpreter's attention to surface meanings, together with their theological analogues, at the expense of "thicker," more personal readings/viewings/appropriations of the text.[2]

One need only read a cross section of biblical commentaries with their focus on historical-critical interpretation to understand the problem with this more "objective" focus. In a recent review, David Lyle Jeffrey voiced the judgment of many when he wrote of "the increasingly painful bankruptcy of the historical-critical method in our time."[3] With regard to

theology and film criticism, one might listen to Catholic film scholar Richard Blake, who criticizes those in the church for wanting to make film relevant by using it educationally or ethically to illustrate doctrine and practice rather than seeing it as a "form of divine revelation."[4]

The objectification of text is, of course, not limited to biblical scholars or theology and film critics. Even in the early 1970s, Theodore Roszak could write of the limitations of such "single vision" in our wider culture. His contention was that "the universe of single vision, the orthodox consciousness in which most of us reside most of the time and especially when we are being most 'wide awake' and 'realistic,' is very cramped quarters, by no means various and spacious enough to let us grow to full human size." For Roszak, "[t]he well-focused eye may see sharply what it sees, but it studies a lesser reality than the enraptured gaze."[5]

This chapter explores whether the widespread criticism of our culture's over-objectivity, together with a growing recognition of the value of the "enraptured gaze," might provide helpful direction to theology and film criticism as it moves into its second generation.[6] In particular, it will look for insight and instruction from a pre-modern, holistic, interpretive approach to reading the Bible. Once considered classical and unquestioned, but now largely abandoned both because of its misuse and because of the Enlightenment's overrationality, the medievalist's four-fold reading of scripture might provide evangelical theology and film critics an interpretive model, opening viewers to an overflow of spiritual meaning as a film's story and its viewers' stories merge into a larger whole. Taking its cue from the medievalist's reading of the Bible, movie viewing can be understood as having an analogous thickness of meaning so that (1) when film is viewed on its own terms (the literal), (2) it can stimulate belief (the allegorical), (3) encourage right practice (the tropological), and (4) even invite divine contemplation (the anagogical). The "ancient" biblical exegete can thus serve as an interpretive guide for postmodern evangelical filmgoers. Their four-fold method, hammered out over a thousand years, can find still another "life" as it helps evangelical moviegoers describe and practice their own thick viewing of film.

The Problem Addressed

As British New Testament scholar James D. G. Dunn summarizes the problem in biblical studies, the Reformation gave "priority to the literal sense, over against the medieval openness to the text's polyvalence of

meaning, as expressed particularly through allegorical interpretation."[7] Martin Luther wrote, for example, "I convey the literal sense of Scripture. . . . Other interpretations, however appealing, are the work of fools."[8] John Calvin was equally clear in his rejection of those "deadly corruptions, those pretended expositions which lead away from the literal sense."[9] So too John Colet in England. In their rejection of the allegorical sense of scripture, these reformers were extending a trend that had begun as early as the thirteenth century with the rise of the university, when metaphor and imagination began to be held in less importance. "Since the time when theology [including biblical studies] became professionalized, spirituals and mystics took up the challenge of [interpreting] the spoken word. [But] in doing so, they were displaced toward the area of the 'fable.' "[10] In this way, the use of the imagination became separated from the academic field of interpretation, becoming closer to a song or cry, something understood as largely subjective.

In the centuries that have followed, the focus on a text's plain meaning, whether religious or artistic, has often been nuanced to include a concern for the author's intention (or at least the author's implied intention). In addition, the importance of a reader's (or an implied reader's) perspective is now being embraced. The artistic-critical circle has in this way rightly been recognized as important for any full-orbed interpretive endeavor. But particularly in evangelical Protestant circles, reader-response theory has been questioned because of its supposed subjectivism.

The first generation of Protestant interpreters of film has largely chosen to concentrate their attention on a film's subject matter, finding in it parallels and illustrations to theological themes imported from outside the film-viewing experience and, thus, elsewhere defined. What a movie might mean to different individuals, or how critical attention might best be centered on the viewer's experience of a film, has largely been ignored. Thus, when Joel Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr. published their important book *Screening the Sacred* in 1995 and attempted to systematize then-current approaches to the study of religion and film, they listed "theology" as one of several interpretive approaches. As they described it, a theological critique of film studies "cathedrals" built by cinema. That is, it looks for traditional theological concepts, such as redemption or hope, within cinema in order to understand a film's larger intent. Its goal is a more abstracted, second-order conversation between theology and film centering on common themes. This approach, they argued, was an appropriate method for studying films like *Places in the Heart* (1984) and *Platoon* (1986).[11]

Such theologizing has continued into the present. In *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment* (2002), author and screenwriter Brian Godawa, for example, states the goal of his book is "to aid the viewer's ability to discern the ideas being communicated."[12] But his theologically dictated approach causes Godawa at times to miss a movie's deeper meaning, such as when he understands *Grand Canyon* (1991) to be about existential meaninglessness rather than being about an invitation to a sense of wonder for the film's characters and viewers as the movie ends looking out over that magnificent crevice. The four volumes in inter-textual studies by Larry Kreitzer (1993–2002) might also be mentioned here. Kreitzer, to use a phrase from his book title, "reverses the hermeneutical flow," starting with the film text and moving to scripture rather than vice versa.[13] But his concentration on themes and theological content remains central nonetheless, making his books informative but also abstracted and removed from the liveliness of the film narrative. Better perhaps are Bryan Stone's *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema*[14] and Robert Jewett's influential books *St. Paul at the Movies* and *St. Paul Returns to the Movies*.[15] Like the others, what are important for these authors are the formal correlations between filmic text and biblical or theological themes, though both Jewett and Stone are better at first looking and listening to the film text on its own terms. My own volume, *Useless Beauty: Ecclesiastes through the Lens of Contemporary Film*, also fits here.[16]

