And In Other News…

"Faith-Based" Films or Hollywood Heresy?

by Shaun Willcock

In the past, professing Christians knew that Hollywood could not, as a general rule, be relied upon to produce decent, moral, clean entertainment. Preachers thundered against supporting the sinful "entertainment" that spewed from the movie industry. And the ungodly garbage that Hollywood dished up was for the most part shunned by those claiming to be Christians.

And in addition to producing immoral movies, over the years the movie industry has frequently produced films which are *direct attacks* on the Christian faith. Some notable examples are *The Last Temptation of Christ, Jesus Christ Superstar* and *The Da Vinci Code.* A great many more could be cited. In such movies Christ the Lord, His Gospel, and His followers, are ridiculed.

Occasionally producers would make biblical "epics" such as Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments,* or Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth,* and others of that nature; or they would zero in on biblical accounts which contained a lot of fighting or romance (such as Samson and Delilah, a favourite theme for obvious reasons in this age of sexual immorality), and these movies would be touted as being "accurate" and "authentic" and all the rest; but not only were they usually nowhere near as biblically accurate as they claimed to be, such films were not made in order to further the Christian faith, evangelise the lost, or build up true believers in their faith. They were simply attempts by the movie-makers to rake in mega-bucks from sweeping biblical sagas; and they often succeeded in doing just that.

By the 1980s the movie industry was becoming increasingly pervasive in society; and at the same time, as churches were moving away from their doctrinal foundations and from practical separation from the world, pastors no longer preached against ungodly entertainment. Professing Christians were increasingly attending the movies, no matter what was showing, and without much condemnation from the pulpits, if any, for the hirelings occupying them knew on which side their bread was buttered. Besides, the pastors were all too often just as much devotees at the shrine of Hollywood as anyone else.

Then came the invention of videos, which brought the movies right into the living rooms of multiplied millions of people the world over. Suddenly, pastors not only had to condemn attending sinful movies, but to be consistent they had to condemn the bringing of those same movies right into the homes of their flocks. And this was something most pastors simply were not prepared to do. They compromised, they fell silent, their own children brought home the same Hollywood junk, and in no time at all a revolution had taken place, which continues to this day. The entertainment industry is a very different monster to what it was in the 1970s, in that today it is *all-pervasive* in society. Literally everywhere one goes, one is bombarded with it, in the form of music and movies. Television screens are in shops, malls, cars, and sometimes in every bedroom of people's homes. Many people rent DVDs a number of nights a week – certainly they watch TV throughout the entire evening. Some, in fact, are watching it almost all day long as well, even at work. With the majority of Americans today talking constantly about the content of movies and television programmes, this is *the most popular topic of conversation in America,* according to the Barna Research Group! [1] And the rest of the world is not far behind. *Everywhere* one goes, one hears people talking about the movies. Computers provide almost-instant access to the make-believe world of Hollywood and its equivalents. Cellphones provide instant information about movies, and even show clips from them. The so-called "stars" are seen everywhere, on magazine covers, posters, etc. We truly live in an entertainment-saturated world. And as a direct result of churches and ministers no longer taking a stand against these ungodly forms of entertainment, professing "Christians" began to flock to the movies in ever-growing numbers, and to bring the movies into their homes via videos and later DVDs. And they were watching anything and everything, seemingly without any conscience about it.

But even so, the movie-makers did not, as yet, tap into this vast and constantly growing market with films containing a specifically "Christian" content (or what passes for such). After all, the millions of so-called "Christians" attending the movies, and buying up or renting the videos or DVDs, were just as content as those who made no profession of Christianity to watch whatever Hollywood vomited out! They didn't care if the movies glorified violence, or were filled with sexual immorality of all kinds, or foul language and blasphemy. Every so often a prominent "Christian" commentator would take a swipe at the filth being glorified in the movies, but hardly any of them ever advocated the only biblical response: *staying away from them.* They would bemoan the filth, but continue to go and watch it, along with the millions of others who would be found sitting in churches on Sunday mornings, even though their Friday and Saturday nights were taken up with watching ungodly movies, and the rest of the nights in the week were given over to soaking in the same from their TV screens at home. A study by a leading Hollywood marketing firm, MarketCast, suggested that "Christians", in addition to readily watching mainstream "entertainment", were also drawn to violent fare – even the most conservative among them! Joseph Helfgot, president of MarketCast, said, "There's a wind going through the production community about responding to religion. But when it comes to movies, people distinguish between moral issues and entertainment issues. And most people, even the very religious, are very happy with their movies." [2]

