

JESUS CHRIST **GOES TO** **HOLLYWOOD?**



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INTRODUCTION

Christian-based entertainment has always been a popular draw for those who hold to Judeo-Christian values. Before the invention of the movie projector, Europeans used lanterns to cast shadows to tell stories. Even David Livingstone used lanterns to illustrate the gospel in Africa. In the late nineteenth century, a dispute arose throughout the motion picture industry contesting that the use of lanterns and movie projectors in Christianity was the violation of the Second Commandment in Exodus 20:4. “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” As the nineteenth century transitioned into the twentieth century, this argument faded and Christianity began using utilizing the motion picture to promote its own purposes. In 1899, Herbert Booth, son of William Booth who founded the Salvation Army, was the first Christian to use film to promote the gospel. As the twentieth century progressed, complete Christian film libraries emerged and were quite popular. As a child, I remember our family watching *The Ten Commandments* starring Charlton Heston when it came on T.V. every year.

Between 1930-1960, Hollywood had much in common with religion. It consisted of Jewish filmmakers following a Catholic-inspired set of moral guidelines, entitled *The Hays Code*, selling movies to a mostly Protestant market that was not offended by God or Biblical morality. When the 1960s arrived, Hollywood elites took a left-turn into liberal politics because the country was changing. Secular society kicked God out of public schools by forbidding prayer and Bible reading (1962). The seed for homosexual rights and gender choice was sown. By 1973, *Roe v. Wade* shocked the world, and Judeo-Christian values were slaughtered. Religion in the movies became a thing of contempt.

Under President Reagan, the “Religious Right” grew rapidly. Several institutions were formed for the purpose of restoring Biblical values back into American society including, the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition, Focus on the Family, and the Family Research Council. Men such as Jerry Falwell, Bob Jones III, James Dobson, and Pat Robertson refused to be swept away by unbiblical societal values and forged a renewed stand for Judeo-Christian values. This stand left a large imprint on the United States illustrated by George W. Bush’s electoral success, attributed to white evangelical voters that comprised 23% of the national vote. In 2000, Bush received 68% of the evangelical vote while in 2004, he received 78% (Family Research Council's Values Voter Summit).

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, a new trend in the entertainment industry arose producing more Christian-friendly films. All five major Hollywood studios created marketing departments to target the growing demand for faith-based entertainment. From January 2000 through August 2016, Hollywood created no less than 300 faith-based films. The last 16 years of Christian filmography has produced more faith-based films than all the history of Christian films combined. How did Hollywood get holy? Has Jesus gone to Hollywood?

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Hollywood learned that there is a weighty group of people who are willing to purchase faith-based entertainment. Because the regression of morality in Hollywood is faster than a speeding bullet, the movie industry realized there is an audience not interested in its product, but this audience could be brought back into the fold with the right content. And so films like *Son of God*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *War Room*, *Courageous*, *Noah*, *Exodus*, *God's Not Dead*, *Risen*, *Soul Surfer*, and *Ben Hur* all reach an audience looking for a more moral form of entertainment Hollywood does not produce in its other publications.

The first reaction of Christians is one of excitement! We can finally turn on the TV to the History Channel and watch the events of the Bible come to life! This was evident when 13.1 million people tuned in to watch Roma Downey and Mark Burnett's *The Bible* on March 3, 2013. The ten-hour miniseries was a primetime hit putting up ratings on par with Sunday Night Football. The series received three Emmy Award nominations for best miniseries. In total, with subsequent airings, the miniseries has received more than 100 million cumulative views. Within its first week on home video, *The Bible* sold 535,000 copies and was the fastest selling television show since 2008. The unaired footage was turned into a feature film entitled *Son of God* (2014). A sequel series, entitled *A.D. The Bible Continues*, aired on NBC (2015). Future productions are in the works. For all three productions, the gross earnings are staggering. *The Bible*, which currently sells on Amazon for \$15.95 and first debuted at the purchase price of \$59.95, has now sold over one million of copies. By 2016, *Son of God* grossed over \$70 million worldwide in theaters. *A.D. The Bible Continues* has had less success, and gross sales numbers were unavailable. Adding all three of these productions together pales in comparison with Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*, which has grossed over \$630,000,000 worldwide in ticket sales in 2004.

There is obviously no lack of desire for faith-based entertainment. After all, Hollywood deemed 2014 as "The Year of the Bible." While some actors or producers may have sincere intentions to spread the morality found in Judeo-Christian values, make no mistake, Hollywood sees a massive revenue stream, and is not concerned about the spiritual growth of its audience.