Such a focus on critical objectivity has brought with it both gains and losses. Again, biblical studies can be our teacher. On the plus side, in scriptural studies, critical stress has been placed on what James Barr has labeled the "factuality" of the biblical text, that is, on its givenness.[17] There has been a refusal, as John Barton notes, to make a text say "just what we should like it to say."[18] Early Protestants were correct to reject the fanciful allegorizations of some of their peers, those magical interpretations of unspoken truths hidden in texts that somehow could be intuited. Similarly, in theology and film studies the orientation toward textual studies by Protestants has meant an increasing seriousness in unpacking the movie itself on its own terms, at least by the best of its interpreters. The consistently insightful writing on film by Calvin College's Roy M. Anker is a good example. In *Catching Light*, Anker uses the metaphor of light to suggest how divine light might show forth from the screen of a darkened room.[19] He offers close and illuminating textual readings of a dozen classical films, giving rightful importance not just to word but to image and music as well. But Anker's analytical approach also has its limitations. The actual Divine

Light remains largely absent—something still to be caught. This is the unfortunate consequence of an overconcentration on the text: discussion remains largely abstracted and second-order.

The focus on the text as "text" has led, in literary critic George Steiner's words, to a "remission from direct encounter with the 'real presence,' " or as Steiner puts it in another way, to the "real absence of that presence." We have sought "the immunities of indirection," argues Steiner, domesticating mystery in the process.[20] Our parasitic discourse has fed off of living utterance, causing an imbalance between explicative-evaluative commentary and that upon which it is based. It has put film in the service of theological reasoning rather than allowing the two to be full partners in dialogue.

Seeking New Directions

The problem in much theology and film scholarship is similar to much biblical scholarship—in Roszak's terminology, its "single vision." For many, this is familiar territory. There is a growing, self-critical awareness that is well advanced in biblical studies and is beginning now to be voiced even in theology and film criticism. The question is this: Can biblical hermeneutics (or the study of how to interpret the Bible) also be our guide as we seek new directions for theology and film scholarship, as we move beyond the present critical impasse?

Old Testament scholar and professor Walter Brueggemann, in his wonderfully suggestive book *Cadences of Home*, recognizes that biblical scholars have too often "been practitioners of a thinning of the text, so the text is only read on the surface."[21] However, there is a density to a biblical text that must be attended to, even if only intuitively. Though we might flatten scripture to fit creedal expectations or reduce texts to historical-critical issues, Brueggemann recognizes that "texts have persisted in their density, refused to be diluted, ever again available in richness, knowing that if denseness is uttered, 'They will come.' "[22] Brueggemann finds in anthropologist Clifford Geertz's use of "thick description" a helpful hermeneutical (or interpretive) clue.[23] As he argues in *Power, Providence, and Personality*, "We are not spectators of these stories. . . . When we yield enough, with enough patience, it becomes clear that we are in the midst of the stories—valuing our own past, pushed by ruthless force, oddly visited by the one whom we dare call God. The pastoral task is managing these stories so that they become distanced, disclosing alternative renderings of our own life."[24]

What Brueggemann is suggesting is the need to rethink what George Steiner calls "the kinds of entrance" which we allow our texts. In his seminal book *Real Presences*, Steiner recognizes that we as readers and viewers need to consider how a text's power and meaning enters "into the narrows of our individual existence."[25] Is it primarily, or even initially, cognitive? What is the role of the imagination? What is it we should be seeking in the scriptures? Or in film? "The answer," as Daniel Hardy recognizes, "is that we should—and can—agree to seek a density of meaning found there that implicates both God and us." Referencing Samuel Coleridge, Hardy understands that our task "is to allow the deep meaning of the Scriptures to find us as 'Truth and Power and purifying Impulse.' "[26] We need to ask how the text finds "me." Hardy, like Coleridge whom he interprets, was reflecting on how to read the Bible. But his critique might equally apply, as Steiner suggests, to our encounter with artistic word, image, or music—or all three, as in the experience of film. There is in both aesthetic and religious text a thickness that does indeed implicate both God and us.

Texts differ not only in surface content but in depth and purpose. And so too do their readers or viewers. There is of course no single reading, viewing, or hearing of a text. We come both with our personal uniqueness and with those "family resemblances" (community insights and perspectives) that allow us fresh entrance into a text. But we also know that the text reads us; its density of meaning demands of viewers continually new understandings, and its reach can at times even be met by the Divine reaching us.

Moving Forward

In the summer of 2009, viewers catapulted *Shawshank Redemption* (1994) into the number one slot on the massive Internet Movie Database's (IMDB) list of the 250 best movies of all time. Their enthusiasm for this movie was not based simply on the fact that the movie's theme was about hope. Rather, the movie was viewed as instilling hope in countless viewers. The emotional experience while watching the movie was redemptive, proving to be more important spiritually than any religious theme the film might have contained. The same is true for *About Schmidt* (2002) or *Fight Club* (1999). Though the movies might open out into a theological discussion of work and vocation, their real spiritual value lies in their ability to cause viewers to reflect on their own life's work and meaning. Such movies are not simply illustrations of truth already known. Rather,

these films provide for many viewers a more immediate, first-order spiritual experience.

Did *Spanglish* (2004) or *Crash* (2005) simply inform the viewers about their lingering racism as they watched them? Or did these films also affect them, inviting change in how they related to others? And what about *American Beauty* (1999)? Was the beauty in the plastic bag shown on the screen something Christian viewers simply filed away as a theme about God's immanent presence in their lives, or was it something they vicariously and viscerally received as a gift?