What an indictment of those calling themselves Christians! *Most people, even the very religious, are very happy with the movies that are churned out.* They will watch precisely the same movies as those who make no profession of faith in Christ!

But of course, being religious, they would also love to watch "religious" movies; and Hollywood did not cater for this. It was in fact very *anti-religious.*

Until, that is, *The Passion of the Christ.*

Mel Gibson's Roman Catholic splatter-movie took the world by storm. Purporting to be an accurate, authentic depiction of the crucifixion of Christ, it was nothing of the sort.[3] It was made by a devout Roman Catholic; it promoted Roman Catholic doctrine; it had a man depicting Christ, contrary to the Word of God; it was nauseatingly violent, so graphic that people threw up while watching it, or passed out. Not that long ago a film like this would have been shunned by evangelical Protestants. But times had changed. Those calling themselves evangelicals were not what they used to be! They were now avid movie-goers, vast numbers of them, with no qualms about watching scenes of horrific violence. They were also softened up to Roman Catholicism by decades of the ecumenical movement, being told by their own spiritually blind pastors that Romanism was "just another Christian church", Roman Catholics were "brothers and sisters in the Lord", etc. And what's more, the vast majority of them were by now so ignorant of sound biblical truth that they readily embraced Arminianism, shallow counterfeit evangelistic methods such as "movie evangelism", "music evangelism", the "altar call" and the "sinner's prayer", and the lie that they must be "in the world [i.e. part of the world, doing what the world does] to win the world" (so obviously contrary to Jn. 17:14-16, 2 Cor. 6:14-18, etc.).

And so, when *The Passion* came out, they swarmed into movie theatres by their millions, urged on by their pastors, even at times hiring the entire venue so that the whole church could go to watch the movie. Protestant ministers pronounced this Papist film a "true Christian movie", and a great evangelistic tool, perhaps one of the greatest ever. Mel Gibson, devout Papist and a veteran actor of all kinds of ungodly movies, was praised and honoured by so-called "evangelicals", and called a Christian by them, as he doubtless laughed all the way to the bank. Certainly his supposed "Christianity" did not prevent him getting drunk and spewing forth anti-Jewish remarks when he was arrested. But what of that? As far as blind "evangelicals" were concerned, he had made the greatest Christian movie of all time, and he was their hero.

And *now* Hollywood woke up to the vast "Christian" market out there. Evangelicals and fundamentalists number tens of millions in the United States alone, and tens of millions more in the rest of the world. Sure, huge numbers of professing "Christians" had for years shown that they were more than willing to watch anything and everything the non-Christians watched; but *The Passion* proved that they would also flock in huge numbers to a "Christian" movie. But also, such a movie would attract *still*

more "Christians", those somewhat more discerning than the common herd, who still had some standards left and would not go to watch movies which were an *overt* attack on their morals or their faith. "A segment of the market is starving for this type of content [i.e. religious content]," said Simon Swart, general manager of 20th Century Fox's U.S. home entertainment unit.[4] FoxFaith, Fox's "Christian" division, declared that they were targeting, in particular, evangelical or "born-again Christians", who had often rejected popular entertainment as offensive. In fact, 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment built up a network of "evangelical Christian" moviegoers, including 90 000 congregations and a database of over 14 million mainly "evangelical" households.