Many questions need to be asked. With the eruption of faith-based entertainment, what type of influence do these movies and shows have on the general landscape of Christianity? Are they helpful or harmful? Do they present the similar Christianity that we should be advocating, or something that should be avoided? Is there any benefit to watching them to engage our culture?

For the sake of this study, we must establish a standard based upon the Word of God that will not fail the test of time. While we may cite some examples of recent films, our goal is to exalt the Word of God over Hollywood.

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Before we develop some Biblical principles, we should establish that entertainment is not necessarily evil. This study is not intended to encourage you to discard your T.V. God never said, “Thou shalt not have fun, nor shalt thou smile in all thy days.” Having a good time is not a sin, but we should be attentive to the principles God has laid out for godly living when we do engage in leisure activities. If unchecked, entertainment can become an idol that is an unnoticed threat because of a subtle approach. Entertainment is neutral, but can be used for positive or negative things. We use it to comfort fussy babies, quiet restless children, and relax weary workers. Entertainment can help unify a family on vacation, give teenagers something healthy to do, and break stress. All humans hunger for entertainment and Hollywood feeds off this truth. Entertainment must never replace or interfere with the supreme delight found in God’s goodness, truth, and beauty.

PRINCIPLE

The Bible must be the absolute authority in shaping what we believe about its contents.

Everything the world knows about Jesus’ deity, life, eternal sonship, teachings, miracles, death, burial, and resurrection has been assembled in sixty-six books, written over a period of 1,600 years, by forty different authors. The Bible is the sole authority and source for all matters of faith.

Culture, and Hollywood in particular, rejects the Bible’s authority. Instead, the stories of the Bible are considered to be great outlines that can be expanded into movie scripts. Since the Bible was not written as a script, the stories must be adapted to fit the big screen. When this is done, what happens to the literal words of Scripture? They are made equal and authoritative to words that God did not write. Consider how the following verses demonstrate inspiration and how precious each specific word of Scripture is:

- 🕒 2 Timothy 3:16-17 - All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.
- 🕒 2 Peter 1:20-21 - Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.

As Fundamentalists, we hold to the verbal inspiration of Scripture. This is how inspiration applies to the very words used in the biblical books. Scripture contains the exact words, forms of words, and wording that God desired in the original manuscripts. The God who inspired the exact words through human writers stands behind every statement, every doctrine, every promise, and every command written in the Scripture. To the authority of

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this Word all men must submit, without rebellion or reservation, because the Bible is God's written will.

One of the dangers in relying upon Hollywood to be a source of biblical instruction is that it easily shapes a person's perception of Biblical material. In 2003, Pope John Paul II viewed Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* before its public release. This was a surprise since Gibson's form of Roman Catholicism is a traditionalist approach that borders on Sedevacantism (Pope Pius XII who was pope from 1939 to 1958, was the last valid pope. All popes since then are invalid). An even bigger surprise was that John Paul II approved of the film and proclaimed, "It is as it was." Catholics consider the pope to be the vicar (substitute) for Christ on earth. Traditionally, the pope's words are just as authoritative as God's words. The pope's authority in this area has diminished over the last 50 years owed to progressive secularism in society, but, Catholics still view the pope as the "Holy See." His words carry weight. When John Paul II declared, "It is as it was," he declared that Gibson's movie was an accurate portrayal of the Passion Week, but is this a true statement? The answer lies within your brand of faith. For many Evangelical and Fundamental viewers, the film did not resemble the four Gospel accounts. It was not as it was. Consider these questions and answers:

Question 1: Does the movie reflect the Biblical account of the last 12 hours of Jesus' life, or is it based on Catholic mystical literature?

Answer 1: Gibson openly admits that the movie is based not only on the Gospels, but also on the visions of two Catholic nun-mystics, St. Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824) and Mary of Agreda (1602-1665) (*The New Yorker*, 9/15/03).

Question 2: Was Jesus tortured as *The Passion* depicts?

Answer 2: Matthew, Mark, and John all say that Jesus was "scourged." Luke wrote that Pilate offered to punish Jesus and then release him. The Gospels only make a fleeting mention of Jesus' suffering before the cross since the cross is the focal point of human history. *The Passion* reverses the biblical account and makes the torture the primary objective. Gibson borrowed much of his movie from Emmerich's, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*, published in 1824, and Agueda's *The Mystical City of God*, published in 1618. The result is not an evangelical movie about the gospel, but rather a Catholic portrayal of a twelve-hour period that Scripture does not describe in such detail. As Gibson puts it, "It reflects my beliefs." His beliefs are rooted in the traditional Catholic doctrine and practices preceding Vatican II (1962-1965).