Movies have "the potential to be transformative, to be an evocation of the spirit, to become a form of devotion," argues Nathaniel Dorsky, the experimental filmmaker. Some movies, he recognizes, provide "moments of revelation or aliveness."[27] There is a thickness, or depth, that invites our participation and response as whole people—mind, emotion, body, will. But how are we to understand this depth of meaning, and how might it be accessed? Most critics have found it difficult to describe what this depth, this thickness, is, let alone suggest guidelines as to how it might best be explored.

In several recent writings, I have argued that biblical and cinematic critics alike have a hermeneutical, or interpretive, resource in the thousand-year practice of *lectio divina* and in its scholarly companion, the medieval four-fold method of biblical interpretation.[28] What I have sought to describe there, as well as what follows in more detail here, is not another version of accessing the facts "but an entirely different way of seeing,"[29] an access into "the imagination of life."[30] I have tried to take seriously the critique of modernism explicit in Brueggemann's and Steiner's statements and to supplement a close viewing of the cinematic text with a thick, or in-depth, response that invites spiritual engagement. Mine has been an ancient/postmodern dialogue.

M. Basil Pennington, the Cistercian father whose book *Centering Prayer* has sold over a million copies, writes of those distinct practices by which Christians have for centuries practiced the presence of God in their reading of scripture. When asked to describe this, he tells his inquirers that his method is *lectio*. He uses the Latin term, he says, because the English translation, "reading," is too often reductive. *Lectio* does not just mean "reading"; it also implies hearing the word of God as well and being willing to act on it. Pennington reminds us that we have a colloquial expression in English: "I read you"—which means, "I fully get you." According to him, the following is a good explanation of *lectio*: "To 'read' [a biblical text, a

movie] in this [thicker, denser] sense: to get God and all he is saying in all the many ways he is speaking."[31]

If someone *really* reads a poem using *lectio* (for example, a poem about moldy magnolia leaves!), the poem is (1) not just about leaves that rot, though it surely is first of all about this. It is (2) also about the human body that decays—and not just about the human transient body because the poem is suggestive of the transience of all life. As such (3) it might increase the reader's desire to protect and nurture life in all its beauty and wonder, that is, the poem provides an ecological invitation. The poem might even (4) invite the reader to come before the Creator of life in awe and wonder as the transcendent becomes immanent. This might be a typical explanation of what it means to read such a poem—or be "read" by it.

In a different example, there are various ways of reading Matthew 6:9–13, the Lord's Prayer. Perhaps some, with ancient Christian Church Father Tertullian, might give it a historicist or dogmatic reading. Along with Gregory of Nyssa, others might give it an ethical reading, the prayer becoming a guide for life. Perhaps with Albert Schweitzer, who pioneered an eschatological ("end-times") reading, someone might see the prayer as anticipating future glory. And perhaps for most, it might be read not only as Jesus's prayer but as their own. Jesus's words would become their words, the Lord's Prayer transforming their thinking.[32] But actually, one would seldom limit his or her reading to any single approach. This prayer invites multiple readings in which all these methodologies can be utilized. This is something analogous to the medievalist's four-fold reading of the biblical text.

For over a thousand years, Christian contemplatives and scholars practiced such *lectio*, uncovering multiple levels of meaning from a single biblical text. There was, of course, variety and idiosyncrasy, as over the centuries medieval scholars hammered out this methodology for accessing divine revelation. But though this four-fold method was never applied formulaically, and though not all of the four moments were always present, there was nevertheless a common strategy that was developed over time by these pre-moderns.[33] The text should (1) first be understood historically (*literally*) before it could be opened up spiritually, (2) "in faith," producing greater personal understanding (*allegorically*), (3) "in love," leading outward to moral insight and action (*tropologically*), and ultimately (4) "in hope," providing a spiritual experience that was a foretaste of heaven (*anagogically*). This was a comprehensive method for interpreting the biblical text, one that discovered from a reading of scripture three spiritual senses

in addition to the literal. The reader received instruction in faith from the *past* (allegory) and insight for action toward one's neighbors for the *present* (tropology), while contemplating the mystery of divine love in which God's *future* was experienced ahead of time, in an anticipatory way (anagogy). Through such thick readings of the text, the goal of these Christian interpreters of scripture was not just to *know about God*, but rather to *know God*, literally, faithfully, lovingly, hopefully.[34]

Some Film Examples

The question that presents itself, therefore, is this: Can such a method once used by the ancient church now be used by postmodern, Christian filmgoers to describe their theological engagement with film? I think so. This thesis can be tested out on four movies to see what such a thick, multilayered viewing might accomplish for our movie-going.

(1) I mentioned *Shawshank Redemption* earlier. When I ask audiences if they recall the moment in that movie that affected them most deeply, they invariably answer by noting one of two scenes: either the scene where Andy listens to a Mozart opera and then broadcasts the music out into the prison yard so that all might be transfixed by its beauty, or the scene when Andy gives the violent guard helpful tax advice and asks as his "reward" that a cold beer be given to each of his fellow inmates who have been roofing a building with him on a blisteringly hot day. To be human is to work, but it is also to be able to play.