Hollywood had never taken the "Christian public" seriously, but now, in the wake of the phenomenal runaway success of *The Passion,* it sat up with a jolt and took notice. Gibson's movie grossed many hundreds of millions of dollars in worldwide box office proceeds. Dollar signs began to flash in producers' eyes. There was a huge untapped – and extremely lucrative – market out there. They now knew that millions of "Christians" would rush to watch "Christian" movies. And they wouldn't even be very discerning – they'd pretty much gobble up any old religious fare that Hollywood served up!

The vice chairman of Universal Pictures, Marc Shmuger, said of the "evangelical" market, "It's a well-formed community, it's identifiable, it has very specific tastes and preferences. In every fashion, you need to customize your message to your audience." [5] This quote shows plainly enough that it's all about making money as far as the movie producers are concerned. Some studios actually began turning to experts in "Christian marketing" to scan their scripts for content that would be objectionable to "Christians", and come up with marketing plans to target the "Christian" audience.

And so the movie-makers began to add things into their movies which they thought would appeal to "Christians", and to take things out which they thought would offend them. An example of adding something in: in a movie called *Mr. And Mrs. Smith,* which was about professional assassins, when a neighbour's car is stolen a crucifix hangs conspicuously from a rearview mirror, and the actors wear borrowed jackets that read "Jesus Rocks" as they go undercover. And the movie's director said, "We decided to make the next-door neighbour, whose crucifix it is, be hip, young, cool Christians. It's literally in there for no other reason than I thought, This is cool." [6]

And an example of taking something out: during shooting of the movie *Flightplan,* actor Peter Sarsgaard was instructed to strike the word "Jesus" from his dialogue. "They said: 'You can't say that. You can't take the Lord's name in vain'," Sarsgaard said of the film's producers.[7]

Well, if such additions and deletions satisfy "Christians", then truly what passes for "Christianity" is shocking! A crucifix in a scene would once upon a time have thrilled no one but a Roman Catholic; and if those calling themselves *evangelicals* are impressed because some godless movie-maker puts a crucifix in a particular scene, or makes the actors wear jackets with the words "Jesus Rocks", then what passes for "evangelical Christianity" is so far from being biblical that there are no words to adequately describe it. Likewise if the removal of a single use of the Lord's name makes "Christians" assume that the movie is a good one! Is this all it takes now to satisfy "Christians"? Do they justify going to watch ungodly movies merely because of changes like these? Oh what times we live in!

But in the wake of *The Passion,* it was not just that movie-makers were making a few changes to their movies such as the ones described above – they realised that *entire movies* should be made to appeal to the "Christian" public.

The next major, supposedly "Christian" movie was *The Chronicles of Narnia: the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,* based on the book by C.S. Lewis, an Anglican "closet Papist" devotee of myth and magic, who promoted heretical doctrines and occultism and was by no means a true Christian.[8] The movie's makers lost no time in jumping on the bandwagon; and they made a concerted effort to include "Christian" organisations throughout the production of the movie. And religious leaders (specially selected!) were given a sneak preview at 140 venues throughout the United States. Michael Flaherty, president of Walden Media, said this preview was just one aspect of promoting the movie. "We're willing to talk to almost all audiences that want to hear about the movies we make," he told the *Texas Catholic* newspaper. "People seem to be interested that we're going to churches to promote this movie, but we're also going to schools, libraries, boy scout and girl scout groups. We're going everywhere." [9] In other words, once again money was the motive. It didn't matter whether the interested groups were

Roman Catholic or evangelical churches, secular schools or libraries – the movie was promoted to all because they knew it would appeal to all. The supposedly "Christian" content was sufficiently downplayed so as not to offend anyone, and yet it was sufficiently present so that it could be interpreted any way the viewer desired. As Flaherty said: "We're interested in telling great stories and being true to the original themes of the author. Many times these great stories we want to tell will have elements of faith in them, and we don't shy away from that. If people interpret the original themes of the book to have elements of faith in them, then they will probably see those same themes in the movie."