Question 3: Do the biblical deviances of Satan's snake crawling out of his nose and coming to Jesus in Gethsemane, extra-biblical flashbacks of Mary, the riot of Jews and Romans as Jesus drags his cross, Jesus being thrown off a bridge, children throwing

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stones at Judas, the temple (not the veil) splitting in two, the teardrop from heaven, and the prominent role of Mary undermine the biblical account of the crucifixion?

Answer 3: All these events and many more are pulled directly from St. Anne Catherine's and Mary of Agreda's books and not the Gospels. Therefore, *The Passion* is an extra-biblical film that describes Catholic mysticism over the Gospel record.

A.W. Tozer pointed this out in his article, *The Menace of Religious Movie*. "From God's revealed plan we depart at our peril. Every departure has two consequences, the immediate and the remote. The immediate touches the individual and those close to him; the remote extends into the future to unknown times, and may expand so far as to influence for evil the whole Church of God on earth." While some may even agree that a film's departure from the Scripture is evident, there may be disagreement upon the effects of the viewer. Can Christians simply filter out the extra or anti-biblical material with grace and discernment? Tozer continues to write, "We of the evangelical faith are in the rather awkward position of criticizing Roman Catholicism for its weight of unscriptural impedimenta and at the same time tolerating in our own churches a world of religious fribble as bad as holy water or the elevated host. Heresy of method may be as deadly as heresy of message. Old-line Protestantism has long ago been smothered to death by extra-scriptural rubbish. Unless we of the gospel churches wake up soon we shall most surely die by the same means."

PRINCIPLE 2

Doctrine must always triumph over entertainment.

Doctrine is not an offensive or legalistic word. In the New Testament, the word "doctrine" means "teaching." The use of the term in Scripture is more than a simple reference to information passed on from one person to another. Bible doctrine is the Scriptural teaching of theological truths. The Bible places extreme importance upon doctrine.

- 🕒 1 Timothy 4:16 - Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.
- 🕒 1 Timothy 6:3-5 - If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself.
- 🕒 Titus 1:9 - Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.

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While some Christians go through life without a passion for sound doctrine, the Bible places it as a priority for every believer. Sound doctrine is not the adherence to an outline found in a systematic theology book. Paul was writing to Timothy and Titus during an era in which the Bible had not been fully written. Imagine living the Christian life without a published, bound Bible to rely on. The teachings, or doctrine, were precious to the church. How much more precious should doctrine be now that the Bible is the inerrant, inspired book of all life, faith, and practice?

When Paul told Timothy and Titus to “take heed” unto doctrine, he was not suggesting a casual remembrance. The Greek verb for “take heed” is in the imperative mood, which shows it is a nonnegotiable command. The word also means that Christians should “hold onto” doctrine as a priority. Since this is the case, consider a few motivations of Hollywood’s methodology.

- The majority of Hollywood does not view the Bible as an authority. This may seem like a plain observation, yet it is important to realize in the spectrum of entertainment. That is not to say that all entertainment that Christians view must be produced by other Christians, but it is necessary for a Christian to consider Hollywood’s rejection of the Bible when viewing entertainment that is supposedly biblical in nature. A clear example is the 2014 movie *Noah*. Russel Crow played the role of Noah as a demented psychopath unrelated to righteousness who goes on a rampage with the Nephilim of Genesis 6 interpreted as rock monsters capable of redemption. The movie is not simply an artistic impression of a moral story, it is outright distortion of God’s Word.
- The majority of Hollywood is biased against biblical accuracy. Again, this is a plain perception, but many do not realize its consequences. To intentionally distort God’s Word and embellish, what the Bible clearly teaches is nothing other than blasphemy. This is clearly demonstrated in Roma Downey and Mark Burnett’s *Son of God*, which is made up of leftover footage from the History Channel’s *The Bible*. In the reenactment of Peter’s confession recorded in Matthew 16, Jesus asked the disciples who they thought he was. In the Bible, Peter makes one of the greatest statements in history. “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” In the movie, the Roman Catholic aim shines brightly when Peter only says, “You are the Son of God.” The declaration of Christ being the Son of God is not the focal point of the passage. The entire thrust of Peter’s confession is that Jesus is the Christ, that is he is the promised Messiah who will lay his life down as a substitutionary atonement. Instead, Downey and Burnett made the moment about Peter’s future role, and not Christ’s identity. According to Catholic doctrine, Peter was the first pope as promised in Matthew 16.
- The majority of Hollywood is biased against the biblical accuracy of supernatural events and miracles by replacing them with “science” and natural explanations. To