On a *literal* level the film is a prison movie. Its plot includes a hypocritical warden, a violent guard, a record player that plays an opera, and Andy who sits in rapture as he listens and then wants to share this moment of joy with his fellow inmates. The story continues as Andy is sent to solitary confinement for two weeks for his foolish behavior, only to tell his buddies when he returns to the lunch room that it was worth every moment for he had continued in the "hole" to listen to the music. "You can't take that away."[35]

On a *spiritual* level, the movie inserts its viewers into the story. As Brueggemann suggests, they do not remain spectators to the story but find themselves in its midst. (1) Many viewers have that same experience of beauty as Andy did as their spirits both ache and soar. (2) Moviegoers might also be encouraged, as thousands were, to buy the CD from the movie or go to a concert to hear Mozart. In other words, viewing the movie might alter their actions; it might encourage them to listen to music in a new way. For some, (3) viewing *Shawshank* might even cause them to sense something of life's T(t)ranscendent mystery. It might become, as Mozart's

Actor Tim Robbins (as Andy Dufresne) in *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994). (Columbia Pictures/Photofest.)

music was for Karl Barth, a concrete occasion of immanent transcendence. Barth heard in Mozart's music an affirmation within ambiguity, a "yes . . . but" quality that ushered him into the presence of the Creator.[36] In the movie, this is what happens for Andy and his fellow inmates in Shawshank as the music causes them to look up, both literally and spiritually. And it is what still happens to many viewers who continue to watch *Shawshank* on DVD. When I recently saw *Shawshank* again, I experienced the truth of what Pope John Paul II said at the turn of the millennium: beauty is one of God's connection points, particularly for those outside the church and for the youth.[37]

(2) Another film we might consider is *Field of Dreams* (1989). Both written and directed by Phil Alden Robinson, the film, on a *literal* level, tells the story of Ray Kinsela, an Iowa corn farmer, who—after hearing a voice say repeatedly, "if you build it, he will come"—converts a portion of his acreage into a baseball field. As the story unfolds, the "he" initially turns out to be Shoeless Joe Jackson of the infamous Black Sox team, who is thus given another chance to play the game he so dearly loves. Ultimately, however, the "he" references Ray's own father, John, who—in what proves a T(t)ranscendent moment for many viewers—is given a second chance to play "catch" with his grown son. That describes the film on a *literal* level.

But the film also resonates *spiritually* for many who see it. Robinson stated after a retrospective screening of his film at the City of Angels Film Festival in 2002 that when writing and directing the film, he had no intention of creating a "spiritual" movie.[38] Yet given the literally thousands of letters he had received since the movie first came out, he now recognized that the movie had burrowed down deep into the spirits of countless viewers, compelling them to reach out to their fathers and seek reconciliation, given previously fractured relations. These viewers had not only seen ("read") the movie; they had been "read/seen" by it.

In 2008 on Father's Day, the *New York Times* ran an op-ed piece by Nicholas Dawidoff, who wrote of one such experience. Dawidoff wrote that when he was only three, he had an absent, divorced father who suffered a violent psychotic breakdown. What once had been a warm personality became hostile and terrifyingly strange. Dawidoff remembers romanticizing about other boys' families every Father's Day. He imagined steaks on the grill, games of catch, and gifts to his dad. Most of his friends thought of Father's Day as a contrived holiday that advertisers created. Not Nicholas. He writes,

> Then one spring day, not long before Father's Day, I sat in a theater watching a new film, "Field of Dreams" [*sic*]. I spent much of the movie gripping the armrests of my seat, trying to maintain control. As the narrative built to its famous climax—disaffected son (Kevin Costner) plays catch with his long-lost father in an Iowa cornfield—I was overwhelmed. But then, there in the dark, I heard something. All over the room, boats softly tooting their horns in a harbor on a foggy night, men were weeping.[39]

Dawidoff reminds us of the power of movies. As a viewer loses himself or herself in the particulars of the movie story (the *literal*), it becomes by analogy, "my story" (the *allegorical*), for it is part of life's larger Story

(the *anagogic*).[40] This is what happened to Dawidoff. Although *Field of Dreams* remains the story of another, there is a density to the text that demanded his attention. Dawidoff ended his op-ed piece by writing, "Not having a good father opens you up to what fatherhood stands for, makes you appreciate it with the intensity of emotion that can only come when you are aware of risk. . . . I'll be thanking my father [this Father's Day] for helping me to see it that way."[41] *Field of Dreams* altered how Dawidoff chose to live and act. In Brueggemann's words, the story became "distanced, disclosing alternative renderings of our own life."[42] For others who have seen the movie, they even speak of that moment in the theater as a glimpse of the T(t)ranscendent, something that provided perspective for life here and now. Here, surely, is the reason thousands of families still make the pilgrimage by car each year to that cornfield outside Dubuque, Iowa, where the movie was filmed.

Field of Dreams is hardly unique in its ability to connect personally, even spiritually, with many viewers. Most of us, when invited to do so, can name our own movie(s) where there proved to be a similar depth of meaning, where our viewing had a surprising thickness.

(3) Perhaps for some, such a movie was *Dead Poets Society* (1989). On a *literal* level, the movie tells the story of John Keating (Robin Williams), who in the fall of 1959 arrives at Welton Academy, an all-boys prep school, to teach English. Unconventional, charismatic, and an independent spirit, Keating inspires his students both to love poetry and to seize the day (*carpe diem*). But for many viewers, the movie is much more than its somewhat sentimental plot; it is a *spiritual* experience. Randy Heffner, a computer software analyst working in Dallas, Texas, saw Robin Williams's film probably in 1991. He explained that he had a close association to the film. The film helped him to realize that his own work was pursued for practical reasons and not passionate reasons like Williams's character (Keating) in the film.[43] In the months that followed, Heffner found himself setting new priorities, spending evenings and weekends reading and viewing film, theology, and philosophy. There followed his participation in reading groups, art conferences, philosophy lectures, and a film discussion night at his church. Heffner's experience viewing *Dead Poets Society* proved *spiritually* transformative. It even led Heffner to write a 400-page manuscript, *Pierced to the Heart*, which explores how film plays a role in forming people's hearts. He writes that although movies are often "undervalued or treated as commonplace . . . I find that there are many, many films through which we can see the world more clearly, learn to love more fully, understand

better why ugly things are ugly, and come away with deeper and richer hearts and lives." Heffner's goal in his avocational speaking, writing, and teaching, he says, is to "open new pathways toward hearts of humility, justice, mercy, and love." What Heffner saw nearly two decades earlier had, he says, "an important role in changing my life [*the tropological*]," a role that for him is ongoing.[44]