Mere "elements of faith"; people "interpreting the story to have these elements of faith"; this is what passes for "Christian entertainment". If this really was a Christian movie, the Christian message would be clear, bold, and all-pervasive in the story. But it was not.

Flaherty admitted the real motive behind such movies when he said that Hollywood producers *are going to be open to any audience that can make them money. If it helps sell tickets, moviemakers are going to emphasise Christian elements in movies.*"

And *that* is the bottom line! Hollywood producers have not suddenly exercised faith in God, but they most certainly have faith in the trend of religious movies to make money for them, and they most certainly have faith in the gullible "Christian" public to flock to such movies and blow their money on them!

Following the massive commercial success of *The Passion* and *The Chronicles of Narnia,* 20th Century Fox announced that it would be producing as many as a dozen major "faith-themed" films a year, aimed at evangelicals, under its new "faith-based" division, FoxFaith. This was described by the *Los Angeles Times* as "the biggest commitment of its sort by a Hollywood studio." But it was certainly not the only studio to commit itself to this. And yet again, straight from the horse's mouth as it were, we were made aware of the kind of "Christian" movie that would be produced. "We want to push the production value, not videotape sermons or proselytise," said Simon Swart, general manager of Fox's U.S. home entertainment unit.[10] "We are not here to proselytise, we are making entertainment," said Steve Feldstein, senior vice president of FoxFaith.[11] Tragically, millions of professing "Christians" would rejoice over this hypocritical, dollar-driven interest by a major studio in producing such movies.

Make no mistake about it, Hollywood is *still* blatantly anti-Christian. The studios and producers will churn out some "Christian-themed" movies if they believe this will make money for them – and it will. But it is extremely naive to believe that the movie-makers have all suddenly experienced some kind of conversion! It's all about profits. *The Passion* proved there is a vast "Christian" audience out there willing to waste their money on this kind of film, and the movie-makers rushed to cash in on that. But the movie industry is still committed to its agenda of making films which *attack* biblical Christianity, true Christians, the Gospel of Christ, and the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. It has not changed.

Yet spiritually blind "evangelicals" cannot see what has happened! In fact, they *welcome* it! Increasing numbers of churches now make use of movie-like screens at the pulpits, where clips from movies, both religious and secular, are made accessible for churches to download, and are used to illustrate the pastor's sermon! Professing "Christians" can easily recount scenes from their favourite films, but find it difficult to recall the central theme of the previous week's sermon – and pastors and churches are well aware of it, and thus are swinging over to the use of film clips *in* their sermons. And they believe that in doing so they have made their churches more relevant to society! How deceived they are. All they have done, by integrating popular culture with their version of the "gospel", is that they have created a hybridised "gospel" that is nothing but "another gospel" entirely, and not the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ! When a man behind the pulpit has sunk to such a low that he needs to pepper his sermon with scenes from Hollywood movies, he has acknowledged that Hollywood – ungodly, wicked Hollywood – is, as far as he is concerned, more powerful than the God of the Bible, and that such gimmicks are necessary today to enable people to "understand the Gospel".

Such is the state of what passes for "Christianity" today.

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ENDNOTES:

1.*Christianpost.com,* March 12, 2007. http://www.christianpost.com.
2.*The Sunday Times,* 7 August 2005.
3.See *"The Passion of the Christ": Outreach for Antichrist,* by Shaun Willcock. Bible Based Ministries. www.biblebasedministries.co.uk.
4.*The Southern Cross,* September 27 to October 3, 2006.
5.*The Sunday Times,* 7 August 2005.
6.*The Sunday Times,* 7 August 2005.
7.*The Sunday Times,* 7 August 2005.
8.See *"The Chronicles of Narnia": Occult Fantasy of a Closet Roman Catholic,* by Shaun Willcock. Bible Based Ministries. www.biblebasedministries.co.uk.
9.*The Southern Cross,* December 14 to 20, 2005.
10.*The Southern Cross,* September 27 to October 3, 2006.
11.*Weekend Witness,* October 21, 2006.