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make the big screen more palatable, Hollywood changes the biblical narrative to fit its own preconceived notions. In the 2015 remake of the Ten Commandments entitled, *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, director Ridley Scott did his best to remove a sovereign God leading his chosen people out of bondage. Instead, God is heretically displayed as an 11-year old boy who finds pleasure in toying with human life for his own amusement. To add insult to injury, the Red Sea crossing is pawned off as more of an act of nature complete with an earthquake, tsunami, and tornados while Moses battles Pharaoh in the middle of parted waters. Scott rejects the biblical account as portrayed in the 1956's Ten Commandments. He stated, "You can't just do a giant parting, with walls of water trembling while people ride between them...I didn't believe it then, when I was just a kid sitting in the third row. I remember that feeling, and thought that I'd better come up with a more scientific or natural explanation."

🕒 The majority of Hollywood views the Bible through the lens of secular culture. So much is added from our culture so that the story becomes a myth and denial of the accuracy of the biblical and historical account. When entertainment intentionally changes the biblical account to reflect modern culture, it undermines the Bible as the literal Word of God. In 2007, JK Rowling shocked the world when she announced that her famous book series about the wizarding world of Harry Potter was inspired by Christian literature. "To me, the religious parallels have always been obvious," said Rowling who is a member of the Church of Scotland. Take away the demonology, incantations, spells, and necromancy, and you will see Harry Potter as a type of Jesus who dies for the rest of the wizards and witches so that they can live on. In a more subtle manner, Roma Downey and Mark Burnett cast actor Babou Ceesay to play the role of John, the Beloved Disciple in *A.D. The Bible Continues*. Ceesay is a native of Gambia. Mary Magdalene is played by Chipso Chung, a Tanzanian-born actress. Denver Isaac, of Zimbabwean decent plays James, John's brother. Burnett said, "We realized that we could have made *The Bible* better in terms of diversity, but we are getting the chance to do it again. In the Bible there are always second chances. *A.D.* was our second chance and we manage to make this very afrocentric in major characters." Is this really harmful? The answer depends on the motivation to make biblically based entertainment. If the point is to communicate the Word of God as it was written, then it is very harmful. If the point is to correct the "weakness" of cultural diversity found in the Bible by adding social issues shaking the United States to the core, then it is very successful. The majority of Hollywood is not seeking to faithfully teach the Scriptures.

PRINCIPLE 3

The majority of Hollywood has no interest in evangelism.


One of the major arguments that Christians use to tolerate Hollywood's rejection of biblical accuracy is that faith-based films, no matter how inaccurate, can still be used as bridges for evangelism and the spread of the gospel. According to 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, the gospel is the good news of Jesus death, burial, and resurrection according to the Scriptures. Christ died as the only substitute for sin (atonement), and by doing so, he appeased God's wrath for those who will put their faith in Christ. This definition of the gospel cannot be compromised. Paul told the Galatians, "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed" (1:8). Therefore, the gospel is the only way to gain access to eternal life (Romans 1:16). It is not only a truth of vital importance, the gospel is the single most critical issue for sinners to understand because it points to our only everlasting hope which is Christ.

Can faith-based entertainment be a conversation starter to serve as a bridge to share the gospel? After all, one would think that all the productions about the life of Jesus would at least explain the gospel, but this is simply not the case. Very few modern Hollywood films actually present the gospel clearly or in its entirety. This should be no surprise since Hollywood does not seek to hear how sin needs atonement or that the most popular faith-based films are produced from Catholic sources who reject the gospel as defined by Paul, and substitute a work-based system.

Joel Osteen, whose Lakewood mega-church in Houston draws an average of 43,500 attendees each week, reviewed the script for *Son of God* and visited the film set. He has encouraged his followers to see the film and says that he is promoting it as a tool to share his faith: "A lot of people won't go to a church. They are not going to listen to a TV preacher like me but they will go to a movie and see what we are talking about." But what does the Bible say? "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent?" (Romans 10:13-15a)

Over the last few years, there have been many stories about people dying and going to heaven only to come back and tell about the experience they had. There have been many attempts to describe these incidents, but modern society seems primed to hear these stories and publicize them. Some have even been put into film.