Heffner's testimony with regard to the spiritual power of *Dead Poets Society* is hardly singular. Noted script doctors Linda Seger and Edward Jay Whetmore, whose job it is to improve screenplays prior to filming, describe in their book *From Script to Screen* the effect that the movie's *carpe diem* theme had on its initial viewers. According to its producer, Steven Haft, "The movie affected people in powerful ways. Every time I went to a party and someone introduced me as the producer of *Dead Poets Society*, there would be another story of a person who saw it and left a job, or made some serious life change." Haft recalled that he was walking down a street in New York with Robin Williams when a middle-aged man came up to the actor and simply said, "Thank you" for the movie. Williams bowed to the man and then turned to his producer and said that with other movies people usually came up to him and said it was a great movie, but "with this picture it was always 'Thank you.' "[45]

As with Heffner, *Dead Poets Society* has allowed scores of viewers to live out their "passion," to "seize the day." Seeing it has affected them *spiritually*. Just as Brueggemann had recognized with regard to readers of biblical stories, many viewers have not simply been spectators of this celluloid story. Instead, they have found themselves in the midst of the story as it has disclosed alternative renderings of their own lives—renderings that have had *ethical* and *spiritual* consequences.

(4) One final film example is *Moulin Rouge* (2001), a movie that was wrongly passed over for the Academy Awards in 2002 in favor of *A Beautiful Mind*.[46] In interpreting the movie, two options present themselves right from the opening scenes: the movie might be seen, as Graham Ward has argued, to be about the Moulin Rouge nightclub and its new show "Spectacular Spectacular." Understood thusly, its plot presents an exposé of the underworld with its decadence, materialism, and prostitution and finds its embodiment in the violence of the tango scene.[47] Here is one *literal* reading of the movie. Alternatively, the movie might be viewed as the writer Christian telling Satine's story, a tragic story within the larger narrative about the desire to love and be loved in return. Here the crucial scene is

the "elephant medley" where Christian and Satine break into a pastiche of love songs that they sing to each other.

Although both "stories" are present on the *literal* level—one focusing on decadence and the other about love—the movie's narrator, Toulouse-Lautrec, helps us prioritize these storylines in his opening song, "There Was a Boy," as does the ever-present sound of Christian at the typewriter. As the movie ends, Christian types, "I write our story—a story about a time, a place, a people. But above all things, a story about love, a love that will live forever."[48] Seen from one perspective, the movie is about a seedy slice of life in Paris in 1899 and a courtesan who dies of consumption. But as the filmmakers choose to tell it, the story focuses on love—not only Christian's and Satine's, but also the viewers'.

Moulin Rouge is a musical, though not like those on Broadway where the music offers soliloquies, much like a Greek chorus that stops the action to offer an interpretation of the events preceding it. Instead, the music here often substitutes for dialogue, letting the audience in on how the characters are feeling and propelling the action forward. Nevertheless, for Graham Ward, the love songs that the characters sing are deficient. Dehumanized by their decadent surroundings, Christian and Satine can only futilely mouth the words of others. Ward believes their singing to be a heightened likeness; they are "more real than the real, [and] that is how the real is abolished."[49] But Ward's *ideological* viewing of the movie seems out of step with the *spiritual* experience of most moviegoers. For them, the music in the movie is almost transformative. The appropriation of pop songs humanizes what are otherwise somewhat stock and clichéd characters, helping to raise the story for its viewers beyond mere melodrama. The music also "fast-forwards" these lovers into our present. As Christian and Satine sing to each other, the music soars and so does the audience. They identify with their characters; Christian and Satine's songs become their songs, and vice versa.

Yes, the viewers are plummeted by the movie's vibrant colors, frenetic movement, intense close-ups, and violent editing. But as the music is both mashed and belted out, it becomes for some viewers a form of "glossolalia"—ecstatic utterance opening them out to the T(t)ranscendent. Rather than the minimalism of Paul Schrader's *Transcendental Style in Film*, which highlights a film's ability to convey a pregnant silence,[50] the film's all-out assault on the senses by director Baz Luhrmann causes in some viewers an equal, but alternative, T(t)ranscendence, one in which we are "silenced" by too much sight and sound.[51] Madonna, Marilyn Monroe,

Princess Diana, Dolly Parton, Jessica Rabbit, U2, Lennon and McCartney, Phil Collins, Elton John—the film's iconic music transcends its time and place, becoming not only Christian and Satine's but ours as viewers as well. For many who see the movie, love is indeed "like oxygen"; "love lifts us up to where we belong"; "love is a many-splendored thing"; "all we need is love."[52] It is not the evil of the Moulin Rouge's materialism that causes viewers to want to reject it but the alternative beauty of the love portrayed on the screen. The movie's spiritual vision of life—life as it should/could/will be—brings viewers both heartache and hope. As one of my students wrote, "It felt good to hope for that kind of love and attention, but it felt painful that in reality, I did not have that and probably never will."

Conclusion

Some movies invite viewers only to be entertained (and there is value in entertainment). But entertainment, if done well, should help viewers entertain new possibilities, imagine new realities. Movies, at their best, not only entertain; they also transform. Grounded in the senses, in the material, movies can nonetheless project a presence beyond what we see, inviting both our hearing or viewing and our active response. Movies can offer their audiences not just another set of disclosures but a means of being disclosed. They can break us open; they are, in the words of C. S. Lewis, "spilled religion."[53] In this sense film is like other art. At its best, it provides its viewers "not a version of the facts, but an entirely different way of seeing"[54]—a *cinema divina*.

Notes

1. An earlier and shorter version of this chapter was given as a plenary presentation at Svenska Kyrkans Forskardagar, Theologiska Hogskolan Stockholm, Bromma, Sweden, December 3, 2009. I would like to thank Goren Gunner, the convener of the conference, for his generous hospitality during our days together.

2. I am adapting Clifford Geertz's interpretive theory of culture to film criticism. See Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30. For Geertz, "thick description" means understanding the context of a behavior and not just the behavior; in this setting it means understanding that a work of art might have deeper layers of meaning that can be penetrated by taking the surface (literal) meaning with full seriousness.

3. David Lyle Jeffrey, book jacket blurb, in Scott Hahn, *Covenant and Communion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009).

4. Richard Blake, "Secular Prophecy in an Age of Film," *The Journal of Religious Thought* 27, no. 1 (Spring–Summer 1970): 63–69.

5. Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), 70–71, 232–233.

6. The beginning of contemporary theology and film criticism might be traced to 1979 when the first film rentals allowed movies to be more readily available for repeated viewing and theological reflection. But it was not until the 1990s that a corpus of theology and film criticism began to develop. Now, after twenty years, there is recognition of the need to begin both to classify differing approaches to the discipline and to offer midcourse corrections. See Robert K. Johnston, ed., *Reframing Theology and Film* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007); Robert K. Johnston, "Theological Approaches to Film," in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden (New York: Routledge, 2009), 310–328; and Robert K. Johnston, "Re-Framing Religion and Film," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, ed. Frank Burch Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), chapter 13.

7. James D. G. Dunn, "Criteria for a Wise Reading of a Biblical Text," in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture and Theology*, eds. David F. Ford and Graham Stanton (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 42.

8. Martin Luther, quoted in Dunn, "Criteria for a Wise Reading," 42.

9. John Calvin, quoted in ibid.

10. Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 13.

11. Joel Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995).

12. Brian Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 11.

13. See Larry Kreitzer, *The New Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield, UK: JSOT, 1993). See other Larry Kreitzer books: *The Old Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1994); *Pauline Images in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1999); *Gospel Images in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 2002).

14. Bryan Stone, *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000).

15. Robert Jewett, *St. Paul at the Movies: The Apostle's Dialogue with American Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), and *St. Paul Returns to the Movies: Triumph over Shame* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1999).

16. Robert K. Johnston, *Useless Beauty: Ecclesiastes through the Lens of Contemporary Film* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

17. James Barr, quoted in Paul Joyce, "Proverbs 8 in Interpretation (1): Historical Criticism and Beyond," in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom*, eds. David F. Ford and Graham Stanton (London: SCM, 2003), 90.

18. John Barton, quoted in Joyce, "Proverbs 8 in Interpretation," 90.

19. Roy Anker, *Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

20. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 39.

21. Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching among Exiles* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1997), 73.

22. Ibid., 12. Interestingly, Brueggemann's metaphor seems borrowed from Phil Alden Robinson's film *Field of Dreams* (1989), a spiritually charged movie about building a baseball field in an Iowa cornfield. In the movie, a voice tells the lead character multiple times, "If you build it, he will come."

23. Ibid., 75.

24. Walter Brueggemann, *Power, Providence, and Personality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 22–23.

25. Steiner, *Real Presences*, 147.

26. Daniel Hardy, "Reason, Wisdom, and the Interpretation of Scripture," in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom*, eds. David F. Ford and Graham Stanton (London, SCM, 2003), 75.

27. Nathaniel Dorsky, "Devotional Cinema," in *The Hidden God: Film and Faith*, eds. Mary Lea Brady and Antonio Monda (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 261.

28. Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006); Robert K. Johnston, "Transformative Viewing: Penetrating the Story's Surface," in *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 304–322.

29. Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 28.

30. Wallace Stevens, "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," lecture, Mount Holyoke, August, 1943, quoted in Mark Burrows, " 'Raiding the Inarticulate': Mysticism, Poetics, and the Unlanguageable," in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, eds. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 361.

31. M. Basil Pennington, *Seeking His Mind: 40 Meetings with Christ* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2002), xv. See also Pennington, "A Christian Way to Transformation," *Spirituality Today* 35, no. 3 (Fall 1983): 220–229, and *"Lectio Divina": Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scripture* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

32. See Telford Work, *Ain't Too Proud to Beg: Living through the Lord's Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

33. See Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 2, *The Four Senses of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

34. Interestingly, a parallel six-step methodology developed over time within Judaism for reading the Targum.

35. *The Shawshank Redemption*, directed by Frank Darabont (Castle Rock Entertainment, 1994).

36. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3, The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1969), 297–299.

37. Pope John Paul II, "Address of John Paul II to the Participants in the Ninth Public Meeting of the Pontifical Academies," November 9, 2004, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2004/november/documents/hf_j. See George Barna's survey in 2000 that found that 20 percent of all adult Americans find their primary means of spiritual experience and expression in "media . . . arts and culture." Barna projects that by the year 2025 this number will rise to 35 percent. During this same timeframe, he projects that the percentage of people naming the church as their primary means of religious expression will plummet from 70 percent to 35 percent. If Barna is right, in less than twenty years, "Hollywood" and the church will be judged as equal in terms of their spiritual impact on the American landscape. *Revolution* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2005), 48–49.