 *My Time in Heaven* by Richard Sigmund

 *A Christian Rebuttal to Richard Sigmund's My Time in Heaven* by Robert Alan King

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- Touching Heaven: A Cardiologist's Encounters with Death and Living Proof of an Afterlife by Dr. Chauncey Crandall
- Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife by Dr. Eben Alexander
- My Journey to Heaven: What I Saw and How It Changed My Life by Marvin J Besteman
- To Heaven and Back: A Doctor's Extraordinary Account of Her Death, Heaven, Angels, and Life Again: A True Story by Mary C. Neal
- A Walk Through the Dark: How My Husband's 90 Minutes in Heaven Deepened My Faith for a Lifetime by Eva Piper
- The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven: A Remarkable Account of Miracles, Angels, and Life beyond This World by Kevin and Alex Malarkey - later retracted.
- Waking Up in Heaven: A True Story of Brokenness, Heaven, and Life Again by Crystal McVea and Alex Tresniowski
- Heaven is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back by Todd Burpo and Lynn Vincent
- Miracles from Heaven: A Little Girl and Her Amazing Story of Healing by Christy Wilson Beam

Filmmakers have been trying to crack heaven's code for decades. While heaven is certainly for real, *Heaven is for Real* is certainly not. The 2014 film, based upon a book by the same name, is Todd Burpo's book chronicling his son Colton's emergency appendectomy and subsequent claim that he had visited heaven. The filmed earned over \$100 million at the box office. In heaven, Colton meets his miscarried sister whom no one ever had told him about and his great-grandfather who died 30 years before Colton was born. Colton describes a horse that only Jesus could ride, about how big God and his chair are, and how the Holy Spirit "shoots down power" from heaven to help us. The obvious problem with this story and many like it is that it abandons the one source that contains all the information man currently needs to know, the Bible. While it is healthy and good for Christians to cultivate a heart for heaven, the Bible is very clear that there is no reason to believe anyone who claims to have gone to heaven and returned.

- John 3:13 - And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.
- John 1:18 - No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.

Any attempt to solicit a trip to heaven outside the bounds of Scripture is a false gospel. Only four people who where blessed to have vision of heaven actually wrote about it (Isaiah, Ezekiel, Paul, and John). Claiming Paul experienced a near-death experience is taking great liberty with the text. 2 Corinthians 12:2-5 details a vision given to a man, possibly Paul. We know not. Micaiah and Stephen only mention what they saw. All six of these experiences were prophetic visions, and not near-death experiences. The purpose of the visions was

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revelation, a process that ceased with the completion of the canon of Scripture. Isaiah, Ezekiel, and John explain a glimpse of heaven filled with God's wrath, horrific creatures, things indescribable to the human mind and imagination. All three authors are fixated on God's glory. They are overcome, frightened, and left speechless over God's majesty. Modern depictions of heaven simply do not match the biblical description of the Christian's future home. Stories like Colton's paint a twisted, unbiblical picture of heaven; they also irrigate a subjective, superstitious, shallow brand of spirituality. Studying mystical accounts of supposed journeys into the afterlife yields nothing but confusion, false hope, bad doctrine, and a false gospel.

At what length and at what cost are Christians willing to pervert the Scriptures to build a bridge to reach the lost? Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 2:4, "Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth." Coming to the knowledge of a half-truth or truth mixed with error will not be enough. If the salvation of men's souls is at stake and the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, then we cannot innocently stand by and allow error to destroy the integrity of the gospel.

CONCLUSION

Pagan culture cannot be the authority of faith. There is no doubt that movies affect the Christian's viewpoint of Biblical events. Movie makers defame the Creator. Does Hollywood care if they get it right? Hollywood, even on its best day, cannot recount the story of Jesus or present moral truth better than the Bible. If the written Word is not enough to convince a skeptic, the movie theater will never do a better job. The Christian faith isn't based on speculation, vain curiosity, and what ifs, but rather on the revealed Word of God, which gives us all things necessary for faith, life, and equips us to glorify God (2 Timothy 3:17).

It cannot be denied that Hollywood shapes culture, but the church is God's program to transform culture. This transformation comes from the new birth and subsequent transformation for believers into the image of Jesus Christ. Sadly, the Christian's knowledge and passion to the know Word of God lessens each day.

On a final note, it is fair to ask if there is faith-based entertainment that is worth watching. This writer believes that there can be if the subject matter accurately reflects the Word of God, allows doctrine to triumph over secularism, promotes a non-compromised gospel, and glorifies the Lord.