38. Phil Alden Robinson, Q&A after screening of *Field of Dreams*, City of Angels Film Festival, Hollywood, CA, November 3, 2002.

39. Nicholas Dawidoff, "The Man Who Wasn't There," *New York Times*, June 15, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/15/opinion/15dawidoff.html?ei=5.

40. Edie Falco, who played Tony's wife in *The Sopranos*, says that she often got letters from viewers thanking her, for they found themselves in her character.

41. Dawidoff, "The Man Who Wasn't There."

42. Brueggemann, *Power, Providence, and Personality*, 23.

43. Randy Heffner, private correspondence to author, November 21, 2009.

44. Randy Heffner, http://piercedtotheheart.org/bio-randy.

45. Quoted in Linda Seger and Edward Jay Whetmore, *From Script to Screen* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), 95. See also Ken Gire, *Reflections on the Movies: Hearing God in the Unlikeliest of Places* (Colorado Springs: Victor/Cook Communications, 2000), 159–171. In a television interview on NBC's "EXTRA," November 25, 2009, Williams reiterated the point, naming his role in *Dead Poets Society* as his favorite, for it is about "finding your voice."

46. The Academy later sought to rectify that terrible decision by giving Nicole Kidman an Oscar for her lesser performance in *Hours*, Jim Broadbent an Oscar for the trifle *Iris*, and the movie musical *Chicago* an Oscar for Best Picture, for it followed in *Moulin Rouge*'s tradition.

47. Graham Ward, "All You Need Is Love: *Moulin Rouge* or Christian's Tragedy," in *Reconfigurations: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Religion in a*

Post-Secular Society, eds. Stefanie Knauss and Alexander D. Ornella (Vienna: LIT Verlag, 2007), 167–178.

48. *Moulin Rouge*, directed by Baz Luhrmann (Twentieth Century Fox, 2001).

49. Graham Ward, *True Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 27.

50. Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972).

51. For a discussion of "glossolalia" as an alternate film style to Schrader's, see Terry R. Lindvall et al., "Spectacular Transcendence: Abundant Means in the Cinematic Representations of African American Christianity," *Howard Journal of Communication* 7 (1996): 205–220.

52. *Moulin Rouge*.

53. C. S. Lewis, "Christianity and Culture," in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 23: "I am quite ready to describe *Sehnsucht* as 'spilled religion,' provided it is not forgotten that the spilled drops may be full of blessing to the unconverted man who licks them up, and therefore begins the search for the cup whence they were spilled."

54. Winterson, *Art Objects*, 28.

Chapter 5

Looking along the Line between Good and Evil: *Crash* and Evangelical Approaches to Popular Film

Mark Allan Steiner

Shrek 2 features flatulence—mud-bubbling, fish-killing flatulence. My household also at times features communal flatulence, some of it from my young children, who at the dinner table well up with pride and proclaim, "I tooted!" What I did not know before reading Thomas Carder's review of the film is that such behavior is not only not innocent but that it qualifies as "impudence/hate."

Shrek 2 is just one of over 1,000 films discussed on Carder's ChildCare Action Project (CAP) film review website. Reflecting a concern with the morally and spiritually corrosive effects of popular entertainment, the site "tell[s] . . . the truth" about its content, "using God's Word to decide what to tell."[1] Not surprisingly, *Shrek 2* is described by CAP as typical of the nefarious content that Hollywood "feeds" children. In addition to flatulence, the film features "impudence/hate" in its "one use of the three/four letter word vocabulary" and in the showing of a "crotch kick." The film features "wanton violence/crime" with the "hiring of a hit man to kill Shrek" and "action violence, repeatedly." The film features "sexual immorality" with a "cartoon character in underwear" and "dialogue to call attention to posterior," among other things.[2] Content—without needing context of any kind—persuades and corrupts viewers. People must protect themselves from "exposure."

Carder and CAP's general perspective largely and unfortunately sidesteps the question of cultural engagement. What responsibility does the

evangelical Christian community have to respond to and invite dialogue concerning prominent popular art—particularly film—and the cultural values and presuppositions that are reflected in and reinforced by that art? To the degree that this responsibility exists, how can the evangelical Christian community understand film as a means to engage culture with a distinctly Christian perspective, and what should the goals of that engagement be? Questions like these are the concern of this chapter.

Answers to these questions, to be sure, have been offered. Some argue that Christians should take a balanced approach in the consumption and criticism of film and other popular art. This means avoiding both extremes of the "cultural anorexics" who—much like Carder and CAP—see popular art largely as a spiritually dangerous enterprise primarily to be avoided, and of the "cultural gluttons" who "consume popular art too passively, without discrimination."[3] This also means avoiding "appropriation," in which "mainstream practices and trends" within popular art are "infus[ed] . . . with a spiritual justification" and populated with "overt Christian content—an explicit statement of religious belief."[4]

Beyond the mere rejection of simplistic extremes, there is also the need for an affirmative approach to film and other popular art. "Because all truth is ultimately God's truth," writes film critic Brian Godawa, Christians should engage mainstream culture, "discerning the truth and error in art that radiate a 'fallen splendor.' " The goal, he claims, "should be to interact with society with a view toward reform, not to retreat from society, for retreat leads to spiritual and social defeat."[5] "[W]e need," communication scholar William D. Romanowski declares, "a different kind of Christian approach—an engaged, critical, and productive involvement with the popular arts—grounded in a faith vision that encompasses all of life and culture."[6]

Such an alternative vision would repudiate the notion of film as a transparent medium to convey visual content, good or bad, immediately to viewers. It would instead embrace the rhetorical power of the medium itself. Film has a unique capacity to show things in an immediate, associative, and emotionally engaging way. It has a unique capacity to invite people to contemplate the realities of their own identities, of their struggles, of their hopes, and of the world that interacts with them and pushes back against them. Such an alternative vision, moreover, would conceptualize the film-viewing experience as part of a larger conversation among the film, the filmmaker, and the viewers—a conversation that parallels more general conversations between the audience and the culture(s) of which they are a part.

I contend that Paul Haggis's *Crash* (2005)—an ensemble film that emphasizes its characters' encounters with race prejudice in contemporary American urban life—is a particularly opportune film by which American evangelical Christians can and should practice this alternative vision. At first glance this film seems in many ways an unlikely choice, even though it made *Christianity Today*'s list of the top ten redeeming films of that year.[7] The film addresses topics, especially contemporary racism in its explicit and implicit manifestations, that have been glaringly absent in the vast majority of evangelical public discourses. Also, the film carries an "R" rating from the Motion Picture Association of America, marking it as a clear taboo in a broad swath of the evangelical world. However, if evangelicals can get past these obstacles and others that have been imposed by critiques like Carder's, they can glean meaningful insight about how to apply their own religious traditions to their lives and to the culture in which they live. They can also meaningfully draw upon their religious traditions' theological and cultural resources to help those outside the evangelical orbit gain edifying insight from the film. In short, an approach to *Crash* grounded in evangelical theological and doctrinal commitments would expand

***Crash* (2004), directed by Paul Haggis. Shown: Jennifer Esposito (as Ria), Don Cheadle (as Graham), Kathleen York (as Officer Johnson). (Bull's Eye Entertainment/Lions Gate Films/Photofest.)**

evangelical understanding of what cultural engagement means, underscoring the necessity of doing so as part of practicing what sociologist James Davison Hunter calls "faithful presence"[8] and what I call "faithful witness."[9]

In what follows, then, I first explain the major features of a distinctly evangelical reading, or analysis, of *Crash*, focusing particularly on how the film showcases structural and individual manifestations of human finitude and fallenness, as well as human agency and moral responsibility. I then explain the particular lessons that evangelicals can learn from *Crash* and from the medium of film more generally.

Understanding *Crash* from an Evangelical Perspective

Popular reviews of *Crash* tend to focus on the film's authenticity, its engaging and multidimensional characters, and its compelling portrayals of racial tensions. Academic reviews of the film, on the other hand, tend to be much less positive and much more focused on what the writers see as disempowering representations of racial and ethnic minorities. One major concern is that the film functions to promote an "ethos of tolerance" that obscures institutionalized racism and authorizes white privilege.[10] More specifically, the film presents racial problems in highly individualized terms that include traditional victims of racism themselves exhibiting racial prejudice. "[B]y showing almost all the characters to be prejudiced and providing them with moments of redemption, the film implies, 'Don't worry, everyone's a little bit racist.' "[11] The film is also highly selective in how it portrays redemption, such that only the white characters have significant power and agency in the ways they are redeemed.[12]

Many films function ideologically to reinforce existing social, relational, and power structures, even when (and particularly when) those structures result in unjust and dehumanizing conditions for so many people. At the same time, though, *Crash* is a "thick" film, one that is both laden with broader meaning and that can with justice be seen compellingly from different perspectives, so it can invite reflection and dialogue on these sorts of issues. The ability of the film to do this is ably demonstrated by communication scholars Mark P. Orbe and Etsuko Kinefuchi, who critically examined written responses to the film from over 100 students across three college campuses. These responses revealed profound differences in how viewers made sense of what the film was showing them about themselves, about others, and about how to negotiate significant ethnic and cultural differences.[13]

A distinctly evangelical perspective on *Crash* might first emphasize how the film illuminates the structural manifestations of human finitude and fallenness. Human beings possess considerable power to imagine and transform physical and social worlds. But this power is limited. Moreover, human beings are, according to evangelical theology, marred by sin. That is, they are fundamentally unable, without divine power and influence, to get past their moral weaknesses. This "brokenness" goes beyond individual motives and extends to the systems and structures that human beings create and reinforce.

Crash shows this structural "fallenness" in how it portrays the realities of race prejudice: as a problem reflected in existing social and material structures. *Crash* shows the realities of social stratification that are a significant part of this broader structural fallenness. These realities are seen in scenes throughout the film, from the affluent white preserves of Beverly Hills and the residence of Los Angeles District Attorney Rick Cabot on one hand, to the living conditions of the Latino locksmith Daniel Ruiz and the store owned by Farhad and his family on the other hand. These fallen structural dimensions are further seen in how the film portrays the dynamics of racial politics in Los Angeles. Shortly after Cabot and his wife Jean are carjacked at gunpoint by two African American men, he responds by crudely manipulating racial politics to make himself look sufficiently empathetic to racial concerns, chiefly by honoring a recently fallen black police officer and prosecuting the white officer who shot him. For Cabot to exploit this opportunity, though, his office must suppress evidence that the black officer himself was corrupt. To encourage Waters to go along, Cabot manipulates him by offering not to prosecute his three-time-felon brother, Peter, in exchange for his cooperation. In this way, the film offers a view of the more fundamental and structural problem of political leadership, which emphasizes the inherent tendency for leaders to be inauthentic and to construct personae that reinforce existing social conditions and inequalities.[14]

Finally, the film captures these structural manifestations by calling attention to the realities of existential division in people's lives, which is more explicit in sprawling urban areas like Los Angeles. Detective Graham Waters calls attention to this in the film's opening line: "It's the sense of touch. . . . Any real city you walk, you know, you brush past people, people bump into you. In L.A., nobody touches you. We're always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss that touch so much that we crash into each other just so we can feel something."[15] In short, the film communicates well